

CAESAR *and* SERTORIUS

Volume Two in the series The Other Rome

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AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

My name is Tito Kithes Athano, and I was a Head of History at Malitora Museum (or as you would say, Professor of History at Malitora University). An institute that does not exist in a city that does not exist in this timeline. I was doing field research when things went awry. My period of expertise is the Transition Age, the period of the Roman Republic from the Italian Enfranchisement to the establishment of the Federation. The subject I was researching was the development of the interpersonal relationships within the Sertorian Council during the turbulent but relatively poorly-recorded years 680 to 688 AUC, during which time Sertorius held sway from the Nile to the Indus to the plains of the Ukraine. This time and this Council were critical to the eventual Hellenisation of the Republic, just as it was inevitable that the Empire would become Greek when the Imperial Capital was moved to Constantinople in your history. It is strange how there remain so many co-incidences between my history and yours, regardless of how far they diverged, and doubtless the educated reader will spot these co-incidences as they arise.

Of course, that will sound like so much fantasy to you, Gentle Reader. If you have read your history you would know perfectly well that Sertorius died in Spain in 681 AUC, and never went to the east. Which brings me to my own story.

I was conducting my research in person, using a device I will simply call a 'Time Machine', and whose workings I do not even pretend to understand; I leave that to the engineers to worry about. All I knew about it was how to set the spatial and temporal co-ordinates, and the duration timer. On this particular mission I had dropped back to prepare for and attend the Comitia Meetings discussing the Italian Franchise legislation. I had hoped to pose as a chronicler and interview some of the main players about their attitudes towards certain Italian nobles at that stage in the process. Had they ever expected at that time that Italians would be the key players in the Late Republic?

Of course, I could not phrase it in this way; The Ethics Committee and I had spent months to design precisely what I could divulge, what I could not, and how I was to present myself to each individual person in my plan of research. Instead I would be asking them more neutral questions, such as 'How do you think this will play out over the next couple of generations?' or 'What was your opinion of this person at that particular time?' Although Sertorius himself was a Roman Popularis, his close support from the Italianist Faction was the key to his political success, and I wanted to know how his readiness to court both Populares and Italianists was viewed by both factions at that time. He was certainly prescient.

During this mission I managed to gather quite a bit of information, and when the timer warned me that I was due for recall to my own time I casually strolled into the Temple of Saturn so my disappearance would not be observed.

The machine usually returns the traveller to the departure location with a temporal safety margin of a tenth of a second to make sure the traveller does not re-materialise into his outgoing body; to a typical observer, it seems that the traveller has never left, even though he might have experienced days, months, sometimes years in his own time consciousness. And there is usually a spatial margin of about one hundred millimetres from the floor, to make sure any errors did not re-materialise him with his feet set into the floor. Such overlapping of solid material can be disastrous; even re-appearing into thin

air can cause medical complications, which is why transport is always done in a very low pressure chamber, with enough pure oxygen to achieve a barely breathable atmosphere at a minimum pressure, and with some sort of engineering trick to cause the immediate return zone to become even more rarefied during the instant of materialisation. Of course, that can't all be done to the target space on the outward trip, but the engineers have developed some sort of technique to locally displace as much air as possible at the instant of materialisation; but that is never as good as in the laboratory conditions and the typical outbound traveller feels very sick for some time after his arrival. A side effect of this sudden and extreme reduction of air density, and its collapse back to normal an instant later, is a very loud noise like an explosion, which is why we always try to materialise well away from observers when we leave, and in the lab when we return. As a backup the return timer is also fitted with a device that does the same air-thinning trick, but even with this redundancy a few researchers have died; historical research can be a dangerous business.

So I found an unobserved corner in Saturn's Temple, waited for the timer to tick down, and then bent my knees as the zero time approached. This is standard practice, so when you fall on re-materialisation you don't drop onto locked-out knees and break something.

It was certainly more than a one hundred millimetre drop! It seemed like six feet or more, and the wind was knocked out of me. But even more disconcerting was the darkness. Where were the lab lights? And the headache! And the nausea! And my whole body was tingling, burning and cramping at the same time! It felt like stories I had heard from the first trials, when subjects had travelled without modern atmospheric density precautions. I was so thankful for the redundancy benefit of the return timer, or I surely would have died from gas embolisms. Then I felt something wet on my cheek. With a rush of dread that probably included an adrenalin shock, if only my body was not already too distressed to feel it, I realised that a large black dog was licking my face. Then, out of the deeper gloom, I saw another approach. But I was effectively paralysed from the high-atmospheric-pressure materialisation; I was completely helpless. Then one of the dogs started to bark.

It seemed like an hour to me, full of dread and my body racked with pain from the included gases; but I was later assured it was less than a minute after hearing the huge boom of my return before I was found. I was bathed with light and I heard a door opening behind me and a voice calling, presumably to me. I was in no condition to respond, even if I had understood the language. The door slammed shut, and soon opened again, this time with two male voices. I was not capable of even feeble movement, but could control my body enough to give a low moan. There were steps approaching me, but keeping their distance as they circled around to see my face and come within my field of vision. Another light, this one in front of me, snapped on and blinded me. There was a sharp short command, and the dog that had been licking me left me. At least the dogs are trained, I thought with relief.

I closed my eyes against the glare and asked in slurred tones, 'What has happened?'. In return one of the men said something I could not understand; but I could tell he was alarmed and defensive. I squinted one eye open to see that both of them were holding long-bladed knives in each hand.

I still could not move, my body still cramped and in agony, but I was starting to think more clearly. I could not recognise the language, although there were not as many languages in my time as there are in this timeline. And certainly not as many among men who have a European appearance.

But they were not responding to my Oiku speech, which was a derivative of Koine Greek and effectively the world tongue in my time. I tried again, this time in Chinish, although these men were not Chinish in their appearance. But I think that one of them realised what I was trying to do; Oiku and Chinish sound so different that he realised I was looking for a common language. He demanded back at me in a few different sentences, with pauses between. I recognised none of them.

In desperation I tried Latin, which I had been speaking for the last month; but very few understand Latin in my time. It is only used by specialist historians, it having become localised to the West Mediterranean basin before going extinct soon after 900 AUC when Greek was adopted throughout the Republic. Latin is in my world what Ancient Egyptian or Akkadian is in yours.

But to my shock, he recognised it! Then, with an excruciatingly bad accent and stumbling for words, the stranger lowered the knife he had been pointing at me, and asked 'Are you speaking Latin?'.

I did not reply immediately; that was when my bowels cramped and I fouled my toga. The associated bout of vomiting probably did not convey a good impression either. Then I answered 'Yes, but your Latin is not very good.' The stranger laughed, as though my incontinence had been my response to his poor command of the tongue and my reply an explanation. When I was able to move I slowly rolled out of my toga to reveal that I had no weapons, and then struggled to stand naked before them. They started to relax a bit more.

That was how I first met Alan and his son-in-law Brian (not their real names, to protect them). When I told them where I had come from, they obviously thought I was mad; but there I was, with a toga, with my paper notes in Latin in my carry-bag and my visual and sound recordings in my touchboard, yet completely baffled by every European language they tried on me - though some of what I later learned was Brian's Spanish sounded similar to Latin. By now they were convinced that I was no threat to them, and they were kind enough to take me into the house and allow me to clean up. They fitted me with some of Alan's clothes, too; we were similar enough in size for some of his loose casual shorts and Tee-shirts to fit me.

Alan had studied Latin at school, which is why he recognised it; but it was schoolboy Latin, and he was very rusty. He eventually took me into his house and displayed a map of his locality. The landforms were the same! I had materialised back in the place occupied by the research lab in Malitora Museum; except that the Museum was not here. I was in a small town whose name I will not mention. I am only glad that in this timeline the area of my return had not been filled with earth, or a wall built through my re-materialisation point. I had suffered no more than a fall to natural ground level instead of onto the lab floor. I am indeed glad that the Machine had been installed on the ground floor, and not ten stories higher! I later determined, by comparison of calendars, that I had also returned to the precise point in time, as well.

Next Alan started mentioning some Roman names; the first was, to my total surprise, Caius Julius Caesar! The Man of Shame in my history was apparently the most famous Roman of all in this timeline. Alan clicked around on his computer a bit more, and mentioned Caius Marius next. There was a name and a personal history I recognised, at least at first. But when he started talking about the Italian War I was completely lost. Eventually we pinned down that the split in our histories was some time around 662 AUC. That was when it dawned on me; my return timer had somehow caught onto the wrong thread, or whatever those temporal engineers called them. The split had happened the moment my return was triggered.

But that was a few years ago now, and in the meantime I have had to learn English. Alan has been kind enough to feed, clothe and shelter me during that time, and to protect me from the less scrupulous in this rather vicious society (at least in comparison to my own timeline). In between learning English and other aspects of my new world, I have written a history of my old world, starting at the time of our separation. Hopefully it will earn enough to compensate Alan for his expenses in caring for me. At first I wrote in Latin and Oiku, not having the English skills; but I translated these early passages as my understanding of English improved.

Although it is written as a historical novel, and it does indeed simplify many aspects of Roman life for those who do not have the historian's patience with such things, it is a reasonably accurate retelling of what actually happened in my timeline. While I have used my own reconstructions of the details of many of the conversations, I have done this only where the surviving records in my timeline had left gaps, and I assure my readers that the main thrust is accurate, consistent with what has already been established by proper scholarly research. The characters are true to their real natures, and the perceptions by the characters of each other are faithfully reproduced. Remember, I studied this period intensely. As you will read in this first volume, we had developed the Printing Press within Sulla's lifetime, which prompted virtually everyone of any importance to write his memoirs to defend and explain his own actions, and others to write biographies and histories. It also ensured thousands of copies of almost everything were produced. And we did not go through your Dark Ages, in which you lost so many important documents. So compared to your scholars, who have to scratch hard to establish even a basic outline, the scholars in my timeline suffer from an overabundance of raw data and their task is to sort through it all, to separate propaganda from fact.

I had the time, resources and the data to know each significant player in this period as well as I knew my own family; and after the Time Machine became a reliable research tool, I have even spoken with some of the men I write about!

So read my offering, and ponder how different your history might have been. More books will be released as I have the opportunity to write them.

Chapter 1 – late 676 AUC (78 B.C.) to late 678 AUC (76 B.C.)

“Welcome home, Quintus!” Drusus greeted his friend.

“It is good to be home, Marcus Livius,” Sertorius replied. “Specially so, now that I think I’ve got the Spains set up properly now.” The two men had barely sat when there was another knock on the street door. This was Young Marius. Atticus led him into the triclinium to join the other two.

“Greetings, Caius!” Sertorius exclaimed, “Come in!” Sertorius and Drusus both stood to offer right arms.

Over the next fifteen minutes a stream of friends came to welcome Sertorius home and discuss their approach to the next election.

“First question, Quintus; do you want the Consulate this year?” Drusus asked. “You should have had it two years ago, except for some dirty politics; and I have to re-assure you that no Italian will fall for that lie again.”

“Thanks, Marcus Livius,” Sertorius replied. “But not just yet. I need to re-build a bit of credibility first. I think I will try for Republican Praetor for my Tribe first, make a few speeches, be seen doing things. And be assured that I hold no grudge against any Italians for that last disaster; we both know who to blame for that, and he was as Ancient-Family Roman as they come.”

“Sorry, Quintus,” Young Marius had been caught by surprise. “Who was to blame? Or is it a special secret between you two alone?”

“No secret at all, Caius,” Sertorius laughed. “I am surprised that it has not become public knowledge by now. The whole scheme was invented and conducted by Sulla.”

There was an audible shock through the room. “That’s right, friends; Sulla was as much a member of the Boni as Cato himself; it was just that he had inherited a power base from the Great Marius, and decided to work with it rather than start again. He supported Italian Rights because it suited his own agenda to do so.”

“You should not say things like that about Lucius Cornelius,” Vidacilius growled.

“Don’t take my word for it,” Sertorius answered. “Ask Marcus Livius here; ask Lucius Cluentius, or the other three who did not support me two years ago,” Sertorius made a sweeping gesture that took in the whole room. “Not that I resent their actions, now that I know they did what they did for the best possible motives; they are honourable men who were unaware of how duplicitous Sulla could be if he set his mind to it.”

All eyes turned to Drusus. “Quintus speaks the truth,” Drusus admitted. “When I gave Sulla’s funeral oration, I thought it best to leave that bit out.” Drusus looked around the room until his eyes fell on Cluentius. Others followed his lead.

“Yes; we were played for fools, and we took the bait,” Cluentius admitted. “But Quintus was very gracious; never again will I doubt him.”

Drusus stepped back into the pause. "So you say no to the Consulate this year, Quintus? When do you intend to make your move?"

"Perhaps next year, but probably the year after that," he replied easily. "Provided, of course, that I have your support!" he smiled around the room.

"You certainly deserve it," Sextus Julius Caesar said agreeably, "But that means we have another year or two before we have to talk about it. Whom do we support for this year?"

"Whom are the Boni supporting?" Sertorius asked.

"Appius Claudius Pulcher is the word around my contacts," Drusus said. Others nodded their agreement. The Conservatives seemed to be going out of their way to give the sixty-year-old a more dynamic reputation.

"We propose Titus Lafrenius," Mutilus spoke up. He sensed the lack of enthusiasm among the Populares. "When are you leaders of the Populares going to do a bit of leading?" Mutilus said impatiently. "Titus has been blackballed for ten years now, and why? Because he had the courage and composure to do what every one of you knows was the best thing anyone could have done! He saved the Republic! And he did it in a way that did NOT betray Caius Marius, but which was the only legal way Caius could have fulfilled the prophecy!" He glared around the room. "The only person he really hurt was Sulpicius, a brute and trouble-maker if ever there was one, and even he was permitted to leave Rome unharmed.

"But the cattle of the Head Count don't understand that, and none of you have had the courage to explain it to them!" Mutilus continued. "When are you going to take control of the situation, instead of letting the lie stay on the table?"

"That is all well and good, Caius Papius," Carbo said soothingly. "But why fight a battle when you can win by refusing it? This is politics! Do you have anyone we do not need to re-habilitate?"

"Don't be so certain that Titus needs to be re-habilitated," Sextus Julius Caesar interrupted. "While I was Consul four years ago, I heard nothing but praise for how Titus was governing Asia. So perhaps we should ask our supporters among the Equites for their opinion of the man. I think you might be surprised. And I also think that the Head Count simply don't matter any more; at least, not as much as they did in the days of the Mass Comitia. The new Representative Comitia is a lot more rational these days. They will support Titus if the Equites do, and the Equites will fund their re-election in return. A year later no-one in the Head Count will remember who voted for Titus, and probably won't care even if they do."

"Thank you, Sextus Julius," Mutilus said gravely. "You know your politics. So I agree to your proposal; ask the leading merchants if they would welcome Titus to the fasces, and see how they respond. If they are opposed, we will re-consider." There seemed to be some satisfaction with this answer.

"When will you gentlemen decide who will be the Populares' standard-bearer?" Drusus asked.

"This evening, when your ears are safely out of range," Caesar smiled. "But what I would like you to do is write down whom you think we should go

with. Then we can seal it, and open it after we tell you our answer. I will allow you three guesses, the stakes being an amphora of Chian wine.”

A chuckle went around the room. Caesar and Drusus, although nominally political opponents, had been personal friends for a long time and had negotiated many mutually-beneficial outcomes over the years. When they were feeling comfortable enough to make friendly chips at each other like that, then all would be well in the end.

“Do I have to tell you whom you should go with, or just guess whom you unimaginative types finally select?” Drusus asked innocently.

Another chuckle, stronger this time.

“It is a test, to see if you can match our wisdom,” Caesar answered. There was genuine laughter this time.

“Then I accept!” Drusus smiled. “Just don't cheat by picking a name I can't spell! Where is a quill and some paper, Quintus? And some wax; I will need to seal this well, or you will all read it and pick someone else, all for the sake of a free amphora of wine!”

“No, Marcus Livius; we will seal it with our rings, and you can keep the paper yourself!” Caesar corrected him. “No-body can read your terrible writing anyway!”

Thus was the tension concerning the nomination of Lafrenius overcome. The Italianists in the little celebratory meeting took their leave, and Sertorius as host called his colleagues to order.

“Well, that was a surprise!” Drusus commented, and threw his sealed paper into the fireplace when they met again later that month. “I'll get that amphora to your house as soon as I can arrange it.”

“Whom had you guessed, Marcus Livius?” Caesar asked.

“No-one as suitable as Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, that is for sure!” Drusus assured him. “I did not realise that he was a contender. He is certainly a man the Italian tribes can support.”

“Also, we have spoken to a few of our more prominent supporters, specially those with interests in Asia,” Caesar went on. “They speak warmly of Titus, so we have no problems your candidate, either.”

“Indeed so, Titus,” Vopiscus added, turning to Lafrenius. “We must apologise that we have under-estimated you for so long.”

Lafrenius raised a hand in acknowledgement. “All's well that ends well,” he replied with a half-smile. “The secret of success is to always look forward.”

“Speaking of looking forward,” Caesar took up the theme as host and chairman by tacit consent, “Gnaeus Papirius has advised that he intends to propose Tribal status for Africa Province, along the same lines as those adopted for Sicily. We expect you will agree, but did not want to presume.”

“Do you see any problem with that, Titus?” Drusus asked his colleague.

“Not immediately, Marcus Livius,” Lafrenius replied after a moment's pause. “Most citizens there are old Marian veterans or their sons; either Head Count Romans or Italians before they were given their lands upon retirement. I

think they deserve the same status as Sicily, but I would like to pass it around our own people before we bind ourselves to it," he concluded.

"Then I think you can take that as a basis for planning, Sextus Julius," Drusus replied to Caesar, "but we will get back to you in a few days. We might need to sort out a few details first." Since the early days of Italian Citizenship each of the various Italian tribes had required their representatives to the Comitia to discuss all measures and vote as a block. Over the next few years the individual Tribal caucuses had also started to meet together to decide on an overall "Italian" position and vote as a super-block. It had also allowed them to appoint specific members to lead the debates on specific issues, giving many of them a good public profile and enhancing their future electoral prospects. This unified approach and discipline had greatly enhanced their effectiveness in both Houses. Lucius Glaucia and Caius Papius Mutilus, two Samnites, had specifically bought a house with an exceptionally large atrium and then roofed it over so it could serve as a meeting-hall in all seasons; the impluvium had been filled at this time to give a large clear floor. This had become an all-but-official Italian Club, where caucus meetings were held, guests were accommodated and the Italianist Party networked in all sorts of capacities, both official and unofficial. It was referred to as "Italia House" even by its regulars.

"Yes, I am aware of your new procedures," Caesar answered approvingly. "It risks a bit of anarchy, if you have a few overly-ambitious men; but so long as there is discipline it seems an excellent way of mentoring your newer members."

Drusus thought it significant that Caesar thought so positively of this arrangement. Probably because it would reduce the influence of Young Marius vis-a-vis the Caesarian faction within the Populares if his own party were to adopt it. Young Caius Marius had inherited his father's huge house and enormous courtyard, so most major Populares meetings were held there. This gave Marius the honour of host, even if Caesar tended to chair the meetings.

"However, there are some points that the Boni might raise that could embarrass us. We need to have a united answer to those questions," Drusus continued. "For example, it has been discovered that many non-citizens have been paying poorer Roman citizens to legally adopt them, thereby avoiding the taxes to make up the Republic Stipend. The more that do this, the more the non-citizen taxes need to be raised to make up the shortfall, and therefore the greater incentive to take adoption as a means of avoiding them. How do you intend to overcome this problem, both in Sicily and in Africa?" Drusus finished.

"We are still discussing options among ourselves, Marcus Livius," Caesar looked as if unhappy with all the options put to him so far. "Perhaps your people could discuss these questions and suggest something to us."

"I will do that," Drusus agreed. "Now I should take my leave of Caius. I will be in touch."

"How could you support Marcus Aemilius Lepidus?" Drusus repeated in his perplexity, now that he and Sextus Julius were in more private circumstances.

"You don't approve?" Caesar asked.

Drusus shrugged. "It is your call to make, Sextus Julius, and I have no right to argue; which is why I didn't in public."

"Why don't you approve, Marcus Livius?" Caesar pressed. "He is full of energy; he will do well."

"I will speak plainly, since you insist," Drusus responded. "You say he is full of energy; I say he is full of himself. He has his own agenda, which is himself. He believes nothing is more important than his own advancement, and everything else he supports is only a means to that end."

"Which is why he will work so hard for it," Caesar replied.

Drusus shrugged again. "It is your decision. But just make sure he stays on script. It would be a shame if he discredits the Popularis brand name, and makes it harder for Quintus when his turn comes."

"As you said, he is personally ambitious," Caesar reasoned. "If he ever wants to become Censor, he will know what is expected of him." He reached for a grape on the low table before him. "I have already told him that if we find ourselves at war, Titus will take command."

"Who will delegate it to Quintus Poppaedi^{us} if it is in the east, and Lucius Glaucia if it is anywhere else," Drusus added. "Those are our best two Generals anyway, not to mention that I wouldn't want Lepidus in sole control of Rome."

"It is good to know we agree on everything," Caesar summarised.

"Speaking of Quintus Poppaedi^{us} over in Armenia," Drusus changed the subject again, "He sent me a letter; it arrived a few days ago. He says that he intends to winter in Antioch this year; Tigranocerta is too cold for his bones these days."

"How is the Old Warrior going?" Caesar asked, genuinely interested.

"He seems very cheerful," Drusus answered. "Considering he is probably the best soldier Rome has ever produced, and that includes Caius Marius in my opinion, he is genuinely happy that there is still peace with Parthia."

"Maybe that is one of the reasons why he is such a good soldier," Caesar offered. "He has always been unwilling to shed blood. I'm sure his men appreciate that."

"Yes," Drusus allowed his thoughts to wander. "He has been over there for, what? Twelve years now, I think; except for the year he was Consul, and even then he spent most of it in the east."

"For such a cultured man, he seems to dislike city living," Caesar observed. "The Boni are always belittling Italian nobles as 'hayseeds', but if you think about it for a moment you will realise that the Italians are a lot closer to the Early Days of the Republic than these silk-wearing theatre-goers that call themselves the Good Men of Rome!"

I agree," Drusus conceded. "I recall Sulla saying that Quintus Poppaedi^{us} carried the Mos Majorum in his heart, or he would never have been able to

compose the Miletus Decree. And since Italian Rights have been in place, virtually all of our good soldiers and many of our better administrators have been Italians,” Drusus continued. “There seems something just a bit decadent about Rome itself in comparison, and I think Italians will prove to be the salvation of the Republic. That's why I have continued to support them.”

Caesar popped another grape into his mouth and chomped on it as he thought. “I suppose there are many parallels between Quintus Poppaedi and Cincinnatus,” Caesar mused. “He had to be persuaded to take up the consulship, and at the end of his term he swore 'Never again!'. And he is very much the darling of the Senators rather than the Plebeians, in so far as any Italian can be called that. And he has made it no secret that he will retire to his farm in the hills when he is finished, rather than moving to the city.”

“And in another way, too; he prefers his enemies to surrender and live, rather than be slaughtered,” Drusus added. “An Italian Cincinnatus! What would the Boni say!” Drusus chuckled.

“Anyway, thanks for the chat and the grapes,” Caesar said as he stood. “I really should be on my way.”

The elections went as expected. The Comitia's representative structure made elections much more predictable and manageable than the old Mass Comitia before the Catonian reforms; and by a twist of irony, it was Cato's Boni faction that was consistently the loser as the alliance between the Populares and the Italianists strengthened.

The new Republican Comitia continued to be divided almost evenly between the three factions, which meant that the Boni were in a two-to-one minority against the Italianist/Populares coalition. Cato and his colleagues in the Boni camp were almost in despair. After having at least one consul for as long as anyone could remember, including the first eight years after the Italian enfranchisement, they had managed only one term by a single consul in the last five years; and even that was because of Sulla's perfidy within his own Italianist faction.

But none of them dared to try to use the old politics of bribery or coercion to improve the situation. That had been attempted a few years ago, when Cato and some of his allies had stacked the Lucanian elections and Pompeius had done the same in Picenum. Both rotten Comitiae had been thrown out, and punitive Tribal taxes imposed on predominantly Roman large landholders. When Pompeius attempted to challenge this by armed force, he had been captured and humiliatingly mutilated before being handed over to the Republic Senate and tried for treason.

Since then, all elections among the Italian tribes had been done by marking paper ballots which were collected together before being counted. This made intimidation and bribery of voters impossible to enforce. Every Italian tribal Comitia and every Italian Republic Praetor since then had been those endorsed by Drusus, Silo, Lafrenius and other trusted Italian nobles.

If only the Italian tribes could splinter, with an effective Boni faction arising! Cato would wish. But that would be asking too much; one of the core convictions among the Boni was that Italians should not have been allowed citizenship in the first place. So strong Italian support for the Boni was obviously not going to happen. As a result of this hopelessness the only active Boni now were the Metelli, the Ahenobarbi and Cato himself. The other nominally Boni members of the Republic Senate rarely bothered to attend.

Mutilus, who had been Consul a few years earlier, had requested some time at home before taking a Proconsular appointment; he nominated Spain, his term to begin when Sertorius finished his second governorship there. There was plenty of surprise, but no objections; Spain was a province everyone wanted to avoid.

Carbo arrived in Rome in late March. Sextus Caesar called a meeting of the Popularis leadership to discuss the proposal for another Tribe to be recognised in Africa. As in Sicily, the proposal included an annual tribute to the Republic to make up for the loss of Provincial Tax revenues.

There were no surprises there. Carbo received agreement to support the petition, and invited Mutilus, Lafrenius and Drusus to talk about it with himself, Lepidus, Sertorius and Caesar.

“There would not be a dozen men in the whole province who can boast a noble in their ancestry, Titus,” Carbo was telling Lafrenius. “My guess is that two-thirds of them would be Marius's veterans or their sons, and most of those would be from Italian legions. So they might be Popularis supporters from love of old Gaius who gave them their citizenship, or they might lean towards the Italian Party because of their blood; but either way, they will not support the Boni.”

Lafrenius shrugged. “Those old party lines are becoming a bit blurred by now,” he said. “The Boni are becoming irrelevant to the Republic; they will never be a serious political force again. And within a generation Italians will be accepted as no less part of the Republic than the Rural Roman Tribes, so the need for them to act as a block will fade as well; they will blend in with the Populares, and change Popularis politics as they do so.

“The political arguments in the next generation will not be about competing Noble, Plebeian and Italian interests; they will be about how to order different priorities within a fundamentally Plebeian body politic in which the rich and the noble will be progressively reduced in importance and power. Which precise issues will be the battlegrounds probably can't even be guessed at yet,” Lafrenius concluded in a manner that allowed no doubt that his prediction would be proven accurate.

Drusus heard these words with a numbness filling his chest. How many times had Sulla accused him of giving too much ground to the Populares to secure short-term advantage! Sulla had feared the Mob more than anything else in politics, and held absolutely to the view that the Mob could only be

controlled by the constant threat of force. Give the Populares any power at all, and the Mob will be emboldened and try to seize more, he had often said!

Even his new Constitution, erroneously hailed as the Catonian reforms to make the Boni swallow it, was a deliberate attempt to closet the Comitia into a building rather than leaving it loose in the Forum where it could call out the Mob. Sulla had hoped to turn its rabble-rousing speeches into tidy debates, and thereby castrate its leading demagogues so they would become miniature senators. Indeed, one of Sulla's last acts had been to deceitfully undermine the Popularist member in their joint ticket in the Consular elections, to ensure a Boni victory.

Drusus remembered back fifteen years, to his pledge to never act against the will of the Senate. Within the literal meaning of the words, he had held to that pledge; but in doing so, he had completely destroyed the power of the Senate as it was then understood. The Senate no longer ruled the Roman world unfettered; Italy was now ruled by the various Tribal Comitiae, and the Senate barely ruled the Provinces, more accurate to say that it merely administered them. Yet each step along the way had been a good one. Even Sulla had supported them, his only objections being the partnership with the Populares to achieve them. But here we are, supporting a Consular candidate who plainly states that the Old Families are obsolete! And knowing in my heart that he is correct! I can only hope and beg of the gods that Sulla's pre-emptive remedies in the Catonian Reforms will prove adequate. That the new representative model will render the Mob powerless, and that the new de-centralised Republic will educate even the Head Count that the Rule of Law is the hidden heart of the Mos Majorum, and to not focus on the trivial trappings that the Boni get distracted by.

But there can be no going back, Drusus pulled his thoughts together. Then he realised that the others in the room was looking at him. "I'm sorry, I was following my own thoughts," he apologised.

"We were asking if you had any ideas about the adoption issue you raised last meeting," Caesar said to him. "You know, non-citizen Sicilians buying adoption as a means of gaining citizenship and minimising their taxes; you said we had to have an answer to Boni criticisms on that score."

"Yes, sorry," Drusus replied. "I really don't know what can be done about it. So if the Boni raise the point, we should just put on a brave face. Does a citizen not have the right to adopt a slave, if he so chooses? So why quibble if he adopts a respectable free man instead? And if this creates problems for Sicily Tribe, then it is up to Sicily Tribe to solve its own problems."

"But if this continues, there will not be enough income from non-citizens to pay the Republic Stipend," Lepidus objected.

"Then let them make up the shortfall out of their own purses," Drusus replied. "It is a problem they have let happen; so it is their responsibility to solve it. That is what autonomy is all about."

"There has been talk of imposing an Adoption Levy," Carbo injected a comment. "It is suggested that half of an adoptee's worth be levied to the Tribe;

this would discourage the practice, and earn quite a few sesterces where it still continues.”

“Rubbish!” Drusus replied. “Even I can see a way around that! All that needs to be done is to enter into a contract to sell all one's assets for a denarius, with an option of buying them back at that price a month later once the adoption is complete.”

Really, Marcus Livius! Do you think there are not ways to counter that?” Carbo replied almost sarcastically. “Just having that right under the contract could be considered an 'asset', and valued as such. There are ways of stopping such obvious practices.”

“And there will always be less obvious ways found, to avoid your stops, Gnaeus Papirius,” Drusus replied tiredly. “So rather than taking responsibility for the practice and defending it ourselves, why not just say it is legal, and if the Boni don't like it then let them suggest a solution?”

“Let me ask a really stupid question here, gentlemen,” Lafrenius broke in. “In the end, what difference will it make? We are only talking about a few hundred, even a few thousand men. Their votes will not matter. The Tribe will have to find the Stipend, and however they go about it is their decision. If they can't find it by taxing non-citizens, then their citizens will have to make up for it. But either way, it is NOT OUR PROBLEM! And even if every man in the Province is made a citizen, and the whole of the stipend is to be raised by additional taxation on citizens, they will still be better off than as a Province.”

There was silence for a short time. At length, Lepidus took a deep breath and said “So in effect, you are agreeing with Marcus Livius?”

“Yes,” Lafrenius answered.

I am very uncomfortable about this,” Caesar interjected. “Fourteen years ago the question of making Italians full citizens almost tore the Republic apart. Now you seem to be content to allow citizenship to Greeks and Sicilian natives, and who knows what else! It isn't just the Boni who will be screaming; many of the Head Count are as xenophobic as Cato himself. If we try to go too fast, the whole thing might explode.”

“You will not find that mindset among the Italians, Sextus Julius,” Mutilus said. “To a man, Italians think Rome is altogether too arrogant, and a bit of watering-down of their precious racial blood is long overdue. We had hundreds of years of fighting Rome's wars and paying Rome's exactions and still being considered little more than slaves; we see no reason why provincials should put up with that treatment.”

“And the more Tribes in the Republic Comitia and Senate, the less influence the Old Tribes will have,” Caesar saw the direction of the logic. “That is what the Boni were saying when the admission of Sicily was being debated. 'A poorly disguised attempt to introduce more plebeians and Italians' was Cato's allegation. And he was right.”

“Yes, he was right,” Mutilus agreed. “But it was more than just that; the Boni still seem to think Rome is a walled town surrounded by hostile Sabines. But it is in fact the mistress of the whole world. The Republic that rules most of

the world is no longer a small camp of warriors! It is time it was governed as a community of all nations, and not just a fortress for one.”

“That is exactly what Lucius Cornelius said to me once,” Drusus interrupted. “He wanted the *Mos Majorum* – his understanding of it, that is – to be offered to every people. If they adopted it and lived by it, then he would consider them as being Romans in their hearts.”

“Sulla was a ruthless, deceitful, scheming bastard,” Sertorius said. “But he was also a genius, a man of great vision. The man who hated the idea of Kingship would have been an excellent king!”

“I tell you; the Celtiberians over in the Spains are as close to barbarians as I have ever seen; but now that the Ruffian system is bedded down, they are adopting civilised ways faster than I could have imagined. Within a generation they will be the match of Italian Gaul. If I am still around by then, I expect they will be applying for Tribal status as well, on par with any Italian Tribe.”

Caesar was stunned. After gaping for a moment, he broke out. “By all the gods! If you are talking about the Spains that way, then how much stronger a case could be made for Asia, Macedonia, Achaia? The list goes on! Will Rome be swallowed by her own conquests?”

“That is precisely my point, Sextus Julius,” Sertorius replied. “The Republic is now much bigger than just Rome. We need to recognise where we are going, and plot out a course so the process can be managed. Just adding Sicily, and then Africa, and then another, one-by-one as the conditions arise, will lead to chaos. We need to set up strict criteria, and processes that a Province must go through if it is to become a Tribe.”

“I feel like I am being asked to hew my own cross,” Caesar said softly, still trying to take in what was being said. “You are talking about the end of Rome as I have always loved her.”

“As Lucius Cornelius once told Cato, Rome is not the Republic; but Rome has given birth to the Republic,” Drusus extended the metaphor. “It is Rome's duty as a good parent to make sure her child grows up healthy, temperate and virtuous, a daughter she can be proud of.”

Caesar lifted his arms and dropped them again. “It is too much for me to take in. Perhaps we can talk about it in a few days' time.”

“Conscript Fathers, I present to you the proposal titled 'The Lafrenian Law concerning Recognition of New Tribes'.” Lafrenius opened his speech. “Two years ago, Sicily was recognised as a Tribe in its own right. The citizens in that province, almost all of them veterans of the legions and worthy of our total respect, had up until that point been effectively denied the rights which most citizens in Rome or the other Tribes in Italy are guaranteed. Admission of Sicily as a Tribe was a reasonable and convenient way of extending to them their full range of rights as citizens.

“We now have before us a proposal to recognise Africa as a Tribe, and for much the same reasons. I for one have no trouble acknowledging the justice of their claims. But I can foresee that this process will not stop at Africa. As more

and more veterans are granted land in the provinces in return for their faithful service, we will find this same pattern continuing. Sardinia and Corsica already have large numbers of citizens living there, and Italian Gaul is much the same. Within a generation we can expect Silo's retired veterans to swell the numbers of Roman citizens living in the East. I am convinced that this process should not be entirely ad-hoc, and dependent upon the whim of whoever is in the Senate at the time; if this sloppy process is permitted, then we can be certain that sooner or later, any claim will be recognised because it suits a particular coalition at the time to do so. This could cause considerable damage to the Republic.

“I propose that we legislate in advance of this approaching wave of petitions. Thus we can impose some discipline on the process, set clear criteria that must be observed, and guide more constructively the augmentation of our Republic.” Lafrenius stood squarely before that part of the chamber where the Boni tended to gather. “I call upon you, who are called 'Boni', to recognise that such measures must be taken to ensure the changes that result from these inevitable petitions are properly controlled, and not allowed to happen as if by accident. If you do not support this proposed law, then you are allowing the process to remain anarchic.” Lafrenius then started strolling back to the opposite wing of the chamber as he continued.

“This law proposes that no province can petition for Tribal status unless it meets the following criteria. First, it must be a recognised Province, under effective Republic Administration for at least twenty five years. This measure is to ensure that there has been a generational change since it came under Roman authority. This generational change is required to ensure that Roman ways, Roman laws, Roman customs are understood and accepted as the norm in its own dealings. The adoption of the Rufan System throughout the Roman world will contribute greatly to this process. This requirement is not to be understood to mean that there must have been total tranquillity, of course. We need only to cast our own minds back over the last fifteen years to recognise that Rome itself was on the brink of civil war in the consulship of Sextus Julius Caesar and Lucius Marcus Philippus. Then it was subject to the Sulpician Coup during the consulships of Lucius Cornelius Sulla and Lucius Porcius Cato. And finally had to be rescued from another attempted coup by Pompeius Strabo during the consulship of Marcus Livius Drusus and Lucius Porcius Cato. So I am not talking about total serenity here, of which not even Rome itself can boast in a similar period of twenty five years; but this should be read as a general acceptance of the authority of the Republic.

“Secondly, it must be economically and socially viable as an autonomous component within the Republic. This means that it must have an adequate financial basis for its own governance and maintenance of social order. It must have an educated class capable of providing its own leadership. It must have a general population sufficiently sophisticated to provide political stability.

“Thirdly, it must be a genuine community, with some substantial measure of common identity. To give an example, Sicily may be thought of as having

ancestry divided between Romans, Italians, Greeks, Punics and native Sicilians. But that is only from the perspective of genealogies! If you tour Sicily today, you will soon realise that these disparate bloodlines have substantially fused to form a single new society. There are no longer separate 'Roman' communities, 'Greek' communities, etc., but a single society with a multistranded heritage. Compare this to Long-haired Gaul, where even if it were to beg for admission to the Republic, it is still split into three main nations, and even within each of those nations there are tribes deeply resentful of each other even to the point of war! Long-haired Gaul is divided; but by that comparison you can see that the variety within Sicily is harmonious and healthy. Africa is the same; harmonious and healthy.

"Fourthly, it must contain the entirety of the proposed community, and not be a splinter. For example, were the Greeks to seek admission, they could not be accepted as individual city-states. That would fragment the Republic, rather than strengthen it! They must first form themselves into a single Greek Province; or at the very least, into one province in Macedonia, Thracia and Achaia, and another on the far side of the Aegean. But of course, the idea of Greeks, or any other nation, being admitted is well off into the distance.

"And finally, there must be an agreed Republic Stipend to be paid annually. This not only serves to compensate the Republic for the tax income it will forgo in future years, but it also recognises that Tribal status within this Republic is a privilege; it is akin to a foreigner buying his private citizenship, and thereafter paying his Roman taxes. It is something which must be valued, not given away!" Lafrenius pivoted on one heel to take in the whole Senate in one sweeping glance.

"Conscript Fathers, it is inevitable that our citizens in the Provinces will prosper under the peace and stability the Republic offers. It is also inevitable that the foreigners in those provinces will become Romanised over time, as they enjoy the benefits that come from being part of this Republic and attempt to advance their families under this marvellous form of governance. As this process continues into the future, there will be a need to regulate it. Simple prohibition will not be enough; that will only create unrest, and give rise to resentment, revolts and civil war. It is much better to lift up a people than to cast them down! This proposed law will ensure peace, prosperity and harmony throughout the Roman world; and in such peace, prosperity and harmony is a more certain security than can be offered by a hundred legions! I commend this law for your approval."

Cato stood.

"Lucius Porcius, you would speak against this bill?" Lepidus asked.

"Yes, Marcus Aemilius," Cato asserted, and strode to the focus of the floor. "Conscript Fathers, this proposal is most disturbing. Titus has spoken about the requirements that he would impose on any petition for a Province to be accepted as a Tribe. He has made these requirements sound quite prudent and cautious, as though he were eager to limit such applications. But consider for a moment the requirements he does *not* impose. The first one – and surely a

most fundamental one! - is that there need not be so much as a single citizen in the entire province!

“When the Senate accepted Sicily as a Tribe – an acceptance which I warned would be a disaster for the *Mos Majorum*! - we were talking at that time not about granting citizenship to all and sundry. No! We were concerned only with allowing men who were already citizens to form a new Tribe, ostensibly to protect their rights as citizens. No new citizens, we were assured! But look at what has happened! There is a whole new industry in Sicily now; Roman citizens – or should I say, Italians who have been granted a citizenship which they hold in no esteem at all – these disgraceful pimps are prostituting their citizenship. They are nominally adopting wealthy Sicilians and Greeks, for a fee; thus granting these men citizenship by adoption. And then they disinherit their so-called 'sons', much as a harlot walks away from her latest client.

“But at least they were going through a formality, however empty and abusive of the *Mos Majorum*. This proposed law, on the other hand, makes no mention of citizenship at all! And presumably these non-citizens would be permitted to elect Republican Praetors from among their own number, Praetors who would by law be eligible to stand for the Consulate.

“Just think, Conscript Fathers! This Republic, which our ancestors bled and died for, and which many of us have also risked our lives to serve; Titus Lafrenius would permit it to be governed by men who are not even citizens! Thus Titus Lafrenius is true to form. He deceived and betrayed Caius Marius when he was accorded absolute trust; and now he would deceive and betray the Republic of which he is shamefully a consul, in another act of deception and betrayal!”

Lafrenius leapt to his feet as a startled murmur ran through the chamber.

“You have already spoken, Titus,” Lepidus said quietly.

“A point of order, Marcus Aemilius. The last speaker accused a consul of the Republic of betrayal, which I take to mean High Treason. Such an accusation should not be made; and if made, should be subject to immediate retraction and apology.”

“I will never apologise to a traitor!” Cato shouted back.

“Lucius Porcius; you have been Consul four times, and Censor,” Lafrenius responded. “It is only my respect for the offices which you have held, and which you have fulfilled honourably and with great competence, that permits me to forgive the ravings of a paranoid old man.” Another low murmur ran around the terraces.

“Order! Order!” Lepidus called. Once the muttering had died down to spoke again. “Conscript Fathers; I would ask all members to speak with the dignity their own status demands, and of each other with proper respect.” Lepidus settled onto his curule chair slightly. “I take it from those last words by my colleague that he has forgiven the insult, so I will take no action in this case; but any further intemperate language will be subject to discipline.”

Drusus stood.

“Yes, Marcus Livius?” Lepidus asked.

"I recall that my good friend Lucius Porcius, twice my colleague in the Consulate, had no misgivings about Varius taking his place in the Senate, even though he was half-Celt. Yet it is known that Varius embezzled State funds before he fled into exile. Nor do I recall any objection from Lucius Porcius when Pompeius Strabo took his seat in the Senate, even though he had Picentine blood in his veins. Not that there is anything wrong with Picentines, of course; but at the time they were not citizens. Yet this same Pompeius Strabo attempted to take over Rome by armed force. And I also know that Lucius Porcius trusts his own life, and the lives of all his family, to a physician who is a Greek slave.

"So it would seem that my dear friend has never had problems with non-Romans actually sitting in the Senate, even those who deliberately do harm to the Republic; and he is prepared to trust his entire family to the care of a Greek slave. Yet he will not abide the mere possibility that, some time in the distant future, a free man of Greek ancestry might be entrusted by his Tribe to represent their interests in this place!"

I am sorry, old friend," Drusus smiled as he looked across to Cato, "but I cannot see the logical consistency in your position."

Metellus Pius stood as Drusus sat, and was recognised. "I am filled with dread at how things have progressed since we gave our citizenship away when Caesar and Lupus were consuls," he confessed. "I warned at the time that it was a mistake to grant citizenship to the Italians, and the path of events has proven me right. Look at what has happened since they were permitted a hand in the government of the Republic!" Metellus exclaimed. "We now have a Senate that has virtually no authority! The Mob rules Rome itself through its Tribal Comitia, the Italians do as they please, imposing huge taxes on Roman landholders, and even our authority over the Provinces has been crippled by that accursed Miletus Decree, drafted by an Italian with no regard for the need for flexibility in government! And now they propose yet another stampede away from the Mos Majorum, by allowing Provincials a voice within this Senate! In this Senate, which should be ruling the Provinces, rather than subject to them!

"I have a vision before me, dreadful and ominous, that within the lifetime of my children Rome will become a subject city. Yes, I see that Rome will not command an empire and be honoured above every city in the world; but will instead be enslaved by a polyglot empire which it first assembled, and then capitulated to in an act of racial suicide! We have just heard the Consul of Rome – Yes, I said the Consul of Rome! – talking about the so-called inevitability of Greeks being accepted as a Tribe! Even Long-haired Gaul is used as an example! And now, right now, he is advocating Tribal Status for Africa, the land of Carthage! Yes, Carthage, our bitterest enemy less than sixty years ago, is to be given Roman Citizenship and seats in this Senate, to destroy us from within!

"We have heard it said that all this is inevitable. I pray to Jupiter and Mars that it must not be so! Rome must not be made subject to anyone! Rome must rule, and not be ruled! Just as I opposed the admission of Sicily, and the admission of the Italian Tribes before that, I oppose and will continue to oppose

any further weakening of Rome's sovereignty. To do less is to betray all that makes Rome what she always has been. And to even think about 'regulating' the criteria for new Tribes is to admit defeat before we even set out to war."

Glaucia stood for the call as Metellus sat.

"Lucius, please speak," Lepidus invited.

"Conscript Fathers, this might seem strange coming from my lips; but I urge you to think very seriously about what you have just heard from Quintus Caecilius," Glaucia said soberly. "'Look at what has happened since those Italians were given citizenship', he urged. Yes, let's look!

"First, an Italian by the name of Silo has repulsed Mithridates, who posed an even greater threat to Rome than the Germans and the Carthaginians; Silo has conquered Pontus and put this threat to rest forever. And he did this with almost no casualties! Compare that to the last battle in which Roman forces were commanded by one of the Boni; that would be Arausio, I think? No! I am wrong; it was Quintus Lutatius Catulus in Italian Gaul! Oh, well; not one, but two catastrophic examples of what a good, old-fashioned Bonus general can do, compared to an Italian like Silo.

"And not only did Silo conquer Pontus; he has also made Asia, a province that was seething with rebellion, one of the most prosperous and pacific provinces in our possession. He has also taken control of Armenia, another threat to our eastern frontier, and he has made an enduring and favourable peace with Parthia, the only remaining power able to cause us any concern. Oh, and I almost forgot; he has also added Syria to our domains. The Seleucids are no more.

"Where ten years ago there was Asia, a coastal scraping of a Province facing the Aegean Sea, a province that so hated us that they joined hands with our enemies, and slaughtered a hundred thousand of our citizens; we now control all of Anatolia, Pontus, Armenia, Syria, and half of Mesopotamia, in peace and tranquillity, and with ten times the revenue that had been squeezed out of Asia at terrible expense in unrest.

"What else have those pesky Italians done in that time?" Glaucia asked himself. "Oh, yes! Threatening to destroy Rome! How could I have forgotten? Do any of you remember Sulpicius? Was he an Italian, or a Roman? Was he backed by Italian legions, or by a Roman Mob? Who saved Rome from the hands of the Mob back then? Lucius Cornelius, of course; but this was only possible because the Italians secretly provided him with every possible assistance, including provisioning and a route of march. And then there was Strabo! I have to admit, Strabo had a bit of Italian blood in him! But none of the Boni seemed to mind that while he supported them. But who saved Rome from his clutches? Lucius Cornelius again, backed by Italian legions!

"There is no doubt about it; the Italians have definitely been a major influence on Rome's recent history. But has it been for good or for ill? You decide! Now think about what would have happened had Quintus Caecilius been successful in stopping Italian Citizenship. To put it simply, it would have been war. And as Caius Marius warned you at the time, the Italians would have

won. They had more and better equipment, twice as many troops, and a leader the calibre of Quintus Poppaedi Silo.” Glauca looked around the chamber. “I have spent years as second-in-command under Quintus Poppaedi. I assure you, he is head and shoulders above even Caius Marius. Alexander the Great would have wept with envy, and then opened his veins!

“So be assured that had the Boni policy been followed and Italian citizenship rejected, there is only one way that war could have ended. But it would NOT have been Rome as a smoking ruin on the banks of the Tiber; Silo is too civilised, too merciful, too wise, to create in Rome an enemy forever. He would have offered Rome a full share in the Republic of Italia. Yes, Rome could have been one of the sixteen Tribes of Italia! But fortunately for Rome, Marcus Livius carried the day, and thereby maintained Rome as the dominant power in this Republic.

“And this is a situation that we Italians do not resent, much as it might surprise some of you. For we Italians are today very much what Rome has made us. I look forward to the days when Greeks and Gauls will be brought to the same state; I long for all peoples to learn the ways of the Republic that Rome gave birth to, and to join with us in nourishing it. I urge you all to support this proposal, and thereby start to fulfil the destiny that the gods have set before Rome; to become the Honoured, Respected and Revered Mother of the whole world.” As Glauca walked back to his place a handful of Italians stood and started to applaud. Soon most of the Senate was on its feet, and clapping thunderously.

Lepidus called for order, and after several minutes was heeded. “Is there a speaker against the proposal?” he asked.

Ahenobarbus stood.

“Lucius Domitius has the floor,” Lepidus announced.

“What is the point?” Ahenobarbus sneered. “The manipulators of illiterate Italians have combined with the pawns of the Mob to destroy the Mos Majorum. What else can we true Romans do to prevent you?” He started for the door, and a few other Boni senators rose to join him in the walk-out.

Flaccus stood.

“Lucius Valerius?” Lepidus asked.

“I would advise Senators to delay their departure for just a short time. They might regret it if they miss what I am about to say.” Flaccus was Head of the Senate, and respected by virtually all. The straggle of senators heading for the door stopped in their places to listen, but made no move to return to their seats. Flaccus nodded as if to say that he accepted this as good enough.

“The last time we had a walk-out by the Boni was the meeting when Italian citizenship was put to the vote. Quintus Caecilius has already reminded you of how much was gained by that little bit of dummy-spitting. But I must advise you all of something even more serious; that any attempt to resolve this question by force will not be successful. It did not work when Sulpicius tried it, and nor will it work if the Boni try it. Scream all you like about doing it to save the Mos Majorum, but the Mos Majorum itself forbids a Roman, any Roman,

from taking up arms against the Senate which is the only legal source of military authority.

“So if anyone here is thinking of arms, then he is not only a traitor to Rome; he is also a traitor to his own vision of Rome.” Then Flaccus disconcertingly adopted a more casual air, and shrugged his shoulders. “Quite apart from the fact that any such attempt will fall flat; you delude yourselves if you think as many as one man in a thousand would support you. However, any such attempt will at least achieve some good; it will allow this Senate to rid itself of its least valuable members when the trials for Perduellio are conducted, and also bring in a bit of revenue when their estates are confiscated.” Flaccus sat. The Boni on their feet looked deflated, but continued their walk towards the doors. To turn back now would be too humiliating.

Carbo had been deeply involved in the formulation of the Lafrenian Law, of course. Like all of both Populares and Italianists, he wanted the law drafted to appear as tight and restrictive as possible, while setting the criteria no higher than Africa could manage. His submission to the next meeting of the Senate listed all the criteria in the Law, and provided information showing that the province satisfied each of them. After the Sicilian precedent, the Tribal Stipend was based on the Provincial Tax. However, the actual value was not simply adopted from the previous year, that being affected by drought, but was made equal with the average for the last five years.

The first African Comitia was elected under strict supervision by the two Consuls; since the death of Sulla, there were no Censors. They extended to Cato an invitation to join them as an observer, but Cato refused. He did not want to provide anything which might be considered an endorsement of the process. Voting was restricted to Republic citizens, naturally, but Tribal affiliation was not a consideration. It would require another Census to register individuals into 'Africa Tribe', and the death of Sulla two and a half years ago had meant that the remainder of the lustrum would be without Censors. It would be another year before this could be normalised.

To ensure that no allegations of interference could be made, neither Populares nor Italianists tried to organise their own candidates for this election. They were content to ensure that the efforts of the Boni were frustrated, but otherwise kept their distance. Not surprisingly, the merchants and veterans of Africa elected a Comitia almost devoid of conservatives. These African men could not be considered either Populares or Italianists; they had their own African agenda, and their two Tribal Praetors said that they were prepared to work with whichever of the main Republican factions best suited their own plans. This generally meant the Populares.

Pontius Telesinus and Gaius Aurelius Cotta were elected Consuls, despite Quintus Mucius Scaevola standing as the Bonus candidate. This greatly demoralised the Boni; the Great Scaevola, consul twenty years earlier, was respected by all factions for his learning and integrity. But the odour of the *Lex*

Licinia Mucia, which he had pushed through the Senate during his Consulship to deny citizenship to Italians and even Latins, made him totally unacceptable to the Italians, and his harsh treatment of the Publicani while Governor of Asia had made his name a swear-word to the merchant supporters of the Populares. If he could be defeated by a relative unknown like Telesinus, then there was no hope. The less intelligent but more determined of them started to become almost paranoid about the Popularis-Italianist coalition, referring to it as a 'conspiracy'.

The other great shock was a Basic Law passed by the African Comitia during that first year. This Basic Law was wide-ranging, but not very specific. Rather than being aimed at one specific problem, it acted more as a framework which all other laws were required to conform to. The Basic Law's provisions included one which established that no aspect of it could be changed except by the support of an absolute three-quarters of the new Tribe's Comitia. Much of it was uncontentious; it explicitly stated that where any Tribal laws were inconsistent with Republic Laws, then Republic laws would prevail. But among many other basic guarantees, it specifically granted non-citizens many rights formerly reserved for citizens, including equal treatment before the law. Another was the right to register as a 'Tribal Voter' if certain conditions were met. These dictated a minimum of five years residency, sufficient wealth to be listed as Fifth Class or better were he a citizen, and not being found guilty of any crime that would be punishable by loss of 'Tribal Voter' status. In this last regard, it also required that any law which could impose loss of this status must obtain an absolute three-quarters of the vote in the Comitia to be valid.

This did not grant full citizenship, which was a Republican matter, but it was not far short of it. It was debatable whether or not this permitted a non-citizen to act as Tribal Praetor. The Republican Laws made no mention of citizenship, it being assumed at the time the Catonian Reform was instituted that political office was confined to citizens, but this would not be a significant point. There was no doubt that a full citizen who was a supporter would perform a 'Sicilian adoption' to ensure eligibility if his favoured candidate was accused of being ineligible. This extension of these rights also had enormous implications for the finances of the Tribe. It meant that the Tribal Stipend could not be raised by taxing non-citizens more heavily. The Tribal Stipend would need to be paid from General Treasury funds, raised from citizen and non-citizen alike.

"I warn you, Conscript Fathers!" Metellus Pius proclaimed shrilly as he wound up his case. "If this is permitted, then citizenship would be devalued. Indeed, I have no doubt that the Africans would grant full citizenship if it were within their power to do so; but because it is not, they are giving away all the rights of citizenship instead. What a farce! What a tragedy! What has come over these citizens, to throw away their rights?"

"Something must be done to set this aright! This Senate must take action to protect our heritage!" he continued at full rant. "Since citizenship is still a Republic issue, we must take immediate action to make it clear that only full

citizens are entitled to due process. Therefore I propose the 'Metellan Law concerning Citizenship' as circulated to all Senators. You will see that this explicitly forbids the extension of certain rights to non-citizens. Under this law, a non-citizen may not vote, may not demand compensation for compulsory acquisition of property, may not stand for an elected position within the Republic or any Tribe, and is also disqualified from the various other rights so promiscuously granted by this African Basic Law. You must stop this disaster before it becomes unmanageable!" At last he sat.

Glaucia stood.

"Lucius, please speak," Telesinus said, it being his month with the fasces.

"Firstly, I must thank Quintus Caecilius for drawing this matter to the attention of all Senators. This African Basic Law is, as he says, a most seminal concept; I can only compare it to the Miletus Decree as a fundamental step in the growth of the Republic. We would all do well to study it carefully, and I would not be surprised if some of its tenets are adopted by other Tribes.

"The most significant point is that it greatly strengthens the most fundamental principle of the *Mos Majorum*; the Rule of Law. By imposing a framework with which all subsequent laws must comply, it says that even a majority of the *Comitia* itself is not above the Law. This formalisation into a Basic Law is a huge step forward in legal thought, and a marvellous guarantee that the *Mos Majorum* will be respected. Yet it is not so arrogant as to declare itself infallible. By allowing that it can be changed if the need arises, it allows flexibility for future generations; but only if the need for change is so obvious, so clear, and so necessary that a seventy-five percent majority agrees. I am struck by the vision and moral courage of those citizens who formulated this Basic Law and supported it through the African *Comitia*. These are not timorous souls, afraid to do anything in case it is a mistake and hiding under the threadbare shelter of worn-out verities! No; these men have the intelligence and insight to see how the world is changing, and the courage to take control of those changes. I applaud them!

"As for its specific provisions; I must point out that this Senate has declared that it has no right to interfere in internal Tribal matters. We can all remember when the Picentine and Lucanian Tribal elections were perverted by certain persons, namely well-known Boni senators. The Boni were quite happy to declare the doctrine of Tribal Autonomy then! And to their eternal credit, even the other Italian Tribes accepted that ruling, however dangerous a precedent it might have set for their own futures. So this Senate has no right to interfere in Tribal matters, provided citizens of the Republic do not suffer any restrictions of their rights. Similarly, it has no right to set aside any other rights granted by a Tribal *Comitia* in regard to its own operations.

"Certainly, the Republic Senate is not bound by this Basic Law. If this Senate were to acquire property from a non-citizen, then it need not pay compensation. If a non-citizen were to be charged with a Republic crime, he would not be guaranteed due process; but I hope he would be accorded it, to ensure that no errors are made. But if his property is acquired by the Tribe, and

the Tribe is bound to pay him for it, what is that to the Republic? If a case is brought against a non-citizen by a citizen, then the citizen plaintiff is still guaranteed his rights under this Basic Law. And if a non-citizen takes a citizen to court, that citizen defendant is still guaranteed his rights under this Basic Law. In no way will this Basic Law curtail the rights of any citizen, and nor will it limit the power of the Republic. The most that Quintus Caecilius can complain about is that non-citizens are being treated as well as citizens. If he believes that people should not be treated with common decency and obvious justice, then that reveals much more about him than it reveals about this Basic Law.

“But what he cannot complain about is that the rights of a citizen have been infringed. And because the rights of a citizen are not being harmed, his proposed law is nothing more than a combination of arrogance and scare-mongering. And because all matters internal to a Tribe are beyond the authority of this Senate, his proposed Law is also futile.”

Cato stood and was given the call.

“As usual, Conscript Fathers, Lucius Glaucia has completely missed the point. This Basic Law will grant to non-citizens certain rights which can then be used *against citizens*. That is the critical point here; not that non-citizens are given certain rights and privileges as such, but that these rights and privileges may then be turned against citizens!” Cato strolled heavily as he composed his thoughts. “What is wrong with this man, that he cannot see the danger?” Cato pleaded. “He has a good record as a soldier, so he cannot be oblivious to the risks. Yet he is so casual about providing weapons to potential enemies! When will he realise that a non-citizen is, by definition, not a citizen? If he is not a citizen, then he is a potential danger to a citizen. It is so simple that a child could see it!” Cato stood, hands out and palms up, as if wondering.

“Rome has had to fight, to struggle, to scratch and claw for its survival for its whole life. Is it because Lucius Glaucia has no part of this heritage in his own blood, that he cannot sense it? Is it because he was given citizenship without cost and without effort, that he places so little value on it? Whatever the reason, he stands condemned out of his own mouth. This African Basic Law would try to elevate non-citizens to the same rank as citizens, and thereby it diminishes the true citizens. If he cannot understand this, then he is not worth listening to.”

Cato sat and a dozen Italian Senators leapt to their feet. But Telesinus stood himself.

“This is the second time this Senate has heard Lucius Porcius Cato insult and demean a Roman Consular. And, in my mind, completely without just cause on both occasions,” he said, the tight control on his rage almost tangible. “Out of respect for his glorious record, I allowed him to finish his address without interruption. But I will not allow it to stand without correction. Lucius Porcius said Rome has had to fight for its survival; well, so have the Tribes of Italy; usually against a Rome that strove not for survival, but for supremacy. I assure Lucius Porcius that Italians are very familiar with the struggle to survive;

more so than he is, in fact. And he alleges that Italians do not value their citizenship. I assure him we do; enough that only fourteen years ago we were on the brink of war because a Roman Senate in the grip of the Boni were determined to refuse us citizenship; a citizenship which was rightfully ours because we had been faithfully fighting at Rome's behest for generations. 'Without cost and without effort', you say, Lucius Porcius! At the cost of generations of faithful allies dead and maimed, I say! And you and your like would still be refusing us what was promised, your sacred oaths nothing more than a rich tradition of lies and deceit!

"To whom is citizenship more valuable, Lucius Porcius? To us Italians, who were prepared to die for it, or to you Romans, who were prepared to give it away rather than fight? To whom is this Republic more precious, Lucius Porcius? To us Italians who fought off the Germans, then conquered Mithridates when he tried to conquer Rome, and then we unseated Tigranes for good measure? More than three-quarters of the men that fought in the East over the last thirteen years were Italian, not Roman, Lucius Porcius. Lead by that pair of Italians, Silo and Glauca, the man you have just insulted! So who is seeing the danger, and confronting it? While you imagine that the Republic means nothing more than allowing Romans to do wrong to non-Romans with impunity, we Italians are the true upholders of the *Mos Majorum*! And in case you have forgotten what that means, let me remind you how Lucius Cornelius summarised it; 'No-one is King!' Yet you would want to make every Roman a King, and every non-Roman a slave!" Telesinus took a deep breath to underscore this climax.

"You have honours and titles and offices in abundance, Lucius Porcius. Four times Consul, more than any except Caius Marius; but not even he attained the office of Censor to crown his achievements! Yet you have not the faintest idea of the real, beating heart of the *Mos Majorum*! To Quintus Poppaedi who gladly accepts a duty amounting to exile at the edge of the world for the sake of this Republic; to Titus Lafrenius who was instrumental in putting down the Sulpician Coup more than ten years ago and served with great valour in the East, but whom you called a traitor to his face last year; to Lucius Glauca who served for years as Silo's right-hand man against Mithridates and Tigranes but whom you so freely insult today; and to me, even though I have no grounds for boasting except that I share the vision of these great men; to us, the *Mos Majorum* is a beautiful ideal on which to build a great Republic; it is worth the sacrifice of all we are and all we have to maintain it and spread its influence. It is our life, our soul, our passion! But to you it is no more than an excuse for hypocrisy and veniality.

"So be assured that whenever I hold the fasces, if I hear you ever speak so disrespectfully of a Consular again, you will be evicted from that session of the Senate." Telesinus sat, and called for the next speaker.

Ahenobarbus stood, his face glowing and his hands shaking in rage. "How dare you!" he choked out, without waiting for the call. "How dare you, an Italian, threaten to evict the only man in Rome's history to serve in more than

three consulships and also become Censor! How dare you, a man who has no forebears and will achieve nothing worth recording, a man who by all rights should not even be permitted to walk into this chamber except to mop its floor, a man of no dignitas and competent at nothing except arrogance..."

Telesinus stood. "Lictors, please assist Lucius Domitius to some fresh air!" he commanded. And then in a gentler voice to Ahenobarbus, "Please, Lucius Domitius; feel free to return as soon as you have recovered."

Cato stood immediately, and glared at Telesinus as the lictors approached Ahenobarbus. Then he turned to his Bonus colleague "Come, Lucius Domitius; do not trouble these good Roman men. Let us both leave without the need for them to soil their consciences by obeying so disgusting an order!"

Metellus also rose to his feet and started walking towards the Great Doors. The rest of the Boni faction also stood and followed him.

"I can see why Quintus Poppaediis kept you up his sleeve for 'Special Missions', Pontius!" Caesar held out a goblet of Falernian wine as in a toast. "Pulling Cato's beard like that, in front of the whole Senate, was something only a brave man or a fool would attempt! And then to top it by ordering Ahenobarbus out!" Caesar laughed with amazement.

But beside him Drusus sat with a pained look. "I served with Lucius Porcius twice as Consul. I grew to respect him greatly. But he is no longer the same man. He seems to be growing ever more bitter as he ages."

"It was not that hard for him to be gracious back then, Marcus Livius." Telesinus offered an opinion. "You and Lucius Cornelius were his allies against the Populares. He was assured the Consulship and a respectful, co-operative colleague. But now, in times of adversity, is when a man's true character comes out." Telesinus shrugged. "There is a certain quality that really great men have. Caius Marius had it; Lucius Cornelius had it; you and Quintus Poppaediis both have it. It is what makes you not only fight harder when the going is tough, but also fight smarter. Cato just doesn't have it."

Mutilus, who was on a quick visit from Spain, agreed. "In fact, I don't think any of this crop of Boni can claim that quality. I think it is part of their politics; their whole ideology is built on the assumption that they were born to rule, so if that is not happening they have nowhere to start from. They get resentful instead of creative."

"That's it in a word, Gaius Papius!" Caesar agreed eagerly. "They are not creative! In fact they think 'creative' is a dirty word, because it means doing something that hasn't been done before. It is part of their oath as Boni that nothing new may ever be done!"

"There is one new thing that I think they might try to do," Telesinus said cautiously. "I think they might try a handful of assassinations. The political situation for them at the moment is that they now have no hope of winning an election purely on the strength of their vote. They might try to win by default."

"You might be right there," Drusus agreed. "Except that it is not a new thing. They tried to kill me the night before the Enfranchisement Vote, but

Lucius Cornelius thwarted it. So they have no qualms about murder, if it is 'all for the Greater Good'. And remember what Pompeius did in Picenum."

"Being born to rule is only part of their mental furniture," Mutilus went on. "The assumption that they can do whatever they like with impunity is another important feature; just remember how Cato was aghast at the idea of a non-citizen being able to take a citizen to court!"

"Yes!" Caesar jumped in. "That explains why Ahenobarbus lost his temper, too. Pontius was actually enforcing Standing Orders against a Bonus; but in his mind, it is the right of the Boni to enforce the rules against everyone else. Suddenly his world was being turned upside down." The four men looked to each other thoughtfully. All the levity had vanished from the conversation.

Telesinus was the first to speak. "As I said; don't be surprised if there is an assassination attempt next December. Our men should be alert to that."

Drusus took a deep sigh. "Well, that settles it. I am eligible for another Consulate next year, but was undecided about standing. Now I think I will." He smiled weakly. "I mean no offence to anyone else; but I suspect that murdering an obscure Italian candidate might not trouble them too much; but to murder Marcus Livius Drusus, son of a Consul and twice Consul himself, and with all of Italy nominally in his clientele; well, that might be a bit more than they want to risk. If word got out that the Boni were behind it, then there would be no escape for them." The other four men looked at him.

"Well, if that's what you want, Marcus Livius..." Mutilus said.

"If you put your hand up for the job, Marcus Livius, all other hands would stay down," Telesinus agreed.

Drusus looked across to Caesar. "Well, Sextus Julius? Would I be an acceptable candidate to the Populares?"

Caesar smiled broadly. "It is the Italianists' turn to be Senior Consul anyway! Why not!"

"Who will your candidate be?" Drusus asked.

"No firm decision yet," Caesar answered. "But it seems to be assumed that if Quintus Sertorius wants it, then it is his."

"Hm," Drusus thought to himself for a moment. "It would be a delight to have Quintus as a colleague, but it seems a waste of the man's abilities to be the Junior."

"Not if a war breaks out," Caesar said. "You are not a Military Man, Marcus Livius, and a Military Man like Quintus Sertorius would be the perfect fit with your abilities."

"Well, let's see if he wants it, or prefers to wait another year or two," Drusus closed the discussion. "But speaking of Quintus, what sort of condition did he leave Spain in, Caius Papius?"

"Excellent," Mutilus answered. "He had the professional Administrators in, all trained in the Rufan System, but he had appointed many of the leading Celtiberians in parallel with the official structure, as well as an elected Advisory Council. He had also arranged with Rufus and Flaccus to open another College

in Nova Carthago, to start training locals. It was almost finished when I left, and lecturers were being recruited. He had also set up schools for the – well, we would call then Fourth and Fifth class Celtiberians, to teach their sons Latin and mathematics. These are turning out youngsters who have literacy and numeracy skills to go into trades, and the brightest of them will be granted free admission to the Rufan College. He was slowly turning the whole of the Spains into a little Italy.”

“So what has he left for you to do?” Caesar said with a grin.

“To learn,” Mutilus replied. “Quintus had picked up quite a few of my ideas from Sicily, but he had the wit to change them to suit the local conditions. But more than that, he had to get the province up to the level of Sicily so these methods would work. He added a complete layer of local committees underneath my work. If Rome ever bothers to go into Long-Haired Gaul, or Germany, or Numidia, where there is not already a basic level of civilisation and where tribal loyalties still run high, then what Quintus did in Spain would serve as an excellent model.”

“So Spain is on the point of governing itself?” Drusus asked.

“Not yet,” Mutilus answered. “It is such a big place, and there are so many local variations, that I am forever making adjustments here and changes there to keep it running smoothly. Quintus has made this easier by setting up Committees in just about every town, and leaving them to make all the decisions within their budget. This is appealing to their sense of being masters of their own fate, as well as making them realise the limits of what is possible. And there are also some tribal jealousies that need to be smoothed out; no matter what you do, one tribe will always complain that another tribe is being treated more favourably. Having Tribal Councils that can recommend local priorities was a big step forward in both satisfying their complaints and making them responsible for their choices. But so long as they can take turns at feeling favoured and then aggrieved and then favoured again but generally listened to, all will be well.”

“It sounds like you think they might be ready for Tribal status some time, though,” Drusus continued to hope.

Mutilus frowned. “It is hard to say. In terms of literacy, Spain is perhaps ten years behind Sicily. In terms of social cohesion, it is generations away; they still see themselves as members of their local tribe first, and ‘Spain’ is a Roman idea that they don’t really understand. But who knows?” Mutilus shrugged. “Perhaps with education and Romanisation, the tribal set of mind might be overcome within the one generation. We can only work with what we’ve got.”

“Have you spoken to Quintus about your plans? Or asked him to explain what he had in mind?” Caesar asked.

“We spoke before I left for Spain,” Mutilus shrugged. “But I realised when I arrived that I had over-simplified the situation in my own mind. Now that I know what is happening on the ground I intend to speak to him again. I dropped in on his house yesterday when I arrived back in Rome; but I was told he was up in Nursia on Tribal business. I’ll stay in Rome until he returns.”

Sertorius arrived back in Rome two days later. His first call was to Mutilus. The two men spent most of the next two days talking through the situation in the Spains before asking for another informal gathering with the leading Populares. It was a further three days before Young Marius returned from duties with his own rural tribe in the far north, and another two after that while the leading Populares discussed their position.

"Thank you for your hospitality again, Caius," Sertorius said to Young Marius as he was admitted through the street door.

"It is a pleasure, Quintus," Marius replied. Caesar was already in the triclinium, and stood to greet the arrival. As he did so there was another knock on the door. Drusus and Mutilus had arrived together, and this was the start of a small stream. Within ten minutes Cotta, Carbo, Lafrenius, Lepidus, Telesinus and Vopiscus had joined them.

"Thank you for all coming today," Young Marius started the meeting after a short time for relaxing chatter. "I realise that we Populares outnumber our guests by two-to-one, but we will not be taking any votes here today, just sharing news and views. The first point is that Quintus would prefer to delay his candidature for Consul for another year or two. The second point is that we have heard that Cato will be standing again."

"What?" Drusus cried with incredulity. "He has already been Consul four times, and Censor once!"

"Exactly right." Caesar agreed. "But it has been ten years since his last Consulship, so he is eligible; and the feeling among the Boni is that they just cannot survive another year without a Consul. So they are playing their absolute best man to try to stop the momentum."

"And Quintus has already lost one election," Drusus nodded to himself. "He does not want to be remembered for losing twice, or he will never be given a third chance."

"Not to put too fine a point on it, but yes," Caesar agreed.

Drusus turned this information over in his mind for a moment. "So who will run with me?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, no other reasonable candidate wants to dent his reputation with a loss; they all want to wait until next year," Caesar admitted.

"And if Quintus wants next year?" Drusus asked.

"Then perhaps everyone else will have to wait until the year after that," Caesar shrugged.

Drusus thought a few more minutes. "What would you say if we Italianists put up two candidates?" he suggested. "Would you support us, without using this as an excuse to ask for two of your own at some future time?"

Caesar waved away the question. "No risk of that, Marcus Livius. If you can find someone to keep the Great Cato out of office, *we* will owe *you* the favour!"

"Then I might ask Caius Vidacilius if he wants to show the flag as the second man on the ticket," Drusus suggested. "I understand that he doesn't see

himself as a major prospect in the future, so that might mean that he will be prepared to take what might be the only chance he gets.”

“And not too scared of harming his future prospects if he fails,” Caesar completed the thought. “But he is Italian; might it not be better to put up a Roman, so as not to narrow his possible support base?”

“Good point,” Drusus agreed. “Gnaeus Priscus comes to mind, for one; he's Roman. I'll talk it over at Italia House. See who wants the mission, and we can choose from among them.”

And there is also one more question,” Caesar added. “We are due to elect Censors this year. Whom do you suggest?”

“Well, Lucius Cornelius was one of our faction, so it is your right to nominate,” Drusus replied.

“You don't think that we could try for both positions?” Caesar asked hopefully.

Drusus smiled broadly and shook his head. “Lucius Cornelius was always accusing me of being too pro-Popularis; now you will accuse me of being too much in favour of the Boni! But I think that could be pushing the Boni too hard if we lock them out of this position, which is largely ceremonial anyway so long as we have one of our own men there, to keep the other honest. Let's not force them into desperate measures.”

“Come now, Marcus Livius!” Caesar cajoled his friend. “Who could object to Quintus Poppaedi being recognised? He is almost a legend now, heroically defending the East!”

Quintus Poppaedi would refuse,” Drusus answered. “He told me that his year as Consul was living hell; there is no way he will submit to five years as Censor.”

“Then how about the Samnite Bull? His administrative ability is beyond question.”

“You will not get him out of the Spains that easily,” Drusus replied.

Caesar snapped his fingers in a moment of inspiration. “I know! Quintus Pompeius Rufus! The man who invented the Rufan System that now rules the world! Who could be better?”

“So Rufus is to be the Popularis candidate, eh? Whom do you suggest from our side?” Drusus asked.

“No, he would be the Italianist candidate; his appointment to Asia was the pet project of Lucius Cornelius, and he has sworn his support to you. We Populares will think about our man at our next meeting,” Caesar laughed.

Drusus smiled at the transparent bit of negotiating side-step. “Seriously, Sextus Julius; if we are going to put up two men, they will both have to be top quality, and both acceptable to both sides of our alliance. Perhaps we each need to draw up a short list, and then have a joint meeting to decide.” Then he added. “But I like Rufus; he would be a natural.”

On the way home Drusus visited the house rented by Africa Tribe for its Praetors in Rome. He was welcomed inside.

"Publius, thank you for your time," Drusus thanked Publius Dolla as he entered. Dolla smiled warmly.

"No, I must ask you to thank Lucius Glauca and Pontius Telesinus for their strong support for us," Dolla replied.

"Actually, that Basic Law is the reason for my visit today," Drusus cut straight to the business as he was shown into Dolla's private office. Dolla clapped for attention from the household slave, and gestured for cakes and wine to be brought before he closed the door behind him.

"Take a seat, Marcus Livius," he gestured as he crossed to his own office chair. Then settling, he asked "What do you want to say about that Law?"

"Only that I was very surprised by it," Drusus replied. "Surely your Comitia realises that it will result in a heavier burden upon citizens, if non-citizens are not taxed more?"

"Ah! That!" Dolla exclaimed. "Let me explain.

"First, if Africa Tribe does not impose taxes on non-citizens, then where would you expect non-citizen tradesmen to go, even if the wages might be slightly lower there, but taxes much lower? Where would you expect wealthy non-citizens to set up their businesses, if taxes and wages are lower?"

"I see," Drusus nodded in understanding. "You are aiming to create a significant inflow of cheap labour, attract business, and generally stimulate growth. And this growth will mean more prosperity for everyone, including citizens, in the medium term."

"And that is not all," Dolla continued. "The more people we have, the less expensive it is per capita to build roads, ports, aqueducts, bridges, and so on. And also the burden of the Republic Stipend is spread wider, and therefore thinner, as the population grows." There was a knock on the door. "Come!" Dolla responded.

The house slave entered with a plate of small cakes, a jug of watered wine and two goblets. He placed them on the edge of Dolla's desk and left, closing the door as he went. "Have one!" Dolla invited. "I have a young girl who does these very well."

Drusus took one and popped it into his mouth. He nodded his satisfaction. After chewing a few times he swallowed. "Yes, very nice!" he agreed. "Anyway, it will be interesting to see how this goes for you in Africa," Drusus returned to the topic. "It is an interesting approach, and I hope it works. Anything that advances the Rule of Law instead of venal privilege has got to be a good thing."

"Thank you for your encouragement, Marcus Livius."

"One other thing, Publius," Drusus said casually, "I hear that a certain ex-soldier is quietly recruiting veterans. This is supposedly to open up more farming land in Africa, but it seems very strange that he would be asking ex-soldiers to do this instead of younger men, or simply buying slaves."

Dolla shrugged. "I have heard that, too. But no doubt he has his reasons."

"No doubt he does. Do you have any idea what those reasons might be?"

"I have heard rumours."

"I am sure you have, Publius, but I did not ask if you have heard rumours. I asked if you had any idea," Drusus insisted. "Please give me a straight answer."

Dolla paused a moment. "I have heard several possible reasons. Some of them sound plausible, but I can't say definitely that any one of them is correct."

"Can't say, or won't?"

"Can't, Marcus Livius," Dolla pleaded.

"Because I have heard a rumour or two myself," Drusus said, relaxed again. "One is that the Basic Law is an attempt to gain support from the four-fifths of the population that are currently non-citizens, with a view to declaring independence from Rome and not paying the Republic Stipend. These recruits are to become an African Army to ensure Rome does not attempt to re-establish supremacy."

"Oh, that is a nonsense!" Dolla exclaimed. "Look at how many legions Rome can command! And with men like Silo, or even Glaucia to command them! Mithridates folded up like wet bedsheet against them, so what chance would Africa have?"

"That is just one rumour I have heard, Publius," Drusus continued. "Another is that Pontius Telesinus, whom you have just acclaimed for his support of Africa Tribe, is planning to station six legions in Utica, just in case."

Dolla looked up sharply, and then inwardly cursed himself for being so transparent. "Excellent!" he said. "Thirty thousand more men will mean more money being spent, more businesses making a profit; even the whores will rejoice!" he said in an attempt to mislead.

Drusus smiled. "But as I said, it is only a rumour." He rose from his seat. "Thank you for that delicious cake, Publius. I really should call on you more often!"

Dolla stood with his guest. "I am glad you visited, Marcus Livius. It would be good if we could continue to keep in touch." He opened the office door to see his guest to the front door.

Caius Cassius, the other Praetor representing Africa, arrived back at the house half an hour after Drusus left.

"Caius, I think we have problems," Dolla greeted him as he walked into the atrium. "Marcus Livius was here a short while ago, asking about the recruitment of all those veterans."

"And you told him that it was to extend the farmlands?" Cassius asked.

"He already knew that story, and said he doubted it. He asked if I knew the real reason."

"So you just pleaded ignorance, no?"

"That's right," Dolla answered. "But he didn't believe me. And then he said that Telesinus suspects Africa was planning to refuse payment of the Republic Stipend, and the soldiers were there to defend us against the legions."

"That's not a problem; we just pay the Stipend."

“Telesinus is not going to wait and see. He is planning to move six legions into Utica.”

“Shit!” Cassius exploded. “He can't do that!”

”What is to stop him?” Dolla asked.

Cassius thought furiously. “We pay the Stipend immediately, or at least before the legions are despatched. That will head off the threat of default, and eliminate the need to send them.”

“Good idea!” Dolla agreed. “I'll sail for Utica immediately.”

While the African Praetors were having this discussion, Drusus was sitting in Telesinus' study. “I have no doubt, Pontius; they are up to something.” Drusus told his friend. “I doubt it will be a default; they are not so foolish as to think we would let them get away with that, and they respect your ability as a soldier as well.”

“Perhaps so, Marcus Livius; perhaps not,” Telesinus replied. “But 'something' is a rather vague term to use. If they are enlisting a secret private army, then it has to be for either defence or attack; not for decoration. So who is there that could threaten Africa? And if anyone did, then why would they not call on the Republic to defend them, rather than pay for it out of their own purses?”

“Which would imply that you think they intend to use it for an attack; and if they are so eager to keep it secret, then it is an attack that they do not think would gain approval if they put it to the Republic Senate,” Drusus completed the analysis.

“I can see no other reasonable explanation,” Telesinus spread his hands.

“Perhaps they are intending to hire them out as a mercenary force.” Drusus suggested.

“Once again, their secrecy implies that they would be hired to someone that they believe the Republic might not wish to support,” Telesinus batted the suggestion back.

Drusus suddenly sat still, as if stunned. “Oh, shit!”

“What?” Telesinus asked, worried.

“Numidia!” Drusus answered.

“What about Numidia?” Telesinus pressed. “Do you think they will attack Numidia?”

“Not that straightforward, Pontius. If they did that, they would be in all sorts of trouble,” Drusus corrected his friend. “They know that only the Republic can wage war. Provoking a war would be High Treason, and even if they won, the conquered territory would be the Republic's, not their own.”

“So...?” Telesinus was left wondering.

“But think about this,” Drusus ploughed on. “Suppose one of the princelings in Numidia were to seize his father's throne using a hired army of Roman veterans? What would the Republic do about that?”

“Probably nothing,” Telesinus answered. “But why would the Africans bother to be involved?”

“Because the mercenaries would be Romans,” Drusus answered. “And if they don't get paid, they would have no loyalty to the new king. In fact, their commander might have specific instructions to act on behalf of his African backers, even if they do get paid.”

At last the penny dropped in Telesinus' mind. “These Africans want to set up a puppet kingdom of their own, by-passing the Republic!”

“Exactly!” Drusus answered emphatically. “They will milk Numidia! All of it unofficial, of course; but the new king will know that if he does not make regular and generous gifts to his backers, then his mercenaries might follow orders from someone other than him.”

Telesinus leant back to think about the consequences of this. “If that is what they are planning, then what do we do about it? Or better, do we need to do anything about it at all?” he asked.

“Most certainly we have to do something about it!” Drusus insisted. “What if it all goes pear-shaped? We could have another Numidian War on our hands, and it will be up to the Republic to pull Africa out of the fire! These bloody Africans know that they have no down-side risk here – the Republic will have to under-write their little war, whether we approve of it or not! And besides, even if it is successful, I don't like the idea of all those Numidians seeing their prosperity being skimmed off by Romans; they will one day rise in revolt against this puppet king, and then there will be a real hatred for anything Roman. That will lead to war.”

“You're right, Marcus Livius,” Telesinus agreed. “Foreign Policy is the preserve of the Republic, not private citizens. How many legions did you tell him that I was going to send to Utica?”

“Six legions, Pontius.”

“Then six it will be!” Telesinus agreed. “I will talk to Gaius Aurelius about it at our next meeting.”

“Welcome, Pontius!” Cotta greeted his consular colleague as he entered the atrium. “It seems we have a bit to talk about today.” This was the regular meeting that the two Consuls had agreed to hold two days before each regular Senate Meeting.

“I have letters here from some leading citizens in Corsica and Sardinia,” Cotta continued as the two men walked to Cotta's study. “They have been talking to each other about Tribal Status for their islands, after the precedent of Africa and Sicily.”

The men sat in chairs either side of Cotta's large table, which had been specially built for these Consular meetings, with draws on both sides for the two of them. A jug of orange juice, a jug of water and some light pastries were on the table.

“And what do their Governors say?” Telesinus asked.

“They don't mention that, so I suspect the provincials are going over their governors' heads,” Cotta smiled.

“Well, the Lafrenian Law says nothing about governors, but it was assumed that the recommendation would come from the current Governor of the Province concerned,” Telesinus observed.

“Yes; assumed, but not required,” Cotta agreed and corrected at the same time. “What do you suggest we do?”

Telesinus thought for a moment. “I do not want to encourage every man and his dog to put in such applications; the Senate doesn't have time to consider the dozens that would flood in. I suggest that you write back to them and tell them that the Governor is the correct channel for such an application to be lodged. You should also write to the two governors, advising them that certain un-named leading citizens have raised the issue with you, and you seek their comments.”

Cotta nodded. “I'll do that. I had in mind to just forward the letters to the Governors, but that might be a bit too blunt.” Cotta stretched his legs out straight. “But it did get me thinking that perhaps we need to issue some more detailed guidelines on the process. In this case, I would suggest that Corsica and Sardinia should be combined into a single Province, so when the time comes they will form a single Tribe,” Cotta continued.

“Yes, that makes sense, Gaius. The Lafrenian Law does say that Tribes should be entire communities, and not individual settlements or cities. These two islands are very different from Sicily, but I don't think that they are all that different from each other. Do you want to add the Balearic Islands as well?”

Cotta wrinkled his face as he considered this question. “No, I don't think so. Let the Balearics remain part of a combined Spain Province.”

“Right. What next?” Telesinus glanced down at the short agenda that Cotta had prepared for today. “Land for Silo's veterans.”

“Yes. Quintus Poppaadius has written to give us fair warning; the legions that were raised for the War against Mithridates will have served their fifteen years at the end of this year. They will be entitled to their land grants, and he has made preliminary enquiries to find how many want to take their retirement and claim their farms. He says we can expect 75,000 veterans to put in their claims all in one bundle, unless we offer a sweetener to spread their retirements over a couple of years.”

“75,000 soldiers? That means – what?” Telesinus did some quick mental arithmetic, “Twenty iugera per man? One and a half thousand *thousand* iugera, isn't it? ” Telesinus was stunned by the sheer magnitude of the problem. “Is there that much land left in the Ager Publicus?”

“Relax, Pontius; but don't relax too much,” Cotta comforted him. “The actual area itself totals about forty miles square, and then add on an allowance for roads, and so on. It can be done, but we will need to get the surveyors onto it very soon. I would rather not offer these soldiers more money, just to delay.”

“That is not the only problem either, Gaius,” Telesinus rolled on. “If he is sending fifteen legions' worth of men back for their retirement, then that will leave him with hardly any men still under arms. His total establishment is only

twenty legions for all of Asia, Syria, Anatolia and Armenia; that is counting every man beyond the Aegean Sea.”

“Actually, not all those veterans are still in Anatolia; some newer legions have been rotated through,” Cotta explained. “Quintus Poppaadius will be left with eight legions. He tells me that should be enough, but he can raise more from among the local populations if he needs to. There are a lot of experienced Armenian soldiers who deserted Tigranes in the last days, and who are grateful enough and hungry enough to enlist if asked.”

“Even so!” Telesinus was still over-awed by the retirement bill. Then a new thought struck him.

“This isn't on your agenda, Gaius, but it would be a good time to mention it,” he started. “Marcus Livius is aware of a private, low-key recruitment drive. Recently retired veterans are being approached to enlist for two years as a mercenary force. Good pay and guarantees of good booty are being offered. The Africans already know that Marcus Livius suspects them of being behind the recruitment, but he has said no more than that. Their excuse is that they want strong, hardy men to open up new farming lands.”

“How does Marcus Livius know all this?” Cotta was interested.

“Some of his clients have told him that these offers are being made in the name of a prominent merchant based in Utica; but that might not be the truth.”

“Why would an African merchant want a mercenary soldier force?” Cotta asked. “If he wants bodyguards, then why not just employ street thugs?”

“Precisely the question Marcus Livius asked,” Telesinus said with a forefinger raised. “The conclusion we have reached is that certain African interests intend to offer these men to a Numidian prince so he can take over his father's kingdom, and then these African interests will extort Numidian tribute because they will control the ultimate loyalty of the soldiers; a client kingdom, in effect, but bound to themselves rather than to the Republic.”

“But that would be illegal!” Cotta exclaimed. “Numidia is a Friend and Ally, and any Roman assisting in armed insurrection of a Friend and Ally is guilty of Treason!”

“We gather they intend to make it look like an internal Numidian revolt, and expect that the new King would be recognised as Friend and Ally in turn.” Telesinus explained. “But the extortion will continue, because all the mercenaries will be loyal to their employer, rather than the puppet king.”

Cotta sat silently for a minute. “It would probably work, too,” he said at last. “If they are clever enough to hide their own involvement in the original revolt.”

“But I don't think it is a good thing for the Republic,” Telesinus urged. “If it goes wrong, and the Numidians find out who is behind it, we might end up with another Numidian War. The Republic will have to fight a war started by these merchants! And even if it works, what happens in ten years' time? After seeing their own kingdom milked by the Africans, who is to say there will not be a revolt against the Puppet King, and a war of revenge? The way it is being

set up, all the benefits of success will go to these anonymous Africans, but all the risks if it goes wrong will fall to the Republic.”

“Oh, I agree with you Pontius,” Cotta agreed earnestly. “The big question is, how do we stop it?”

“I suggest we station six legions in Utica, as a starting point,” Telesinus said.

“Agreed. But wait! Do we have six legions to spare, Pontius?” Cotta asked. “We can't pull them out of the east, with Silo's veterans retiring; and half of the legions now in Macedonia and the Spains are those rotated out of the east, so we can expect a lot of them will be retiring, too. We will have to raise more legions just to keep up with the establishment as it is.”

“Then let's raise them now, and ship them to Africa so they can do their initial training over winter. It doesn't snow in Africa,” Telesinus suggested. “Then they will be ready for action if anything happens next campaigning season.”

“Excellent thinking, Pontius,” Cotta agreed. “And it is the perfect reason for them being sent to Utica, as well.”

Quintus Pompeius Rufus was visiting his latest College in Nova Carthago, accompanied by Flaccus as Head of the Senate and Head of the Colleges Committee. Mutilus was taking great pleasure in guiding them around the new facilities and extolling the virtues of the staff he had engaged, even though all three of them knew that all plans and all staff had already been approved by the Colleges Committee before a sestertius had been spent on them.

“The College is an excellent establishment, Caius Papius,” Rufus confirmed over the evening meal. “And with the staff you have in place, it should set a very high standard. If only it were not so remote from the rest of civilisation.”

Mutilus shrugged. “Spain is where Spain always has been. We can't do much about that. But I am not too worried about being so far from the rest of the civilised world. In fact, I think there might be some merit in moving the seat of the Spanish Council even further away, to Toletum.”

“Why would you do that, Caius Papius?” Rufus asked. “You would feel cut off, up there in the middle of the mountains.”

“That is precisely why I would do it, Quintus,” Mutilus answered. “Since I have been in the Spains, I have come to notice how Nearer Spain tries to model itself on Rome, but Further Spain is very particular about the old Celtiberian traditions. This is forcing the two halves in different directions.

“I think that if the two provinces could be officially combined into one, and administered that way, it will bring a sense of common destiny among the different Tribes. And where better to make the seat of Government than just inside the boundaries of Further Spain? Let the old-fashioned Celtiberians feel that they have some respect in the Roman world, and they will start to adopt its ways all the sooner. It might also knock some of the arrogance out of these Nearer Spain types, too; they think that they are the only tribes that matter!”

Rufus shrugged, but said nothing. Flaccus thought for a moment, and then entered the conversation. "So you are that serious about trying to overcome tribalism? To weld one Spain out of the two?"

"I intend to do even more than that," Mutilus said. "In time, I hope to attract the north-west to join the Roman Spains willingly. The whole land south of the Pyrenees should be one consolidated Province."

Flaccus raised his eyebrows at this thought. "From what I hear, that day will be a long time coming. I'm told they are fiercely independent."

Mutilus shrugged before answering. "If we Samnites can be proud of Samnium, and also proud to be part of the Republic, then why can't the Celtiberians be the same?"

*To Publius Dolla,
from Caius Cassius,*

Greetings!

Pontius Telesinus proposed that the Senate authorise the raising of six more legions, his excuse being that fifteen of the legions raised for the war against Mithridates have served their terms and were due to retire. And because the veteran legions would be retired in the Fall, it was essential that the new legions should be trained over winter, so they would be ready if they were needed in the next campaigning season. That was his excuse for raising them now and sending them to Africa as soon as possible; Africa in winter still allows the men to be trained properly, but Italy is too cold.

It all looked so reasonable and prudent! But it is proof that he suspects something. Exactly what, who knows? But I think by far the most likely is that he expects us to refuse payment of the Stipend; so I urge you to get that Stipend raised and paid as soon as possible, before these men can be embarked. In the meantime, I suggest you and our associates make all haste to carry out our plans. The sooner it is done, the better!

Publius Dolla read this letter, and then glanced up at the date. The fifth day of Sextilis; eight days ago! The first half of the Republic Stipend had already been sent three days ago, so they had crossed. The other half should be in hand within the month. Perhaps this will forestall the deployment of the legions. But even so, it would be wise to follow the advice and move quickly. He sent runners to the houses of Lucius Mallius, Septimus Paulus, Marcus Manlius and Quintus Servilius, urging their attendance for the evening meal. They must not waste a day.

"I expect Telesinus will still send the troops, regardless," Manlius announced his opinion loudly. "After telling the Senate that it is necessary, how can he change his position now?"

"I agree," Paulus added his own. "Apart from that reason, we only believe that Telesinus suspects us of intending to withhold the money; but if his real

suspicion is something else, then the Stipend is irrelevant in any case. In fact, we might even have strengthened his suspicions by seeming so eager to pay early.”

Mallius looked around the rest of the group as if seeking their input. Servilius and Dolla simply nodded. “Which confirms the advice from Cassius,” Mallius summarised. “We all agree that we need to bring forward the timetable. How many men do we have on hand and equipped, Septimus?” Paulus was the man in charge of the recruitment process.

“Seventeen thousand in camp at present, with another three thousand due to arrive within ten days. All are equipped, but we need to organise the new arrivals into their units and drill them to ensure they are effective in battle. Another four thousand will arrive in another month after that.” Paulus answered crisply. “That makes five legions, which is our planned total.

“And how is Bocar?” This question was directed to Manlius.

“He was ready two months ago!” Manlius reminded them. Trying to tell Bocar that these things take time had been one of the more tedious aspects of their planning.

“But is he genuinely prepared?” Mallius insisted. “I don't mean big talk or chest-beating, but actually having everything actually in place?”

“I believe so,” Manlius answered. “He is a show pony, as we all know; but he has put in the time to make sure it will go smoothly at his end. He assures me he has the loyalty of Toba.” Toba was the son of another Numidian noble, and married to Bocar's only surviving child. Between them Bocar and Toba commanded the majority of the Numidian cavalry.

“Then let's do it with the seventeen thousand we have now,” Mallius suggested. “That should be enough to draw out the bulk of the Numidian forces, and give Bocar his opportunity. The rest can follow if needed.”

“Agreed,” Dolla said, and looked to the others. All heads were nodding. “I will get word to Bocar immediately. Let us say, we march in five days' time?”

King Hempsal of Numidia was relaxing in a minor palace in Theveste when word reached him. A Roman force of over fifteen thousand heavy infantry was marching up the Bagradas River, straight for him.

This confused him. He held 'Friend and Ally' status with Rome, and had done nothing to offend his much more powerful ally. Nor had he heard of any complaint from them. So what was going on? Still three legions was more than just an honour guard for some Roman dignitary; it was a considerable show of force. How to react?

Well, he certainly had no intention to allow these Romans to flout his sovereignty, so doing nothing was not an option. But should he fall upon them with overwhelming force? He had over fifty thousand infantry and archers as a standing army, and ten thousand light cavalry. This would demonstrate resolution, but thus far he had no conclusive indication that the Romans had evil on their minds. So would an ambush be considered an unwarranted escalation?

What are the options in between? A small delegation, to meet them, greet them, and ask their business? That would seem a rather timid response, and might only encourage a greater encroachment.

No; he would call out all his army as a show of force, and prepare them for a set-piece battle if need be; and then, with this backdrop, he would ask their business. Firm, ready for battle, but willing to make peace. That would be his approach. "Call out the army!" he commanded. "We will take up a prepared position in the valley, just south of the confluence. Then I will meet with their commander. I want everyone ready to march at dawn!"

Three days later King Hemsal was inspecting the fortified front line of his infantry. Ten thousand hoplites stood behind a series of pits, traps and stakes that would break the formation of any Roman attack. Five thousand archers stood behind them, ready to fire over the heads of his infantry and thin the Roman lines as they toiled through the barriers. Once broken by these obstacles and the archers, the heavies should be able to stop the Romans; but if not, five thousand light infantry, quick to deploy, would be ample to deal with any clever movement from the surviving Roman units as they emerged from this melee. Harubal, his commander, was a veteran of the Jugurthan War; he well knew what to expect from Romans, and how best to counter their tricks. The Romans would not pass!

On each wing were his cavalry and reserves. Ten thousand light infantry and five thousand cavalry on the right were under the command of Toba, a promising young man, and a similar force on his left was under Bocar. Both knew how to handle cavalry, being nobles from the inland where raiders from the semi-desert were a constant scourge. They would be able to deal with any flanking moves, specially since the Romans had no cavalry to screen them. Time to see what the Romans wanted! He waited on the road as the front of the Roman column came within view.

They were clearly not expecting to be attacked, Hemsal thought to himself. No cavalry screen scouting ahead, and marching six abreast through unknown country! That is either courage or idiocy, but it certainly is confidence! It would indicate, at least, no warlike intention. Then much to his surprise, the front ranks of the Romans split in two, marching laterally across the front of the defensive line some three hundred paces distant. They were deploying into a battle line!

Hemsal thought quickly. Right now they are vulnerable! If I move quickly, I can catch them almost in enfilade! But no; I still don't know their intentions; and my men already have orders to hold. They are not prepared for a charge, so it would be a piece-meal attack from a confused position. It would end in catastrophe. Maybe that is why the Romans are doing this; to tempt us out of our prepared positions.

Well, the numbers, the prepared ground and deployments were on his side. He could afford the time to speak to the Romans; then he could act on the basis of better intelligence of the Romans' intentions. He kicked his horse into a walk

towards the Roman lines. He stopped some ten paces short of the mounted Romans he took to be in command. The columns were still dividing behind them, to spread the width of the valley floor between the river and the ridge on the east.

“Hail, Friends!” he greeted them. “What brings you to Numidia?”

“Who is asking?” came a gruff reply.

“I am Hemsal, King of Numidia, and a Friend and Ally of the Republic.”

“Please welcome the king, men,” the gruff voice said to no-one in particular. Hemsal saw five men move out from behind the mounted men, each with a crossbow. They raised their weapons, took aim, and fired. Hemsal was dead before he hit the ground.

“Sound the trumpet!” the gruff voice commanded, and one of the mounted men produced a trumpet from under his cloak. He sounded one long blast. Immediately there was a commotion from each end of the Numidian line. A rolling roar arose, as the ten thousand light infantry in reserve on each wing fell on the troops in front of them, butchering and slashing their countrymen in complete surprise. The cavalry quickly fanned along the rear of the centre, slashing with their swords as they went. Within only a few minutes the entire force of archers standing behind the infantry in the centre had been slaughtered.

“Advance!” the gruff voice shouted. Two long notes came from the trumpet, and the Roman line advanced to within ten paces of the front of the Numidian earthworks. Those of the Numidian infantry who had fled through the trenches and stakes to escape the Numidian cavalry were caught in an envelopment. Some threw down their weapons and begged for their lives in front of the Romans, who stood impassive in tight formation, shields locked side-by-side and gladii protruding menacingly.

The Numidian reserve infantry had disposed of those in front of them by now. They had turned inwards, and were rolling up the infantry in the centre, taking them in a double envelopment.

“Stand your ground, men!” the gruff voice commanded, and the order was repeated down the lines in both directions. The centre of the Numidian line, seeing slaughter approaching them from both sides, pushed back through the stakes and earthworks to get clear of the Roman line. They were picked off by the cavalry waiting for them. Some took refuge by remaining within the depth of the defensive works, the stakes preventing the cavalry from approaching them. But they knew all was lost, as the wings ground ever closer to them.

In just over an hour from the time Hemsal had greeted the Roman commander, the battle was over. Hemsal, Harubal, and the loyalist core of the Numidian army were all dead. Only Bocar, Toba and their own troops were still standing in front of the Romans.

Bocar approached the Roman command. “An excellent day's work, my lords,” he greeted them. “My thanks to you, and to your associates. Please assure them that our agreement will be adhered to in full, and that they are welcome to visit the new King of Numidia whenever they wish.”

“It is a pleasure doing business with you, Your Majesty,” the gruff voice replied. “I leave my boys in your care now; I am sure you are aware of what might happen if you do not keep them happy.”

“They will be very happy, I assure you!” Bocar promised. “They will be going home next year with more cash than they earned in fifteen years in Pontus. I just need them to do a little thinning of the tall stalks, and all will be well.”

The gruff voice snapped off a crisp salute, Roman style, and turned his horse towards home. The rest of the command group turned with him, and a century of the troops designated as their escort turned in their places to start marching back to Utica.

Pontius Telesinus landed in Utica with four of his new legions. As courtesy dictated, he went immediately to the offices of the African Comitia. He was greeted there by the Chief Administrator.

“Consul Telesinus, this is a great honour.” The Administrator, a small wiry man, greeted him with a sincere smile and an outstretched right arm. “My name is Titus Claudius.”

Telesinus took the arm with a smile. “Thank you for your welcome, Titus. Are the Praetors available?”

“Yes indeed, lord Telesinus. I will send for them.”

“Please, Titus, my name is Pontius. And could you tell me where I might be able to find a suitable place to stay for a month or so?”

“I will delegate one of my officers to take your man to some of the properties available for rent. There are quite a few good houses that would be available to you. But for the moment, would you like to be shown to the Comitia bath house?”

“That would be excellent, Titus. Thank you.” Telesinus gestured to his body slave to bring a change of clothes with him, and followed Claudius into the cool of the Comitia building.

“Have you heard about Numidia, sir?” Claudius asked as he conducted Telesinus through the corridors.

Telesinus felt his chest tighten. “What about Numidia, Titus?”

“Apparently they have a new King,” Titus offered smoothly. “I understand that there was a revolt by part of the army, and Bocar has been proclaimed king.”

“Who is this Bocar, please?”

“He is one of the major nobles; his base is in the south, so we have not seen much of him. He is about sixty years old, and has a very capable son-in-law who would appear to be his heir.”

“And what do the other nobles think of him?” Telesinus probed.

“Competent, reliable,” Claudius said as he pushed through one last door and into the atrium of the baths. “At least, that is the impression they gave beforehand. But I have not heard anything lately. It seems he is not an entirely

popular successor, because there have been reports of some executions and confiscations.”

“And how is he disposed towards the Republic?”

“I have no reason to believe he is hostile, sir,” Claudius assured Telesinus. “If I may leave you now, and get back to my work?”

“Yes, of course,” Telesinus agreed. “Thank you for your courtesy.”

“Telesinus eased himself into the tepidarium; even though it was getting late into the year, it was much too warm here in Utica to use the caldarium. He sat on the submerged bench, deep in thought. Co-incidence? He thought not! At least this had not blown up in his face; the coup had obviously been successful, and the risk of another Numidian War had been avoided. Should he leave well enough alone?

No, blast it! He was not going to allow these provincial upstarts imperil the Republic and get away with it! He was not going to be the Consul on whose watch a precedent like this would be set! The fact that it had not been a failure that resulted in war was a gift of Fortuna, and one should never let that Lady think that her favours are being assumed! He would find proof that these men, whoever they are, had conspired to do harm to a Friend and Ally of the Republic; that was High Treason, and they would pay for it to make sure nobody else would attempt the same trick later. He plunged below the surface a few times, rinsing the salt from his hair, and then stepped out for a towel. The body slave handed him a fresh loincloth and tunic. Everyone in Africa dressed light and informal, so why not follow their example? He walked back to the ship to take control of his luggage and give further instructions.

Chapter 2 – 679 AUC (75 B.C.)

“I believe we have made history, Lucius Porcius,” Drusus said to his consular colleague. “Never before have the same two men been consuls together three times.” He extended his right arm and smiled warmly.

“I believe the closest any two have come to that record before now would be ourselves, anyway,” Cato responded as he took the offered arm. “When we served two consecutive terms together during the War.”

“Yes, but you shared the same honour with Lucius Cornelius before me,” Drusus explained.

“Ah, but I was only suffect the second time with him!” Cato waved a finger.

“Anyway, would you care to take the fasces for this first month? As five-time Consul and ex-Censor, you have seniority regardless of the vote.”

“Thank you, Marcus Livius; as always, your courtesy is appreciated,” Cato replied.

The augurs pronounced the omens propitious as the two consuls spoke; the Senate would start its session in half an hour. Gaius Aurelius Cotta saw them and strode quickly to their side.

“Excuse me please, Lucius Porcius, Marcus Livius; but I think it proper that I relay to you some confidential information from me and Pontius, from last year.”

Cato looked concerned. “Should we find somewhere more private to talk, then?”

“I was hoping that you would be able to join me and Quintus Pompeius after the meeting, at my house,” Cotta offered.

“Quintus Pompeius too, eh?” Cato repeated. A matter that required consideration by both Consuls and both Censors must be significant. “I will be available, Gaius Aurelius.”

“As will I,” Drusus added.

“Thank you, and my apologies for the interruption,” Cotta acknowledged as he stepped away. He looked around distractedly until his eye caught Rufus in conversation with another knot of senators. He strode away quickly.

Cato looked up at the light and airy dome over the Great Senate chamber.

“Every time I walk into this chamber I am reminded of Lucius Cornelius.” Cato confided. “I admit that we had our differences towards the end, but he certainly was an outstanding man.”

“Indeed,” Drusus agreed. “It was an honour for me to be able to give his funerary oration. He shared with me his vision of what the Republic might become, if we have the courage to make it so. So much of it would make you weep for joy, and other parts would make you recoil in horror.”

“Yes,” Cato nodded. “He never confided in me as much as he did with you. But I think I glimpsed where some of his ideas were leading, and they

scared me. Perhaps it is a good thing that all men must die; it allows those who come after to change direction.”

Drusus chuckled to hear this. “What?” he asked in mock-incredulity. “A Bonus seeing the need to change direction?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Cato confessed. “This is not the same world we lived in fifteen years ago. Even I recognise that we cannot pretend that nothing has changed. In fact, more has changed in these last fifteen years than in the whole hundred years before! But you and Lucius Cornelius, and even Quintus Poppaadius to a large extent, have shown me that it is possible to change the details while keeping the inner spirit; even to strengthen it.” Cato sighed and shook his head.

“But it is a perilous thing to do!” he continued. “And I fear that most of our Italians do not understand how fragile it is! Sometimes they act with the arrogance of youth, not knowing how easy it is to do unintentional damage.”

Drusus paused, considering his words before he spoke them. “Old friend, I think that your fears are genuine; and I can understand the passion behind them, which drove you to those unfortunate insults against Titus Lafrenius and Lucius Glaucia a year or so ago. But these fears are misplaced. Most of the ‘Old Ways’ which are being eroded are not part of the *Mos Majorum*, but are rather the corruptions that have crept in over the years.

“For example, the extensions of rights to non-citizens which you spoke against in Africa; this is an extension of the *Mos Majorum*, so even non-citizens will find reason to protect it because it protects them! This strengthens the *Mos Majorum*; it does not weaken it! All it weakens is the tendency of some Romans to think that they should not be held accountable when they act unjustly.”

Cato’s shoulders visible slumped. “Yes, I see what you are saying. And yes, those insults were totally reprehensible; and yes, the grace with which Titus and Lucius responded was more dignified than I had any right to expect. I have grown bitter in my later years. And I have grown intellectually lazy, treasuring the comfortable rather than the valuable. Now that I have the Curile Chair again, I must watch myself more carefully.” Cato looked into Drusus’ face again. “And it is good to have an old friend as my colleague.”

Cato looked around the chamber. Some of the senators were already drifting towards their seats, so perhaps it was time to start the day’s business. He turned towards the dais with the curile chairs, and gestured to Drusus to accompany him. Standing in front of the chair with the fasces, Cato called over the hubbub in the chamber. “Conscript Fathers! If you would please take your seats...”

When all were seated properly, Cato gave a short opening address. “Conscript Fathers, before we start the business of the Senate today, I feel obliged to make a short announcement.” His eyes swept around the tiers, and then returned to fall upon Titus Lafrenius.

“First, I must apologise for my insult to Titus Lafrenius, when I accused him of being a betrayer. The fact is that Titus acted with complete honour, in

the best interests of the Republic, and at great personal risk and political cost. He is to be commended for his fidelity to the Republic in his actions, and I rightly deserved to be censured for mis-representing him. In those troubled days when Rome was under the thumb of Sulpicius, and in his competent and diligent service since, and even more in his dignity and forbearance when confronted with such bad behaviour from me, Titus has shown himself to be a man of exceptional quality. I must also apologise to Lucius Glaucia, whom I accused of having no heritage to be proud of. This was a terrible thing for me to say, and for two reasons. The first is that his Samnite heritage is one of the proudest in all of Italy, and which he upholds with great dignity and ability. The second is that his own achievements have added substantially to the lustre of not only Samnium, but the Republic as a whole. We need more men like him!

"I genuinely regret my intemperate words to both of them, and seek their forgiveness." Cato paused for a moment to add a solemnity to his words before pressing on. "Now, let us commence the business of this Senate."

Cotta greeted Rufus at the street door and led him into the triclinium, where Drusus and Cato were already seated. They rose to greet the Censor.

"Quintus Pompeius!" Cato greeted him. "A perfect example of a man completing the cursus honorum purely on merit!"

"High praise indeed from Cato the Censor!" Rufus smiled in return.

"Greetings, Quintus Pompeius," Drusus said. The two of them had already exchanged congratulations.

Cotta indicated that Cato and Rufus should sit on the couch of higher honour, both having been elected Censor. Drusus, as a mere three-time Consul, was offered the lesser couch. "I want to tell you about some information that Pontius sent me late last year," Cotta started. "You will recall that Pontius went to Utica with six new legions, so they could be trained up to standard during the winter." His guests nodded.

"In fact, that was no more than a convenient excuse for the real reason. Pontius and I had reason to believe that some prominent individuals in Africa were planning to overthrow Hempsal of Numidia."

"But Hempsal was overthrown by one of his own nobles!" Cato interjected. "That new king Bocar; wasn't he the cavalry commander or something? The Senate recognised him as Friend and Ally in December."

"You are right there, Lucius Porcius," Cotta went on. "But Bocar did this with the connivance of some African notables, who provided him with four legions of Roman veterans to help with the task. Pontius stayed in Africa over winter, supposedly to supervise the training of the new troops and because he feared a December crossing to get back to Rome; but in fact he was discovering who was behind the scheme."

"You are telling me that prominent African traders conspired to overthrow a Friend and Ally?" Cato asked.

“Yes, Lucius Porcius. Not only is that High Treason; it is also incredibly stupid. What if Hemptal had got wind of the plot? Or if the coup had failed? Rome would be left to pick up the pieces! We could have had another Numidian War.”

“But why would they go to such expense and such risk, just to change one foreign king for another?” Cato asked

“Because those Roman mercenaries are still in Numidia. They are being used to wring cash out of Bocar, and he has no choice but to pay.” The room fell silent.

“Well, thank the gods that it worked, anyway,” Cato said at length. “But we should do something about the High Treason. We can't have private traders deciding our foreign policy and risking war, just so they can screw a few sesterces out of foreigners.”

“I agree completely, Lucius Porcius,” Cotta said. “But Pontius and I are no longer Consuls. We hand the problem over to you and Marcus Livius, and it might also involve me and Quintus Pompeius as Censors, depending on how you intend to handle it. I suggest that this problem should be considered by the four of us.

“Yes, you are right there,” Cato agreed. “I would be glad of your help; you know the context and details. What can you tell us?”

“I might be able to answer that one for you,” Drusus broke in. “Much of the information we have comes from a few of my clients who were recruited as mercenaries by these Africans.”

“Your clients admit to helping overthrow a Friend and Ally?” Cato was appalled. “What are you doing about it?”

“They told me when they were approached, and I told them to play along. I ordered them to keep me informed, and if they went to Africa to find out what they could and then report to Pontius,” Drusus explained.

“And what have they discovered?”

“They told Pontius the names of their legions' commanders, which banker was paying their wages – incredibly good pay, by the way! - and the names of two Africans who seemed to be deeply involved with this mercenary force. They also told Pontius where their training grounds were, out of sight in the hills to the south.”

“And what did he do with this information?” Cato asked.

“Nothing yet,” Cotta answered. “It was so late in the year by then that he did not want to start something that the next two Consuls did not want to finish.”

“Very considerate of him. This is the same man who threatened to throw me out of the Senate; he continues to show good judgement!” Cato said with a self-effacing smile. “But you must have some sort of plan, or preferred way of dealing with this, surely!”

“Yes,” Cotta agreed. “Pontius suggests that he pay a visit to the new king, Bocar. He intends to assure Bocar that the Senate has recognised his legitimacy, and has accorded him Friend and Ally status. He also intends to let

Bocar know that we know that he is being subjected to extortion by these Africans, and we do not approve. So his offer is this; if Bocar will cede sovereignty of Numidia to the Republic as a province, we will confirm him as ethnarch with a generous personal allowance. We will also remove the Roman mercenaries so his life and tenure are no longer under threat. And we will prosecute the Africans for High Treason.” Cotta looked around the group. “That is the carrot part; now comes the stick. We warn him that if he refuses to accept this offer, we will declare that he has wrongfully attacked and killed Hemptal, a Friend and Ally of Rome. Then we will send in the legions, and call upon the mercenaries to overthrow Bocar or share his fate.

“As for the soldiers; we will tell them that if they surrender and assist us in prosecuting their commanders and paymasters, we will grant them a full pardon, they will be able to keep their earnings, and we will provide free transport back home. But if they do not, then we will send in our best veteran legions to kill or enslave them.”

“In other words,” Cato summed up his understanding of the proposal, “Bocar keeps his head and a comfortable life, but not his kingdom; the soldiers keep their heads and pay so far, but not their prospective booty, the Republic gets a new Province, and the ringleaders get tried for High Treason, which should send a message to anyone else who might get ideas.”

“That is our suggestion to you and Marcus Livius; but you are the Consuls this year, so you get to decide,” Cotta said.

Drusus and Cato looked to each other. “Gaius and Pontius have had plenty of time to think this through,” Drusus opined. “And what they say seems to make sense to me.”

Cato nodded thoughtfully. “Well, we have to send out a message that this sort of conspiracy will be punished. And the method they suggest would seem to be the cheapest and give the best results.”

Cato looked back to Cotta. “What province has been allocated to Pontius?”

Cotta smiled thinly. “Pontius was allocated both Corsica and Sardinia; he intends to administer them as a combined province.”

“I am thinking, Gaius; would it be prudent to transfer him to Numidia instead?” Cato asked.

Cotta's smile widened. “One of the things he mentioned in his report was that he was inclined that way himself, depending on what the incoming Consuls might decide.”

Cato turned back to Drusus. “Let us think about this for a few more days, Marcus Livius; but I am inclined to go along with their advice.”

“I agree,” Drusus replied. “If we are to act, it has to be when the new legions in Utica are fully-trained, but before they are shipped out. But there is one detail that I would like to make clear.

“Those men in the mercenary force who accepted their recruitment under my advice; these men cannot be held responsible for what their commanders do. They must be honoured as our spies, not punished as rebels.”

“Of course, Marcus Livius. They have served the Republic well and should be rewarded,” Cato agreed. “But back to the timing. The weather will not allow troops to be transported out of Africa for more than a month yet, so we have plenty of time to think before we act. Whatever we do, we should have our plan in place by the end of February. Are we agreed on that?” Cato looked around the gathering. All nodded their agreement. “Then we should ask Pontius to stay in Utica. Send a message by the first available ship.”

Pontius Telesinus was not wasting his time in Utica. Although these six legions under his command were nominally unblooded, he had put into practice not only the standard drills common to all Roman legions, but also the techniques he had learned under Silo for training his officers. For more times than he could count, he had thanked the hundreds of his old veterans that had agreed to re-enlist so he could appoint them as centurions. Although the typical rank-and-file might be novices, everyone from centurion upwards was a veteran of at least fifteen years fighting against Mithridates, Tigranes and Gozardes. Just breathing the same air as these men would strengthen the recruits!

He had also impressed upon all the need to exercise initiative. Here in Africa, where sheer space made cavalry much more important than in the confined valleys of the northern shore of Our Sea, communication with the General was not always quick and easy. To that end he had stripped the legions of their cavalry components and consolidated all mounted men into two distinct cavalry units. These mounted squadrons will have to operate as semi-detached units more often than the normal fighting doctrine allowed, independent of the heavy infantry. He smiled to himself when he remembered back to the Battle of the Euphrates, under Silo. His orders from the general were to take two thousand light cavalry and 'sweep around their rear, and cause panic without risking your force'.

By the end of that day he had slaughtered five thousand enemy cataphract horsemen and cut loose their horses before they could get into their armour, fallen upon another two thousand unarmed infantry, their weapons and armour stowed as they waited to cross the river, captured another eight thousand infantry without a fight, and then fallen on the rear of the enemy's main line of defence, forcing their surrender and the end of the battle. All for fifty-three casualties!

That is what can happen if a competent detached command is given proper training in thinking on the move and a licence to seize whatever opportunity presents itself! Throughout the veterans of the east, this was now known as 'the Silo Touch'.

He had learned from Drusus' men, who were his embedded informers, that the mercenary force was entirely heavy infantry, the Numidians being confident in their own cavalry. And why not! They had long been known as the best cavalry in the world, and many of the best Roman cavalry units were Numidian. So Telesinus knew what to expect if it came to a battle; not that he expected that it would. He was quietly confident that the new Consuls would adopt his recommendations, and that Bocar would fall into line. Even if he did not, he

doubted that the Roman mercenaries would fight. Why would they, if failure meant death and victory meant exile? Better to surrender and be pardoned. But he made sure that he was prepared for the worst.

Such were his musings as he watched a training battle from the top of a hill. He was pleased to see that one of his innovations had worked. The hapless defenders were overwhelmed by an unexpected and cleverly-concealed flank attack; the battle was now over. He kicked his horse to a slow trot, and the trumpeter beside him started blowing the signal for 'Cease Fighting'. He was as ready as he would ever be!

He returned to headquarters to find a letter waiting for him. He glanced at the seals, two of them. With a thrill he recognised they were the seals of Drusus and Cato. Although this was the first communication of the new year, he felt he had a good idea of how the elections back in Rome had gone.

*To Pontius Telesinus, Commander of all Republic Forces in Africa,
from Lucius Porcius Cato and Marcus Livius Drusus, Consuls of the Republic,*

Greetings!

As you might tell from the salutation, we have appointed you as our Commander in the Field for all Republic Forces on the south side of Our Sea. We request that you accept this duty, delaying your entry into your allocated provinces for as long as this duty might demand. We also request that you proceed with your plans on the Mercenary Question, as outlined to us by your colleague Gaius Aurelius Cotta; who was elected Censor in the recent elections and sends you his best wishes.

To this end, we authorise you to take whatever actions and make whatever decisions, arrangements, offers and proclamations as you consider necessary without reference to us if time does not allow proper discussion. We request that you seek such direction if time permits, but wherever you feel that you must act quickly we accord you full proconsular imperium.

Any decisions or actions you might take without prior reference are to be reported to us immediately.

May the gods favour you!

“Excellent!” Telesinus exclaimed. He took a sheet of paper and a quill, and dipped the nib in his bottle of ink.

*To Lucius Porcius Cato and Marcus Livius Drusus, Consuls of the Republic,
from Pontius Telesinus Commander in the Field in Africa,*

Greetings!

I thank you for the trust and honour you have accorded me with this appointment. Be assured that I accept this appointment, and will fully comply with your instructions in the performance of my command. I inform you that the six legions are now in excellent condition, indeed I expect them to perform better than some battle-experienced legions I have known. I have also developed and trained them in some techniques more suited to African conditions than our conventional doctrine. I do not expect that I will need to employ these specialised techniques, but will meet with success as per our plans. But if battle does come, we will succeed. I will commence the first steps immediately.

On a personal note, I offer you, Lucius Porcius, my congratulations and admiration on your election to your fifth Consulate. You have served the Republic well, and I am pleased to see that this service continues. I also offer my warmest respect and congratulations to you, Marcus Livius.

Telesinus read through the letter, was satisfied with it, and called for his secretary. “Sappho; please make a fair copy of this letter and bring it back to me for sealing. Meanwhile, send for the six legion commanders and my cavalry commanders; I want them here at mid-day tomorrow.”

Telesinus was welcomed into Zama with great pomp, a century of heavies in his train. Bocar was very eager to win the friendship of this Consular and to re-assure him that Hemsal's policy of obedience to the Republic would not be abandoned. Bocar himself, dressed in finery, came out on foot to welcome his guest with the broadest of smiles.

“Most honoured lord Telesinus! What a joy, that you would spend some of your valuable time to call on your humble servant!” he proclaimed. “Please, allow your honour guard to take every advantage of our small city; I have gathered together wine, women and food for their delight!” indicating a large building that looked like a barracks.

“That is very kind of you, King Bocar,” Telesinus replied as he dismounted. Then, striding towards his host with right arm outstretched, he added, “But please remove the wine. My men are permitted to enjoy the hospitality of your food and women, though.”

Bocar gestured to an attendant urgently. “Remove the wine from the hall!” he ordered in Berber. And then he took the arm offered to him, in a studiously Roman way. As his attendant scurried off to comply, Bocar reverted back to Latin. “Please, lord Telesinus; here in Zama we have a Roman-style bath in our palace. Please, let us avail ourselves of it, after your hot and dusty journey.” Then, realising that he still held Telesinus arm for what might be considered an inappropriate length of time, he released it hoping not to seem too hasty in that act.

“Thank you, King Bocar; I would like that very much. May my First Officer join us in that delight?”

“But of course, lord Telesinus! My only regret is that my humble bathhouse is so poor compared to your own!”

Telesinus turned to Gaius Lucianus. “Gaius, please dismiss the men and advise them that they may enter that hall over there for refreshment. But no wine may be drunk; I will parade them to smell their breath later. Then come and join us inside.” He then turned to walk slowly beside Bocar into the cool shade of the palace as Lucianus barked out orders.

“Please, lord Telesinus, forgive my clumsiness with your customs,” Bocar spoke submissively. “I am from the south, the harsher lands, and I know that I do not have the polish of a Roman gentleman. I hope that in time I will become more civilised under the influence of your mighty Republic.”

“Really, king Bocar; you do yourself a disservice! I am not Roman myself, but Italian, a Samnite; and Romans like to make jokes about how barbarous we Samnites are!” Telesinus laughed. “That is their way of covering their embarrassment that we are better soldiers.”

“Better than Romans?” Bocar asked with a touch of awe.

“Oh, yes,” Telesinus assured him lightly. “Just look at our great generals in recent years. Caius Marius was a Roman citizen, but from Picenum, the land of the Picentine tribe. Silo is Marsic, and so is Lafrenius; Glauca is Samnite, like me; Asinius is Marrucini.”

“I was not aware of that,” Bocar confessed as they entered the bathhouse.

“It is not important,” Telesinus dismissed the matter. “We are all part of the one Republic now, and that is the only thing that matters.”

“Yes, lord Telesinus; a Republic that I admire, and I am proud to be considered its Friend and Ally.” Bocar took yet another opportunity to ingratiate himself. “Now, if you would be so kind to forgive my lack of polish, and correct me where I do not follow your proper customs...” Bocar started stripping his finery and draping it over a couch to one side of the atrium.

Telesinus knelt by the side of the pool and splashed his hand in the water. “Ah! Delightfully cool!” He then started to strip himself, using another couch to hold his armour and then his padded undershirt and other clothing. “It gets hot in padded armour under that sun!”

The two had just stepped into the water when Lucianus entered the room in the company of a household slave. “The men are taking their relaxation, sir. I confirm that there was no wine in the hall when I left, and the men had been warned.”

“Excellent, Gaius; now come and join us,” Telesinus invited.

“This is not purely an official State Visit, king Bocar,” Telesinus started the conversation as Gaius stepped into the water. “There are some things that have come to my notice that cause me to be concerned for your welfare.” Telesinus smiled reassuringly. “The Republic values its Friends and Allies, and does not like the idea of anyone harming them.”

Bocar felt a shiver. Was this an allusion to his coup? Best to say nothing. But Telesinus could read the man.

“Not that we would interfere in purely internal matters, of course,” Telesinus went on. “If Numidia changes kings, that is a matter for Numidia; and although we were Friend and Ally of Hemsal before you, and regret his passing, it is not our place to interfere in domestic Numidian politics.”

Telesinus adopted a deliberately harder tone. “So although we did not approve of your coming to power as you did, king Bocar, you need have no fear of the Republic taking revenge.”

“That would seem a most enlightened, proper and wise policy, lord Telesinus.”

“Thank you,” acknowledged Telesinus. “My colleague in the Consulship last year, and also this year's Consuls, have discussed this matter, and we are all four agreed on that point. But we are also agreed on a few other points as well,” Telesinus continued.

“The first is that such instability on our borders is undesirable. Whenever such a thing happens, it is possible that the new leader might not be as well-disposed and friendly towards the Republic as you are yourself, king. There are many in the Republic, and doubtless many in Numidia, who still have scars and resentment because of the last war between us.”

“I doubt you will find any in Numidia who have anything but respect for the Republic, lord Telesinus,” Bocar volunteered.

Telesinus raised his eyebrows momentarily. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. But my point is that we do not want an unstable kingdom on our borders.”

“This kingdom is quite stable, lord Telesinus,” Bocar assured him.

“Please, king Bocar; do not say to me things which are not true,” Telesinus said flatly. “We know for a fact that this kingdom is *not* stable. We know for a fact that you are reliant upon a mercenary force for your own security, and that the men in this mercenary force are more loyal to their employers than they are to you. One snap of the fingers is all it will take for you to be their next victim. That is why you are obliged to pay huge amounts of gold to certain Africans who control the loyalty of these men. And don't think that this will only be for two years while you eliminate all challengers to your throne. We are aware of the plans of these Africans; they are still recruiting, and intend to replace your current men with new men at the end of that two years, and continue milking your kingdom. If you try to stop it, these men will turn on you,” Telesinus paused as he finished his recital.

“Now, we Consuls don't want that to happen. It can end only one way; when you run out of ready money, you will be forced to screw it out of your people. When your people run out of money, they will hate you, and hate African merchants for their woes. And soon you will be dead, and your successor will have an entire kingdom that hates African merchants so much that he will be forced to go to war. The Republic does not want war. And we do not want you dead,” Telesinus concluded. “How do you propose to avoid this fate?”

Bocar was stunned. “What mercenaries?” he said, trying to bluff.

“Really, king; I would be much happier if you would speak honestly to me. If you do not, then we might decide on another course of action that does not involve you except as a memory.” Telesinus sighed deeply. “If I mention a few names, will that help jog your memory? And your tongue?”

“To name just your legionary commanders, without going further down the list; Gnaeus Horbus, Piso Carebus, Lucius Marbo, Titus Adrianus and Gnaeus Pullo.”

Bocar felt as though he was being strangled. The thought crossed his mind that perhaps Lucianus had been invited to the bath to help drown him if he did not co-operate. But no! - he had suggested that bath himself. There was no plot to drown him. “What do you propose, lord Telesinus?” he asked, looking and feeling like a cornered mouse.

“We propose to try these African merchants for High Treason, in that they conspired to murder Hemsal, a Friend and Ally of the Republic and therefore sacrosanct to all Republic citizens,” Telesinus answered. “We also propose to pardon all of your mercenaries, on the assumption that they were not told when they enlisted about the nature of their mission. We propose to pardon you for your part in Hemsal's death, because you were not a Republic citizen nor a Friend and Ally at the time, and therefore not bound by our laws. And finally, we propose to provide a garrison of legitimate Republic soldiers, under you as Ethnarch, until such time as they are no longer required to ensure the safety of Numidia Province.”

Bocar let it sink in. At length he said “Ethnarch? Numidia Province?”

“Yes,” Telesinus confirmed.

“But the Senate has recognised me as a Friend and Ally!” he objected weakly. “Why should I give up my throne?”

“Two reasons, king,” Telesinus replied. “The first is that you will lose it anyway, when the Africans have milked all they can from you, and then decide there is no reason for them to continue paying their mercenaries.

“The second reason is that if you do not agree, then we will let it be known that your mercenaries are being offered a free pardon for their part in the overthrow of Hemsal if they surrender to the Republic authorities, and we will offer a reward for your head for your role in perverting these good, honest Romans. But if we have to send in Republic legions to apprehend them and you, your mercenaries will know they can expect crucifixion for opposing a legitimate Republic army. That choice, when put to them, should put an end to your life rather quickly, I would think.”

Now I know why Lucianus was invited in, Bocar realised. To make sure I didn't try to drown Telesinus!

“So, if I surrender my throne to the Republic, I will be recognised as Ethnarch,” Bocar rehearsed. “But if I do not, then you will kick the support out from under me; even reward someone for killing me.”

“Yes,” Telesinus confirmed. “The simple plans are always the best. But there is a catch I should warn you about.”

“Oh? And what is that?”

“You will be required to answer questions about the coup; the funding, your African contacts, everything. The whole purpose of this project is to convict and punish your backers; and although we know who they are, we cannot produce witnesses that would be acceptable in a court for High Treason. We need you as a witness. In return, you get immunity and the title 'Ethnarch'.”

Bocar sat in silence.

Lucianus broke into his thoughts. “And by the way, king; killing us, or even killing our entire honour guard, won't do you much good. Three other consulars know everything we do, and they will not make this offer to you again. It will be a dozen legions headed by Lucius Glaucia if you don't accept this chance while you can.”

“Thank you, Gaius,” Telesinus said. “That was bleeding obvious, but sometimes the bleeding obvious needs to be said.”

At length Bocar spoke. “Lord Telesinus; I think that being an Ethnarch under the Republic is a great honour. One I would like very much to attain.”

Bocar had added another name to the clique, Septimus Paulus who was the king's main organisational contact. Telesinus took his leave of the king in another pompous ceremony the next morning and started the march back to Utica.

A few days later Telesinus was back in his headquarters. He took out the letter from Drusus and Cato, and read through his letter again. 'full proconsular imperium', it said. That meant that he was authorised to declare a State of Emergency if he had grounds for believing that there was a threat to the integrity or safety of the Republic. And under that State of Emergency he could rule by decree until relieved by a Consul, and take any action that he considered necessary in that time. His authority over-ruled Tribal and City authorities, provided his actions were confined to the protection of the Republic. He carefully drafted an order.

STATE OF EMERGENCY

Be it known that I, Pontius Telesinus, have received full proconsular imperium from both current Consuls.

I now exercise that imperium to declare a State of Emergency. Under the terms of that State of Emergency, the officer named below and any soldiers under his command have the authority to do any or all of the following things.

- 1. Enter and search any house or other place suspected of containing material or correspondence relevant to interference in the affairs of the Kingdom of Numidia.*
- 2. Seize such material or correspondence.*
- 3. Detain any person suspected of being relevant to this investigation.*
- 4. Question such persons, with power to compel answers under threat of trial for obstructing an investigation into High Treason.*

5. *Restrict access to or egress from any place.*
6. *Use so much force as is required, up to and including deadly force, to achieve any of the above objectives.*

Any person who fails to co-operate fully and immediately to any reasonable request made by any person acting under the authority of this notice may be charged with obstructing an investigation into High Treason.

Any person attempting in any way to mislead, delay, divert, avoid, assist another person to avoid, or in any other way hamper an authorised person in the execution of any of the above things may be charged with obstructing an investigation into High Treason.

Any person interfering with any evidence, witness or material relevant to this matter may be charged with obstructing an investigation into High Treason.

The named officer is

Telesinus read through the whole document one more time. Yes, that should be enough to serve his purposes. "Sappho!" he called for his secretary. The Greek slave appeared at his door almost immediately. "I want thirty-one copies of this document made as quickly as possible; and use only the most trusted scribes, it is most secret. I want those thirty-one copies finished by dawn tomorrow, so get them written tonight so they will be dry by dawn. And I want the thirty most senior cohort commanders to report to my office at the first hour tomorrow."

Sappho bowed to show his understanding of the order, took the draft, and left the room. Telesinus then took another sheet of paper.

*To Lucius Porcius Cato and Marcus Livius Drusus, Consuls of the Republic,
From Pontius Telesinus, Commander in the Field in Africa, and acting under
proconsular imperium,*

Greetings!

I have acted upon my understanding of your instructions as outlined in your letter dated the fifth day of February this year. I confirm that our Numidian friend has agreed to our proposals in full, and has provided hitherto unknown details.

I intend to pay a surprise visit to certain persons, and seize whatever documentation might be of interest in determining which other presently unknown persons are involved, if any, and in what way. To this end I have declared a limited State of Emergency to ensure my investigations are not hindered by procedural difficulties. I enclose a copy of the Declaration for your information.

I understand that this is a rather bold step; but I have a bit of a reputation for such bold steps. However, this has the benefit of placing you at arm's length

from my actions and will allow you to over-rule me if you are so minded. One of you might even think it fit to come here and discuss the issues face-to-face, and even relieve me if you are not satisfied with my handling of the matter. In the meantime I will proceed with my customary self-confidence.

“Sappho!” he called again. Sappho appeared at the door. “Do you have the copying of that other document under way?” Telesinus asked.

“Yes, lord; I have three trusted men making master copies already, and another five will join them soon.”

“Good man!” Telesinus responded. “When you have a man to spare, please produce a fair copy of this as well.” He handed Sappho his letter to the Consuls.

At the second hour the next morning Lucianus and five of his *primi pili*, each with a *contubernium* of legionaries, presented themselves at the door of Caius Cassius. The same thing was happening at the same time at the houses of Publius Dolla and Septimus Paulus. A porter opened the small flap to see who was knocking on the door, and asked their business. Gaius Lucianus responded to the slave.

“We have been sent by the Consular, Pontius Telesinus. We have been instructed to ask the Republican Praetor some questions. It has to do with Republic business.”

“Lord Cassius is not available; he has left for Rome, to take his place in the Senate,” the porter replied.

“Then I must ask to speak with a responsible member of his family, or his secretary, or his Head of House.”

The slave looked over the crowd outside. “You have many men with you, and my instructions are to admit the retinue of known friends only. I must ask that only you enter.”

“Thank you,” Lucianus replied with a smile. “That will be adequate for my purposes.”

The bar on the door could be heard being lifted, and the smaller leaf swung open. Lucianus stepped through, and the door closed behind him.

“This way, please, to Demetrios, the Head of House.” The slave started to walk towards a small office off the atrium. A small, balding man came out to greet him.

“My name is Demetrios, lord. What can I do for you?”

Lucianus took out his copy of the Decree, with his name written into the space at the bottom, and read it to the Head of House. When he had finished, he folded it and put it into his pouch.

“First, you can open the door to admit my colleagues. Next, you will call the entire household together into this atrium. You shall tell them that no-one is to be admitted to this house and no-one is to leave unless I permit it. After that, you will answer any questions I ask you fully and truthfully, as required by the Decree.”

Demetrios looked over to the porter. "Admit the others," he commanded and then he crossed to a gong in the corner of the atrium. "This is our custom in this house, to call all together whenever the Master so desires," he explained. Lucianus nodded permission, and Demetrios struck the gong. Soon some fifty persons were crowded into the atrium, twenty three of them members of the household, the rest legionaries and primi pili with Lucianus. The other Romans remained outside for lack of comfortable space. Lucianus read the Decree to all of them to ensure that they understood he had the full force of the Law behind him, and then addressed them directly.

"Each of you will now go back to his or her private quarters with one of my men. You are to disclose to my man any documents or other items of interest that are in your quarters. You will show them to my man, whether they are your own property or the property of another. When you have done this, my man will then conduct his own search. If he finds anything of interest that you have not voluntarily revealed, you may be arrested and charged with obstructing an investigation into High Treason. The penalty is crucifixion, so be sure to reveal everything that might be of interest."

The crowd dispersed, each with a soldier in company. The street door was opened and the remaining men outside admitted to the house. Lucianus directed two of the officers into what was obviously the Master's office, and the other two into the office Demetrios occupied. They started systematically working through the shelves, drawers, pigeon-holes and book buckets in each office. These documents were subjected to an initial scan, to sort into 'potentially interesting' and 'unlikely', and set in two piles in the atrium outside the office doors. From there the legionaries were set to work reading through the 'potentially interesting' in more detail. It did not take long for the search to discover that Cassius made use of two different bankers. One of them seemed to handle the bulk of his transactions, including management of properties and household expenditure.

The other, a Greek named Andronicos, seemed to operate only one account, and this had some very interesting entries. A great deal of money had been poured into it over the last year and a bit; the date of the first payment slightly pre-dated the first signs of veteran recruitment to come to Drusus' knowledge via his clients. These payments stopped soon after the overthrow of Hemsal.

"Wonderful!" Lucianus exclaimed. "Marcus, Titus, Lucius; get down to Andronicos immediately, look for that account, and see if anyone else is pouring money into it. If anyone else is contributing, then go and pay a visit on those others as well. And see where the money is going, if you can, and pay a visit to the recipients as well."

Heracles Andronicos was not the sort of banker who bothered dealing in small clients. His business office was in his home, and he operated less than one hundred accounts, none of them worth less than a hundred talents of gold. It did not take him long to present the account when requested. The records listed payments into the account from all three suspects, plus another three

named Lucius Mallius, Marcus Manlius and Quintus Servilius. Servilius had been making contributions four times those of each of the other conspirators. But payments from these six ceased a couple of months ago, and payments from an anonymous source commenced shortly after. The anonymous payments were huge in comparison.

Payments out had one direction only; to *Eugenes et Philemon*, well-known for their retail-level banking operation. All these payments could be paid only if authorised by at least five partners.

A visit to *Eugenes et Philemon* made the final link. That account showed the transfers in from Andronicos, and monthly payments to over twenty thousand recipients. All of Drusus' recruited informers were listed as recipients, and so were the six conspirators.

By evening the structure of the conspiracy was reasonably clear. The correspondence suggested that the hitherto unsuspected Lucius Mallius conceived the scheme and was the co-ordinator of the group. He had approached and engaged the two Republic Praetors because of their contacts in Rome; they would be best placed to hear first if anything was coming to the notice of the authorities. He had also engaged Marcus Manlius, a former legionary commander under Marius, to act as recruitment officer. Paulus had been brought in for his contacts with the Numidian nobility, and it was he who had suborned Bocar.

Ironically, Servilius, the major shareholder, was very much a silent partner, brought in to help fund the scheme to the extent of four shares for every one by the other five. An understandable silent partner, though; he was reputed to be the richest man in Africa.

The three conspirators currently accessible in Utica were all arrested immediately, and their property put under management by an accountant appointed by Telesinus. The property of the other three was also put under management, and messages sent to Rome to arrest Cassius and Dolla. Paulus was known to be visiting Bocar at the time, probably to collect tribute due. He was intercepted as he returned and arrested.

Telesinus set out to visit Bocar immediately Paulus was known to be in custody. This time he took five of his six legions with him. Bocar received him with the same tacky pomp as the first time.

"I have heard that you have arrested four merchants, lord Telesinus," Bocar mentioned as soon as they were in private. "Including the one I mentioned to you last time you were here. Does that mean that the plot is broken?"

"Yes it does, Bocar," Telesinus replied, omitting the royal title as he spoke. "In fact, we now have enough documentary evidence against them that you need not trouble yourself to testify if you prefer to remain here."

Bocar paled. "But lord Telesinus! Does that mean that I am no longer important to you? That you will not honour your word to me?"

"You are both right and wrong there, Bocar," Telesinus answered. "You are no longer important to us. But regardless, I will still honour my word."

Telesinus sighed deeply. "But I do wish you would not insult me by questioning my honour."

"My apologies, lord Telesinus," Bocar backtracked immediately. "As I said, I am a man of rough manners, and have become accustomed to the barbarian ways of the wilds. Be patient with me, and provide me with trusted advisors, and I will soon learn all that is required of me."

"I understand, Bocar. Do not be alarmed; only be loyal, and you will do well," Telesinus soothed him. "I am here today with my six legions not to do away with you, but to exchange your mercenaries for regular legions. I will leave you with four of them, and a number of administrative men to ensure the other nobles in Numidia are quickly reconciled to being part of the Republic. I would appreciate it if you could call your mercenaries together tomorrow morning. I need to speak to them, to reassure them that they will be treated well." Telesinus smiled to Bocar.

"Of course, lord Telesinus. I will arrange for it immediately." Bocar clapped twice and a slave appeared. "Call the Commander of the Infantry here immediately." The slave bowed and disappeared. "And my appointment as Ethnarch has been confirmed?" Bocar asked anxiously.

"It does not need to be confirmed," Telesinus dismissed the question. "I have authority to proclaim it myself."

"And will you proclaim it?" Bocar saw that he was about to question Telesinus' word for a second time, and hastened to add "any time soon?"

Telesinus raised an eyebrow to show that he had detected the hesitation. "Yes. I intend to do so tomorrow, after I have spoken to your mercenaries; and then again in Utica as soon as I return."

"You are a most gracious man, lord Telesinus," Bocar exhaled more heavily than he had intended to. "And when will I be introduced to the advisors you will leave with me, to help me do all that you require of me?"

"You have already met Gaius Lucianus; he shared our bath last time I was here. If you have no objection, I would like to share your table tonight with Caius and my other delegate. And if your son-in-law could join us as well, that would be most welcome."

An alarm went off in the back of Bocar's mind. Are these Romans trying to get us both in the same place at the same time, to do us a mischief? "I am sorry, but I do not think Toba is in town at the moment. He told me this morning that he intended to go south today," Bocar explained.

"A pity! I would have liked to have met the man. Oh, well; perhaps next time," Telesinus shrugged off the disappointment.

Lucianus entered the room at that point in the conversation. "The men are in camp, sir, with full fortifications and doubled watches," he reported crisply.

"Excellent, Gaius!" Telesinus said approvingly. "Now, please join us; I was about to outline the general plan we have for Numidia."

As Lucianus took his seat another soldier appeared at the doorway. "You asked to see me, King?" he said in Latin with a Lucanian accent.

Telesinus was on his feet before Bocar could react. "Ah! You must be Lucius Marbo, the only Lucanian among the top officers!" Telesinus advanced, his right arm outstretched.

Marbo was taken by surprise. He took the offered arm tentatively and confused. "Greetings, lord Telesinus! How do you know my name?"

"Oh, I know about you, and the two Gnaeuses, and Piso, and Titus." Telesinus said off-handedly. "All excellent soldiers, experienced under Silo in Armenia, and excellent choices to command the infantry for Bocar." Telesinus released Marbo's arm. "Here, join us." Telesinus pulled another chair over to the group. "This is Gaius Lucianus; he will replace you here as Commander of Infantry."

Lucianus stood, smiled and offered his arm. Marbo took it. "Greetings, Gaius," he said. "But I was not aware that I was to be replaced." He looked towards Bocar for confirmation.

"Oh, yes," Telesinus acknowledged and confirmed in one reply. "As of tomorrow, you and the Republican soldiers under your command will be going home early, but still rich. Let me explain in detail."

Telesinus pressed Marbo into the chair, and then sat himself.

"You and your men will be marching out as soon as possible to go back home. And you will be provided with free transport and rations until you get home. And you will also be granted full and complete pardons, and allowed to retain the pay you have received so far," Telesinus smiled.

"But we were on a two-year contract, sir," Marbo stumbled out.

"Yes, well I should explain that too," Telesinus responded. "You see, those contracts are invalid."

"Invalid?" Marbo was seriously confused now.

"Yes. Invalid because they required you to do something illegal; and of course a contract to break the law obviously cannot be enforced at law," Telesinus explained. "You see; you were told that your duties would be to provide military services for a Friend and Ally of the Republic, weren't you?"

"Well, yes," Marbo agreed. "But how did you know that?"

"Never mind how I know," Telesinus rambled on. "But what you didn't know is that you were misled. Your services included aiding and abetting the murder of king Hempsal, a Friend and Ally. For a Republic citizen to do so is High Treason."

Marbo's mouth dropped open with shock. "High Treason?" he strangled out eventually.

"Yes, but you will not be prosecuted because you were not aware that you were being told lies. You will be pardoned and taken home," Telesinus assured him.

Marbo looked to Bocar. "Is this true, my King?"

Bocar looked uneasy. "Yes, it is true. That battle you saw when you first marched here? That was me and my son-in-law seizing the kingdom from Hempsal."

Marbo gaped like a fish. "But we were told that Hempsal was going to march against Africa! We were told that the Republic did not want to do anything openly, lest it sabotage negotiations still under way; but privately we were to be prepared to intervene on the side of some factions still faithful to the Republic."

"Yes, it was a convincing lie, wasn't it?" Telesinus agreed. "That is why you will all be pardoned and permitted to keep the pay you earned in good faith," Telesinus explained yet again. I hope I'm getting through to him that he will be pardoned and paid. The gods know I have said it often enough!

"Oh." At last the penny dropped. Then Marbo looked at Bocar. "You bastard!" he said with passion as he leapt to his feet. "What have you done!"

"Now, don't you worry about that, Lucius!" Telesinus said soothingly. "Bocar will not get away with this, I assure you. We have confronted him with our proof of his wrongdoing. He has agreed to cede his kingdom to the Republic, as a province subject to the Great Senate. All without a drop of blood being spilt. The Republic is satisfied, and so should you be."

Marbo was confused and angry. He looked from one face to the other, seeing only shame in Bocar and firmness in the Telesinus and Lucianus. At last he sat.

"Whatever you tell us to do, lord Telesinus, be assured that we will do it. We are not traitors, but we are all good, honest soldiers of the Republic!" he said with his last spark of fire. "And I am furious that this bastard has tricked us into doing anything so shameful!"

"I know you and your men are faithful to the Republic," Telesinus assured him softly. "That is why you will be permitted to march out with honour, with your weapons, your freedom, your dignity and your pay. You have served the Republic well, and nothing will be permitted to tarnish that honour," Telesinus gestured for Marbo to sit again. "Tomorrow, I want you to gather all the men together in the valley outside, and I will tell them what I have just told you. They will then return to barracks, pack their gear, and march out the following morning with two of my legions. The other four legions with me will stay to take your place."

Marbo sat still on his chair for a few deep breaths, staring at his hands on his own thighs. Then he looked up. "Thank you, sir."

"Good," Telesinus said softly. "Now if you would please let the other officers know what has happened, and arrange for the men to assemble at the second hour?" Marbo stood and turned towards the door. "Oh, and also," Telesinus added, "If you know the whereabouts of lord Toba, could you please ask him to attend the evening meal tonight, with Bocar and me?"

"I will do that, sir. Lord Toba is with his cavalry officers at the moment." Marbo saluted and left.

Telesinus turned a raised eyebrow towards Bocar. "So Toba told you he was going south today?" He shook his head slowly and sadly. "Really, Bocar; if you do not soon learn to speak the truth to me, your term as Ethnarch might be very short indeed.!"

Caius Cassius, Lucius Mallius, Septimus Paulus, Marcus Manlius and Quintus Servilius and Publius Dolla were tried under the old law of Perduellio. This allowed for a punishment of being hung from an 'accursed tree'. Caius Cassius and Publius Dolla, being Republic Praetors and therefore owing a particularly high level of duty to uphold the Republic, were crucified and their bodies thrown into the lime pits. The other four were shown some clemency; they were beheaded.

All were subjected to confiscation of all property to the Republic. All these trials and sentences were held under the State of Emergency, and penalties imposed by Pontius Telesinus, whose actions and Decree of a State of Emergency had been explicitly endorsed by both Consuls.

Cato finished reading Telesinus' last Report, concluding with the paragraph

“Now that this matter has been resolved fully, I intend to rescind the State of Emergency tomorrow and surrender my imperium. I have already made arrangements to sail for Sardinia in three days' time to take up my governorship there.

Thank you for the trust and confidence you have shown in me during this affair.”

“At least this shows why the Africans were so keen to pass that Basic Law and attract more business and population to Africa,” Drusus observed. “The bigger Africa Tribe featured in the Republic economy in five years' time after they had sucked Numidia dry, the more the Republic would be obliged to defend it against any Numidian uprising.”

“Indeed,” Cato agreed. “I knew from the first that there was something underhand about it, and this proved me right.” Cato wagged a forefinger at his colleague as though Drusus were a naughty child. “Next time anyone comes up with something so absurd as giving legal rights to non-citizens, you will listen to your Uncle Lucius! Right?”

Drusus broke into laughter, and so did Cato. “Lucius – or should I call you 'Uncle Lucius'? - It is good to have you as a colleague in this Consulship. The marriage of opposites! And it works so well, because we respect each other, even when we disagree. If only all pairs of Consuls could oppose each other so creatively!”

Silo was leading his monthly review of the forces under his command on the Armenian Frontier. Nominally he had twenty legions still under his command, but this was a severe over-statement of his capabilities. Soon he would have only eight legions to garrison the entire Eastern Marches and defend against Parthia. Many of his men were employed not in military duties, but in road construction and bridge-building, strung out like beads on a string between

the Meander valley and Tigranocerta. Piso Gallienus was forever banging on about the value of good, fast communications and deployment routes, and he had a point there. Others were doing similar work in the far north, around Colchis and Artashat. And after the death of the Jewish king last year there was every chance that Sanatruces of Parthia might do something to distract him in Judea.

His mind wandered back four years, when he had made peace with Gotarzes. A uniquely personal and intimate bond had been established then, on the banks of the Tigris, and Silo was confident that he would have an enduring peace. But Gotarzes had died the next year, probably with the help of that upstart who had already displaced Orodes in the East. What was his name again? - oh, well; he didn't last. Sanatruces swept him aside before the anniversary of his ascension, with a newly re-united Parthia behind him. The two years since had shown that Sanatruces was no fool; but he was certainly an opportunist. And there was intelligence that Sanatruces was indeed putting together a force; big enough to cause trouble if he decided to attack, but not quite big enough to cause concern so long as it stayed south of Ctesiphon.

Silo pulled his mind back to the talk around the table with a jolt. Gallienus had said something that had tripped an alarm. "I'm sorry, Piso; could you repeat that?" Silo asked.

"Yes, General. I suggested that we should ask Rome for replacements for the twelve legions about to retire." Gallienus said again. "I know you are confident that we can recruit locally if we decide to do so, but it would take six months to teach Armenians proper Roman doctrine. In particular, the old Armenian Army suppressed any sort of initiative. They have been trained to simply stand their ground if anything unexpected happens. That makes their formations very vulnerable to decapitation; if the commanding officer is taken out of action, the whole unit simply stops working."

"The Senate won't like that," Silo replied. "They are in a panic already, trying to find land for the seventy thousand retiring veterans enlisted fifteen years ago for the Mithridatic War, and they don't want to be caught like that again in another fifteen years. I have been told to make do with what I have, and if I need more I am to enlist non-citizens on the basis of pay only, no retirement benefit."

"I expect the Senate would be in even more of a panic if Sanatruces starts marching north next year," Gallienus retorted.

"It is our job here to make sure that doesn't happen, Piso."

"In that case, sir, I don't think we can afford to be so widely dispersed," Gallienus fell back to his second option. "Much as I am an advocate for good roads, we cannot afford to allocate our legions to building them. We should concentrate all of our men along the frontier, and put the road-building out to contract."

Silo nodded to himself. "Paying labourers to build roads would be cheaper than paying Armenians for a year of training before they are of any real

use as soldiers,” he agreed. “But we still need a couple of legions in the north, to keep the Albanians and Iberians respectful.”

“If I might suggest another measure, General.” This was Priscus, who had been acting as his chief logistics officer since the reduction of Armenia. “At present each contubernium nominally has ten soldiers, but two of these are effectively non-combatant. This system works well as a way for new recruits to gain familiarity with army life; but after all these years most servants are more experienced than the average veteran elsewhere in the Republic. It is also a fact that most of our legions are understrength; the typical contubernium has only six combatant soldiers.

“I suggest that we advance the servants to full combatants, and buy slaves to fill the servant positions. This would mean effectively bring our eight legions up to nominal fighting strength, more or less, with no more liability to veterans in years to come. We would need to pay only the cost of suitable slaves, and the cost of feeding them,” Priscus summarised.

“That would provide more men,” Silo agreed. He thought a moment longer. “So yes, do it, Gnaeus! But by recruiting new soldiers as infill, not slaves,” Silo decided. “And next year, when the new soldiers have a bit of experience, we can promote them to combatants, recruit more servants, and take two experienced soldiers out of each of three contubernia to form the core of a fourth. This will give us enough for two new legions. And I know that we have enough experienced centurions and cohort commanders worthy of promotion to fill the officer cadre they would need.”

“And as for your suggestions, Piso; I agree.” Silo slapped his right palm against the table top. “Henceforth our soldiers will be soldiers, pure and simple. Leave the civil works to contract; the money we will not be paying in wages to the veterans who are retiring will be ample to cover private contractors. So I want one legion in each of Colchis and Artashat, and three each in Edessa and Tigranocerta, with all legions being put on intensive training. Those veterans who qualify for their retirement grants can march to Antioch and be taken home as the ships become available.

“Any further business?” Silo looked around the table. Nobody moved. “Good. Report back to me on progress,” Silo ordered. “I will write to the Consuls and report on the desperation measures we have been forced to, if they do not send us a few more legions.”

“I warned you, Conscript Fathers, that Sicily would be the start of an avalanche!” Metellus Pius shrieked. “Although it seemed to many of you a good idea at the time, the sequel we have seen in Africa should prove to everyone with eyes that this was a most dangerous precedent, has turned into a most dangerous practice, and if left to work its inexorable way, it will be fatal to the Republic! Although it is now too late to undo the disasters of Sicily and Africa, it is not too late to say 'Never again!'. We must not create any more disasters that cannot be undone!” Metellus sat abruptly.

Cotta was one of several who stood. As Censor, he was senior and was recognised. "Quintus Caecilius is quite right when he reports facts, Conscript Fathers," Cotta started in measured tones. "He did indeed warn us when we were debating the acceptance of Sicilia as a Tribe. So far, nothing that he warned against has come to pass. He also warned us against granting Africa the status of a Tribe within the Republic. So far not a drop of innocent blood has been spilt, a new province of Numidia has been gained, and the Treason committed by certain Africans had nothing to do with Tribal status; it could have happened even if Africa were still a Province.

"He also warned us, more than fifteen years ago, that the acceptance of the Italian Tribes as citizens would be a disaster. So far, nothing that he warned us against has come to pass. In fact, the extension of citizenship to the Italians has, to any fair-minded observer, greatly strengthened the Republic. So, yes, Quintus Caecilius is quite right when he reminds us that he has been issuing warnings for the best part of twenty years!" Cotta spread his hands to emphasise the point. "And so far, not one specific warning has been fulfilled.

"But what has he *not* warned us about?" Cotta paced the floor. "He did not warn us, during the debate on Italian citizenship, that if we refused the Italians would wipe the floor with us. He did not warn us that they had us outnumbered, out-equipped, and that Quintus Poppaedi Silo at their head would prove himself the greatest general in history! Far better than Caius Marius, and even better than Alexander! Nor did he warn us that Strabo would attempt a coup. Yes, Pompeius Strabo, whom he numbered among his friends! If it had not been for that accursed Italian-lover Sulla and his accursed Italian legions, Rome would now have a King!

"Yes, Quintus Caecilius is forever warning us about perils that would arise if we take a certain course of action; and when we have taken the action he warns against, that peril fails to materialise! But he is blind to those perils that will arise if we do *not* take action." Cotta turned to face Metellus.

"Tell me now, Quintus Caecilius; what peril will arise if Italian Gaul is recognised as a Tribe? Be specific! I don't want to hear yet again some vague waffle that 'Terrible Things will happen!' I want you to warn us *what* 'terrible things' will happen, and when they will happen. And I want your word that when these nominated 'terrible things' do *not* happen, you will save us this tiresome business of all your false warnings! I for one am convinced that you are jumping in fear from your own nightmares."

Lucius Glaucia jumped to his feet and spoke before being recognised. "A point of order, Lucius Porcius. The speaker referred to an ex-Censor as 'accursed'. Pontius Telesinus in his time ruled that such language was unseemly, and should be punished by removal from the chamber of any person employing it." Chuckles ran around the chamber.

Cotta stood again. "My apologies, Conscript Fathers, but I was using irony. I retract that word 'accursed', and assert in its place that Lucius Cornelius Sulla, twice Consul and twice Censor, was indeed an Italian-lover, but was also one of the greatest gifts that the gods have bestowed on Rome in its history."

The Italianists and most of the Populares stood to applaud this assertion. Yet again the Boni were told in no uncertain terms where the sympathies were when yet another prophecy of doom was trotted out. Rather than calling for another speaker against the Question, Cato stood himself. "Conscript Fathers, we already have in place the Lafrenian Law, which sets the criteria for admission of new Tribes. So unless this chamber determines to abolish that law, and convinces the Comitia to agree, then we must work within the terms of that law." He turned towards Metellus. "I understand your fears, Quintus Caecilius, and indeed I share many of them; but fear is not one of the criteria we are to consider. What we are to consider in making this decision are the points made in the recommendation by Herius Asinius as Governor of the province in question, and how these points measure up against the Lafrenian Law." Cato then looked around the chamber.

"As I work through the submission, I am persuaded that the proposed Tribe of Italian Gaul clearly satisfies the first four requirements. There is simply no room for argument here, if one sticks to the plain, simple facts. However, the fifth criterion is the problem! In my eyes, the proposed Stipend is inadequate. Certainly it is based on the average nett tax raised over the last five years; but that is, to my mind, an artificial number. It is based on Italian Gaul being taxed much too lightly over that period, as can be seen when you consider the population. As a result, the per capita Stipend is little more than half of that imposed on Sicily. This is clearly inadequate, and the Application should be refused.

"Now, as I conclude, I remind all speakers that their cases should be built on the provisions of the Lafrenian Law and the details of the Application, and not on either fear on one hand or political agenda on the other."

Sextus Julius Caesar, as an ex-Censor, was most senior of those who stood to speak for granting the Application. "I am most grateful for the advice of Lucius Porcius that the only point relevant to this whole debate is the level of Stipend to be fixed. Lucius Porcius is of the opinion that the proposed Stipend is too small, even though it matches average nett tax receipts. He argues that these average tax receipts have been artificially depressed for the last five years, to gain an ongoing benefit. And he does this by comparison with Sicily.

"I dispute that assessment. I would suggest that the per capita tax income from Italian Gaul is lower than in Sicily because the whole province is poorer than Sicily. The growing season is shorter, and more subject to frosts; the roads are poorer, meaning that the costs of transport to market are greater. There are no mines in Italian Gaul. Italian Gaul is not at the crossroads of Our Sea, so it earns nothing from trade compared to the huge shipping income that Sicily enjoys. And there are very few wealthy Romans or Italians who spend winter in Italian Gaul, unlike the many winter villas in Sicily. This means that Italian Gaul generates almost no income over winter, compared to the demand for services that the wealthy create in Sicily during the colder months.

"So one would expect the per capita income to be much lower than in Sicily," Caesar summed up his catalogue. "But let us not rely on expectation or

gut feeling; let us look at the statistics. The tax income over the last five years, although apparently lower than one might expect, has not been artificially depressed. If you consult the records for the previous five years, you will see little difference, with some years being slightly higher and some slightly lower. Go back for the five years before that again, and you will find that those five years were actually lower than the latest five; but only by a small margin. I have calculated the average nett tax receipts over the last fifteen years, not just the last five; and I have found that the Stipend proposed is actually slightly greater than the fifteen-year average for that province.

“Therefore I conclude that the proposed Stipend is fair and reasonable. That it seems low is due to the simple fact that the province is not as wealthy as one might imagine. Certainly, withholding Tribal status will not increase the nett tax income in the future; rather, it is likely to result in the population moving to other provinces where their labour and skills will attract greater pay, and Italian Gaul will go into a long-term decline. The other possibility, of granting Tribal status but with a significantly heavier Stipend, will have the same effect of driving out the population that serves as its tax base. This is not in the best interests of the Republic as a whole. It would be much better if Tribal status is granted, and the locals are then empowered to spend their own taxes on what they themselves know is best for them. This is the only way Italian Gaul can prosper, for their own good as well as the good of the Republic. I urge acceptance of this Proposal.”

There were no further speakers against the proposal. Cato himself, by far the most prestigious of the Boni, had already conceded all but the level of Stipend, and Caesar had established this point so effectively that no-one could contradict him. The proposal was accepted on the voices; all citizens wishing to transfer their tribal enrolment to Italian Gaul would be permitted to do so in September, and the Tribal Elections for their first Comitia would take place in December.

“The next matter on the agenda is a request from Quintus Poppaedi Silo,” Cato intoned. “Twelve of his twenty legions are due for retirement this year, and are already on their way home. He has requested at least four new legions, to bring his force up to twelve legions in strength. There is also one legion in the Spains, one in Macedonia and another in Transalpine Gaul due for retirement.”

Vidacilius stood unopposed. It was accepted practice that if the person making the request or moving a proposal was not present, there would be a delegated proponent permitted to speak first on his behalf.

“Conscript Fathers,” Vidacilius started speaking, “There is more to this proposal than meets the eye at first glance. I will attempt to put this question into proper context.

“During the War against Mithridates, our strength in the east was some thirty legions. Add to these another dozen scattered around the Spains, Africa, Gaul and other garrisons, and we had a total of more than forty legions under arms. Now, some might say that this was more than we actually required, and

point to the outstanding success of Silo during that War. 'We only need half that number', some might conclude. But they would be wrong. Silo's outstanding success owed itself to the brilliance of Silo himself, and the excellence of his officers, and the control and command techniques he developed with them. His total force of thirty legions, or some 150,000 men, must be compared to Mithridates' ability to raise almost 200,000 men against him on soil hostile to us; and that does not take into account the support he gained from Tigranes. Make no mistake; Silo was comfortably out-numbered!

"I also refer you back to the times of Caius Marius, who confronted three columns of Germans, with more than 250,000 fighting men at their command. Only the genius of Caius Marius saved Rome, and all Italy, in those days.

"At present we are on good terms with Long-haired Gaul and Parthia; but within a year we could find that a new leader in Long-haired Gaul could become hostile towards us; and either he or Parthia could match the numbers the Germans or Mithridates threw against us. Were that to happen, I have no doubt that Quintus Poppaedi in the east or Lucius Glaucia in Gaul would be equal to the task; but only if only he has the men to lead. But if the other foreign nation were to see this as an opportunity, we could be faced with two distinct threats, each able to field over 200,000 men, at opposite ends of the world! While we might well have Silo on one front and Glaucia on the other; would we be able to mobilise sufficient soldiers for them to be effective?

"To do mere garrison duty, apart from fighting a war, we need about ten legions. To fight a major war on one front, we need at least another twenty, and probably thirty if we are not blessed with a truly great commander. Therefore I suggest that this Republic should maintain a standing army of at least thirty legions, even to fight at one end of the world." Vidacilius scanned the chamber to give this number 'thirty' time to sink in. "But how many legions will we actually have under arms, once these veterans of the Mithridatic War retire?

"We will have eight in Syria-Armenia; we will have two in the Spains and another two in Gaul; we will have four on loan to the Ethnarch Bocar, to ensure the submission of Numidia. And two more in Macedonia, confronting the barbarians. That is a total of eighteen legions, Conscript Fathers. Little more than half the minimum prudent establishment. In fact, little more than the bare minimum for garrison duty, never mind fighting a war as well!" Vidacilius prowled the floor.

"I understand the shock that so many of us had when we realised that fifteen legions were due for retirement all at one time, and the cost this would impose on the Republic to grant these veterans the land they have so rightfully earned. I understand that you do not want to engage in mass recruitments, lest we have the same shock in another fifteen years. But to maintain thirty legions under arms, with a fifteen year term of service, we must become accustomed to the idea of providing land for two legions of men each year. That is almost ten thousand farms each year. Two hundred thousand iugera more land fit for farming. Five square miles, plus an allowance for roads and the excision of

unsuitable land, year after year after year.” Vidacilius looked around the chamber.

“We must prepare ourselves for that sort of effort, Conscript Fathers, year after year after year. If we do not, we will not be able to maintain even a minimum prudent army. Not that there is any shortage of good land, I might say; but we must be prepared to build the towns and the roads and the water supply and the sewer systems to make this much land useful. In the light of our earlier debate, maybe we should look towards Italian Gaul. Or in light of recent events in Africa, maybe we should be looking towards the virgin lands in Numidia. But wherever, we must be ready to plan for the inevitable. So how can we go from only eighteen legions to a minimum of thirty, without creating a shock to our systems? And how can we secure the Parthian Frontier when more than half of Silo's army retires? The veteran half, that is?

“I suggest the following. Last year, Pontius Telesinus raised and trained six legions. Without them, we would have only twelve! This year, and for the next six years, we resolve to recruit and train four new legions each year. Allowing for retirements in that time, we will have thirty legions in six years' time. Thereafter, we need to recruit and train perhaps three legions per year, to replace retirements and casualties.

“This will be sufficient for garrison duty and one war. If events unfold that we do have to go to war in a more serious way, then we should immediately suspend retirements of old legions and recall recently-retired veterans to the extent required to provide an additional fifteen legions to deter any opportunism at the other end of the world. These deferred retirements and recalled veterans should not be entitled to additional land, but are to be paid generously for their additional length of service to compensate for this absence of additional land entitlement.

“And I propose that the new legions, after preliminary training, be sent to the east, to serve their first two years under Quintus Poppaadius and thus gain the highest possible level of competence as quickly as possible. If we do this, we will be able to satisfy General Silo's minimum request for four legions as replacements, and also set up a system that will serve the Republic as a whole in good stead for generations to come.”

Cato looked around the chamber as Vidacilius sat. “Is there a speaker against the proposal?” No-one stood.

“This is most unusual,” he commented. “Is there anyone opposed to the proposal?” Still silence.

“Then there being no-one opposed, I take it the proposal is supported unanimously. Is there a call for a vote?” Still silence. “Then I declare it carried,” Cato announced. “I don't think that has ever happened before.”

“Bocar; you wanted this job. Now you've got it. So do it!” Lucianus was losing patience with this Berber yet again. That seemed to be the case most days. “Unless, of course, you would prefer to resign and allow the Senate to appoint another?”

"I *am* doing the job, Lucianus," Bocar snapped back, oblivious to the insult implied in the bare use of the gens name. "I am Ethnarch, and what I say is law. And I say that we need to march against Bomilcar as a rebel."

"Bocar; sit down, shut your mouth, and listen carefully." There was unmistakable menace in his tone. Bocar sat, but tried to look aloof as he did so. The result looked more like petulance than independence.

"I know I have told you this before, but it just doesn't seem to sink it. If it does not sink in this time, then I will have no choice but to report back to the Senate. You are Ethnarch. But what you say is *not* law. You are not sovereign here, but the Senate of the Republic is. And for all intents and purposes, I and Titus Claudius speak for the Senate as far as you are concerned. And I am telling you that a refusal by a personal enemy to come alone to attend to you in your palace is *not* rebellion. It is simple common sense, from what I know about you. Under Republic law, you have no right to command anyone to do anything or go anywhere, except by due process. You can request; and if he does not comply you can deprive him of any privileges that are within your gift.

"But he is not enjoying any privileges within your gift; he is only enjoying his rights under the law. If he still does not come to you, then you must obtain a legal warrant to demand his attendance. That is to be obtained from the Chief Administrator. And although Titus is nominally subordinate to you, he also has a duty to ensure that his rulings are in accordance with Law, and not just a reflection of your will. Therefore, you need to demonstrate, to the satisfaction of the Chief Administrator, that there is a legitimate need for Bomilcar to attend. And whether or not he attends alone or with a retinue is again a matter that you need to demonstrate to the Chief Administrator.

"And whatever you do," Lucianus cringed as he said this, "Whatever you do, you must not threaten, bribe or in any other way place undue pressure on Titus to comply with your petition, but only state an acceptable case in law. If you so much as give him even the slightest hint that there is any threat or promise behind your plea, then you can be imprisoned purely on his word, transported back to Rome, and tried for corruption. Maximum penalty, death."

"Then what is the point of being Ethnarch?" Bocar shouted in his frustration.

"No point at all, Bocar," Lucianus agreed. "So why don't you resign now?"

"Arh! Well, if he won't come to me, I'll go to him!" Bocar spat back.

"Oh? Will you go alone, or with friends? And what will you do when you get there?"

"I'll take a couple of legions, and pull his walls down on top of him!" Bocar snarled.

"Well, you won't take a couple of my legions with you unless you can give me a good reason to consider Bomilcar a danger to the Republic, or a criminal."

"You are my advisor, not my master, Lucianus!"

“Yes. And I am advising you that I will not act outside the law,” Lucianus replied evenly. “Again, if you try to use Republic troops to perpetuate a private feud, then that is also corruption.”

“Then I will use my own cavalry; they are not Roman! And Toba will come with me!”

“And if you use those cavalry to do any harm, then that will make you either a rebel or a criminal. Only the Republic has the authority to use military force, so you will have to argue that your cavalry is not a military force. And if it is not a military force, then they must be brigands, for which the penalty is death.” Lucianus sighed deeply. “You just don’t get it, do you?” he asked Bocar.

No, I don’t!” Bocar agreed angrily. “I don’t understand how he can refuse an order, and when I take action against him for disobedience, I am the one facing the punishment.”

“That is because you have no right to give that order. Therefore he has every right to ignore it.” Lucianus sighed again. “Seriously, Bocar; I have this terrible fear that you are going to do something totally illegal without even realising it, and lose your life as a result. The Chief Administrator and I can protect you in so far as we know what you have in mind; but what we *don’t* know about is the big danger. If I were you, I would resign the position, turn all your assets into cash, and go somewhere else to live comfortably. You are playing a deadly game, and you don’t even know the Rules.”

Bocar just stared at him for a moment, and then stamped out of the office. Lucianus followed him out at a dawdle, deep in thought. He walked slowly up the corridor to the Chief Administrator’s office and entered the outer office.

“Hello Jason,” he said to the clerk. “Is Titus available?”

“Yes, lord. Go straight in.”

Lucianus knocked on the door, waited a moment, and opened it.

“Hello Gaius,” the Chief Administrator greeted him cheerily.

“Hello Titus,” Lucianus replied more glumly.

“Here; sit down and spill your thoughts,” Titus Claudius suggested.

“How are you managing with Bocar? Does he have any clue? For example, has he separated his private purse from the Province’s treasury?” Lucianus asked in quick succession as he dropped into a chair.

“To answer your questions in so far as I remember each of them,” Claudius replied airily, “I’m making slow headway, No, he has no clue, and I am currently helping him to set up a separate Province Treasury. Or at least, a separate accounting for the Province, but it still seems to all be going into the same strong room,” Claudius looked more closely. “Why, are you having problems too?”

“Oh, the idiot seems to think that being Ethnarch means he has Republic backing for carrying out private vendettas. It is as though our taxes are bribe money, so we will allow him to do what he wants,” Lucianus dropped his hands in a gesture of despair.

“Strange, but back in Utica the general opinion is that he is as clever as any. Anything but an idiot,” Claudius commented.

“Oh, I have no doubt he is rat-cunning, and as good a schemer as any,” Lucianus explained. “But he just can't think outside this barbarian paradigm. He has no idea of Law as such; only that the guy with the power is an idiot if he doesn't use it for his own benefit. He has no idea of *government*! He seems to think it is just extortion on a grander scale.”

Claudius nodded in agreement. “Yes, because that is the only kind of government he has ever seen.”

“What are we going to do about it, Titus?” Lucianus asked. “I have this terrible fear that he is going to do something grossly out of order because he knows no better, and we two will have our balls in the trap for not stopping him.”

Claudius leant back in his chair for a moment. “Perhaps the first step is to get him away from any temptation. And perhaps the best excuse for doing that is to take him to Sicily or Asia, so he can see how things are done properly. So how about we send him on an educational tour, and while he is gone we can set things up here the way they should be.”

“Yes!” Lucianus agreed enthusiastically. “Can you have one of your staff arrange that, or should I appoint one of my junior officers to hold his hand?”

“Well, if Bocar is out of the way, I will want as many of my people here as I can keep. That's our big chance to make all the changes without him putting his fingers over everything,” Claudius answered.

“Fair enough. I'll get one of my staff to guide him.”

Lucianus found Bocar in his private quarters that afternoon. “Bocar, I think I know how I can help you.”

Bocar looked up distrustfully. “Help me what? Get rid of Bomilcar?”

“No, help you understand how the Republic system works, so you know how to use it better.”

“You have already explained it to me, and it doesn't make sense,” Bocar dismissed the idea brusquely.

“What I have in mind is not just telling you about it, but actually showing you how it works in real life. I want to take you to Sicily and Asia, where the Rufan System has been in practice for ten years now.”

“You want me to tour Sicily and Asia?” Bocar asked.

“Yes.”

“What sort of fool do you take me for?” Bocar asked scornfully. “As soon as I am out of Numidia you will take over the place for yourself. By the time I get back – if I get back! - I will have lost everything! No! Go away!”

“Bocar,” Lucianus said quietly. “If we wanted to take all your wealth off you, it would be so easy for us. We could set you up to do something illegal, and then take you to the Senate. We could run legal rings around you, and you would end up penniless, if not dead. And if we really wanted to do it quickly, I could have you killed tonight. The army is mine, remember? So why would we try to trick you into going overseas if we intended anything as simple as getting

rid of you?" Lucianus asked. "The only explanation that makes sense is that we don't want you to do anything utterly stupid! Because if you do something stupid, we will have to explain why we didn't stop you."

"Don't give me your silly stories, Lucianus. I can see straight through you!"

Lucianus shrugged. "Well, if you say you don't want to go, that's the end of the story. I can advise you, but not order you to go." He turned and walked out. He was back talking to Titus Claudius within a few minutes.

"Rat-cunning is the best description for him," Lucianus said in his exasperation. I think we can only do one thing now."

"That's one more than I can think of," Claudius confessed. "Except wait for him to stuff up, hope it is not too bad, and we don't do too much damage to our own careers."

"Typical of you Administrator types!" Lucianus joked. "We soldiers like to take pre-emptive action. I suggest you write to the Consuls expressing grave concerns with the way Bocar is approaching this job. Just stick to the facts; that he wants to use his authority and power corruptly, and give the examples we have seen already. Suggest that the Senate should call him to attend a short course on what Administration is all about, to give him a clearer idea of what the Republic requires of its Governors and Ethnarchs." Lucianus paused a moment. "And perhaps add that this should be done soon, before he commits some gross illegality in his ignorance. We can only advise, and he is showing increasing signs of becoming impatient with our advice."

Claudius tilted his head with a thoughtful grimace. "It has been done before, I suppose. And if ever there was a need for it to be repeated....". Claudius seemed to make up his mind, but his next words belied that.

"I just wonder how Bocar will respond to receiving such an order from the Senate; it might make him panic. I'll think about it overnight, and we can talk in the morning," he declared.

By the next morning Claudius had reached a decision. "I will tell Bocar that I will guide him through the Short Course the College of Administrators has put together for first-time Governors and Ethnarchs. It will take about four hours a day for ten days, and comes with an examination at the end. If he fails, he will be required to repeat the course and the exam until he passes, or until he is dismissed for repeated failure."

"I didn't realise there was such a course," Lucianus replied.

"Oh, yes; most Romans don't need to do it, because service as a Republican Praetor or higher is considered the equivalent. But it was written a few years back after the Nicomedes Incident, when Silo was Consul. Just in case there was a repeat."

The Nicomedes Incident was a celebrated case. Nicomedes had been King of Bithynia until Mithridates over-ran his Kingdom in the War. When the territory was re-captured by Roman forces under Silo, Nicomedes had been told the Rome had acquired sovereignty by right of conquest, but would permit

Nicomedes to return as the appointed Ethnarch. Nicomedes had then tried to divert the contents of the Treasury into his personal wealth, and been tried for Fraud as a result.

"No doubt about the College of Administrators," Lucianus said mockingly, "They have a protocol for every purpose!"

Claudius smiled in return. "Never let a precedent go to waste!" he agreed.

"Good idea so far," Lucianus agreed with the plan. "But what will you do if Bocar disagrees?"

"Then I'll get a direction from the Senate commanding him to comply," Claudius answered. "At least that will not spook him as much as being told to go to Sicily."

Lucianus nodded his agreement. "Yes; so long as he is allowed to stay here, his paranoia won't get the better of him."

"Good. We are agreed," Claudius summarised. "I'll tell him now." Claudius stood and walked to the door of his office.

Lucianus followed. "I'll go with you."

They found Bocar in his working office attached to the Basilica. "What do you two want?" he challenged the Romans as they were shown in by his secretary. Lucianus' Chief Engineer standing across the table from him looked as though he needed a break.

"If you would be kind enough to spare us some time as soon as you are free," Claudius asked politely.

"I'm free now!" Bocar growled. And then to the Engineer "Just do as I say! No excuses! Go!" The Engineer gathered up some plans from the desk and hurried past Lucianus, whispering "I will wait for you" as he passed.

"That upstart prick of an Engineer! Why can't he just do what he is told?" Bocar asked in exasperation. "Anyway, what brings both of you here at the same time? It must be important."

Claudius slipped into the question smoothly. "It is obvious that the Republic way of doing things is something you find confusing and complicated, Bocar; and when we try to explain it to you one tiny bit at a time we are not giving you the proper overall view. But there is a properly thought-out way to explain it to you. If you take the time, then everything will become much clearer to you, and you will be able to use your authority much more effectively." Claudius gestured back towards the open door behind him. "You will know how to get that Engineer to do what he is told, for example."

"I'm not going to Sicily or Asia," Bocar said flatly.

"Good," Claudius replied. "We can go through it here with you. It will take about four hours a day for ten days, and give you a good understanding of the basic principles behind the Republic's way of governing."

"Four hours a day?" Bocar asked. "Right here?" pointing downwards for emphasis.

"Yes. For ten days," Claudius confirmed.

"And that will keep you two off my back? No more telling me what I can or can't do?"

"That's right. You will know yourself what you can do, and more importantly how you can get it done," Claudius encouraged him.

"Right. When do we start?" Bocar asked.

"I will have to send to Ephesus for the materials; we will probably be able to start in a month, maybe a bit longer if the shipping is delayed," Claudius explained. "But in the meantime, please be patient and listen carefully to our advice. Being an Ethnarch is an honour, but a very dangerous one if you make even an honest mistake."

"I can wait a couple of months, if it means that I will have a freer hand," Bocar agreed.

Lucianus and Claudius gave a short nod of acknowledgement before turning and leaving. Just outside the door was the Chief Engineer, waiting for Lucianus. "Sir," he addressed Lucianus, and then decided he should salute the Chief Administrator as well, "and lord Claudius; I have misgivings over Bocar's latest scheme. I would like your advice."

"What is he planning now, Lucius?" Lucianus asked tiredly.

"You are aware that his own private holdings are in the far south? Where rainfall is less, and not as reliable?"

"We know that, Lucius."

"Well, Bocar wants to build a dam across the upper reaches of the river, and hold this water to irrigate his own land," the Engineer explained. "That will flood the best land upstream of his own holdings, and he only intends to release as much water as he needs himself, so those downstream of him will be stuck in an everlasting drought. Except for during full flood, anyway."

"He can't do that," Claudius replied. "Or at least, not without paying compensation."

"That's what I told him, lord," the Engineer agreed. "But he says the law is none of my business; I should just build whatever he tells me to build, and leave the law to him."

"Perhaps you should do as he says, Lucius," Lucianus broke in. "At least, the preliminary work, such as surveying and design." Lucianus then looked to Claudius. "And each month we will assess how much public resources this work has consumed and send Bocar a bill, to pay as a private citizen. That should make him realise that these things can come back to bite him, and discourage any more ideas without clearing them with us first."

Claudius nodded slowly. "Yes, perhaps it is about time we let him have his head, and then pulled on his chain to get him back into line. Meanwhile, I will give a higher priority to separating Provincial accounts from Bocar's private wealth."

It was only four days later that Claudius presented Bocar with a Treasury Report. "Ah! This is excellent, Claudius!" Bocar chuckled as he saw the bottom line. "I never realised that the Kingdom had so much wealth! And the income you say can be generated is most impressive!"

"Yes, it is pleasing," Claudius agreed. "But as the attachments show, there is still some work to be done, details to attend to, and so on."

“Who cares? Just see to it,” Bocar waved away the comment.

“Yes, Ethnarch. I will get onto it straight away,” Claudius bowed slightly before turning and leaving.

Claudius met with Bocar a few days later. “According to your instructions, Ethnarch, I have prepared a list of former Kingdom assets currently in the possession of private citizens, and which should be returned to the Province Treasury. I have prepared a separate list for each private citizen affected, and will serve notice on each of them as soon as communication allows.” He handed Bocar a sheet of paper.

Bocar glanced down at the sheet in his right hand. “What is this?”

“It is a Notice, as you authorised me to issue last time we met,” Claudius answered glibly.

Bocar scanned down the sheet. “What! You are telling me to give into the Treasury all the loot I took from Hempsal? What sort of joke is this?”

“It is not a joke, Ethnarch. Under Roman Law, all property of a king deposed by a Friend and Ally must be paid into the Provincial Treasury if the former kingdom is made a Province; or paid to the Senate if the territory is not annexed.”

Bocar continued to scan down the sheet. “What's this about land?” he demanded. “These lands are mine now!”

“Those lands are in your possession, Ethnarch, and I must thank you for extending your protection to them. But they also were the property of either Hempsal or others whom you have determined were Enemies of the Kingdom. Their assets were therefore forfeit to the Kingdom, and therefore now to the Province.”

Bocar continued reading down the list. “And what is this item? 'Value of produce appropriated'?” he challenged again.

“Ah, that!” Claudius was quick to explain. “That was the value of produce from the lands listed above, sold by you to Roman traders. Since it was grown on Province land, the produce also belonged to the Province. The money raised when it was sold has not yet been paid into the Province Treasury.”

“Listen, you slimy little quill-pusher!” Bocar shouted in rage. “Don't try any more of this smart-arse stuff! What is mine is mine, and it will stay that way! Take this list and shove it, and don't try any more silly jokes like this again or you will be sorry.”

“What is yours is yours, and what is the Treasury's is the Treasury's,”

Claudius replied with an edge in his voice. “As for shoving it; it is your notice, so perhaps you should be the one to decide where would be the most appropriate place for it. And I am not joking. This Notice has force of Law, and Lucianus has commanded his men to protect me from any silliness you might try.”

Claudius advanced on Bocar, menace in his stance and his voice building from conversational to a shout as he built up momentum. “This slimy little quill-pusher is not joking. He is teaching you a lesson that you have refused to

learn any other way! I have tried to warn you to learn the Law before you do anything silly, and you have refused to listen. Now that I have your attention, you should start listening. Because I have more power in a broken nib than you have in your entire body. Do you understand that now, or do you require an even harsher lesson?" Claudius thundered. Then Claudius took two steps back and adopted a subservient pose. "Are there any other things that the Ethnarch needs to have explained?" he asked evenly.

Bocar looked at the guards in the audience room. He could tell from their faces that he no longer commanded them except in theory.

Sanatruces launched his attack late in the summer, hoping that the Republic would not be able to respond before winter closed down their longer lines of transport and communications. He knew from reports that only two legions had been added to Silo's eight remaining, and these two were those from Africa, who had barely finished basic training. They were not yet battle-ready.

The Parthians relied heavily on cataphracts, heavy cavalry units in which even the horses were armoured. These were very effective on the flat lands of Mesopotamia, when used as a shock weapon. They drove into Adiabene rapidly. Arbela opened its gates, there being no substantial Republic forces anywhere in the region. Silo had pulled all his forces on the east side of the Tigris back, rather than expose them to surprise. Sanatruces rejoiced in this quick victory and rapid advance. This Silo, he reasoned, was nothing. His victory over Armenia and Gotarzes a few years back had not been proper soldiering; it had been the work of a vulture, picking the eyes out after tricking Tigranes and Gotarzes into slaughtering each other. But here, faced with a competent, unified and powerful enemy, this Silo fell back and hid from battle.

Well, let's see how far he will retreat before the morale of his force shatters completely, and leaves the way open to Tigranocerta! He continued pushing into Gordyene, reaching the remnants of the false fortifications on the river that had separated the mock-armies of Gotarzes and Tigranes those few years ago. He had still found no resistance, and started ordering boats to be made, to ferry his forces across the river. Slowly at first, but in increasing numbers as more boats became available, the Parthians landed men and equipment on the northern bank. There were no Roman forces to be seen for at least ten miles past the river.

"They had some five thousand infantry and three thousand heavy cavalry over the river at sunset, General," Titus Herennius reported to Silo as the darkness deepened. "They also have more boats, so we expect that number to double tomorrow. He has a total of ten thousand cataphracts in his force; they are what worry me most if we have to fight a set-piece battle. They can fight off our light cavalry and then freeze our infantry in place, to be picked off in detail by their infantry."

Silo nodded his appreciation. "Gnaeus should be just about through Atropatene by now; he has had fifteen days. Piso is in position with his artillery; I know that much. Yes, tonight would be a good time," Silo decided.

We won't inflict much in the way of losses, compared to what he still has on the other side of the river, but it will be enough to pull him into our trap. Give the order!"

Gnaeus Priscus was under orders to break out of southern Atropatene with his five thousand light cavalry on the twentieth day and form a picket across to the Tigris, north of Arbela. He had with him virtually all of the available Republic cavalry for this mission. From there he was meant to scout at least twenty miles north and south of the picket, and annihilate any forces he felt strong enough to challenge. In so far as possible, he would destroy and occupy any bridgehead over the Khabur River, north of Arbela. Piso Gallienus was under orders to cross the Tigris from Osrhoene three days later, with two legions of infantry and virtually all of the artillery available; in theory Priscus would have arrived on the East Bank to cover his crossing by then, and protect his artillery and infantry as they reinforced the picket into a genuine fortified line of defence.

But they would be so thin! Less than 200 men per mile of front on the average! That was not even enough to form a single rank one tenth that frontage! Everything depended on concentration along the most likely lines of advance, and concealment. For this to work, Silo had to pull as many Parthians as far forward as possible, and give his subordinates an empty field in which to prepare the set-piece battle that would determine the campaign. But by dedicating virtually all his cavalry and artillery to this cutoff mission, he was left with only two legions of infantry himself, and forty onagers. His one chance was in a set-piece battle of his own, behind good fortifications and with cross-bows to replace the missing artillery. If it came to hand-to-hand combat, he would be lost.

Silo could hear the chosen veterans mustering for this strangest of missions for a typical legionary. A Roman legionary was the most formidable heavy infantryman in the world. They were better armed, better trained and much more versatile than the legendary hoplites of Sparta; but tonight they would be going in unarmoured and without shields. Even the standard gladius was to be left behind, a small dagger in a leather sheath being the substitute weapon. They could not risk any sound of metal upon metal. Then there was the soft sound of the men scuffling away, to the south. Such a pity that they had only a thin crescent of a moon to light their way, and that would have set long before they were in position. Please, Mars and Jupiter, do not let this mission fail for lack of light!

Time is of the essence, Septimus Caretus kept telling himself as he led his two centuries down the road at a moderate jog. If we can cover twenty miles in the three hours of moonlight we will only be a mile or two short of the Parthians. Then we can rest for half an hour, spend the next hour or so scouting sentries and the layout of the Parthian camp, and finding the best way to their horses. By then the crossbowmen should have caught up. We need to take out any sentries that might be guarding the horses, and then slaughter as many

animals as we can before we have to fall back under the Parthian reaction. I would hate to have to carry a cross-bow and a full quiver of bolts over this distance! I don't begrudge them being allowed a couple of hours extra!

Each of his men was wearing nothing but a tunic coloured deep blue for concealment, his army sandals, a light loincloth and a belt with his dagger. Thankfully the road was in good condition; anyone with a twisted ankle would have to be left where he fell.

The moon set, and Caretus was still well short of the Parthian camp. But there was no way he could ask his men run through this total darkness, prepared road or not. The jog dropped back to a walk. It was almost midnight when he heard the sound of Parthian horses in front of him. "Stop!" he ordered in a fierce whisper. "Cross-bow guides, wait here! Advance party, slow advance!" A dozen men fell out by the side of the road, delegated to intercept the crossbowmen so they did not blunder into the enemy.

Another hundred paces to a low rise, and from there they could see the fires from the Parthian camp spread along the back of the old fortifications along the river. For joy! Light to see by!

The camp looked very poorly laid out. It was arranged in huddles. Perhaps eight tents in each huddle were clumped around a central fire, and two men attended each fire, probably as sentries. But this geometry meant that no pair of sentries could see their neighbours because of the obstruction by the tents, and they could see very little outside their huddle between the tents. The real sentries in this arrangement were the horses themselves, kept in enclosures made up by roping off sections of the old fortifications. They were more likely to sense the intruders than the soldiers were. But these were located river-side of the men's tents; we would have to go through not just a few sentries, but a few thousand men, if we are to get to those horses.

Caretus pulled his men back behind the rise, and called for his senior men in a hoarse whisper. "The easy way to do this would be to start at one end, take out the sentries, and then dust them off one tent at a time," he gave his assessment. "But if it takes us a minute to take out the sentries, then three minutes per tent, that is only three camps per hour we can get through. And we only have four or five hours of darkness left; even less if the cross-bows take their time. In four hours, that is only a dozen camps we can take out. There are must be close to a hundred camps. We won't have time to kill the horses, and that is the whole point of this mission."

"Let's start at each end," one man suggested. "We still won't get finished in time, but it will do more damage."

"No." Caretus said quickly. "Our mission is to take out the horses. The cataphracts are the big danger, not the infantry. We need to get at the horses."

"How about a complete change of plan?" another said. "Let's take out the sentries only, and leave the sleepers. Then sneak through and untie the horses so they can run. Then, we start a few fires. The horses will panic and run. The cross-bows can pick off as many as they can as they are back-lit by the fires, and the rest will escape, not available for fighting."

Caretus stared into the dark for a moment. "Yes. Good idea. At least it means their horses will be lost to them, even if we can't kill them. Right. Then start working out along the lines. Space yourselves, find good shooting positions for the bows so they don't have to waste their time. I want two men opposite each set of sentries," Caretus ordered. "And be quiet while you do it; there is plenty of time before the crossbows get here!"

An hour later the two hundred crossbow men arrived. They were sent out along the line, with four dropping off with each pair of pre-stationed infantrymen. Four crossbows for each pair of sentries. As soon as the last four were in position, they were to take careful aim and take out their sentries, two bows per target to ensure no misses. This would be the signal to anyone else who saw that the attack had started, and the process would ripple back down the line. With luck, half of the line would be left defenceless in a matter of minutes. Then the crossbows would all move further along by fifty positions, and take out the remaining sentries.

That was the plan. But it required everything to go right. If even one sentry raised the alarm, there would be problems. If that happened, Caretus had given clear orders. Everyone must fire quickly and re-load. If they charge at you, keep shooting until they are too close, and then run! Make as much noise as possible as you do it. But if they run away from you, keep shooting and re-loading! And if they run at another part of the line but not at you, then shoot at them in a cross-fire to support those under attack. Only run if you are attacked, and only if they are too close to allow another volley.

Caretus had made a point of stationing himself behind the centre of his line. The chill of the night was deepening. He hoped the cross-bowmen would not have their aim affected by shivering. There! A movement in one of the far huddles! The shooting had started! So far so good; from the distance to that fire, at least a dozen pairs of sentries must have fallen by now, and still no alarm. Then a few more pairs of sentries went down simultaneously. This time he saw that one had two bolts in his chest as he fell. That was good co-ordination!

Half a minute later another pair of sentries was hit. But this time, one of them fell against a tent. Would that wake the men inside? If it did, would they rouse, or would they just curse the clumsy sentry and go back to sleep? That sentry was still pressing against the wall of the tent. That would annoy whoever is trying to sleep in that space! More pairs of sentries went down, but Caretus had his eyes fixed on the tent. There! A man coming out, to see who was to blame for his inconvenience! Almost immediately he went down. Good thinking, whoever was at that station, to be prepared for that possibility instead of moving off to their second station immediately!

Then he heard the sound he dreaded. It had been too good to last! In fact, he was lucky it had lasted this long! But there was a voice coming from one of the tents almost directly in front of him. He could not speak the language, but he could tell from the sound that the alarm was being raised. But would they

take the time to dress in their fighting equipment and charge into the dark against an unseen enemy, or would they run back to the safety of the river?

Caretus looked along the line. It seemed that all the sentries had been picked off on this half of the line, but the shouts of alarm were spreading. Soon the camps not yet attacked would be roused. Suddenly half a dozen men broke from a tent, running for their lives towards the river. Then another half-dozen from an adjacent tent. Excellent! If the first few run away, the later ones will surely follow! Nobody will want to stay and fight if everyone else is running!

“Start the fires as soon as the enemy are clear!” Caretus bellowed at the top of his voice. There was no advantage in stealth now; in fact, the more noise they made, the more they would panic the enemy. He heard the order relayed down the line in both directions.

By now the enemy were streaming out of their tents and running for safety. As the flood of the enemy soldiers dwindled, his own men came forward to grab burning sticks from the campfires and race towards the horse enclosures. Slashing at ropes and throwing the brands onto anything that looked like it might burn, his men screamed to create the impression of a full-blooded attack. He saw one soldier run at a horse and plunge his dagger into the horse's neck. The terrified animal reared, and then ran for a few paces before falling; the other horses fled in a stampede.

Within a few minutes the dry old wood of the disused fortifications was well alight. Caretus noted with approval that the fires had been spread well beyond the extent of the crossbowmen; his light infantry further along the line, still waiting for the crossbowmen to reach their huddles, had taken the initiative. If there were fires there, then that meant that the horses had also been set free or killed. In the distance Caretus could see the fires along the river bank being fed more fuel, and by that light he could see a scramble for the punts. The enemy were trying to get across the river! Why were they not at least forming a defensive line?

Then he realised that they had fled without their equipment; all of their gear had been left in their tents. “Burn the tents!” He bellowed over the noise. “Burn the tents!” He was relieved to hear this order being repeated across the field, and in a few moments a few of the tents were in flames. That should give the hint to those out of the range of the order, he thought with satisfaction.

Caretus stood and watched as the fires spread. In the areas where the fires were well established he could see his men running back into the darkness, their mission completed. Within fifteen minutes the whole front was ablaze. “Fall back!” He bellowed. “Fall back to the road!” He looked to the crossbowmen beside him. “You! Run along the line of the tents and shout that order as you go! You two to the left, the others to the right. When you get to the end, run back doing the same.” The four men dropped their bows and set off at a quick jog, their path well lit by the burning tents.

The first glimmer of dawn was touching the sky in the East by the time Caretus was convinced that all his surviving men were with him at the road. Counting by the light of a burning stick he had grabbed to guide his men back to

him, he had accounted for three hundred and twenty seven; seventy men not accounted for. He could only hope that most of those were simply lost in the darkness, and making their own way to the north. "Right, men! Time to go home. I want the crossbows at the rear; if we hear anyone following, we deploy to keep them at a distance with the bolts. Hand-to-hand with only daggers does not appeal to me."

The march north turned into a slow jog as the light improved. He was driving his men as hard as he dared without breaking the weakest of them; but he genuinely feared pursuit by surviving Parthian cavalry. He had been promised that an entire legion in full gear would be marching down the road during the night by torchlight, to meet him at first light. The road had proven longer than had been estimated, and the sooner he met that protection the better.

As the sun rose, Caretus caught the glint of metal in the distance to the north. "Come on, lads!" he exhorted his men. "I can see the boys coming for us! Only another mile!" The crossbowmen at the rear were exhausted. It was not only the weight of their weapon that was troubling them; it had been designed to be able to be slung across the back when marching. But it was an incredibly awkward device when carried at a jog.

Within quarter of an hour they were safe in the ranks of the heavy infantry, marching six abreast to allow a rapid evolution into a box if troubled by cavalry. The formation turned about to return to their camp in the north. Just as they did so, a call came from the southern end of the column. "Enemy to the south!" It had taken the Parthians almost two hours to find enough horses and equipment to pull together a pursuit squadron; this had been barely enough time for their escape. The Parthians approached up the road and skirted around the rear of the Roman column at a distance. The Romans did not break march, but were prepared to form a box at a moment's notice. After twenty minutes assessing the legion, the cataphracts turned back south.

Caretus stood before Silo late that afternoon, and gave his report. Silo nodded slowly and thoughtfully when he had finished. "Good work, centurion!" he said warmly. "As soon as there is a vacancy you will be assigned to command a cohort. I like your initiative on the spot." Silo stood and held out an arm. "Congratulations!" he smiled.

Caretus took the arm. "Thank you, General. I have the advantage of excellent examples above me."

Silo motioned towards a chair as he sat again. "Please, take a seat. You say that most of their horses escaped?"

Caretus sat, but remained almost rigid on the edge of the chair. "As well as I could see by firelight, sir. But I would expect that they might have run only a few miles, if that. The Parthians would probably be able to re-capture most of them. That was why I ordered the burning of the tents, hoping that necessary equipment would be destroyed."

"You are probably right about them getting their horses back," Silo agreed glumly. "But I agree that you did the best you could in the circumstances."

From now on, they will be much more wary of us, more cautious in their work. So your good work might end up being to our disadvantage in the long run.” Silo flopped back in his chair. “Is there anything else of note you can think of?”

“One thing, General. When the pursuit found us, we were already with the legion,” Caretus answered. “It would seem to them that the attack had been carried out by a whole legion, not just four light centuries. So they would be thinking right now that you can march an entire legion more than twenty miles and deploy them in ambush order in only six hours, in total darkness. So from now on, they will be careful to make sure that have good fortifications every night, and very heavy overnight guards to repel an attack in force. This should slow their rate of march considerably,” Caretus concluded.

“Yes, you are right there,” Silo agreed. “They will not only be more cautious; they will also be much slower.”

This proved true. Cavalry scouting the next day found that the bridgehead had been extensively fortified to prevent another night attack. Almost a hundred of the Parthian horses had also been found by the Roman scouts and taken back to base. Not as swift or agile as the Numidian and Gallic bloodstock used by the Republic forces, these beasts were larger and stronger, good for haulage work.

By the third day after the raid the Parthians had completed their crossing of the river. They started the march north, but halted soon after mid-day to commence fortifying their camp. Only ten miles gained, instead of the twenty that might have been expected. They were also using cataphracts as scouts. Not what these units were designed for, carrying all that weight for an extended period of time, and the duty was being rotated around them to minimise the strain. But it did make an ambush of the scouts much more hazardous. Silo was content that the progress was already slow enough.

Sanatruces was not concerned about the slower pace. There was still ample time left in the season to take Tigranocerta, and the slow build-up of pressure would not be doing the Roman morale any good. All the more time for desertions to further weaken his enemy! Of more concern to him was the loss of almost a thousand of his horses, and equipment for fifteen hundred. His effective cataphract force was now down to just over eight thousand. Thankfully he still had over fifty five thousand infantry, enough to provide all the labour needed to build decent camps along the way, and to meet with the handful of legions available to the enemy. Six more days, even at this reduced pace, and he would be outside Tigranocerta! Perhaps even inside it, if the Romans kept falling back!

But he was wary of ambushes, which these Romans had used with such devastating effect against Tigranes. The terrain grew ever more into a series of choke points between isolated river flats, and each choke point was a potential trap. Now that they were out of the broad, flat lands, the use of his heavy cavalry was becoming more problematic. By abandoning Adiabene without a fight, Silo had turned this into an infantry campaign, neutralising his disadvantage in cavalry. Would he also abandon Gordyene?

Also, foraging was becoming harder. These Romans were taking all the stored grain and livestock with them as they fell back, and that meant the local population went with them. Sanatruces could no longer feed his army off the land, as he had up to now, but had to rely on carrying his food supplies with him. That meant some of his forces had to be diverted to protect a supply mission, all the way back to Arbela a hundred miles to the rear. This need only move at the speed of oxen, so no cataphracts would be wasted on that. Let them have five thousand infantry, more than enough to protect from the light cavalry squadrons that were the only raiding force the Romans could spare.

Sanatruces was three days out from Tigranocerta when he found that the Romans would retreat no further. A strong defensive line had been prepared, with ditches and stakes to hold any attacking force in a killing field under artillery fire. He sent mounted scouts right and left to discover the extent of these works, and hopefully pass around them. Word soon came back from the left; the fortifications ran down to the Tigris, and out into the water past the depth a man could stand in. There was no quick way through in that direction. To the east the landform became more uneven, and the line of fortification followed a ridge inland until it met steeper, lightly wooded country. The fortifications were flimsy here; no trenching or ramparts were possible due to the shallow soil. Beyond the end of the line the land rose further into the forests at the foot of terrain virtually impassable. This would restrict speed of movement and make larger infantry formations difficult to control, and cataphracts impossible. A battle there would soon descend into an extended hand-to-hand skirmish.

“That puts our cataphracts out of business,” Sanatruces said. “They can’t do anything against prepared defences or broken terrain. Well, we have the infantry to spare,” Sanatruces decided. “We attack through the hill country, turn the corner, and then come back to roll up their main line from the flank.” The subordinate officers bowed, and then set about preparing orders down to commanders of hundreds. This would be a very foggy battle indeed, and even the most junior officers would need to know what was required of them.

That evening a dusty and exhausted rider was brought to him. “Mighty King. The Romans have attacked north of Arbela,” he reported.

“North of Arbela? Where? How many? What are they doing?” Sanatruces was worried.

“About two thousand light cavalry have occupied the road on the north bank of the Khabur,” the rider answered. “They seem to have no other target, they are not moving.”

“They are a pest, nothing more,” Sanatruces said, relieved. “The five thousand infantry I have sent back as protection to the supply caravan will fall on them and scatter them. Roman cavalry are fit for nothing except scouting and raiding.” He flicked a hand at the rider. The rider bowed, took three steps backwards, and left.

By the time Sanatruces made this decision, Gallienus had already crossed the Tigris and marched his men south to the Khabur ferry to link with Priscus. The two old friends set to work establishing a blocking force on the north bank. All of the punts used to cross the river had been seized, and were secured on the northern bank. The Parthians would have to build their own vessels if they wanted to break through from the south, so this front was protected by only a few ballistae equipped with firepots. They were under orders to wait if attacked until a hit was virtually assured, and then set any encroaching vessels on fire. This allowed Gallienus to set up the bulk of his artillery to protect the fortifications. Earthworks were constructed to funnel any attacks, and onagers were precisely pre-positioned to cover these choke points with indirect fire. Any attackers would be hit before they realised their danger, and by units which were out of their sight and therefore could not be neutralised quickly.

Within three days of Priscus first seeing the crossing, the Roman force of five thousand cavalry, ten thousand infantrymen and five thousand artillery specialists was virtually impregnable within their perimeter.

Word of this came to Sanatruces on the seventh day after the raid on his horses. He was not overly concerned; in fact, he took comfort in the estimate of three or four Roman legions in the south. Not strong enough to threaten Arbela, and not strong enough to catch him in the rear; but three or four legions that were not in front of him. That probably meant that there were no more than fifteen thousand Romans in all of Armenia! Allowing for minimum garrisons throughout the province, there could be not much more than a legion between Tigranocerta and his own force of over fifty thousand! This confirmed in his own mind that the single legion seen marching north after the night attack was the only force to his north.

That was not a problem; even if his supply mission were blocked, he still had food enough for six days, and Tigranocerta was only three days away once these Romans were dealt with. He would press on at first light tomorrow and take Tigranocerta in only two days, once the threat of Roman sallies and ambushes was eliminated. Then he could replenish his food supply and annihilate this puny blocking force as he returned south.

Silo was not surprised by the attack when it came. He had deliberately made the river flank much stronger than the inland side, to ensure that the enemy would do something predictable. Sanatruces was not to know that concealed behind the apparently thin line of pickets on the crest, lurked the bulk of Silo's crossbowmen. And now, late in the summer, the ground was covered with parched vegetation. All Silo needed now was luck. He looked to the cloudless sky and the trees, now barely moving in the light breeze. There had been just enough breeze overnight to prevent dew. His luck had held good.

And true to his custom, he had made sure that every commander down to centurion knew exactly what he had in mind, and that they had licence to use their initiative to achieve it. Silo took comfort in knowing that he could be the first casualty of a battle, and still win it. "Patience, Lucius," he said calmly to

the legate in command of the left flank. “Delayed gratification is the key to success, you know!”

“Yes sir,” Lucius smiled. He knew that his General was just as energised as he was himself, but a cool facade did a great deal in maintaining tight discipline among the ranks. The less adrenalin they had until actual contact, the better.

The ten onagers behind and downslope had been pre-set to have their bombs fall in a line at the bottom of this facing slope, where the dry fuel on the ground was thickest. The aim was to have as many enemy trapped between the fire and the picket line as possible. Each onager was aimed at the extreme right hand side of its own area of responsibility; after each bomb launch, it would swing a couple of degrees to the left, fire again, and go on traversing until its whole length of fire was completed.

The Parthian infantry were filling the side of the small valley, the front ranks climbing warily up the slopes until only fifteen paces away from the Romans on the crest. Their eyes were sharp, looking for the first sign of a rush by the defenders before their own ranks had formed. By Romans standards they were light infantry, with only the front ranks in chain mail, and the later ranks in thickly padded double leather. Which was not such a disadvantage, Silo thought to himself; they were not carrying so much weight on an uphill charge. Even the shield was small and light, more designed for parrying a blade than full body protection, and again this was to their comparative advantage. Except that...

There was something eerie about these men facing each other in silence at a distance of fifteen paces, while the later ranks of Parthians took up position behind their crack men to carry their momentum through the Roman lines. All the Parthians were on the slope now, the last ranks still climbing into their positions.

“I think it is time now, Lucius,” Silo said casually.

“Bowmen! Advance and rapid fire!”

Immediately a row of crossbowmen took three steps up from their concealment to stand beside the heavies in the front line, and started firing as rapidly as they could into the ranks below them. The shields that could parry a sword swing were as thin as a parchment against a heavy steel bolt fired at that range. At the same signal, the onagers further back started lobbing oil-filled and fused bombs over their heads. Small brush fires broke out where they landed and cracked open.

Those Parthians in the second rank heard the hubbub in front of them and tried to surge forward, only to feel the front rank press back on them, and then fall. They had time enough to catch a glimpse of crossbows being raised towards them before they also died. The third rank pushed forward and made a few paces up the slope before they fell; by now the mass of infantry had some forward momentum. The fourth rank made it to within ten paces before it fell, and the fifth to within seven paces. The sixth got to within five paces, but that was the high-water mark in this attack. The sheer number of corpses on the

ground caused the later ranks to stumble and trip as they advanced. Betrayed into immobility by the bodies of their fallen, the remaining mass of men, twenty deep in places, broke and ran down the slope. By this time the fires along the foot of the slope were spreading uphill, a fearsome barrier. Some realised that their only escape was through the Roman ranks; but they had already lost too much height and distance to renew the attack. They threw their weapons and shields to the ground and arms outstretched climbed the slope begging for their lives. As one cross-bow bolt followed another, they discovered that the stories of Romans taking prisoners were not always true.

The back side of the ridge had been cleared of vegetation, so the fire died down as soon as it reached the crest. The crossbowmen, hands in leather gloves now to protect against heat, went forward to retrieve as many bolts as they could for re-use.

“Remember, lads! No looting!” Silo called out cheerily. “You’ll get your share, and anyone stealing from his comrades deserves what he will get.”

Sanatruces was stunned by what he had seen from down on the valley floor. Over a front of five hundred paces width these Romans had shown only a thousand heavy infantry as defenders. Barely a single line in close formation! Allowing that this was only a third of the total fortification line and that there would surely be others in concealment along the whole front, such weakness had convinced him that he was faced with only the single legion reported by the scouts after the raid on the river.

He had stacked almost ten thousand men against them, to punch through and roll them up. But the crossbows! There must have been at least five hundred of them, probably a thousand or more! And the onagers! That could mean only one thing; the rest of the line must be eggshell-thin. And he still had more than thirty thousand infantry lined up along the centre of the front.

“Order general charge!” he commanded. “They can’t be strong everywhere!” The command horn blared its message for a general assault, and the call was taken up along the line. The only problem was the line of stakes set by the Romans. On both wings these were spaced so closely that a man could barely squeeze through, if at all. These men would be easily picked off by those blasted Roman cross-bows, and their bodies would remain slumped between the stakes, choking the passage and blocking those following. The best point of attack was the centre, on either side of the roadway, where the staking was incomplete.

As the solid ranks of Parthian infantry started to march forward towards the Roman defences three hundred paces away Sanatruces thrilled. At most, there would be only a couple of thousand Romans in front of them. Surely they will break!

“Shit! By all the gods and with a few Greek pretenders thrown in, No!” Quintus Albus cried as he saw the Parthian ranks line up opposite his position. He had only two thousand men for this central section of the line, and no bowmen. But at least he had a dozen onagers. “Tension the onagers! Select

light bombs, firing four at a time! Wait for my order!" he ordered. "Infantry; to the lines!"

As his men advanced, Sanatruces saw the smoke traces left by the oil-bombs as they arced through the sky. They were so colourful as they landed in the front ranks of his infantry, spraying oil over the men and setting fires on the ground. The splashed men panicked, and tried to fall back away from the flames that would surely spread to them now that they were oil-soaked. Others less fortunate were already aflame, running in their agony and sharing their fate around generously as they bumped into their comrades. And the bombs kept raining down, spreading across the whole front of the men as the advance broke down. Even those parts of the front not affected recoiled as they saw men on either side confronted with flames and some of them engulfed. The fear of the same fate if they approached any closer gave them all pause.

Then Sanatruces heard the horns blowing the signal for 'Fall back'.

"Who ordered the retreat?" he demanded explosively. "I gave no such order!"

"I did, Mighty King," answered Parmines, his army commander. "I need to restore order," he explained. And then added grimly "And remind them that anyone still on this side of that Roman line by sunset will be executed for cowardice."

Sanatruces was mollified. "Then do so. Address them all, and send them back in." Another flick of the hand dismissed the commander. He looked towards the most recent engagement, and saw that the rain of bombs had ceased.

It took almost an hour to re-form the divisions within the attacking force. Parmines addressed the assembly from horseback, to imply he was going to join the attack, and also to gain visibility over the heads of the men. He spoke in phrases and pauses, so his words could be relayed to the whole mass of the men.

"Soldiers of Parthia!" he bellowed. "There are only a couple of thousand Romans standing between you and Tigranocerta! We need only to step over their bodies to reclaim all of Armenia, and expel this filth from our territory forever! I was ashamed to see how you fell back at the first sign of resistance! Right now, I will consider only four types of soldier.

"The first are those who have been burned so badly that they cannot fight. These men deserve to die for running from battle, and they will be executed. Are there any such here?" he asked. Even the most severely blistered men stood still in their ranks. To do otherwise was to volunteer for death.

"Ah! That is good. So you must all be fit to fight," Parmines continued. "The second type of soldier is the one who will be on the other side of the Roman line later today. He is a worthy soldier, and will be well rewarded.

"The third type of soldier is one who will die in this battle. I expect that there might be as many as a dozen of them today, because even against a defence as weak as this, sometimes bad things do happen. And the fourth type is one who is alive, but on this side of the Roman line." Parmines looked grimly around, scanning over the heads of the men. "That fourth type will die painfully."

“So of these four types, only one type will survive the day. Which type are you? The decision is yours to make!” Parmines walked his horse away from in front of the men. “Battle Order!” he shouted as he left. The flanking units marched laterally to the width of the front, and evolved into a line of battle.

Silo had not been wasting this time. He had recalled his crossbowmen back from retrieving bolts and ordered them on the rush to the central front. Some of the infantry were put to collecting the bolts instead, and returning them to the store, while the rest were sent down to thicken the line. He ordered more bolts be rushed from storage to supply the centre, and left Herius to watch over the left flank.

He arrived back in time to see that Albus had demanded that the onagers on the right flank and inner left be re-deployed to support his own; the far left were in the hilly country and could not be moved quickly. The adjacent commanders had released most, but not all, of their machines. He had twenty three onagers at his command now. He had also called for more bombs, stacked against each machine.

“I’m sorry to have used so much ammunition, General; but I had to create as much a deterrent as I could as quickly as I could. Four at a throw seemed reasonable at the time,” he hurried out an explanation.

“Never apologise for doing a great job, Albus,” Silo waved away the justification. “Excellent judgement! Now, get some more bombs here as soon as you can, and I will tell the other commanders to do the same thing.”

“I have, sir. That is our full supply stacked up now. I just hope they try to hit the same part of the line next time, instead of taking some other axis,” Albus smiled. “I’ve stripped everyone else.”

“Don’t worry,” Silo assured him with a smile. “These Parthians deploy so slowly that we will be able to re-deploy in plenty of time.”

In the event, the attack came on the same segment, a front five hundred paces wide centred on the road, and forty five ranks deep.

“Who are they trying to fool?” Silo derided the formation. “If the first thirty ranks fall, do they really expect the last ten to press on? Or are they just there to stop the front thirty from turning and running?” Nervous laughter greeted the General’s little joke. But it had the desired effect; anything that made the men doubt the courage or competence of the enemy was good for morale.

“Ready, onagers?” Silo asked. Each onager chief raised his arm vertically; there were none horizontal, implying unready. “Right, four bombs per cast, rapid fire when ordered; adjust your range as required. Wind back and prepare to launch!” he bellowed. “Crossbows, to the front line. Wait for orders before shooting; you will be under ‘Aim and Fire’ conditions.” The campaign so far had been expensive on crossbow bolts; they were in genuinely short supply and the last of them had been distributed for this encounter. Nine bolts per man; enough for about two minutes under ‘Aim and Fire’ drill. An orderly charge in battle formation was usually done at a brisk walk rather than a run, so two minutes would correspond to just over one hundred paces. Crossbows were

reasonably accurate at about eighty paces, but these men were trained to aim high so anything that went over the first ranks might still do damage to those following. Precision aiming at individuals would be left until the enemy were at the stakes, which should hold them up for a minute or so. So if he gave the order to start shooting at about eighty paces, that should just about exhaust his ammunition by the time the enemy were on his shields. That would be the most effective use of a limited resource. He listened in satisfaction as his orders were relayed the length of the front.

“Albus; you have done a very good job so far,” Silo said to his effective second-in-command for this segment. “I want the bombs falling among their front ranks all the way; order the onagers to shorten range when required. I’m going forward. Commence onager fire on my signal.”

Silo walked forward, arriving just as the Parthians started their advance. He waved to Albus to commence fire. In a moment the first bombs landed and exploded in the advancing mass. Spot on the front ranks; his judgement had been good. Keep it happening, Albus, he said to himself as he came to the battle line some ten paces short of the rows of inclined stakes.

“When I give the order, it will be ‘Aim and Fire’, not ‘Rapid Fire’. Every bolt must count. Shoot long rather than short.” The word spread along the line of crossbows; eight hundred of them in a front five hundred paces wide.

The Parthians caught by the first volleys from the onagers were running and screaming, disrupting their own lines. They were cut down by their own men, fearful of spreading the fire to their comrades, and the ranks re-formed around the patches of burning oil just as another volley landed. These were pitched out to the right of the first impacts, the onager captains were traversing their weapons to increase their effectiveness. Another swathe of men ran screaming. The third volley of onager bombs came down and there seemed to be a solid wall of flames now. Silo had no doubt that the men in the middle and rear ranks had no clear line of advance, but were blocked by a line of fire. If we can take out these ten thousand or so in the front, we have a good chance. Perhaps by then Sanatruces will go home; and if not, perhaps we will have some more bolts delivered from the left flank, ready for re-use, as well as some left over here.

“Crossbows! Aim high and fire!” Silo called as he judged the distance down to eighty paces. All around him the whip of released bolts filled the air. Looking out, he saw some of the front ranks going down, and the hint of more behind. He would have preferred all bolts to be passing over the front ranks; hitting the front meant that a percentage would probably be falling sort; but that seemed good enough, and would improve as the range closed.

The Parthian line came on. Another wave of bolts filled the air, slightly staggered this time because they were aiming and firing individually rather than in volleys. Silo knew from experience that the appearance of volleys would be even more ragged on the third wave, and disappear altogether by the fifth. Again Parthians fell, many in the front rank but also many behind could be seen going down with the thinning charge and the closer range.

Another volley of onager bombs burst on the charge, ragged in range but almost all of them just behind the front rank. Albus had done well with his adjustment! Parthian infantry caught in the splash of oil and on fire ran screaming; others splashed but not yet aflame recoiled in dread of the flames, disputing the advance of the men not directly affected.

A third ragged wave of crossbow bolts hammered into the charge. Silo noted with approval that his men had concentrated on the congested sections of the ranks between the firebombs' landing points. This slowed the charge to a stumble as they closed to only forty paces from the stakes. Another twenty paces and their discipline will collapse and they will break into a run.

He turned to look back to Albus standing by the onagers and saw his subordinate flicking his eyes along the row of onagers and then looking to his commander, and then back to his machines. Good! The man is still alert to the big picture! Silo swung both arms in horizontal arcs, palms down, and continued to do so until Albus glanced at him again. Albus whipped off a quick salute to acknowledge the order, and then gestured along the line of onagers. Silo turned back to the Parthians just as the front rank broke into a run and a scream to hide their desperate fear. The crossbows were now firing with no discernible timing as the men loosed their bolts, drew back, loaded and aimed their next shot, some in a quicker cycle than their comrades, some slower.

A last few onager bombs landed behind the front ranks, presumably from machines already wound back and loaded, further breaking up the charge. The enemy converged on the sections of the palisade where the stakes seemed more widely spaced; such a pity that there had not been enough time to close all the gaps, Silo thought in passing. But at least it allows us to concentrate the crossbow fire.

Once at the rows of stakes, even though spaced more widely than in the tighter sections, the Parthians still had to slow and organise themselves into files to pass through the gaps, rather than each man risk being shouldered by his companion into being impaled on a stake rather than fitting through the gap. As the cross-bows picked them off, the piled bodies made the passage even more difficult for those following.

But weight of numbers told eventually. In one place, and then another, and then a third, enough made their way through to charge at the Roman line waiting ten paces behind the stakes. Just as drilled, the crossbowmen in these sections fell back through the gaps between the heavies, the infantrymen in the second and fourth ranks then stepped sideways into the channel to close it, and advanced a step to present a continuous and tight line of two ranks. Front rank with heavy shields locked side-by-side except for their protruding stabbing gladii, and second rank stabbing over the top with spears, a Roman tight line was not easy to crack. At least, not by light infantry already on the back side of an adrenalin surge from their advance to this point.

The centurions allowed the first wave to break against the shields of their men, and then bellowed their order; 'Step up!' The line gave a co-ordinated shove forward, their shields a battering ram, and the Parthians fell back,

unbalanced. The shields parted for a moment to allow gladii to stab at the exposed bellies, and an instant later the second rank stabbed their spears over the shoulders of the front rank, into the faces and chests of the enemy. Then a step back, to ensure that following attackers would have to contend with the bodies of the fallen as they struggled for good footing.

This was a battle to remember, to compose songs about! A defensive line of heavy infantry only two lines deep was holding back the full force of Parthia! Never mind the engineering and tactics that went into this battle; they were not the stuff to stir hearts and bring forth tears; but the sheer reliability of men thrown into this most visceral form of warfare, where one single man losing his composure could destroy a whole legion... That was worthy of Homer! Now that the crossbowmen had been forced to fall back, there seemed no alternative but to slug it out in close combat. Silo hoped and called upon Mars and Jupiter, as well as his own Marsi Tribal hearth gods, that they would strengthen his men in these critical breakthrough points.

As if by a stroke of inspiration from these gods, the unengaged ranks on one side of one breakthrough advanced and folded in on the enemy, taking them from the vulnerable right-hand side; the side that did not carry their small round shields. Seeing this example, other centurions followed and ordered their men to wrap around the sides of the breakthrough points. The men under the direct pressure of the enemy front took heart, and held for that minute or two longer than might have otherwise been the case. The breakthrough Parthians were distracted, and then annihilated.

Silo looked out towards the Parthian camp. There were no more soldiers coming; just a wall of fire as the remaining oil in the bombs burnt out. The second attack had been turned back! A spontaneous roar of victory rose from the ranks.

“Good work, men!” Silo bellowed after the shout faded. “Now, get forward and retrieve any cross-bow bolts you can find. He turned and hurried back to Albus. “Get the sappers onto that line of stakes; I want the gaps filled, and even halve the remaining spacing if they have the time and the timber.”

Sanatruces was enraged. Of the thirty thousand men he had thrown against this tissue-thin line, two-thirds had not even made it to the line of battle. They had been turned back by the flames. He was even angrier as Parmines reported back to him.

“I was watching the fall of the Roman fire-bombs, Mighty King,” he explained. “The Romans obviously have their catapults in squads of four, and very well disciplined to fire simultaneously. And I counted at least twenty five different points of origin. So the Romans have deceived us; they have at least one hundred of the catapults. They also managed to destroy almost ten thousand men who advanced through the catapult fire; even with good defences, that would require at least half that number in defence, though the fires and the fall of the land prevented us from assessing their actual strength. That would mean at least five thousand infantry, not counting what they have on the slope

where we launched our first attack. So I think it would be prudent to assume they have at least eight thousand infantry, a thousand crossbow, and a hundred catapults, all behind a very strong line of defence. I do not recommend another frontal attack.” Parmines bowed.

“But how is that possible?” Sanatruces demanded. “You know the reports! You know how few legions they have now! How could they possibly have the strength you suggest?”

“I do not know how, Mighty King; I only know that they have it.” Parmines bowed again. “And I suggest that since they do indeed have it, then we should conserve our own strength. If we lose the remainder of the army here, then what is to stop this Roman force from marching to join their blocking force on the Khabur, and then on to Ctesiphon? Remember how they dealt with Tigranes; they lured him forward into one trap after another, until he was totally destroyed. I love my master the Mighty King too much to contemplate such a possibility,” Parmines replied, hoping this show of concerned devotion would not be interpreted as defeatism.

Sanatruces seemed slightly calmer. “So how strong do you think they really are, not just a minimum?” he asked more temperately.

“I would estimate two legions in the centre; and allow for another legion on their left, where they repulsed us this morning, and another on their right. That adds up to four legions; about twenty thousand men.”

Sanatruces thought for a few moments. “And they have another ten, maybe fifteen thousand in that accursed blocking force, not counting cavalry and artillery,” he noted. “And we have only thirty thousand infantry left.” Sanatruces thought a moment longer. “So we are unlikely to be able to break through to Tigranocerta, you say? Then we must fall back. What are your thoughts about confronting the blocking force and reaching an agreement; we will not harm them, if they allow free passage pack to Arbela. Otherwise, we will destroy them.”

Parmines thought for a moment before answering. “That would be a good option, Mighty King. We still have our cataphracts largely intact, and if this Roman force follows us south out of their fortifications, then they will be easy meat in a battle. So we will present an overwhelming force against the blocking Romans because they will not be able to rely on this northern force to help them. If they try, we defeat them in detail. And if they don’t, we starve them out over winter.”

“But we might be the ones who are starving!” Sanatruces retorted. “We have only five days’ of supplies left!”

“But the Romans don’t know that, Mighty King,” Parmines replied. “And with the losses of today, we have enough to almost last twice as long, to put on a good show.”

“You don’t need to remind me of the losses today,” Sanatruces snarled. “But yes; your suggestion will be adopted. Let it be so!”

Silo was receiving and correlating reports from his entire force. These were disturbing. He had only nine onager bombs for each machine; two four-bomb volleys and one in reserve. Perhaps he should drop back to three-bomb loads for the next attack; that would allow him three salvos per machine, not quite like the disruption from the last full attack, but useful. Crossbow bolts were now critical; even with those scavenged from the bodies of fallen enemies, he could allow only four per man. Which would probably be enough, he thought grimly; the next attack would be the last, one way or the other. The one thing he had barely enough of was infantry, so long as they held their nerve as in the last attack. So far his casualties had been light. Not that he could expect this to continue without the assistance of onager bombs and crossbows! This next battle could be the last of his life.

Silo went into the privacy of his own tent and prostrated himself on the floor. "Neptunus Oceanus! I have placed myself in your hands before, and with a clear conscience. You heard my prayer. Although I am far from the sea, please intercede for me!

"Mars, the god who defends us in time of war! You know how I have tried to maintain peace on this frontier, but have been attacked by your enemies! Allow me to repulse them!

"Jupiter, who maintains justice! We are the innocent party here; protect us from the aggressor!

"And above all, without meaning any insult to those other gods whose protection I implore; I call upon Angitia the healer, my own Marsi goddess to whom I have prostrated myself in her own temple by the lake. I call upon you to protect my men from the weapons raised against us unjustly.

"I implore all of you to agree, to protect those who depend upon you. Not only to protect my men whom I love, but also the Republic that will carry your glory to the ends of the world. Make great your own names, by granting me this small but critical victory."

Silo rose from the floor, confident that the gods would be with him. He called for Albus. It did not take long for Albus to report the Silo.

"You sent for me, sir?" he asked as he saluted.

"Yes, Albus," Silo replied. "I would consider it an honour if you would permit me to address you by your first name."

Albus was overcome by embarrassment. "My familiar name is Quintus, sir."

"Quintus, I see in you the makings of a great commander. Your repulse of the first attack was brilliant as an independent command, and your behaviour in the second attack showed that you fully understood the need for communication and co-ordination," Silo commended him. "We might have done enough to repel them already; or they might come back for a lucky third try," Silo went on. "You know that we have only two hundred and sixty bombs left; that is less than nine bombs per onager. I can also tell you that we have only four bolts per cross-bow, and this is only by re-use of those not too badly damaged in earlier use. How many bombs did we use in that second attack?" Silo asked.

“Five hundred and twenty four, sir.” Albus replied.

“So we have less than half as much if we have to do it again,” Silo calculated. “and four bolts per cross-bow is enough only to pick them off at the stakes, but at least every bolt should count at that range,” Silo stood and paced the floor. “We can do it, Quintus,” he asserted. “We can do it if we have to, because the gods love the Republic. Let us hope they love us enough to not put us to the question; but if they allow this one more attack, we must stand firm and fight smart. One more time.”

“Yes, General,” Albus agreed. “After today, the men know they can withstand anything. We will stand.”

“How would you suggest we use the nine bombs you have for each onager?” Silo asked.

“Today we fired in a pattern of three; one slightly left, one straight ahead and one slightly right, then back to the left and centre again at reduced range. It seemed to give us a good spread and an unbroken wall,” he mused out loud. “So I would suggest the same pattern again, but with three bombs per load. That will give us one complete traverse. And because we will not be able to set up a second row, I suggest that we set this wall a bit closer than today; a shorter range means less time rewinding the machines, so we will be able to drop the barrier quicker, as well as more accurately,” Albus concluded.

“I agree, Quintus,” Silo nodded. “Make sure your artillerymen know the plan perfectly. I will talk to the crossbowmen and infantry. They did well today to fold in on the flanks, and I must encourage them to do the same next time.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” Albus left the command tent.

Silo was relieved the next morning to see the Parthians packing up and turning south. The gods had smiled on him! “Titus,” Silo called to Herennius, “Send two fast riders inland and then south, around the enemy. Let Gallienus and Priscus know what happened here, and that the Parthians are heading south. I do not intend to chase them; I don’t have the supplies.”

“And what are your orders to them, General?” Herennius asked.

“To act on their own considered initiative,” Silo smiled. “They proved at Edessa that they can be relied upon to make the most of the situation.”

Herennius smiled back. “Yes, sir; Standard Silo Orders,” he summarised.

“Good,” Silo nodded. “Now, I will have Albus call the men in the centre to an assembly.”

It was a small assembly; barely two thousand infantry, less than a thousand crossbows, and just over a hundred artillerymen. All gathered together, they looked such a small force, little more than half a legion.

“Men! Yesterday you did something quite remarkable. You confronted a force ten times larger than yourselves, and you gave them such a hiding that they are now running away from you.” Silo scanned over them carefully, seeming to rest his eyes on each of them in turn. “Greeks like to bang on about

Thermopylae as an example of military greatness. But I would like to point out a few differences between that battle and yours.

“The first difference is that the Spartans had to hold a very narrow pass; they were many ranks deep. But you were faced with a front half a mile wide, and could deploy only two deep. Two deep! Think about it! We were more brittle than paper-thin glass! And yet you held!

“The second difference is even more significant, and to my mind, the only one that really matters. The Spartans lost, but you won!” A cheer rose from the men. When it died away, Silo smiled and continued. “Yes, I agree. I prefer a victory rather than a heroic defeat any day!” Silo looked around the men again.

“And there is one final difference. Soldiers in winning armies often grow rich on loot. But there was no loot to be gained in this battle, even though it was by far the most amazing feat of arms I have ever seen. That is not a just outcome! So as soon as I get back to Tigranocerta and can send the order to my bankers, I will be paying each of you five thousand sesterces in acknowledgement of your work here.” A huge roar rose from the ranks; this was more than five years’ base pay! Some men in the front started a chant “Silo! Silo! Silo!” and this spread through the mass. At last Silo managed to quieten the men.

“You do yourself an injustice, men. Do not chant my name, but your own. You are the heroes of this battle.” Silo started for the steps as he said to Albus “You may dismiss the men, Quintus.”

“Not yet, sir,” Albus replied. “We still have some unfinished business. Please return to the centre of the platform.” Then he turned to a group of centurions standing to one side of the low platform. These five men marched to the steps and climbed them with military precision. They stood in line abreast in front of Silo, and the central man placed on Silo’s head a crown of woven grass.

Of all awards given in the Roman army, only one was awarded by the common soldiers to an officer. The Grass Crown, woven from the grass of the battlefield where a commander’s brilliance and courage had saved an army from annihilation.

“Imperator! Imperator!” The cry went up from the men. As the chant continued, Silo went onto one knee and kissed the hand of the centurion who had crowned him. The chant went on for a very long time.

Gallienus was pleased when word arrived of the battle to the north. Not only had the Parthians lost many casualties; they would also be very respectful of Roman defensive fortifications. The reported numbers did not concern him too much; thirty to forty thousand light infantry were not a threat to the fortifications and artillery he had on hand. But the eight thousand or more cataphracts would mean that he dare not send his own infantry out to meet them in the open. At most, his ventures beyond the fortification would be limited to light cavalry raiding; cataphracts did not have the pace or endurance to force his lighter cavalry to battle. He was glad he had Gnaeus Priscus on hand to

command the cavalry; Gallienus admitted that he would never really understand cavalry.

Sanatruces was marching with half of his cataphracts a few miles ahead and the rest ready at the rear to deal with any harrying force that might dare to follow. With twenty thousand fewer men to feed than before the disastrous day of battle, his supplies were now able to last until eight days after his retreat, more than enough to march back to the Khabur, crush the blocking force, and then cross over into better-supplied land. Certainly he was disappointed that his campaign had not taken Tigranocerta, but at least Arbela and southern Adiabene had made the season a moderately successful one. But next time he tried, he would take much more food with him, and leave behind some protection against this strategic flank attack.

When he was one day's march short of the Khabur a new scouting report came to him. Roman strength was still estimated at three legions, but the area had been substantially fortified. "Curse these Romans!" He exploded. "Why can they not fight in the open, like real soldiers? Why do they insist on cowering behind ditches and mounds and stakes, like women?"

"Because that is the only way they can hope to win against a leader of your stature, Mighty King," Parmines answered smoothly. "But not even that will save them this time."

"Oh? You have devised a way to break through these works?" Sanatruces asked his commander.

"Even better, Mighty King," Parmines answered. "I have devised a way to eliminate the need. These Romans dare not come out of their perimeter, or our cataphracts will cut them to ribbons. Nor can they escape by crossing the river; the five thousand you sent to protect the supply mission would be holding that opposite bank. So we will make our own crossing several miles upstream of the Romans, join with our men on the southern bank, and thus establish a supply line to Arbela. Then we will construct our own fortifications and artillery, and burn them out if we can't starve them out."

Sanatruces considered this for a moment. "Yes. Do it," he ordered.

The lookouts reported that the Parthians were digging in. But more disturbing was that their fortifications were not only protecting their camp; they were circumvallating the Roman position. They clearly had a siege in mind. Which, in turn, meant that their forces on the north bank, facing the Roman line, had to be supplied for a considerable length of time. Where would they expect to get their provisioning, if the Romans held the crossing?

There was only one answer; they were making another crossing somewhere. Gallienus sent a few longboats upstream and downstream to locate this second crossing. He soon found it, four miles upstream on the Khabur.

"The Parthians have almost completed a small wharf on the north bank and were making a flotilla of rafts," Lucius Fabro was telling him. "It would seem that they have no competent shipwrights with them, so they are keeping it simple," he added with a smile.

“Good work, Lucius,” Gallienus said warmly.

Sanatruces was starting to worry about the food situation. He had arrived outside the Roman camp with six days' supply for his reduced force, and hoped to cut to half rations once the energy demands of the march were behind him, but all the earthworks and construction work was no less demanding than marching. He was now down to four days' food.

“Do not be concerned, Mighty King,” Parmines assured him. “The wharf will be complete tomorrow, and four rafts. Even without a wharf on the south side, we will be able to swing the rafts across the river, land some men on the other side, and link with the forces on the south bank. By evening we will be ferrying supplies back to this side of the river. Once we get the southern wharf completed, we will be able to move more than enough to keep the men fed.”

Sanatruces knew he should be satisfied, but still felt uneasy. “What is to stop a Roman sally, to destroy your works? Their light cavalry can move very quickly.”

“Our fortifications come right down to the river, and some good distance into the water, just as theirs do. They will not be able to go around, and we have more than enough men to ensure they cannot get through,” Parmines said soothingly.

“If they do, Parmines, you will be held responsible,” Sanatruces warned.

“Of course, Mighty King,” Parmines agreed. “But that is not what is motivating me. Your glory is much more important to me than my own small life,” he bowed slightly.

“And to me, too, Parmines,” Sanatruces agreed menacingly. “See that you remember that at all times.” Parmines bowed again, took three small steps backwards, and left the royal tent. Silly bastard! Parmines thought to himself. If you have any better ideas, Mighty King, then why not share them with me? You got yourself into this position, it was not my doing! But of course he would never share those thoughts with anyone. Or at least, not until regicide was the best strategy available. That might be only a few days away now.

Parmines had been told that a rowboat full of Romans had been seen off the new crossing, inspecting the works. He was not displeased with that; now he knew that the Romans knew they were trapped, and that the siege could be maintained. They had to either break out or starve. Now would be a good time to offer terms.

A Parthian officer rode his immaculately dressed cataphract up to the Roman line of fortifications. Gallienus had been told he was coming, and turned out to meet him.

“Hail, Roman!” the Parthian said in pleasant Greek.

“Hail Parthian,” Gallienus replied evenly. “Have you come to ask for terms?”

The Parthian officer chuckled. “I could come to like you, Roman. You have both courage and a good sense of humour. What is your name?”

"I am Piso Gallienus, and I also appreciate your courage under such great pressure," Gallienus replied. "By what name shall I know you from among our captives?"

The Parthian brought out a wax pad. "Excuse me, but I am required to report names in Greek form; we Parthians are not familiar with Latin names. Shall I write 'Pison Gallienos'?"

"Yes, that is close enough in Greek," Gallienus agreed. "And your name, that I might treat you with proper respect in a few days' time?"

The Parthian swung his right leg over his horse and dismounted. With a broad smile on his face, he advanced with his right arm outstretched. "I like you, Pison! You may ask for Timocles when you are captured, and I will ensure you are treated well."

Gallienus met his advance, his own right hand forward. They met in a proper Roman bond.

"Thank you for your courtesy in greeting me as a Roman would, Timocles. That will not be forgotten," Gallienus said warmly. "Now let us get down to business. What do you propose?"

"The Mighty King is most impressed with your courage and diligence against overwhelming odds," Timocles announced. "In respect for your manliness, he will allow you safe passage back into Osrhoene, complete with your weapons. You shall not be disgraced on account of the failure of your General's plan, for you have played your part well."

Gallienus dropped the right-hand grip. "Please relay back to the Mighty King my appreciation for his kind words. However, the very fact that you are here rather than in Tigranocerta would suggest that my General's plan has not failed. I must therefore assume that he has been successful. And on that basis, I must also assume that you are trapped between his many legions as a hammer, and mine as the anvil. However, he has delegated to me the authority to act as I consider appropriate. Therefore I have the power to prevent the death of so many good Parthian soldiers, and also the power to preserve the life of the Mighty King, which might otherwise be lost in a futile endeavour.

"Therefore I am able to offer to you, your men, and to the Mighty King these terms. I will grant to the Mighty King safe passage to Ctesiphon. I will grant to his officers commanding more than four thousand men each a similar safe passage. And to lower officers who surrender to us, the status of a free man in the Republic. Common soldiers will be offered our standard terms; those who enrol in our legions shall be granted citizenship and land after fifteen years of service, of those who do not enrol half shall be sold into slavery, and the other half granted freedman status."

Timocles laughed as a friend would at a small joke. "You mistake my mission, friend Pison! I am here to offer you the terms I have already laid out. I am not here to relay any message back other than acceptance or rejection. Do you accept safe passage, or would you rather condemn yourself and your men to starvation? We know that you already know that you are hedged in. We know that you know that we know that we would have difficulty penetrating your

defences, for which I must compliment you. So we will not throw our men onto your stakes. Instead, we will wait until you order your men to throw themselves onto ours. The only way out of this futile position is to accept our offer of free passage. You have one day to decide.” Timocles bowed deeply. “I genuinely hope you will preserve your life, friend Pison; I already like you.”

“Friend Timocles, my offer to you stands, for the moment. Be assured that I will hold it open as long as I can,” Gallienus replied. “But if you will not save yourself and the Mighty King, then I can do nothing to save you.”

Gallienus gestured back towards the Parthian horse. “Advise your King to act wisely, my friend. I wish you long life and prosperity.”

“It saddens me, friend Pison, that I might one day have to identify your lifeless body,” Timocles said heavily. “I cannot guarantee the clemency of the Mighty King past mid-day tomorrow. Please send a rider if you come to your senses by that time. After that, who knows?”

Gallienus offered his right arm again. “Live long and well, friend!”

Timocles took the arm. “And you, friend!” He then released and walked back to his mount.

Gallienus saluted the Parthian as he mounted and pulled his horse around. And then he walked back to his own lines.

“They are worried, or they would not be offering safe passage,” he said to Priscus.

“That much is obvious, Pison,” Priscus agreed. “But what are they worried about? It seems that they already dread us doing something they don’t expect. Our reputation for being unpredictable has gone before us.”

“I sense more than that, Gnaeus,” Gallienus replied. “The mention of the deadline might have been to cause us to decide in haste; but it might also reflect some urgency in their own thoughts. Perhaps they are running short of provisions; why else would they be so eager to construct their own crossing?”

“Ah! That is the critical point!” Priscus replied. “Let us disrupt their crossing, and see what that does!”

Gallienus threw up his arms. “How can we disrupt that crossing? They have a defensive line we cannot break!”

“How typical of you, Pison!” Priscus said with a challenge under his words. “You think only of infantry and artillery! I am thinking navy!”

Gallienus stopped dead and thought for a moment. “Nah! They are building rafts, not boats. A raft will float even if you ram it.”

“But what if you mount an onager on one of our boats, or even a ballista, and burnt their wharf, their rafts, and any stores they have on the banks?” Priscus pressed. “In fact, what if we fit out a dozen of our boats like that, and keep up a constant patrol, sending boats out in turns?”

The light went on in Gallienus' head. He smiled broadly. “You know, Gnaeus; one day you might develop into a useful subordinate! So let's get down to the bank and see what we can do.”

By nightfall the two men had an answer of sorts. They started by trying to fit a standard onager onto one of their larger row boats. It looked a bit top-

heavy, and made it very difficult to seat enough men to row it properly; but that did not matter too much, they had no need for speed. Then they test-fired the onager. The recoil rolled the boat over on its side, sending the crew into the chest-deep water. They all came up laughing, but the lesson had been well learnt. The onager must be aligned to fire forwards, and not over one side. But it was too late to do anything about that now, as night fell. Gallienus took Priscus and the most experienced boat man back to his tent to plan the next day.

First light the next morning saw the results of this night of planning taking shape. Beams were laid over two boats to fix them side-by-side, with the onager mounted on these beams, set to fire forward. This left the hulls less cluttered, so each could take half a rowing crew in their outer sides. The onager crew were stationed on a platform built up off the beams, and ammunition could be stored in the unoccupied parts of the boat hulls.

This was not a fast craft, being about three times the weight of a single hull but with only the equivalent of a single crew on the oars; but it would be fast enough if it were stable enough. By late morning the work was complete enough for another test firing. This time the recoil pitched the hulls backwards and forwards, but not enough to cause concern. They had a weapon fit for the purpose! Orders were given to produce another three craft based on this prototype.

Soon after mid-day the strange craft was fully laden with firebombs and there were back-up flames and flints on board. They set off up the river, Priscus having been 'promoted' to admiral in a little mock ceremony on the banks. His 'official orders' included an instruction to never sail out of sight of land. Morale was high.

Three hours later they were just outside archer's range from the Parthian wharf, now apparently completed, and the rafts were being levered down the banks towards the river. Priscus threw out an anchor and fitted a spring-line to bring the craft in line with his target.

"Tension onager!" Priscus barked the order. Four men took out their levers and started to wind tension into the sinews that propelled the onager arm. This would take just over a minute. Meanwhile he ordered the rowers to bring the craft into line with the wharf. "Jason; your job now is to give direction to the spring line; keep us in line!" Jason went to the back of the hull, so he could more accurately look down the centreline of the hull.

"Light the lamps!" was the next order. The two lamps used to ignite the bombs were lit. "Draw back the arm!" The onager arm was pulled about half-way back. The full swing would not be needed at this range. "Ignite the bomb!" The wick trailing from the jar of oil was held over the lamp until clearly alight. It was placed in the cup at the end of the onager arm. "Shoot!" The arm was released, and the bomb flew in an arc towards the shore. It fell slightly short and to the left.

"Jason, how was our alignment?" Priscus asked.

"We seemed in line, sir. Perhaps the onager is mounted slightly crooked."

“Probably,” Priscus agreed. “Make allowance for that next shot. Right, men; you know the routine by now, load and fire carefully, we are in no rush.

The next two shots also went wide, but the range was better. “What is the problem, Jason?” Priscus asked.

“We seem to be swinging in the current like a pendulum, sir.” Jason tried to explain his difficulties. “And the recoil seems to make it worse for a while, until it stabilises again. This is not the same as working on dry land.”

“Understood, Jason. Do your best, and tell us when you think we are set. We won't ignite the wick until you say to,” Priscus promised. Through all this the Parthians had been watching, at first with incomprehension, and then with some mirth.

“Yes, laugh all you like, you oriental idiots! But once we get a few on target you'll stop laughing!” Priscus muttered loudly enough for the whole crew to hear. No-body likes being the object of ridicule; that should focus their attention!

“Ready!” Jason shouted. The next bomb was quickly lit, dropped into the onager cup, and flung. This landed on the raft beside the wharf. Oil sprayed everywhere and caught fire.

“Excellent, Jason!” Priscus exclaimed. “Now for the next one!”

“I was aiming for the wharf, sir, but I will make allowance for the time taken to fire and load next time.” The onager was wound back quickly while on shore the workmen reacted by scooping up mud with their hands to throw onto the raft. “Onager ready, sir. Get ready,” Jason called. Then, after a pause, “Now!”

The wick was ignited, the bomb placed, and the onager latch tripped. The bomb landed on the wharf, and flames started spreading. By this time the workmen on the shore had found a bucket. One of them was scooping water from the river and throwing it over burning raft.

Another bomb and this was a near miss. But it did land among a group of workmen, spraying three with oil. They ran to the river and dived in, to extinguish the flames. The next landed on another raft, but by now the men on the shore were soaking all of their rafts with river water to prevent them from burning.

“Well, it was a good idea,” Priscus concluded, “but it needs a bit more refinement. Let's go home, boys! Raise the anchor, break out the oars.”

“Stop building any more onager boats!” Priscus called as he approached the Roman base. “We need to do some more thinking.”

Gallienus waved an acknowledgement from the shore. Then he looked west, towards the setting sun. “That will be enough for today, men. Get some food and get some rest.” Gallienus waited for Priscus to come ashore.

“How went it, Gnaeus?”

“The idea works, but we were too inaccurate and our rate of fire too slow.” Priscus replied. “The boat bobs around in the water and swings in direction too much. If we are going to do anything like that, then we should be using

ballistae instead, so we can keep accurate aim even as the boat moves under us. There would be less recoil, too.”

“So we start fitting ballistae instead,” Gallienus agreed.

“I’m not sure that would work, either. It is too easy for the enemy to keep their rafts wet; they won’t burn then.”

“What if we attack them in transit, instead of on shore?” Gallienus continued. “If we set fire to their food, they will not throw water over that!”

“No, but there is no reason why they can’t cover their cargo with hides and keep the hides wet,” Priscus answered.

“So what to try next?” Gallienus asked.

“Well, I’ve been asking myself how they expect to get rafts from one side of the river to the other, and then back again. A fully-laden raft can’t be rowed all that easily. So I expect they will take a rope across the river and pull themselves along the rope.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Gallienus commented.

“So perhaps all we need to do is cut the rope.”

Gallienus shrugged. “That might work once, but they can always take over another. And if we try to cut it each time, they will be able to pick off our boats with archers.”

“Good point, Piso,” Priscus agreed. “In fact, after our little trip today, they might already have the banks lined with archers. I think we might be wise to put up some sideboards to protect our men before we try again.”

Gallienus thought to himself for a few moments.

“Gnaeus, I think this is all getting too predictable. The Parthians know that we are going to try to cut their crossing, so they will be making it as hard for us as possible. So I’m inclined to let them think that, while we take aim at a completely different tactic.” He outlined his thoughts to Priscus.

“It is a big risk, Piso. I would rather cut their supply line, but if worse comes to worst, we might have to do it,” Priscus agreed.

The next morning Priscus busied himself with fitting side walls to one of the longboats and ensuring all other vessels were in good repair. Shortly before mid-day the high-walled longboat set off up river, equipped with a hook anchor on a rope, and a few good sharp gladii. If the rope had been put across the river, they would fish it out and cut it.

They arrived to find a light line had been taken across the river, and this was being used to haul a heavier rope across. They also found that Gallienus had been correct; there were a couple of dozen archers on the bank, but the sidewalls provided protection enough. The archers soon tired of the futile attempt to harm them. The rope was cut, and Priscus stayed on station to see how the enemy would react.

“How did they get that first line across the river, sir?” Jason asked Priscus as they waited and watched.

“I don’t know, Jason. Perhaps they have someone who is a strong swimmer. Or perhaps they paddled a small raft over,” Priscus replied with a shrug.

"I am only guessing here, sir, but I think I can see how it might be done," another man offered. "You see that the southern force has moved one of their piddly little catapults up here?" he pointed at the southern bank. A wharf had been built on that bank too, with a catapult standing on it.

"Yes, I see, but I doubt that tiny thing could throw over the width of the river," Priscus replied.

"Perhaps not, sir. But there is another on the north bank, too." the man went on, pointing at the wharf. "If one threw a light rope with a four-hook anchor across but angled slightly downstream, and the other threw its own hook over it, to cross it, then they would catch the tow lines together. One could pull the other's rope in."

Priscus built the picture in his mind. "I think you might be right there," he concluded. "Which means that as soon as we move off, they will do the same again. They could get the system up and running within a couple of hours, and ship supplies overnight." Priscus shrugged. "So we stay here until dark; it will be a lot trickier to establish that first line in the dark. Then we go back and build a few boats like this one, and stand watch around the dial."

The day ground on, with the occasional stroke of the oars to maintain position. Water and biscuits were passed around.

"Hey, look at that!" one of the men called, pointing some distance upstream. There was movement on the north bank. One raft started moving out from the shore, being poled by some two dozen men.

"I wonder how deep this river is?" Priscus asked. "Will they be able to push out to midstream? Or even all the way across?"

"It will be hard work for them to hold that raft against the current," Jason commented. "A raft has a lot more drag than a boat carrying the same weight."

"No, they have a rope out the back, tied to a tree a few hundred paces upstream," someone pointed out. "See? That will hold them against the current, and all they have to do is hold the raft from swinging back into the bank."

"Then why are they doing it?" another asked. "That rope isn't long enough for them to get to the far bank."

"Row up to them, Jason," Priscus ordered. "I want a closer look." The men leant to their oars and pulled up towards the raft. Priscus dared to stand for a moment, his head above the protection of the side walls, to see what materials were lying on the deck of the raft. The Parthians looked up towards him as he approached, pointing and talking among themselves. They did not seem very fearful.

"Stop! Reverse course!" Priscus said in a panic as he sat just as a volley of arrows hit the boarding beside him. "Don't try to turn; the archers on the banks will be able to shoot straight down our open ends, but start backpedalling right now!"

The boat heaved as the forward motion was killed. On the raft the enemy dropped their poles and reached for the deck. They came up with bows in their left hands and arrows in their right. They rapidly fitted the arrows and left fly.

Their aim was inaccurate due to their haste and the heaving deck, but one arrow found the upper arm of a rower. He grunted under the impact, and dropped that arm. More volleys followed in quick succession, but haste and the rocking of the raft was making aim difficult. Three more men were hit before the boat was out of range.

Priscus looked back into the boat. One dead, three wounded, one seriously. "Tend to the wounded as we go home, Jason."

A second man died before the boat was back at the Roman base. The two survivors were tended to by the army surgeon as Priscus reported to Gallienus.

"I don't think we can interfere with their crossing any longer, Piso," he concluded after giving a narrative account. "They can station a couple of those rafts a third of the river width off each bank downstream of the crossing, and we would not be able to get through. Specially if they tie their platforms to each other, to stabilise their position, and I expect they will think of that without too much trouble."

"Yes, you are right, Gnaeus. But at least we have cost them two days of food," Gallienus replied. "I don't know how much they still have, but I am guessing not much."

"So the landings go ahead tonight?" Priscus asked.

"Yes. We will have a few hours of no moon, and then a three-quarters moon until dawn. We have enough boats to take five hundred in a trip, less a hundred to bring them back for the next load, and I expect to be able to take at least five round trips; that should give us at least two thousand men on the other shore by sunrise, and we keep on sending more for as long as we can."

"Then good luck, sir," Priscus saluted his commander and friend solemnly. This was not going to be an easy mission, but it had to be done.

The men were being taken across in a specific order. The first load were lightly dressed; no armour or heavy weaponry, only cross-bows and daggers. They were in dark clothing, and their exposed flesh was patchily smeared with charcoal dust added to oil. The subsequent loads were all standard heavy infantry.

Gallienus had landed with his first load, the stealth team, about a mile upstream of the Parthian force facing them from the south bank. He had already apologised to his men that there had been no initial reconnoitre of the target, but explained that he had not wanted to risk losing the element of surprise if a scout had been discovered. But they knew what was required of them.

He led them through the trees along the rough road that the Parthians had constructed to their new crossing site. In less than an hour he had found the Parthian perimeter.

He had made a point, ever since the Parthians established themselves on the southern bank, to show no interest in them whatsoever. No threat of crossing for even a small raid, no preparations for a crossing in strength to displace them. The Parthians had been taken in by this passivity; they had not bothered to fortify their landward perimeter, and kept only a small sentry watch.

Gallienus prowled the length of their landward edge, dropping off men as he went. In all, the Parthian pocket extended for some five hundred paces along the bank of the river, but was only some hundred paces deep. What an amazingly stupid layout! Gallienus thought to himself. Certainly it allows the men to be brought to the river very quickly, if needed to repulse a landing; but it made it so easy to cut the camp into pieces from the landward side!

Gallienus worked back along his ribbon of stealthed crossbowmen, urging patience on them as he went. They were not to shoot unless definitely discovered, and only at those who approached them to confirm. But the slovenly guards dotted along the line seemed more interested in standing by their fires for warmth and talking to each other out of boredom than in looking into the night. Then he took to the road to trot back to the landing site. He had been gone a total of three hours since the first landing, and two more loads of men had just landed. Eight hundred men in all.

They had all been told the importance of silence. No clanking of armour, no tramping as they marched was to be tolerated. They spread widely as they followed him down the road, and then into the diversion around the perimeter. They consolidated themselves into the far three hundred paces length of the left flank, about three men per pace of front. Their orders were simple; do whatever the Centre did. The crossbows in particular were to watch for mass shootings of sentries, and take that as their own signal. Gallienus tapped and gestured the five men on the extreme right edge of this body to follow him as he went back towards the road.

“You men are to be traffic controllers,” he told them in a whisper. “I will tell you what to do as we go.” One of them was dropped off after two hundred paces of the way back. “When the next cohort arrives, they are to spread evenly between here and the tail of the flanking force. That should be about four men per pace of front.” The man nodded his understanding. “Stay here, as a landmark to define the edge of the right flank,” Gallienus added, and the man nodded again.

Another hundred paces saw them at the end of the Parthian perimeter. Another hundred paces again and Gallienus dropped his third man. “Absolute silence from the men once they reach you. Direct them along the track we have worn.”

Then Gallienus regained to road, and left his third man to mark the point where the men must cut inland from the road. The other two were dropped off at about three hundred pace intervals, to re-assure the remaining men that they were not lost.

Another load of four hundred men were waiting in marching order, and a second load was debarking as he arrived. He called for their centurions.

“Men, your eight hundred will be the centre of an attack,” Gallienus briefed them. “When I give the order, the crossbows will pick off as many sentries as they can. Hopefully, this will be done without raising an alarm. If we manage to take out their guards, you will advance quietly, and enter their tents by stealth, killing as many as you can in their beds. But once we are

discovered and the alarm raised, you will be as loud as possible, and as quick as possible. The first aim is to eliminate as many of the enemy as you can, before they can get into their gear and organise themselves. The secondary aim is to have them run rather than fight.” Gallienus paused. “Any questions?” No-one made a sound. They knew the situation well enough, or they would not be centurions.

“Then go and make sure your men understand. You move out in five minutes; there are guides along the way.” Gallienus dismissed them and looked to the sky. Still three hours before first light, he judged it. We will manage to get another five hundred, at least; maybe two loads. I wonder what the Parthians are making of all the boat traffic? he mused. Surely they can see it; it is a bright moonlit night! But not a sound from their camp. They probably think we are moving against the river crossing, but if they had any sense they would know that we could not row there and back in such a short round trip. No, they are just lazy; they deserve to be slaughtered, he concluded.

It was little more than an hour later when the boats were back. Should I wait for another load? Gallienus asked himself. No; it might get here in time, but I would not have the time to get back to the battle. He called the centurions as the men formed up and explained the plan to them. Then he ordered the men handling the unloading to wait for the next batch and simply order them up the road. If they arrive in time to be in position, then well and good; but at least they will be a cork in the road, the only way out of the killing ground.

He led the four hundred down the road. Once at the last traffic controller, he ordered them to spread at a bit less than one pace separation, and creep up to the concealed bowmen around the right flank of the perimeter. The traffic controller was told to wait and tell the next batch the same. Then Gallienus crept up the diversion and made his way to the centre.

The northerly breeze, which had helped in keeping the sound of their movements from the enemy, but had also chilled his men to the bone, had almost disappeared. There was movement in the camp! A couple of men came out of one tent to talk to the sentries, and then stoke up the fire. Cooks! And others would follow them soon!

“Very well, men, prepare to start shooting,” he ordered softly. There was a pause as the crossbowmen pulled back their machines and loaded a bolt. This swept down the line in both directions. Gallienus waited another four minutes, enough time for the ripple of reaction to spread to the end of his line.

“Commence shooting,” he ordered, and the whine of bolts rose into the air. Gallienus could not see to the very flanks, but it seemed that all the visible enemy in his range had gone down. “Infantry, advance!” he ordered. The heavies then rose from their concealment and slowly walked forward.

They had advanced perhaps a dozen paces when there was a cry from the enemy camp. This rapidly grew into a tumult. “Charge, men!” Gallienus bellowed, and a roar went up from his men as they lumbered on frozen-stiff legs the rest of the distance to the enemy tents.

The leading ranks did not stop to go into the tents; they slashed at the guy ropes as they passed to bring the tents down on the occupants, and charged on towards the river. Gallienus could see the flanks rising to join them. In couple of minutes every tent was collapsed, with the camp fires showing shapes of waking men struggling under the dark weight of canvas. His own men were running from one heaving spread of canvas to the next, stabbing at the shapes. Most of the enemy died trapped under their collapsed tents, without even seeing their killers.

Many of the men converged on the clump of six timber buildings that had been erected by the Parthians. Gallienus expected one of them to be the commander's quarters; from what he had seen so far, Parthian officers liked their comforts, which he had always thought were bad for morale among the men having to sleep in tents. The others were likely to be stores.

Orders were clear; burn nothing except what cannot be held. He only hoped that in the excitement the men would remember that. He started running towards the presumed stores, to remind them to leave it alone; why burn your own loot? Or more to the point in Gallienus' mind, why burn your own food?

As he ran he saw one man splash the wall of a building with his flask of oil, then crouch to strike his flint. He shouted as loudly as he could, but the noise of battle around him drowned out his voice; but another soldier, probably his decanus, slapped him across the side of the helmet and spoke. The two men ran around to the doorway and kicked it in. Not bothering – or not risking? - to go inside in the dark, they hurried off to the next hut.

Gallienus caught up with them as they were kicking in the last door. “Men! Do not burn these huts! They must be kept intact!” he shouted over the surrounding din. “I want you eight of you to stand guard here, and make sure no-one does them any damage!”

“Yes, sir!” one responded on behalf of all. Probably the decanus, Gallienus confirmed in his own mind. “And don't bother going inside in the darkness; wait until dawn. But seize anyone who comes out,” Gallienus added.

There was a faint light in the eastern sky now. Dawn would come soon. Suddenly he felt very tired. He had not slept for a whole day and night, and that had been a day full of planning and giving detailed orders, followed by a night of edge-of-the-nerves deployment and battle. But another three hours, and everything would be finished here. He looked around, as well as he could now that he was down in the camp. This central section had been cleaned out to the waterfront, and his soldiers were wandering aimlessly, looking for Parthians to kill. He grabbed one passing soldier. “Run out to the western edge of the camp and see if the enemy have been wiped out. Then come back to report.” The man saluted and started off at a slow jog; to 'run' a round distance of half a mile in full gear straight after a battle was a flexible term.

He collared another soldier to do the same in the other direction, and then a third to stand there and wear his commander's cloak. “Wait here until two soldiers come back with reports, and tell them to wait with you.”

“Yes, sir!” he answered snappily. “I always wanted to wear a General's cloak!”

Gallienus smiled at the man before he went back to the timber huts. The light was obviously getting stronger now. “Anything to report?” he asked the first man he came to.

“Yes, sir,” the man replied. “My decanus will tell you,” he added, pointing another man.

“Two men came out of that building, sir,” the decanus reported. “Arms out, asking for their lives. One of them is the commander. We told them to go back inside and wait for you.”

“Good work, soldier,” Gallienus responded. “Hold them until I give further orders.”

Gallienus looked around again. It seemed that the battle was over; the last of the shouting had died down, and men were looking wistfully at the collapsed tents. They obviously had looting on their mind, but they were well aware of Silo's Standing Orders against that. Looting was to be carried out by special squads and the proceeds shared equally; anyone found acting independently was charged with stealing from his comrades, and treated very harshly. I should put the temptation out of their minds, Gallienus thought to himself. He found his way back to the legionary in his General's cloak. “Thanks for keeping it warm for me, soldier,” he said as he took his cloak back.

“Thank you, sir,” the chirpy soldier responded. “I'll have to tell my kids about this.”

It was only a couple of minutes before the first man reported back. “All quiet, sir. No more resistance,” he said between puffs. Another minute and the other came back with the same report.

“Right; now go back and order everyone to report for assembly between the timber huts and the river. Tell everyone to spread the word.” The men turned and lumbered away to the flanks again.

It was half an hour later, and full dawn light, when the assault force finally assembled. Gallienus addressed them from the roof of one hut.

“Well done, men!” he started. “This was a very difficult mission, and you all did well. It is not easy for two thousand men to move in darkness as quietly as you did this morning. I am most impressed by your competence and nerve. This loot today should provide ample reward for your efforts.” A cheer went up in response, as it always did when loot was mentioned. “But all that will come later. Right now there are still some final details to attend to. We must march up to the Parthians' attempted crossing point and destroy their works. Once that is done we can be confident that there will be more loot to share!” Another cheer rose from the men. “So assemble into your centuries now and be ready to march out. Centurions, to the front, please!”

The march along the supply road started just as the sun peeked over the hills to the east. On the way he ordered the dozen boats still at the landing point to follow the march up river. The men reached the southern wharf in mid-morning and made short work of the few hundred men stationed there as a

bridgehead guard against any boat raids. The dismay of the men on the northern bank was obvious.

Gallienus had done enough walking for one day. He gave orders for half the men to prepare defences against a possible attack across the river, and the other half to get some sleep. Duty to be reversed each three hours until sunset, and then a six-hour roster to be adopted through the night. Then he boarded one of the boats, leaving the others to be sent back in case of any urgent reports. He was back in base in less than two hours.

Priscus was waiting at the riverbank for him.

"It all sounded good from this side, Piso," Priscus welcomed him out of the boat with a broad smile.

"It was," he confirmed. "Some commanders should be crucified for how poorly they protect their men." He looked around. "Which reminds me; send a boat across to fetch the two prisoners. I want them here immediately. I also want a few fast riders and their horses to be taken down river and around the Parthian lines; we need to get news of this to the General as soon as possible."

Priscus attended to these two matters immediately while Gallienus went into his tent. He then followed his commander.

Gallienus was slumped into a chair. "We took the camp completely by surprise. I saw no casualties on our side, the surprise was so great, but I expect that there might have been a few somewhere. Then we took the southern landing point; we lost twenty men there. See that you get a report from the centurions, and allocate the usual bonus loot to the shares of the fallen." Gallienus looked up to his friend, obviously exhausted.

"My inclination is for you to take the southern commander out to call on Timocles. That should prove that Sanatruces is completely cut off. Then offer him terms; last time we offered free passage for the king and his senior officers, and the usual for the common soldiers. Same offer again. And tell him that he has as much time as he wants to think about it; we have all the food we need." Then Gallienus added, "but warn him that if he takes too long he might be facing a mutiny."

"That sounds like a good plan to me," Priscus commented. "Better to capture slaves than to suffer casualties trying to kill them. I will head out as soon as you finish with the prisoner; in the meantime I will send out a rider asking for parley in an hour."

"Good. Please do that," Gallienus agreed. "I will have a quick wash in the river."

The commander of the southern garrison explained to Gallienus that he had been chosen to guard the supply wagons that had brought food from Arbela. He had crossed the river going south only the afternoon before Priscus had captured it, and knew about the blocking force; but his orders were to take supplies north, so he continued to Arbela to collect the supplies, and when he returned to the river crossing he decided he should wait for the Romans to be removed from in front of his path.

"Why did you not attack us?" Gallienus asked.

"That was not within my orders," was the reply.

"Why did you not fortify your position?"

"We did not think you were strong enough to attack us," was the reply.

"We thought you were only a couple of thousand, and would be soon swept aside by the Mighty King in any case."

Gallienus nodded to himself for a moment. "I think I can see why you were chosen for this duty."

"Why?" the commander asked.

"Because the Mighty King had no idea that you would be anywhere near your enemy when he sent you. As far away from a battle as possible would be the safest place to put you," Gallienus answered. "But don't worry; you will have the opportunity to explain everything to him yourself. We are going to grant you free passage through our lines and hand you over to the King."

That was when alarm sprang into the commander's eyes. "No; you cannot do that! You Romans offer freedom to officers who surrender!"

Gallienus gave a wry smile. "You did not surrender. We had to attack and capture you, remember?" But then Gallienus went on to add. "But don't worry; if you want to tell us that you surrendered to us freely, then we will accept that, and tell the Mighty King the same story when we hand you over to him."

The commander paled and looked genuinely sick. "No, you are right. I was captured in battle."

"It is good to know we understand each other," Gallienus smiled again. "But if you would rather stay with us than go back to the Mighty King, then you might have to give us a bit of information. For example, how many Parthian soldiers are there in Arbela?"

The Parthian licked his lips. "If I help you, I will live as a free man in Rome?" he asked.

"If everything you tell us is found to be true, then you will live as a free man in Rome," Gallienus assured him. "But you will not be released immediately; you will remain under our care until we find out whether or not you have lied."

"There were three thousand Parthian infantry in Arbela last time I was there. I do not know if it is more or less now."

"That's a good start," Gallienus congratulated him. "Next; how much food does Sanatruces have?"

"I do not know!" the commander was terrified that he could not answer; he dare not guess and find out later he was wrong.

"What was the last information you had?" Gallienus pressed him. "When you were sent for more supplies, how much did he have then?"

"He had enough for nine or ten days when he started marching north from here."

"Ten days for how many men?"

"About sixty five thousand men, including cavalry."

Gallienus muttered to himself. "Then four days march to the north at full strength would reduce that to six days; that would mean six times sixty-five, is three hundred and ninety. Then Silo killed about twenty thousand, leaving forty five thousand. So for forty five thousand men, that is about six or seven days. Since then he has marched for two days, and sat in camp for another three days. So he must be down to his last day or two, unless he has managed to get some more, or gone to half-rations." Then he came out of his musings.

"How much did you manage to get across the river to him?" Gallienus asked.

"Nothing. We had a few wagon-loads on the shore waiting for him, but none had left as of last night."

Gallienus looked over to Priscus and broke into Latin. "So far it makes sense. And even if Sanatruces went to half-rations when he stopped marching, he would still only have at most five days."

"And digging those fortifications needs food," Priscus added. "I would say probably much less than five days, if this clown is telling the truth."

The Parthian had no idea what this conversation in Latin might mean. But it seemed clear to him that there was no anger in their voices. He started to relax.

Right, you!" Priscus addressed him in Greek. "We are going for a ride."

"A ride? Where to, lord?" The relaxation did not last long.

"We are going to parley with a Parthian envoy. We will show you to him, to prove that we now hold the south bank of the river, as well as all the supplies. And then we are going to offer terms; we take no delight in killing unless we have no other choice."

The Parthian was troubled. Going to meet a Parthian envoy could be a cover for surrendering him; but why would they do that? If they want him dead, they could make sure of it here and now. He still held some hope. And the talk about not wanting to kill seemed genuine enough.

"Yes, lord," he stood. "Should I go like this, or in uniform?"

"Like that will be fine," Priscus smiled. "It shows how diligent you were. I will get you a horse."

Timocles was ready and waiting when they arrived outside the Roman line.

"My apologies, lord Timocles, for being late; but we thought that this man would be of some interest to you."

"Not a worry, my friend, I was not going anywhere," Timocles waved a hand dismissively. "Could I ask your name please?"

"Oh, my apologies again," Priscus stuttered out. "My name is Gnaeus Priscus. I am second in command under Piso Gallienus, whom you have met; but my commander is too exhausted to meet with you after a very busy couple of days."

Timocles marked his wax tablet. "That is an awkward name for a Greek-speaker. Would you be offended if I wrote it as 'Naos'?"

Priscus raised an eyebrow and smiled in surprise. He had never thought of himself as a shrine. "No offence at all, lord Timocles; in fact, I am honoured."

"An honour that undoubtedly you merit," Timocles said smoothly. "And I hope my friend Pison is only exhausted, and not ill or injured?"

"I assure you, only exhausted. He has gone two days and a night without sleep, in which time he has won a significant battle."

"We are aware that you have displaced the crew on our south landing point, lord Naos; but I would hesitate to think that this cannot be reversed by tomorrow, once our southern force gets to work," Timocles said gently.

"Which is why I have brought this gentleman with me," Priscus gestured towards his prisoner, still in the night clothing of his capture.

Timocles studied the man for a clue. He could only discern that the man wore Parthian sleeping attire, and was obviously both afraid and embarrassed.

"Then please introduce me to your Parthian friend, lord Naos," he asked.

"We believe him to be the commander of your southern force," Priscus replied. "We have annihilated that force almost to a man; perhaps a handful escaped by swimming, but otherwise this man and a pretty young lad sharing his bed are the only survivors."

Timocles could not mask his alarm. "And what is his name, please?"

"We have not bothered to ask; perhaps you might like to ask him a few questions yourself."

Timocles rattled off a sentence in Pahlavanik, but Priscus interrupted.

"I would be most grateful, lord Timocles, if the conversation was carried out in Greek," he requested. "I know this man speaks Greek."

"My apologies, friend Naos; I was not aware of that," Timocles smiled. Then he turned back to the Parthian.

"Your name?"

"Artanes."

"Have you lost your force?"

"Yes; totally. The Roman tells the truth."

"Not even any prisoners?"

"Not that I know of. The Romans ran through our camp an hour before sunrise, killing my men as they tried to escape from their collapsed tents." Artanes drew a deep breath.

"Also, they seized all of the supplies we had brought from Arbela."

"Parmines will not be pleased with you," Timocles said, a massive understatement.

"Parmines' pleasure is the least of my problems at the moment," Artanes replied.

Timocles sat still on his mount, trying to think how to handle this surprise. At length he spoke to Priscus again. "Well, friend Naos; thank you for bringing this man back to us. We appreciate the gesture, and we will be generous to you when you are captured in turn."

"I am sorry, lord Timocles, but you have misunderstood the situation," Priscus corrected the envoy. "We are not turning this man over to you; we know you do not have the food to keep him, so we will undertake that cost.

"But I am here to re-state the terms offered by Piso a few days ago. The King and his senior officers will be permitted safe passage back to Ctesiphon; the lower officers and men will be allowed to live, half of them as free men in the Spains, and the other half to be sold as slaves.

"There is no time limit on this offer at the moment, but if it is not accepted by noon tomorrow, then the terms will be made known to all of your men in the afternoon. Hungry soldiers can become quite undisciplined if they think that their lives are being thrown away in a hopeless cause. So for the King's safety, and your own, you would do well to accept before the rank-and-file take things into their own hands," Priscus smiled again.

"Thank you for this friendly chat, Naos," Timocles replied after a pause. "I will inform the Mighty King of this conversation immediately. Now, if you will excuse me?"

"Of course, lord Timocles. Sleep well tonight," Priscus farewelled him as he turned and tugged the reins of the horse carrying Artanes after him.

Sanatruces was enraged to hear that he had lost not only the five thousand men on the far bank, but more importantly the supplies. The last two days had already been on half-rations, and there was only enough for two days more.

"Of all the incompetent idiots in this world, how high must that Artanes rank!" he stamped around his tent. "Five thousand men under his command, and the Romans squash him in his sleep! Why had he not built fortifications? Why did he not set proper sentries? How did those Western scum get into his camp before the men were even out of their beds?"

Parmines had no answers that would make his king any happier, so he said nothing. At last the king stopped spitting his disgust, and addressed a serious question to his commander.

"Well, Parmines? What do you suggest we do now?"

Parmines resisted the urge to shrug. "I see two main choices, Mighty King. We can either attack, or surrender. Even if the Romans were on the point of starvation themselves this morning, if they have captured the supplies as Artanes says, they will be able to eat for many days to come by tonight. And if we are to attack, should it be at night or at dawn?" Parmines continued. "I suggest at dawn; the Roman defences have been skilfully designed to lead attackers into killing zones, and our men would not be able to circumvent these in the dark. But at dawn, they will be able to see where the traps are. It also allows us the night to prepare."

"Don't you think that the Romans would be thinking along the same lines?" Timocles asked. "So they will be strengthening their lines even now, and they will not be taken by surprise in the morning.

"No! I think the Romans are desperate. Ask yourself; why parley this afternoon, telling us this information if it were true? Would it not be smarter to

let us sit here, eating the last of our rations, so by the time we realised what had happened our men would be too weak to fight? So I think this is all a trick. They have captured a soldier who can speak Greek; probably a junior officer when they attacked the landing point. But I can't believe they have wiped out the southern force and captured the food.

"I think it is much more likely that they know they cannot hold the landing spot against a counter-attack by Artanes, who is still alive and well. This man they claim is Artanes was conveniently not in uniform, because they did not capture the uniform of a high-ranking officer. And they have made a deal with him to tell us this story; perhaps offered him money and freedom in their empire. They did this because they *want* us to attack as soon as possible.

"Now, why would they want us to attack, probably at dawn tomorrow?" Timocles asked rhetorically. "Because they are out of food already! They are already starving! If we can last two more days, we will win!"

Sanatruces and Parmines looked at one another. After a long moment, Sanatruces spoke. "You know, I think Timocles might be right." He sat in his chair, and Parmines was thankful that the anger had evaporated. "Yes, why else tell us all this, when they know that it would force us to attack? These Romans are deceptive; look at how they fooled Tigranes into retreating from Edessa, when he had it all but in his hands! These Romans are masters of false information, and we almost swallowed it!

"Good thinking, Timocles! We will wait them out for a couple more days. And if we have to attack we will do it then, and with proper preparations and a smarter plan and deployment than a rushed job. And by then the Romans will have relaxed their guard, more so than trying at first light tomorrow."

"One more small detail, Mighty King," Timocles offered. "Four days on half rations will not give the men as much strength as they might need. I suggest that we start butchering some horses, to add to their allowance. The horses will be useless in this battle, but the meat will do the men a world of good."

Sanatruces nodded. "Yes; do it! And make the meat portions generous!"

Gallienus was much refreshed the next morning. He rose and smiled as Priscus entered his tent. "I was surprised not to be woken by reports of an attack," he confessed to his subordinate.

"Yes, I half expected that, too," Priscus agreed. "I was up four hours ago, just in case. It was a risk, but trying to organise an assault overnight must have been a bit too much for them."

"Any competent commander would have had the plans already drawn up, as a contingency. He has been sitting there for five days now."

"But it was never his intention to attack; he only ever intended to starve us out," Priscus reminded him.

"Remember what Silo said after we stuffed that exercise on Rhodes?" Gallienus asked. "Never give up an option until you have to? Well, Sanatruces

never even accepted the option in the first place.” Gallienus gave a wry grin. “Not that it would ever be a good one, but all the same...”

“So should we expect an attack today? Or perhaps tomorrow?”

“I wouldn’t expect an attack, but I would certainly keep the men ready for one,” Gallienus replied. “My name is not Artanes.” The two men sat. “If they were to stack as many men as possible on rafts and try to land on the south bank, what sort of force could they carry over?” Gallienus asked.

“You were up there yesterday; how many rafts did they have in place then?” Priscus answered with another question.

“I didn’t notice,” Gallienus confessed. “And there is also the possibility that they are building more rafts than I know about, further upstream, to be floated down when needed.”

“Then I’ll send a couple of boats up the river to do some scouting,” Priscus suggested. Now that we own the south bank we can pass out of archer range, so we don’t have to use those heavy, high-sided jobs.”

“Yes, please do that, Gnaeus,” Gallienus chuckled. “Did Timocles really transliterate your name to ‘Naos’, or were you just kidding me?”

“No kidding, Piso! He now refers to me as ‘The Ancient Shrine’! What a hoot!”

“Except that he probably doesn’t have enough Latin to know what ‘Priscus’ means,” Gallienus interjected. “Otherwise he would not have been able to keep a straight face!”

“Anyway, if they surrender, how are you going to handle the prisoners?” Priscus asked. “There are more than forty thousand of them.”

“Not a problem, Gnaeus; we put them on rafts and float them down to the Tigris, and then over to Osrhoene. We have more than enough men to keep them under control, so long as we are careful. Or we could just march them out.”

“But that leaves Arbela in Parthian hands!”

“Not if Sanatruces wants to get home,” Gallienus assured him. “With a gladius pricking the small of his back, he will be quite happy to order all Parthians out of the city; we could secure it with a single century.”

Priscus stood. “Well, I should go for a little trip up the river now. I’ll be back this afternoon.”

Priscus took ten boats with him for this trip, each with eighteen men aboard. One boat would lead, a second hang back as far as possible without losing sight of the leader, and the following eight would hang back from the second boat. If the lead boat saw any activity on the bank, then it would turn back, all would land on the bank, and attack the work party and their camp. Any rafts would be either destroyed or captured. Priscus preferred capture, to use to transport prisoners in a few days’ time.

The northern wharf was abandoned when they passed it on the way up. The small Roman force still on the south bank reported that there had been no activity there since the previous evening. Apparently the idea of forcing the crossing had been abandoned. Or was this just a ruse, while they started work

elsewhere? They rowed for another two hours, enough to cover about eight miles, Priscus calculated. Not a sign of any activity at all. This did not make sense; even if it was only to keep the men working rather than sitting idle, the Parthians should be doing something! But clearly, whatever they were doing was not building rafts. So what are they up to that we can't see?

He landed the boats on the north bank, just to the east of the northern wharf, and took a boatload of men with him up to the top of the ridge. From here they could see a large portion of the Parthian camp. "Right! You youngsters should be the best for this!" he said to them. "Have a close look at them, and tell me what they are planning."

Eighteen sets of eyes scanned the scene. "I think I see a lot of catapults behind a ridge, half way between the northern road and the road to the wharf."

Priscus strained to see. He could perhaps make out what the man was talking about; or was he seeing it only because he had been told?

"Yes, you are right," another said. "I count twenty, and they all seem to be lined up against the three dips where we have hidden our own third battery."

"How would they know where to aim them?" another asked. "Ours are out of sight."

"Not from up here, they are not. The enemy have climbed a hill themselves, and seen our layout just as easily as we can now see theirs," Priscus commented. "I want all of you to look closely and memorise where those enemy catapults are. Remember the surrounding hills, so you know where we should aim our own. Compare ranges with similar distances in our camp, so we can pace it out. We are going back to report this immediately." Priscus looked back down along the river. He had a clear line of sight to the force holding the southern bank at the crossing point, about a mile away. He waited for a few minutes while the men took in the terrain and distances. "Are we ready to go now?" His men mumbled their agreement.

Priscus scrambled down to the boats and chose one crew. He made certain that they had between them four different coloured cloths. "You will be spotting for our artillery in a couple of hours," he explained. "When you get up to the ridge, you will see where the enemy have built a battery of catapults. If we are not careful to eliminate this threat, they will be able to burn a hole in our defences, so we can't let that happen. So when you see the fall of the bombs from our own, you will wave flags to the crew on the river bank. White will mean that the onagers have to drift right, because white is a good colour. Black means to the left. Red means to increase range, blue means to shorten range." He looked at the men. "You have all that?"

Red means go longer, blue means drop shorter," one decanus recited, "white for right, black for left."

"Good!" Priscus confirmed. "Now, go up there; Lucius, you saw them first, so go up with them to point out the machines, just in case the others don't see them so readily. I will be setting up as semaphore chain. So chop out a tree of two, to make sure the boys on the landing point can see you clearly. And

remember! Make sure your signals can be seen by us, but not by the enemy!" The men started to scramble up the slope.

"The rest of you; let's go!" Priscus urged the crew of his own boat. These were the men who had seen the layout and could describe most accurately where to aim the first volleys. "You make haste back to camp, and tell them to get fire bombs out to the third battery as a matter of urgency, and the best crews that can be found. Then tell them where to aim as best you can, but do not start until I get there. Go!" That boat pushed out into the water and sped away. Priscus and the other seven boats soon followed.

The men holding the landing point were pleased to have something less boring to do than sit and watch the far bank. They had the coloured cloth required, and some to spare. They gave out flags for the boats to continue the signal chain downstream.

Priscus rowed to almost the limit of visibility from the landing point, and then told one boat to drop anchor. A second boat was stationed further downstream where their signals could be seen from within the Roman fortifications. After that, the chain went inland to a low rise, which could also be seen from the onager placement.

By this time there were only three more hours of daylight. Would that be enough? There was certainly ammunition enough on hand.

Gallienus was waiting at the battery, warned by the first boat demanding ammunition be distributed.

"I was told the plot," he said as he approached Priscus. "I suggest we throw triple pots, get things as hot as possible as quickly as possible. How many relays in the semaphore chain?"

"The landing, two boats, and two here in the camp. Five relay points." Priscus answered.

"Then we can expect a delay of about a minute," Gallienus figured. "I think we should go in with maybe three loads, then wait and see what the message is. And I think we should throw from one unit only, so we do not confuse the spotters with too wide a scatter."

"Agreed," Priscus said. "But are they all aligned as best the men could guess, just in case we have problems?"

"Yes, all are set." Gallienus turned to the artillery captain. "Three pots per cast, three casts in quick order. You have the range?"

"Yes, sir," the captain saluted and turned. "Three pots, lads; give it another four clicks past half-range."

The arm was drawn back, the bombs loaded into the cradle and their fuses ignited. "Release!" the captain ordered, and the bombs flew towards the enemy. The men jumped to the capstan to draw the arm back for another cast. This process was repeated another two times before the flags on the rise were seen being waved. "Wait up, men!" Gallienus ordered. He looked at the flags. Black and blue.

"Traverse two points left, and pull back only to half-range."

The adjustments were made, and the next batch of bombs were loaded, fired and thrown. The third volley at this new setting was thrown, and the machine brought to a pause. Gallienus checked the flags. Now only the black flag was being waved. So they must have the range right now!

“Traverse another two points to the left, lads!” Gallienus bellowed. Three more rounds!”

Excitement was running high up on the ridge. The first volley was surprisingly close; the original men must have compared the range to the distance between landmarks inside the camp to be so accurate. And the direction was very good, too. They must have lined up with something else that would be visible from the camp. Just a small adjustment shorter and to the left.

The second round, with a slightly shorter range, burst all around the nearer end of the line of Parthian catapults. Direct hit! Now all that was needed was to traverse along the line. By the time the second triplet of the second series was exploding, it was obvious that the range adjustment had been perfect. The lone black flag was being waved to the men on the river. Another pause followed the sixth round. It was clear that the onagers were firing in brackets of three.

The next bombs fell slightly short, but the momentum carried the spray of oil all over the machines. A little short was as good as spot on; only the overthrows were wasted. But the line of enemy machines angled further from the Roman lines as it went along. The next batch should be thrown a bit longer, but not too much. Did they dare ask for an increase that could be an over-cast?

“Wave black and red!” the decanus ordered, making up his mind in a rush.

Priscus had a good feeling about the procedure as he watched the artillery plugging away. Every batch of three was greeted with another traverse to the left, sometimes with an increase in range, sometimes not. He remembered the layout as he had seen it from the top of the ridge, and in his mind’s eye he was burning along the lines of Parthian machines.

Parmines hurried out to the catapult placement as soon as he heard the reports. He arrived to see eight of his twenty machines already in flames. “What are you all doing?” he screamed at the catapult captain. “Pull those machines back, out of range!”

“I have sent for horses to do that, sir” the man replied anxiously. “We can’t do it by hand; these machines were built flat on the ground; they have no wheels.

Parmines looked over to the machines still intact. Men were frantically trying to lever the back ends of the machines off the ground to slip rollers under the base frames; but even as they succeeded, it was obvious that serious strength was needed. The ground was uneven, and the small-diameter rollers were being pushed into the ground by the weight of their loads. Rollers won’t work, man!” Parmines shouted. “You need skids, and with plenty of oil or grease! Go to the store and get some!”

Even as he gave that last order, the enemy pots fell and broke another five paces along the line, engulfing another two machines. There were no men

trying to save these two, the flames from those already alight being too great a deterrent; but the men working on the next catapult along ran for fear of fire. Those from the next one after that joined them. The machines at the very end of the line stood the best chance of being saved; the Romans were obviously working down the line, and would come to them last. But these were on the most broken ground; impossible to roll, and awkward to lever high enough to clear the unevenness of the ground if they were to slide. But even if he saved them, what use would that be? There would only be a few left, not enough for the massive concentration needed to burn through the Roman fortifications in a swift surprise blow; and even if there were enough, the element of surprise was obviously lost now. But save some he must, if only for the sake of the morale within the camp. And a handful of catapults was better than none.

The fire from the Romans stepped along the line again. Another two machines were now among the flames. Now twelve were burning, and three more were too close to the flames for men to work on. The other five were still not up on skids, and horses were not to be seen anywhere. Parmines walked to the northern end of the line and screamed at the men to work faster, to put some muscle into it. Horses! Here at last! But they were saddled, not in harnesses fit for hauling! Of all the incompetence...!

“Quick, get more horses, with proper haulage harnesses, you idiots!” Parmines exploded. “Yes! You four, on the run!” He looked back to his catapults. “Meanwhile, let’s see if we can tie off to the saddles,” he said to the others. As ropes were being run out to the intact machine closest to the flames, the Roman fall of shot stepped over again. This time the new fire was in centred around the sixth-last catapult. Numbers fourteen, fifteen and sixteen would be aflame soon as more pots landed on them, and seventeen and eighteen within the spray and heat zone from the newly-ignited units. “No! Work on the end two!” Parmines bellowed.

The horses were led further along the line to stand opposite their new task, and ropes tied off to their stirrups. Men dashed forward to tie the other ends to the machines. The horses were not happy with this arrangement. They were not accustomed to haulage work in any case; but without a collar to push against they were getting anxious. Parmines gave one a huge wallop on the rump. The horse lurched forwards in reaction, pulling the saddle back from his chest to around his belly. This only made him panic even more. He kicked back, and his hind legs caught in the ropes and saddle fittings. He fell to the ground, still thrashing. This terror spread to the other horses, who also panicked.

“Cut the ropes!” Parmines ordered in desperation. These horses were not going to be of any help; they were only making the situation more dangerous. The horses galloped away for a hundred paces before dropping back to a canter. The Roman fall of shot crept further up the line, to fall around seventeen and eighteen. The last two were now unapproachable. Parmines stood and watched as his hopes of a swift assault went up in smoke. All he could do now was hope that the Romans were indeed starving, as Timocles had suggested. But if that were so, then why are the Romans still in possession of the southern landing

point? Where was the counter-attack from Artanes? He began to suspect that the Romans had been telling the truth, improbable as it seemed; and that Timocles was wrong. Parmines started walking back to his tent, as he heard someone between the lines bellowing in Greek.

“Men of Parthia! Listen to me!” this Roman was announcing. “You cannot break through our line! And even now, you know that you are facing starvation.” Then there was a pause, presumably to allow Greek-speakers to translate to their comrades. “We have offered the Mighty King and his officers safe passage to Ctesiphon. And we have offered you all your lives, half of you as free men, as is our custom.” Another pause. “This offer is on condition that there is no attack on us. You must surrender! If there is an attack, then the Mighty King and his officers will be executed, and all other surviving captives will be sold into slavery.” Another pause. “Men of Parthia! Officers of Parthia! Think how best you can ensure that you live, and live well!”

Back at the Roman onager, the flags were changing. They were now showing white and red. Traverse right, and reduce range! A cheer went up! They had hit the whole line, and were now going back over the burning machines to ensure they were completely destroyed!

Gallienus and Priscus met in the command tent just as the sun was setting. “Do you think they might be doing something similar somewhere else on the perimeter?” Gallienus asked.

“I doubt it,” Priscus dismissed the thought. “I would say that they picked that spot because they saw that they could knock out our own artillery and make a decisive break, but the rest of our placements were too far away to be seen clearly. And why would they divide their attack, anyway? They would want as much force as possible in one place.”

Gallienus nodded. “That sounds right. And publishing the terms for surrender to their common soldiers will make rebellion more likely, too. Doing it just as their one big hope for victory was going up in smoke was the right timing for it.”

“Let’s see what tomorrow brings, Piso. But set a very alert guard tonight and at dawn. I would suggest that you have not only the usual sentries and screen of guards, but a full legion of infantry in reserve, already dressed and at arms on stand-by along the perimeter.”

The Parthians were holding their own meeting, and this one was not so happy. “How did the Romans know about our catapults?” Sanatruces demanded. “And how could they fire on them so accurately?”

“There are two ways that could happen, Mighty King,” Timocles answered. “Perhaps they had sent spies out; but since the machines were not placed there until today, that is unlikely. The more likely explanation is that they have spotters in the surrounding hills.”

“Do you mean that they can see everything we do?” Sanatruces asked indignantly.

“That is a possibility,” Timocles agreed.

“How could you let this happen, Parmines?” Sanatruces demanded of his commander.

“I have not let it happen, Mighty King,” Parmines answered. “It is obvious now that the Romans still hold the south landing point, and no counter-attack has been made; so Artanes was indeed wiped out. Why did Timocles persuade you otherwise? And it is now obvious that the Romans must have captured the supplies, and are not starving. So why did Timocles persuade you otherwise?” Parmines took a deep breath.

“I am convinced that the Romans knew because they have a spy in our midst. And I do not mean a few of their own men that might crawl through the night, because the catapults were not there last night; but instead someone who knew beforehand where they would be this afternoon.” Parmines looked pointedly towards Timocles. “Now, who in our camp knew about these things, and had the opportunity to pass that information on to the Romans?”

Timocles drew himself together. “And when have I had the opportunity to tell them within a few paces where these catapults were? Do you not think it strange that these Romans could trace exactly along the line of the machines, and then back, on the basis of a broad description only? I would have needed to give them a survey report for them to fix the positions that accurately! No! The Romans knew because they had spotters in the hills, guiding them along the line. Parmines has failed to provide proper security for this battle, just as he bungled the battle in the north by recalling the first attack and giving the Romans time to strengthen their position.”

Sanatruces looked sharply to Parmines. That first attack had been Sanatruces own idea, and this was an excellent opportunity to shift the blame for its failure onto his commander. But let us not make it too obvious, he thought. And let us solve the immediate problem first, and sort out the blame later.

“What do you propose, Parmines?” Sanatruces asked.

“Normally, I would recommend a full attack; and if it failed, then accept the Roman offer of safe passage,” Parmines answered. “But the Romans have made it known all around the camp that they will retract this offer if we attack. My first duty is to protect the life of the Mighty King; and I am not confident that an attack can succeed, not if we have a spy in our midst. So I recommend that you accept safe passage.”

Timocles, what do you suggest?” Sanatruces asked his envoy.

“Normally I would not stoop to ask a favour of the Romans; it is beneath the dignity of the Mighty King,” he answered. “But when we have a military commander of such incompetence, I am loathe to risk the life of the Mighty King to his bumbling. This is specially so, when the men know that they would be safer if they desert than if they fight; we might risk a mutiny because of one man’s proven incompetence. Therefore I recommend that you accept safe passage.”

Sanatruces gave a wry smile. “It is good to see you two agreeing with each other! Timocles, you will go to the Romans tomorrow morning, and make

arrangements.” Then turning to Parmines, “And you will call your senior officers together, to report to me.”

Gallienus and Priscus were in the field three hours before sunrise the next morning, just in case of a desperation attack by the Parthians. The chill of the autumn dawn seeped into their bones, but it was good for the men to know that even their top officers shared this discomfort with them. And this was less comfortable than most mornings. The clear, still sky sucked the heat out of the land, and frost started forming on the ground where the campfires did not reach. There was a fog on the river.

“Keep alert, lads!” Gallienus encouraged his men as he toured the perimeter, “If ever they are going to come at us, it will be this morning! So stay on the job.” He and Priscus were going in opposite directions to and fro, and conferring each time they crossed. Of special interest to them were the darker patches in between the obvious strong points. These were the most likely points for the enemy to try to creep in close undetected, so each night as soon as the darkness closed in these were strung with fine strings and tied back to bells in the onager emplacements. So far there was no sign of movement. At last the sky lightened and there was better visibility than that offered by the half-moon.

“It’s not over yet, lads!” Priscus warned the men as he toured. “Stay alert!”

Shortly after sunrise a lone rider came out from the Parthian camp. “Romans!” he called out in Greek. “I come to parley!” He slowly walked his horse towards the Roman lines. Priscus continued with his sweep of the defences; he knew Gallienus was on hand to handle the negotiation role. Soon he saw his commander walking his horse out to meet the Parthian.

“We meet again, good friend Pison!” Timocles greeted him with a smile. “I must congratulate you on your stunning victory over Artanes since we last spoke.”

“Thank you, Timocles, but I would be the first to admit that it was not difficult. Artanes was a very poor commander; at least, by Romans standards.”

“Success should never be scorned,” Timocles replied. “And, my friend Pison, you now have a second victory. The Mighty King agrees that there is nothing to gain by a battle in this place. He has agreed to return to Ctesiphon without any further hostile action.”

“I am most pleased with that, Timocles. I rejoice that I will not be obliged to cause your death,” Gallienus smiled. “When and how does the Mighty King intend to act on this decision?”

“That is what I am here to discuss with you,” Timocles returned the smile. “In that you have promised safe passage, the Mighty King would take his senior officers and an honour guard of one thousand cataphracts, ride to the east for about fifty miles where there is a town that will take him across the river, and then ride home. He intends to leave today, at about noon.”

“Regretfully, that is not acceptable, Timocles,” Gallienus replied with a wistful smile. “We cannot allow the Mighty King to be exposed in this way.

Instead, he and his senior officers shall command the soldiers to build a stockade for themselves, and pitch their tents in that stockade. Our men will then inspect it, and allow your men in with warm clothing but no armour or weapons. We will then deliver food to them, and firewood. The Mighty King and his officers will then come into our camp for the night, and will be escorted down the road through Arbela by one of our legions. When we reach Arbela, the Mighty King will call his garrison out, surrender the city back to us, and he will be permitted to continue his journey with his Arbela garrison as his escort.”

Timocles smiled wistfully in his turn. “I am sorry, friend Pison; but that is not acceptable, either. The Mighty King must have his own escort out of this place. Otherwise, it would appear to the men that he is surrendering himself to you Romans. That is beneath the dignity of the Mighty King, and cannot be permitted.”

“It would not be the *appearance* of a surrender to Roman forces, friend Timocles; it would be the reality,” Gallienus replied. “There must be no doubt in anyone’s mind about the absolute truth of these three propositions. First, that the Mighty King has lost this campaign, and has been captured. Second, that the Republic has mercifully offered him his life. Third, that the Republic can be relied upon to honour its promises.” Gallienus paused a moment before continuing. “If the Mighty King attempts to sneak away without acknowledging these three realities, then he will be hunted down, taken, and paraded through the streets of Rome before being executed.” Gallienus started to pull his horse around to return to his camp, but spoke again before moving off.

“There is no further need for discussion,” Gallienus announced. “My men will be gathering food and firewood enough to feed your men tonight, and preparing accommodation for the Mighty King and his top twenty officers. Please report when the stockade is ready for inspection.” He started to ride away, but stopped, “Oh; and I am glad that you will live, friend Timocles; you have played your part well, but have been poorly supported by your military.” Gallienus kicked his horse to a walk, leaving the Parthian to himself. Soon Timocles turned back to his own camp.

“Yes, it is outrageous, Mighty King,” Timocles agreed. “But that is what the Roman said, and would not permit anything to be changed. It is your decision what to do in response to this impertinence.”

Sanatruces was like most kings; he flew into a rage whenever anything displeased him. But unlike most kings, Timocles thought to himself, he does not let that rage destroy his judgement. He will allow his calm to return before making a decision.

“Very well,” he said at length. “Order the building of the stockade, as the Roman said, and tell him I will submit. But also advise everyone who is a Leader of a Thousand or higher to prepare for an overland ride,” Sanatruces was calm again. “We will slip out while the Romans still think I am complying in all details. But as for you and Parmines; you will stay behind to add credibility, and cover our escape.”

"I will not go with you, to serve you into the future, Mighty King?" Timocles tried his best to sound as though stabbed through the heart.

"No; and nor will that incompetent Parmines," Sanatruces said bitterly. "It was obvious that the loss of the catapults was his fault; even I could see the flag-waving being used to guide their fire-bombs; and that could only mean a spotter in the hills, as you said. But to try to throw the blame on another who has been faithful to me is not only cowardly; it is treason!" Sanatruces gave a sigh of exasperation. "I would have liked to have impaled him when we returned to Ctesiphon, but that is a luxury I will have to forego. You and he will stay and distract the Romans as long as possible. I have no doubt that you will be treated well. In the meantime, you have authority to command Parmines as if your words were mine. I will tell him that myself.

"But as for now, get the men to work on the stockade, and inform the stores to prepare provisions for seventy men for five days, and chose the best seventy horses for us. The other horses can be slaughtered; let the men have their fill of meat as a mid-day meal!"

"Yes, Mighty King. I will invite the Romans to observe the building of the stockade, to add credibility. I will put the stockade at the far west, so you will be free to make your escape to the east," Timocles said as he took three small steps backwards and bowed before turning his back on the king.

"The bastard!" Priscus exclaimed. "That turd has slaughtered all his horses, rather than allowing us to take them as loot. They would have been excellent haulage beasts! And then he has slipped away, to the east. Will I get together a force to chase him?"

"Do you think you can capture him, even if you do make up the lost time?" Gallienus asked. "Or is it more likely that he will be able to ambush you? Remember, he is on cataphracts, and in a cavalry battle your light cavalry will be at a disadvantage."

"I was outnumbered five to one by cataphracts at the Battle of the Euphrates, and I annihilated them!" Priscus asserted.

"Yes, because their mission was to freeze the infantry, not to fight you off," Gallienus reminded him. "They will not string themselves out like beads on a necklace for you this time, Gnaeus." Then he softened his tone. "I mean you no insult, and what you did there was brilliant; but your brilliance was in taking advantage of their distraction. You would not confront that same situation if they waited in ambush for you. And you would not be able to travel fast enough to catch them if you were to be careful to avoid ambush," Gallienus tried to mollify his famed cavalry commander. "Instead, let us rejoice that we have destroyed his army and made our men wealthier. We should have word from the General soon, and then we can act as a co-ordinated army."

The captives had been disarmed, fed and supplied with firewood. Orders were being written for them to be marched to Tigranocerta and then to Ephesus, where they would be divided by lot into free men to be shipped to Spain, and slaves to be sold.

“Gnaeus, I considered sending a cohort of cavalry to Arbela to demand their surrender. But I think it might be unwise to give them warning. I think I prefer to confront them with overwhelming force, and not give them time to send for help,” Gallienus said. “But I would appreciate your wisdom. Please advise me, my friend.”

Priscus sat and thought for a moment. “I think another day or two will not make much difference. We might have word from the General any time now, so let us make preparation, but not commit.” Then he had another thought. “Word from the General might be taking a roundabout route, not realising that we have neutralised the enemy. I think we should send another message north, along the road, and ask for instructions to come back the same way. In the meantime, let us prepare to march the captives north with one legion of infantry as escorts, and the rest of the infantry can march south with our full artillery and cavalry. We should have word back from the General before we reach Arbela.”

Gallienus had already reached this conclusion himself. He had asked only to re-assure his friend and nominal subordinate that even if his request to chase Sanatruces might not be followed, his advice was still treasured.

“Yes, Gnaeus; we will do that,” Gallienus agreed. “I will send a few light horse north at first light; they should make it to the General by dark, rest the night, and come back with fresh horses the next day. We will be less than half-way to Arbela by that time. Please select half-a dozen men for the duty, and I will write a Report for the General overnight.”

Priscus rose to leave.

“Oh, could you send Marcus in as you leave, please?” Gallienus asked. Priscus nodded, and left the tent.

He crossed to another nearby, where three of Gallienus' staff officers were quartered. “Marcus, you there?”

“Yes, sir,” a young man stepped outside.

“The General would speak to you,” Priscus said, gesturing to Gallienus' tent, and then left.

Marcus entered the command tent.

“Ah, Marcus!” Gallienus greeted him. “I think it is time you had your first independent command. I want you to lead one legion, escorting our captives to Tigranocerta.”

“Thank you sir,” Marcus replied. Not a glorious first command, but a box in his C.V. ticked, regardless.

“The key to this command will not be military genius, Marcus,” Gallienus smiled wryly. “Instead, it will need something much more important; it will be an exercise in logistics, in prudence, in management. You will be out-numbered six to one within your own command, and traversing potentially hostile country. You need to ensure that the captives never have a chance to rise against you, and that will include making sure they are fed well enough to not want to, and restrained well enough to not be able to. It will also include laying out your camp so that no opportunity for surprise presents itself.

“In short, Marcus; this is not an easy mission, so do not allow yourself any hint of over-confidence. You should be on a knife-edge every minute, and alert. So go and do your calculations for food, plan your marching dispositions, and get your orders written ready to leave tomorrow. You will be given the sixth legion, and if you are smart you will listen to your primus pilus; Caius is as good an advisor as you will ever find for an operation like this. Listen and learn!” Gallienus stood and offered his right arm, smiling.

“Thank you sir,” Marcus took the arm and smiled back. “I will not disappoint you, sir,” he released the arm and left the tent. He went straight to the tent of Caius Platinus, the primus pilus of the Sixth, and started making plans.

The three riders Gallienus had sent to report to Silo three days ago arrived in camp two hours after sunrise the next morning.

“General Silo congratulates you on your victory over the southern force, sir,” their leader reported to Gallienus. “He asks you to maintain your position blocking the enemy, unless you have good reason to adopt some other course. He also requests regular reports.”

Gallienus chuckled as he heard this. “How typical of Quintus Poppaadius! ‘Here are your orders; follow them unless you can think of something better!’ It is so good to have a General who respects his subordinates!” Gallienus leant back in his chair. “Did you see the riders I sent out this morning? Did you pass them on the road?” He asked the messengers.

“Yes, sir. They told us of your great victory over the main body, but the General gave us no orders to cover that situation.”

“And do you know what the General intends to do?”

“No, sir.”

Gallienus bent forward in his chair and stood. “It was probably wise to not tell you, in case you were captured. In that case, I will continue with my current intention. You men can go back to your units now, until I have need to send another message to the General,” Gallienus dismissed them, but called them back immediately. “Just a minute, men; how did you hope to get back to me? As far as you knew, we were surrounded by Parthians.”

“We were going to cut a branch out of a tree upstream of their wharf, sir, hide in it and drift downstream to the camp,” their leader answered. “Unless we met the Admiral in one of his triremes first,” he added with a grin.

Gallienus smiled back. “I like a bit of imagination. Good work, men!”

Two days later Gallienus was setting up camp forty miles further south. He was relying on extensive and intensive cavalry scouting for intelligence, and found no sign of enemy forces around him, so he was marching virtually dawn to dusk and forgoing fortification of his camp in his haste. Orders from Silo arrived that evening via the return of his second set of riders.

“The General congratulates you on your stunning victory over the Parthians, sir,” the lead rider reported, “and approves of your decision to march in force on Arbela. He will send his own cavalry down the west bank of the

Tigris, to cross south of Arbela. He expects this force will arrive in Arbela three days from now."

Gallienus interrupted, surprised at this news. "How much cavalry does the General have?" he asked. "I thought most of it was here, under Gnaeus Priscus."

"The general has just under one thousand horse, sir, which he believes will be sufficient to convince the Parthians that a much larger force is approaching. He invites you to detach as many of your own as you think appropriate, and send them across the Tigris to link with his own," the rider answered. "He is also marching one legion down the road behind you, at a forced march pace. You may wait for it, or press on, as you see fit," the rider continued. "That is the end of the Report, sir."

Gallienus looked across the Priscus, then back to the courier..

"Is the general travelling with the cavalry or the infantry, soldier?"

"The general is leading the cavalry, sir. Titus Herennius is in charge of the infantry."

"Then you stay with me, Gnaeus; the cavalry do not need you if Quintus Poppaadius is with them, but I do," Gallienus said to Priscus. "How many horse do you think we can spare?"

Priscus blew out through his lips as he thought.

"I don't think raw numbers are important here, Piso. I expect that any force coming down the road will be enough to scare shit out of the Parthians, because it will mean that Sanatruces' main force has been destroyed. They will think we are a horde to have done that. So I suggest we keep back only enough to maintain good intelligence ahead of us, and the bulk go to the General. I think we could manage with only one thousand, and send four thousand to join his forces," Priscus concluded.

"Yes, you are right. The only use we have for them is scouting, as you say," Gallienus agreed. "Please detach four thousand for the General."

Three days later again Gallienus was setting up his first real camp, with proper fortifications, ten miles north of Arbela. A rider raced up to his tent and rushed in.

"Excuse me, sir; but there is an envoy on the road from Arbela," he said in a hurry.

"Thank you, soldier; I will be there soon," Gallienus answered, and called for his dress armour. At times like these, looking relaxed and comfortable but still businesslike signalled power and confidence, and he wanted nobody to think otherwise. Fifteen minutes later he was walking his horse up to a very impressively-dressed Parthian officer. 'It looks like two can play the dress-up game,' Gallienus thought to himself as he smiled a greeting.

"Good day to you, Parthian. I am Piso Gallienus," he introduced himself.

"I am Topaxes, commander of the garrison here," the Parthian replied. "And I wish you well."

“Well, lord Topaxes; now that we are such good friends, let us discuss our plans for the next couple of days,” Gallienus suggested. “Do you have any news from the south yet?”

“We are aware of a small Roman force; nothing that would disturb us,” Topaxes said lightly.

“Then you are a man of considerable calm, lord Topaxes. In the Republic's Army, a force of five thousand horse usually means five legions, often more,” Gallienus replied. “And I have behind me the force that destroyed the sixty thousand who marched with Sanatruces.” Then he smiled. “And you will note that the former 'Mighty King' himself is no-where to be seen. Do I need to tell you what happened to him?”

“I am sure that all this will become clearer in time,” Topaxes dismissed the question. “I am here today to discuss peace, not war. We both know that any attack on Arbela would result in many deaths, both Parthian and Roman; not to mention the damage that would be done to the city and the loss of civilian life as well.”

“Such losses would be most regrettable,” Gallienus commented. “Do you see any way of avoiding them?”

“Yes, lord Piso, I think we can manage that if we co-operate,” Topaxes smiled.

“Then you are a man of great wisdom, lord Topaxes,” Gallienus continued to smile. “What form will this co-operation take?”

“We will withdraw from Arbela, leaving it undamaged, if you would undertake to do us no harm as we leave,” Topaxes suggested.

“I think that would be entirely reasonable,” Gallienus agreed. “However, the way in which it is done must be clarified. “First, you will open the city,” Gallienus went on. “We will confirm that there has been no damage, no unnecessary killing, no looting; and when this is confirmed, we will allow you to leave with all of your own property and supplies.”

“That is good in principle, lord Piso,” Topaxes replied. “But we must be clear about what is 'unnecessary' killing; some of the citizens were hostile, and discipline and public order had to be maintained. And what is no more than fair wages for our soldiers as they kept the peace should not be considered 'looting'.

“Topaxes; let me be sincere with you,” Gallienus dropped his smile. “Any citizen killed by a Parthian is an unnecessary death, because it was not necessary for any Parthians to be in the city. And any money taken by you to 'maintain the peace', as you so politely phrased it, is unnecessary, because the city had the forces to do that without your intervention.”

“Then how are we to avoid further damage, lord Piso?” Topaxes challenged Gallienus. “Are we to destroy even more, for the sake of that which is already lost?”

“Not at all, lord Topaxes,” Gallienus replied. “For each life taken, we will take one of your men as a slave, and his sale price shall be compensation to the kin of the murdered. And the value of any looted goods shall be made good by you and your men in hard cash; any shortfall shall be made up by seizing more

slaves, one for each thousand sesterces due,” Gallienus gave a smile that was more a grimace. “Let us hope you have not been too irresponsible, lord Topaxes! But if worse comes to worst, you can be sure of at least one thing; you and your men will live, even if as slaves.”

Topaxes knew there was no point in arguing. How could his three thousand men hold out against what must be at least ten times that number of Romans? His one consolation is that there had been few deaths during the occupation, and the loot had not yet been removed to Ctesiphon, so it could be returned. Only what had been destroyed could not be restored. He was confident that he would need to surrender less than a thousand of his men as slaves. “Then the city will open its gates tomorrow, two hours after sunrise,” Topaxes pledged. “Please ensure that your forces in the south are aware of this agreement.”

“If you would be kind enough, lord Topaxes, let us go to them together, right now, to ensure no misunderstanding,” Gallienus asked.

“Yes, let us,” Topaxes agreed.

Chapter 3 – 680 AUC (74 B.C.)

There was outrage when Claudius presented Bocar with the first monthly account for services rendered by the Provincial Army for his personal project, the building of the proposed dam.

“What is this all about?” he demanded in a shout.

Claudius was unperturbed, responding as if he had been asked in the street for directions. “The sheets set out quite clearly all the components of this account,” he replied evenly. “First there is the heading 'Survey', and then the daily rate for a chief surveyor, and the number of days. This multiplies out to this figure here,” Claudius pointed to the third column on the page. “Then there is the daily rate for assistants, the number of assistants, and the number of days for each assistant; these numbers multiply out to the number there,” he tapped the page again. “These add together to give the total labour cost here,” pointing to the foot of the column.

“Then there are consumables, shown on this page, at cost plus 10%. The same system of rate, times quantity, plus 10% loading is adopted for each class of consumable, and totalled here. And finally there are hire rates for equipment, horses, drays, etc. These are also charged at daily rates and the number of days for each.” Claudius raised an eyebrow. “What is there that you do not understand?”

Bocar barely restrained himself from swiping the small clerk with the back of his hand. But he knew only too well that the men nominally his honour guard held him in contempt as a barbarian, and were just itching for an excuse to plunge their gladii into him; so he held himself. “What I do not understand is why I need to pay anything at all out of my private funds for this work. I am Ethnarch, and I ordered the men already employees of the Province to use materials and equipment belonging to the Province to carry out preliminary survey work within the province. Why is that not a public expense?” he answered through clenched teeth.

“Excellent, Bocar!” Claudius congratulated him. “You are starting to learn the difference between public and private projects! Those lessons are starting to give you an idea about how the Republic works! But let me ask you; what is the purpose behind these orders?” Claudius asked.

“I am thinking of building a dam, to irrigate crops and pasture land,” Bocar replied cautiously, aware that his temper could yet undo him.

“And how would this irrigation project be managed?” Claudius asked. “Do you intend to set up an independent authority to manage it, or will you leave it in the hands of the Provincial Administration?”

Bocar was well aware by now that ‘Provincial Administration’ meant Claudius. “I was thinking of an independent authority,” He answered.

“Excellent!” Claudius exulted. “You really are coming to grips with proper administrative systems! I am so pleased.” Hearing that Claudius was pleased was not high on Bocar’s list of things to enjoy. “So who will be appointed to this independent authority?” Claudius continued.

"I have not yet decided," Bocar responded, hoping that this would stop any further probing.

"Well, you should decide soon," Claudius told him. "Because until the Authority is constituted, there is no authorisation to incur these costs, so you will continue to be personally liable."

"What?" Bocar cried out. "Even if it is for Provincial benefit?"

"If it is for Provincial benefit, then it must be done through Provincial procedures; either the general Provincial Administration, or an Authority constituted through proper Provincial procedures. That is what this Rufan System is all about, Bocar."

"In other words, I can't even fart without appointing a Fart-Smelling Authority?" Bocar sneered.

"You can if you want; but if you don't appoint a Fart-Smelling Authority, then you will have to leave that fart unsmelled; or if you insist, pay out of your own purse for someone to smell the fart." Claudius answered.

"Ah!" Bocar pushed away that answer with a sweep of a hand. He turned and walked away a few paces. "The sooner we finish this course on how to twist the law, the better! I want to know how to make these silly rules work *for* me, instead of *against* me."

"Bocar, you have finally seen the System in all its glory!" Claudius exclaimed. "There is hope for you yet!"

Caius Julius Caesar was shown into the study of his uncle Sextus. The older man did not look happy.

"Why are you here?" Sextus asked abruptly.

"Uncle, I would seek a favour from you," Caius answered.

"Why should I show you any favours?" Sextus asked. "You should be tried for Gross Impiety and exiled, if not beheaded!"

"And why would that be, Uncle?" Caesar knew the answer, but would not allow himself to be rebuked, even by one from whom he was asking a boon.

"Because you were Flamen Dialis, bound by sacred duty to marry a Patrician, and instead you married that Plebeian girl!" Sextus said harshly. "I am glad you are not my son; I would refuse to be answerable for you. I would disown you! I know your father would never have permitted it."

"You do not know the law, Uncle," Caius said firmly. "The Flamen Dialis is not bound by sacred duty to *marry* a Patrician, but to *be married* to a Patrician; otherwise he is ineligible. That is why I had to marry Cinnilla before I was made Flamen Dialis. And as soon as Cinnilla died, I was no longer married to a Patrician; therefore I was no longer Flamen Dialis. End of obligation," Caesar concluded.

"There have been many other widowers before you in that office," Sextus shot back. "Yet none of them ceased to be Flamen Dialis; they re-married a Patrician, and continued in office."

"In which case, they were wrong," Caius said simply. "At the very least, they should have been re-consecrated after their re-marriage."

“You little smart-arse!” Sextus responded in anger. “Six hundred years of unbroken tradition, and you alone know better than everyone who has gone before you! You alone, you pimply-faced child!”

“You would make an excellent advocate in the courts, Uncle,” Caius replied evenly. “The first tactic when you know you are wrong in law is to deflect the argument into personal insults.”

Sextus felt the rage rise even higher in him. “Get out! And don't come back without an apology!”

“Well? How did it go?” Aurelia asked as Caius casually walked into the atrium and dropped his cloak over a chair.

“Uncle Sextus threw me out,” Caesar replied casually, as if reporting nothing more important than that the weather had changed.

“I don't believe it! Why would he do that?” Aurelia asked, perturbed.

“He told me I should be tried for Impiety. I told him that he didn't know what he was talking about,” Caesar shrugged. “So he threw me out.”

“Oh, in the names of all the gods!” Aurelia said in exasperation. “For a man of your intelligence, sometimes you can be a complete fool!”

“Don't call me a fool, mother,” Caesar said evenly. “I will not be insulted; not by Uncle Sextus, and certainly not by a woman, not even my own mother. I am paterfamilias in my own house, and you would do well to remember that.”

“Very well, Caius. So please, tell me how clever you are, to go to a man's house seeking a favour that could make or break your whole career, and before you even raise the subject you tell him that he is a fool!” Aurelia harangued. “Tell me how wisely and delicately you handled that encounter!”

Caesar stared at her flatly, menacingly. “I am Caius Julius Caesar, and I am destined for great things. Sabotage by my uncle Caius Marius cannot prevent that, nor the petty spite of uncle Sextus, nor anything else under the whole heavens. I am Caius Julius Caesar, and I will become the greatest Roman ever. I will find a way, regardless of these petty obstacles.”

Caius Julius Caesar was businesslike when he arrived home after his audience with Titus Lafrenius, the ex-Consul. His wife was in the walled garden when he returned home. She rose to greet him, smiling. “Lucia, I will be going to Syria soon. I have an appointment under Quintus Poppaadius Silo,” he announced flatly.

“Oh? How soon?” she asked. “We have only been married three months; will I be going with you?”

“No. You will stay here with Julia; and with your own child, if you have conceived in the meantime.”

Lucia felt her heart lift, but showed nothing on her face. “As you say, Caius. What should I do to help your preparations?”

“Nothing. I will make my own,” he answered. “I have to go and get fitted for my armour and other equipment now. I expect a letter from Titus Lafrenius this afternoon. See to it that it is kept safe,” Caesar turned and left her.

As she watched him go, she cursed her father yet again for his greed and his lust for social-climbing. Why had he forced her to marry this pretty-faced monster? Father already had gold enough and status enough! Perhaps the gods would be more merciful to her than her own family; perhaps Caius would die soon. Aurelia came to stand beside her, and took her hand.

"I remember when his father would visit, between his various duties in the east," Aurelia confided. "I remember that I was always so happy to see him go again."

Lucia looked up sharply. That was not the sort of thing a good Roman wife should say.

"So feel no shame yourself, Lucia. I know even more than you how thoroughly self-centred Caius can be when he is making his plans," Aurelia continued. "He is not cruel in the way of some men, who take delight in causing pain or humiliation. No, he is much crueller than that! He takes little delight in the pain of others, because he cares so little for others, what they feel, what they think, what they say. He cares only for himself. In his mind, you are not even worth the time it would take to beat you; and that is the greatest cruelty of all. He considers you not even worthy of his contempt."

Aurelia pulled her daughter-in-law to her, and embraced her. Lucia knew that she had at least one person who would give her strength through this marriage, even if it could not be shown to any third party. And she was thankful.

Caius Julius Caesar presented himself to Quintus Poppaedi Silo in immaculate order, snapped off a crisp salute, and offered the general a letter. "This is from the consular, sir, but it is of a personal nature."

"Thank you Caius Julius," the Old Warrior said, and glanced down at the seal. He then snapped it open and started reading.

*To Quintus Poppaedi, my old Commander and friend,
From Titus Lafrenius, who once had the authority to order you around,*

Greetings!

Not that I would presume to order you to do anything except follow your own judgement, of course! I have learnt the Silo Touch!

If all goes as it should, this letter will have been delivered to you by Caius Julius Caesar. He is the nephew of old Caius Marius, and also of Sextus Julius Caesar, twice Consul and ex-Censor.

We Italians are indebted to both of these men; the Old Warhorse in the most obvious ways, but also to Sextus Julius who in his first term as Consul ensured that the Enfranchisement was carried out promptly and legally, and as Censor ensured that each Italian Tribe was enrolled in its own right, rather than all of us being grouped as a single tribe "Italia". I feel the heaviest obligation to do all that I can, within the law, to repay this debt of gratitude.

Therefore I ask a personal favour of you; that you would accept young Caius Julius onto your personal staff and provide him with suitable experience.

He has served as the Flamen Dialis, which prohibited him from touching metal, riding a horse, etc. This has caused him to lose several years in which other young men would be training and gaining experience. However, since he left that priestly office he has picked up the martial arts at a prodigious rate. He is already a particularly good horseman. I expect that he will be fully up with his peers within a few short months of active service, and has the potential to outshine most of them within a year.

“Welcome to Syria, Caius Julius!” Silo said, smiling to the young man and offering his right arm. “And welcome to my personal staff.”

Drusus finished reading a private letter from Silo, in which the Old Warrior foreshadowed that he was starting to feel that he had served long enough on the Parthian front. Drusus had thought it prudent to discuss the matter of Silo's replacement with the two Consuls, both of them his allies for almost twenty years, before the news could spread any wider.

“I think I would like to take that command!” said Quintus Sertorius to Drusus and his fellow-consul Piso Gallienus.

Drusus raised his eyebrows to hear this. “But Quintus, it has been twenty years since you were in the army!”

“I don't see this as primarily a military posting; Silo has done enough to keep the Parthians quiet for a generation,” Sertorius explained. “I see this as a chance to start pulling all of Anatolia together into a new Tribe, just as I did with the Spains.

“Once that has been stitched up, the Far East will be more secure than any mere military force could manage. No future Mithridates would be able to win them over with honeyed promises. The need for a Military Man is past; and Old Warrior knows that himself, or he would not be willing to turn his back on it.”

“Perhaps you are right there, Quintus,” Drusus conceded. “But do you think the Senate will see it that way?”

Gallienus broke into the conversation at this point. “You must be joking, Marcus Livius!” he snorted. “Quintus here is the youngest ever winner of the Grass Crown, and served under Caius Marius with distinction! All he will have to do is walk into the Senate wearing his corona, and not one man will dare to speak against him!”

Drusus smiled an apology. “Yes, you are right! It just seems so long ago, and he has done so much as a Governor, that it can easily be forgotten. So do we put Quintus forward? He is entitled to pick his own Imperium, in any case, but it would be good to have the appointment a long-term one, and we need a Senate vote for that.”

“Of course we do,” Gallienus said emphatically. “It is what he does best, and no-one else nearly as well.”

It came as no surprise that the Senate agreed to Sertorius being appointed to the Parthian Frontier Command for a period of five years, with the added Imperium to act as overall Governor for all lands east of the Aegean other than those under regular Governors. His plan to create a unified "Anatolia Province" was warmly endorsed as the best way to bring security to the natural boundary of Republic's interests.

Sertorius presented his list of proposed sub-governors for ratification, and all were approved. He then set off for the East, to officially relieve Silo.

"Quintus Poppaadius! It is so good to see you again!" Sertorius greeted the Old Warrior warmly, extending his right arm.

"And it is good to hand over my work to a man who will not destroy it!" Silo responded, grasping the offered arm. "You are exactly what this part of the world needs, Quintus, and I am pleased that the Senate had the sense to see it!"

"I have a favour to ask of you, Quintus Poppaadius; I know you deserve a Triumph when you return to Rome, but I would ask if your senior staff and a couple of your legions could stay with me to ensure security during the change-over."

"That is not a problem," Silo agreed to the request with a wave of the hand. "I have already had two Triumphs, which is more than any other Italian; let us not push the boundaries too much!"

"You would be surprised, Quintus Poppaadius," Sertorius assured him. "Rome is no longer the city you left ten years ago. Many now boast of being Italian, and the Ancient Families are starting to be considered part of the Bad Old Days; certainly you are worshipped by all in Rome and will walk into the Consulship, Triumph or not."

"You humour an old man, Quintus," Silo smiled. "But I do not want to be Consul again. I served only because Marcus Livius needed me to, after the coup attempt by Pompeius Strabo; but that was the most frustrating year of my life! I prefer to know all my enemies are on the battlefield in front of me, and not plotting in dark corners behind me." He waved a hand to dismiss that thought. "So I will ask my staff and officers to stay with you. In particular, I commend Caius Julius Caesar to your special care. He is the nephew of old Caius Marius, and also of Sextus Julius Caesar, two men to whom we Italians owe a great deal. So if you could take him under your wing and mentor him, all Italy will be most grateful. Apart from that, in the time he has been here he has shown great promise. He will not disappoint you."

"As for the rest, many of my men have served more than fifteen years out here, and deserve to retire to their twenty iugera of farmland," Silo continued. "So I will leave with you any soldier who has not served his time yet, and as many of the others who choose to stay; but the others should be given their rights."

"Thank you, Quintus Poppaadius," Sertorius acknowledged. "But when you offer them the choice, let them know that any who have served their fifteen years will be given thirty iugera right now, here in Armenia, if they sign up for

another five years. They can marry, and have their wives and slaves operate it; plus I will give them an additional two iugera for every extra year they have already served past their minimum fifteen years, and two more each year they serve with me.”

Silo looked at him strangely. “That means that a fifteen-year veteran who signs on for five more years will finish with forty iugera! Where are you going to get the land to give to them, Quintus?”

“I have approval from the Senate to settle veterans out here, to Romanise the province. The Senate will pay for the land I need to do it, and recover the cost by selling the Ager Publicus that the veterans would otherwise be entitled to claim. Ager Publicus in Italy is worth much more than Armenian farmland, so the Senate will make a profit,” Sertorius answered. “And the additional two iugera per year will come out of my pocket if it has to, but I expect the Senate to cover that cost, too. It is the same pro-rata as enlisting a new man, so why not?”

“I hope so; Quintus! Otherwise you will need a deep purse,” Silo laughed.

Sertorius chuckled. “I have plans for developing this province; I will buy land cheaply in the next area I intend to improve, and then sell it at a profit when the improvements are made, to buy more land cheaply in the next target area. If worse comes to worst, that should cover my costs.”

Silo shrugged. “I was never a businessman, just a soldier,” he responded. “If only I had thought ahead a bit more! Now, let me show you around Tigranocerta and introduce you to my staff.”

Silo continued to be surprised by Sertorius' approach to this posting. The Old Warrior had arrived in this part of the world to wage war and conquer land, and his attitude had never evolved away from that; to him, Armenia, Pontus and the slice of Media he had annexed were Occupied Territories, and nothing more. To be governed justly and kept in peace, of course, but conquered lands just the same.

Sertorius came with the view that it was a province in embryo, and needed to be administered, nurtured and developed. Sertorius was determined that his vision of the new province of Anatolia should be a nett contributor to the Treasury by way of trade and taxes, rather than a nett expense because of the military forces needed to garrison it. The staffers he had brought with him were not Military Men, but graduates from the Administrators Colleges set up by Rufus.

“Quintus, I am now more certain than ever that I will not return to politics,” Silo confessed to Sertorius as he packed up, ready to return to Rome the next day. “I have seen from your preparations that I am a relic of a former time.”

“How so, Quintus Poppaedi?” Sertorius asked. “You are in fact emblematic of the new Republic that includes all of Italy!”

“Ah, perhaps I was ten years ago, my friend,” Silo sighed heavily. “But I am also the Old Warrior, from days gone by. The future belongs to the quill, not the sword.”

Sertorius clapped a hand down on Silo's shoulder. “The Quills will always need the Swords to protect them; and the Quills will raise the finances to make the

Swords that much stronger. Both will be needed for as long as civilisation exists.”

“Well, you will have the best of both here, Quintus,” Silo brightened. “Many of my soldiers have decided to stay with you. About half, mainly the older ones or those with permanent injuries, have decided to go back home, but you will be left with a very competent force. So I will re-allocate the stayers into their own centuries and legions, and take the retirees back to Italy.”

“Thank you, Quintus Poppaedius,” Sertorius replied. “Now, do you have any special hints? Any secrets to be kept in mind?”

“Well, it is anything but a secret, Quintus, that I hate Sanatruces to the core of his bones,” Silo told him with venom. “He attacked me without warning, despite a treaty, and would have taken Tigranocerta except for quick thinking by Quintus Albus. And when he was defeated, he agreed to surrender; but then he slaughtered all his horses to deprive us of their value as loot, and sneaked away through the forests.

“But more to the point; he throws away the lives of his men as if they are handfuls of chaff! I an Italian, and we Italians have had too many generals of the Roman Ancient Families do that to our fathers before us, and we hate the arrogance implicit in that attitude! It is as great an impiety as killing your own brother, to throw away the lives of the men who have placed their trust in you!” Silo gathered himself. He realised in a flash of insight why he felt so passionate on this point; his mind went back to a night in the middle of the Aegean, with Caius Marius on deck.... Impiety, killing a man who had trusted in you, and placing your own life in the hands of the gods for their judgement... He brought himself back to the present.

“Six legions will not give you much chance to spank that bastard, not even if you use our trick of enlisting locals to beef them up to an effective eight legions,” Silo conceded. “But if he comes at you, expect him to be wasteful of his men's lives, and punish him for that!”

Three days later Silo presented Sertorius with four veteran legions. The other veterans, looking towards their retirement, were also formed into four legions. Four of the six legions that had come over with Sertorius were handed over in exchange; the establishment for this command was only six legions, so the novices should be re-deployed elsewhere. The others were marched to Ephesus, to wait for ships bound for Rome.

Sanatruces was very interested in the handover of Roman power in Tigranocerta. He had been smarting under the humiliations inflicted upon him by Silo and Gallienus, not to mention the loss of territory and the income foregone with it. His informers told him that the Old Warrior was heading back to Italy, with eight legions. These would doubtless be the remaining eight of those veteran legions that had subjugated Armenia. Which leaves the new man in control, with only the six legions he brought with him. So the new commander would have no local knowledge, and his legions would be novices!

This looked like a good time to restore the border to the Euphrates, as had been agreed with Rome some twenty years earlier. Armenia would be taken, and if Rome accepted that, then he might be content; but if Rome did not concede, or even if Rome did concede but lacked strength to stop him, he might even take Pontus as well, and put a puppet on that throne. This would restore the situation as it had always been, before those Romans started to stick their noses into this part of the world. The preparations were made; as soon as it is confirmed that Silo and his legions are out of Asia, the attack will be launched.

Silo's intelligence network, retained by Sertorius, was also proving its worth. Reports of Parthian army movements in Mesopotamia were coming in. "Caius Julius," Sertorius called to the young adjutant he had inherited from Silo. "You are the nephew of the Great Marius; how would you act, given this information?" Caesar walked over to Sertorius' table, quickly scanned the reports, and dropped then back onto the table. Once again, Sertorius was bewildered at how quickly young Caesar could read, separating out the individual words in the unbroken chain of letters, and how well he absorbed the information.

"Eighty thousand men, in total," Caesar commented, "And that is only those that our spies know about. There could be twice that number." He dropped a finger on Sertorius' map, open on the table. "And to be in the region of Ecbatana suggests that they will be sent against us, rather than Judaea." Caesar looked up. "I expect he will try to take back the territory that Silo captured from him. He might even try to push all the way into Armenia, and set up a puppet. Silo didn't work too hard on hearts and minds there, so Parthia might even be welcomed.

"It is now late summer; the spring torrents have dropped to gentle flow, the land is dry and firm, and granaries are full. Enough to make movement and supply of large armies a simple matter, provided they were not too vigorously opposed. But movement will become much more difficult as winter closes in. If he going to move, then he will need to move soon."

"So far I agree with you, Caius Julius," Sertorius nodded approvingly. "But my question was 'How would you act?'. I am still waiting."

Caesar stared at the map for a moment longer. "The first instinct is to fortify the southern passes, and repel him there. That ground is good defensive terrain. "But I would resist that idea myself. We would need to deploy our men a long way forward of our base, with these restive Armenians at their rear, between our base here and the front.

"I would prefer to fall back as if in disarray, leaving behind smaller units hiding in the hills; then hold him on a line about here," Caesar indicated an easily-defended pass just a day's march south of Tigranocerta. "Then our hidden men will seize the passes behind him, locking his army into these valleys. By then the winter will be approaching, he will not be able to break out, and he will have eaten the farmlands bare. The Armenians will hate him even more than they resent us! In summary, General; why try to eliminate his army, when we can let winter do it for us? And in the meantime, let these Armenians learn to hate the Parthians instead of us."

Sertorius stared at the map. "Not a bad idea, Caius Julius. I had expected you to simply fortify the southern passes. I was going to correct you by suggesting a series of ambushes as we retreat; this would bleed them progressively, and make them advance more cautiously. But what you say about leaving smaller units behind makes good sense." Sertorius paused a moment longer, then snatched up the map with an air of decision. "Let's go study the ground!"

He called to the commander of his cavalry bodyguard, "Get the men together; we are going on an inspection of the south. And bring with us all the officers, centurions and cavalry in the First Legion; everyone is to be mounted, for speed." Then he crossed to his desk, grabbing a sheet of paper and a quill. He carefully composed a short note and called for an attendant. "Take this message to General Silo immediately; ride day and night if you need to, at a gallop. You should catch him well before he reaches Ephesus, but make all haste anyway. Then bring back his reply." Sertorius carefully folded the paper, and dropped a dab of candle wax on the overlap before pressing his signet ring onto it.

Sertorius wasted no time. As he toured Armenia and the fringe of Media that Silo had seized, he seemed to be engrossed in setting up Roman administration in place of the native Armenian administration that Silo had allowed to continue under the new regime. He promised to improve the roads, and asked the headmen of each settlement what else Rome could do to improve their circumstances. This tour had all the trappings of an uneasy ruler trying to curry favour with a tenuously-held domain. The days passed slowly.

But appearances were deceptive; he was also taking careful note of the terrain, and gaining an understanding of how these lands could best be defended. Three of the most easily-defended points were chosen, which could be used to block the retreat or reinforcement of the expected Parthian advance, and most nights were spent discussing exactly how these points would be garrisoned, fortified and defended.

Ten days into this tour Sertorius received an urgent message from the intelligence network. On the same day the reply from Silo was in his hands. He called for his officers to meet in his tent for a conference in one hour's time. While he waited for them to arrive, he wrote carefully and at length on a few sheets of paper. Then he carefully folded two of them together and sealed them with his ring. He handed the package to an attendant. "To Silo, in Ephesus; try the Governor's praetorium first. Now go, and take thirty cavalry with you! I want his reply urgently, and you had better be back in front of me within ten days at the absolute most!" Then to a second attendant, he gave the other sheet of paper, folded and sealed. "Take this to Tigranocerta with all haste!"

The officers were starting to arrive. Sertorius saw that the main men were present, and called for attention. "Gentlemen, I have just received word that a Parthian army estimated at over one hundred thousand men is marching up the Tigris. Some five thousand light cavalry are included, but no cataphracts." He looked around the assembly. "So far, it seems to be going predictably; they are

expecting us to defend the passes, judging by the paucity of their cavalry numbers. They are predominantly infantry and archers, so they won't be very mobile. We will now put our plans into action.

"I have sent a fast rider back to Tigranocerta, ordering the First, Second and Third legions to march immediately. You will now go north to join your legion and centuries as soon as possible. While the Second and Third legions take up formation as if for a set-piece battle, your men from the First shall take up position in the hills and forests, out of sight. As the enemy approaches, we will fall back as if in dread, drawing the enemy into pursuit. As soon as the enemy has passed you, you men of the First will occupy the choke points as already planned, and fortify them as well and as rapidly as possible. The Second and Third will fall back as if in confusion, to draw the enemy further north, and then commence a series of ambush actions as they retreat.

"We will eventually hold the last set of choke points south of Tigranocerta. We will not try to repulse them or force them back south; our intention is to hold them there as long as possible and let winter do our killing for us."

Sertorius looked around the room again, taking in all the officers and centurions of the First. "Your mission is to hold the passes against their retreat, once the enemy despairs of breaking us in the north. You must also hold these passes against any relief forces that might be sent from the south as well, so you must be able to defend from both directions. This will be a battle of annihilation; the only Parthians that survive this thrust will be those whom we take as slaves. Parthia must be taught to never again attempt an attack on the Republic!

"Now, go your way, and make certain that you do not cheer or celebrate in any way. Our success depends on the enemy thinking we are terrified, ready to be broken at the first contact. Look scared!"

The meeting broke up. As the last of the First legion men filed out, Sertorius fixed Caesar with a stare. "The Parthians are using their cavalry as scouts, feeding information back to the main army. Your job is to gouge out their eyes and block their ears, Caius Julius. What forces do you need to do that?"

Caesar pondered the question for a moment. "I would like a hundred light cavalry assigned to me, please. And I want the men to be skilled in use of the cross-bow."

Sertorius stared in confusion. "Cavalry with cross-bows? What strange idea do you have in mind?"

"I intend to ambush their scouts, but require horse for mobility," Caesar explained. "This is a new tactic, but I think it will work well. If I just send in infantry, they will not have the speed to intercept the scouts; but if I adopt normal cavalry tactics, we risk losing too many men in close combat. So I intend the men to ride hard to get in front of the enemy, then lie in wait to ambush; a good volley of cross-bow bolts should be able to take out a typical scouting party before they even realise they are in trouble. No chance of escape, no risk of losses to our men."

Sertorius continued staring. “The Old Warrior was right; you could really amount to something one day! Go, select the men you want, and get to work!”

The two Roman legions looked in excellent condition, drawn up in formation in the narrow gap. The Parthian force, approaching in a long file winding up the valley road, could catch a glimpse of them as they crested the spur two miles downstream. Sertorius expected them to take notice, and spread into a battle formation on the river flats between the legions and the spur. He was not disappointed. The approaching enemy neatly broke from marching five abreast into individual companies, then formed into a broad front.

“I’ll guarantee the Parthian general thinks it is his birthday!” Sertorius commented to Caesar at his side. “We gave him room to deploy his forces; he will believe I am incompetent. Silo would never have been so generous!”

Sertorius looked over his shoulder, to the rear of his army. Yes, the back ranks were starting to fall back, and melt away. Some were starting to run. This was a very convincing display of an army on the brink of panic; the men were doing an excellent job! As he watched, the apparent panic was spreading to the front ranks; the entire infantry section of the army appeared to be putting to flight at no more than the sight of the enemy, who were deploying wider across the open ground in preparation for a charge.

Sertorius felt the time had come for him to move. Followed by his staff officers, he rode into the rapidly thinning ranks, calling for order, but to no avail. His men had been told to ignore the General on his horse and continue the play-acting; only if he dismounted were they to deviate from the pretence of a rout. The enemy ranks could wait no longer, seeing their prey running from them. They roared, and charged. One hundred paces short of where the legions’ front ranks had been standing, the river flat narrowed to only some sixty paces wide. At this point the Parthian front ranks ran headlong into a field of inclined stakes concealed in the thick grass. Their legs were torn by the sharp points, and many who fell forward were impaled. The press of the ranks following caused even those who saw the danger to be ripped in turn.

The charge slowed to a hesitant walk as the remaining Parthians tried to pick their way through, and a volley of arrows swept through their ranks. The retreat of the legions revealed what was not so obvious before; there was a solid line of ballistae waiting to shower the charging Parthians with arrows. But these were ballistae with a difference; instead of the single high-penetration projectiles normally used, Sertorius had developed a modified machine that he called his “porcupines”; they could fire a packet of twenty-five lighter arrows that spread out as they flew, covering a spread five to eight paces wide at a range of two hundred paces, ideal for use against light infantry. At a range of one hundred paces the cone of death was only two or three paces wide, arrows within that cone being spaced about two feet apart. Just the right spacing to stop an infantry charge! Parthians fell like wheat before the sickle.

The charge collapsed. The second row of Parthians, already forming up for their attack, had seen the fate of the first wave. They were calling up their

archers to clean out the ballista crews. Unfortunately, the archers were well back in the column, and the road behind them was choked. It would take hours to get them to the front. Meanwhile the Roman ballistae waited. Some of the crew ventured out to loot the fallen Parthians, and to slit the throats of those still living. This drew a roar of rage from the Parthian infantry watching; the looters gestured their defiance, drawing more roars.

“Come, do something about it!” one Roman officer taunted in Greek, knowing that many Parthians understood the language. This stand-off lasted more than an hour before the ballista crews limbered their machines to their horses and left at a trot. It was an hour before sunset, so the Parthians made camp rather than attempt to follow.

“So far, so good,” Sertorius said with satisfaction.

“I would estimate only a thousand casualties, sir; probably less,” Caesar offered. “Not significant when you consider the size of the whole army.”

“You are right, Caius Julius; but I was not looking to inflict a huge defeat; only to make them adjust their order of march,” Sertorius replied. “If you were the Parthian general, what lessons would you have taken from today?”

Caesar pondered for a moment, as was his custom. “I would have thought that Republican infantry and cavalry are fragile, but the artillery teams can hold their nerve.”

“Good so far,” Sertorius replied. “So what would you do in response?”

“I would see no need for infantry to be at the front of the march, because I would not expect the Roman infantry or cavalry to present any danger; instead, I would lead with archers, to cause the Roman formations to scatter, and then target the ballistae.”

“Excellent, Caius Julius!” Sertorius exclaimed. “So what do we do in response to this new order of march that we expect the Parthians to adopt?”

“We wait in ambush,” Caesar replied. “If their lead units are their archers, they will be vulnerable to ambush, and their infantry will arrive too late to prevent a slaughter.”

“Not a bad attempt,” Sertorius conceded. “But that would give the lie to our pretence of fragility. We might kill a few archers, but they will then revert to a more mixed order of march. What is the strategic benefit in that?”

Caesar paused another moment. “I see a benefit in taking down their archers; it is the closest thing that they have to artillery, the only way they can hurt us at a distance. And there is some benefit in keeping them confused, as well. It prevents them from being too confident in their plans.”

“I agree that we should target their archers, Caius Julius. You have that bit right” Sertorius paused. “But I want them to continue thinking that our infantry are weak. So I intend an ambush as you say; but I will use our artillery to do this from long range, not our infantry. I will set up the onagers to cover a narrow section in the road, and use fire-bombs with indirect fire so the enemy cannot respond accurately. Our ballistae will screen them against enemy who might try to charge them, with a small infantry force to stand by them; but the fire

in the choke point will make sure only the front of the column can reach us.” Sertorius smiled. “If we can take out their archers, as you so rightly say, Caius Julius, that will leave them without the most important weapon needed to break through our blockade. What I need right now is for you to make sure none of their scouts manage to get back to warn them. Send out your ambush parties!”

Sanatruces was annoyed by these tactics, but not overly concerned. “The Romans are running before us instead of standing and fighting; they are only delaying us. But we will be in Tigranocerta in five days, at most ten, even with these pinpricks.” Sanatruces smiled. “Unless they take a stand! Then we will crush them once and for all, and all Armenia will be ours to take at leisure!” he smiled to himself. “We will avenge the embarrassment of last year, Darius,” Sanatruces asserted with confidence. “This time we have overwhelming force, adequate food, and I have protected my flanks against any strategic encirclement. They will not be able to cut me off at the Khabur, or anywhere else, as they did last time!”

“Oh Mighty King!” his general Darius ventured. “Our men must keep moving. We carry only a month's worth of supplies, enough to return to home if we need to. We should forage as we go, to ensure this supply is not diminished. One hundred and twenty thousand men require a great deal of food.”

“Then keep moving!” Sanatruces waved dismissively. “We are still moving fast enough to forage more than we need; and even if we are held up for a few days, that will only be because the Romans have committed to a major battle, and we will have plunder, their supplies and an open road before us thereafter!”

It felt like the first breath of winter. The northerly wind was howling at them, and smelt like snow might be coming. The onager crews were stamping to keep warm, as the battery officer kept his eyes on the distant hillside. Starting a hundred and fifty paces or so in front of them to the south, a century of cross-bowmen were waiting in ambush, spread along the side of the road, spaced a half-pace apart. Each knew precisely what was required of him when the signal was given.

The centurion was at the southern end of the row. He patiently waited for the last horse to walk past him, by some six paces. Then he leapt from his concealment, to run onto the roadway and drive the butt of his pilum into the surface and stand on it. Six men beside him followed without hesitation, presenting a wall of spearpoints preventing retreat by the cavalry back down the road. Even as he started moving, every second man to the north of the cut-off wall launched a cross-bow bolt, aimed at the chest of the horse nearest to directly in front of him. Most of the horses went down immediately, shot through the heart at a range of only a few paces. Others reared before falling against their fellows. Only those horses on the far side of the road, shielded by the bodies of their now-fallen comrades, had survived. But within the space of two breaths they were also exposed, and the remaining cross-bows cut them down. Then all the Romans dropped their cross-bows, rose from concealment, and rushed onto

the road with gladii in hand. Riders struggled to their feet as best they could. Many could not, with legs trapped under their dead mounts. The slaughter was complete. In less than a minute the silence had returned.

The onager commander caught his breath as the centurion appeared on the road, emerging from the forest at the far side of the clearing. He marched to the battery commander to report.

“Parthian scouting squadron completely eliminated. I have left ten men around the next corner to the south, to take out the shuttle rider,” he reported. The shuttle rider was the single horseman that rode back to the main army to report progress, and then galloped back to the scouting group. When he reached the scouting group, he would join it and another rider would go back to the main army to update the progress report. “Remainder of the men are concealing the enemy horses and dead, and removing traces of battle from the road.”

The first stage of the ambush had been successful. Now to wait for the main army! That should be in about an hour. There was another, smaller shout about half an hour after the ambush of the scout squadron. Soon afterwards the remaining ambush party appeared at the edge of the clearing, walking and talking together in good humour. The shuttle horseman had been taken out, the bodies concealed and the battle marks on the road made good.

All the machines in the ambush had been aligned and ranged precisely; no aiming was required. Only a rain of rapid fire would be required of them today. Thankfully, the new anti-scouting ambushes seemed to have successfully trapped and eliminated the scouts sent out by the Parthians; they would probably be marching blind.

The enemy column had been sighted by the fire-controller on the hill. A red flag, visible only to the artillery battery to the north, was being waved. “Onagers, tension and stand ready!” was the order. Immediately the crews wound stress into the sinews that powered the onagers. This was done while the throwing arm was fully forward, to ensure a full power stroke would be available when the arm was wound back. Fires were started to light the bomb-torches. In front of them the ballistae crews were also preparing their machines.

Tensioning and preparing an onager takes less than two minutes. Time dripped by slowly; the battery sergeant walked past briskly, to confirm that all machines were ready, with torches lit. He reported back to the officer.

“Onagers, select light bombs!” The smaller, lighter bombs would fly further. The idea was to cut off the tip of the column by lobbing over them and creating a wall of fire that would isolate them from the rest of their army.

The fire-controller on the hill started waving a yellow flag. The traps must now be sprung!

“Onagers, load and commence rapid fire!” Capstans were wound energetically, and within a minute every one of the fifty big machines had fired its first bomb and was re-wound for the second. The shouts and cries of the enemy a few hundred paces ahead of them could be heard through the trees. After about five salvoes the noise from the enemy was not so loud now; their officers were trying to restore some sort of order.

“Onagers, Select heavy bombs; fire at will!” There were actually five different weights of heavy bomb, scattered among the battery; the purpose was to achieve a good dispersal of fire within the killing zone containing the enemy troops that had been cut off from their main army by what would now be a wall of fire. This scattered landing pattern would tend to break up any useful formations that their officers might be putting together to strike at their tormentors. The 'Fire at will' order was a step less frantic than 'Rapid fire'; it allowed the crew to work at a pace that would not exhaust them too quickly.

The shouts from the enemy rose again. Until now, those who had been cut off from the front of the march had been given a fire-free pocket, and were preparing for an assault on the onager placements ahead of them. But now, with fire-bombs landing among them, they realised that they were standing in a killing zone with no safe place to arrange the men into proper formations to strike back at their attackers. Another half-dozen salvoes later their officers knew there was only one way to safety. They called their men further forward in a random charge, towards the source of these bombs. They ran along the road. After a short stretch of tree-arched track they ran into a clear length of road some eighty paces long. There they are, across the clearing! The enemy onagers!

Then their front-runners were pulled up short by a spray of porcupines from the ballistae. The survivors quickly retreated into the comparative safety of the trees.

“Where are the archers?” the cry went up in the Parthian ranks. Since the first battle, the marching order had consisted of equal numbers of archers and infantrymen in the front ranks. “Archers! Get forward to the tree-line! Take cover behind the trees, but pick off the onager crews!”

The Romans had expected archers; in fact, they had expected them to all be archers. The Republic infantrymen had formed into the 'Tortoise', a defensive formation around each onager crew; this used shields to protect the artillerymen from arrows. The ballista crews took shelter behind the faceplates of their machines.

“Onagers; range one hundred paces, heavy bombs!” The onagers were now wound back only part-stroke; the bombs no longer were aimed at the killing zone up the road, but at the survivors cowering within sight. With the shorter stroke required for each shot, the rate of fire increased remarkably. Soon the tree-line in front of them was ablaze. The north wind behind them fanned the flames, driving the Parthians back down the road.

“Onagers! Limber up and withdraw at the trot!” It took ten minutes to get the last of the fifty big machines on the road to the north. When the last of the onagers was on the road came the order “Ballistae! Limber up and withdraw at the trot!” The thirty smaller machines, with only one horse each, pulled out much more quickly.

“Infantry! Mount and withdraw!” Sertorius had been impressed by young Caesar's idea of horse-mobile infantry. He had adopted the same principle for other uses. This was one of them.

"I estimate over one and a half thousand men were cut off. I counted two hundred and seventy ranks had passed the cutoff line, and they were marching six abreast." That was the report from the fire controller when he arrived back at camp. "But a bonus for us was the wind. It drove the fire to the south as fast as a man could run; and no-one had the room to run on that road. I expect that there would have been more casualties in the following army than there were in the cutoff."

"The number of casualties is not so important," Sertorius commented. "What I want to know is how many of them were archers?"

"They seemed to be marching in companies of perhaps fifty infantry followed by fifty archers. This was the arrangement in the part of the column that I could see, at least. If they kept this pattern for further back, then I expect half the casualties would be archers; and who knows how many died as the fire swept over them?"

"So you are estimating over 750 archers in the cutoff, and perhaps as many more as the fire spread south?" Sertorius was too wise a commander to rage at imprecise estimates; that would only prompt the man to express an undue certainty on the basis of the same vague information.

"As far as I can tell, General. I will return and do a passive count from a hidden hill-top as they return to the north."

"Yes, please do that," Sertorius agreed. "Thank you, you may go now."

Sanatruces was outraged. "How could you march straight into a trap like that!" he demanded of Darius. "Do you know nothing about reconnaissance?"

"We had a company of twenty cavalry riding three miles ahead, Mighty King," Darius explained. "They were under orders to run back to the main army at the first sign of Romans; and until they saw Romans, one would ride back to the head of the march to report, and then ride forward again to re-join the advance troop; and as soon as he did so, another would ride back to the head of the march. Thus, our scouts were always in contact with the main body, and if no scout report was received for more than an hour, the march was to stop. Since the men were advancing at less than three miles an hour, they should never have marched past the length of road already scouted and reported to be clear. I do not know how warning could not have been given."

Sanatruces was exasperated. "I don't care about your perfect plans! The point is that they failed miserably. You marched into a trap!" He stomped back and forth across the carpet in his command tent. Darius stood in silence.

"The march leader obviously made a big mistake; he obviously marched for longer than an hour since the last report," Sanatruces summarised. "Why did he not obey orders?"

"He is dead now, Mighty King, so we will never know for sure," Darius replied. "But perhaps he misjudged the time. Perhaps he felt pressed to make a good pace on the road, to reach the next town in time for the evening camp. Perhaps it was not his fault at all; the scouts might not have been far enough in

advance of the main body; it is difficult for the scouts to know how far back the main march is.”

Sanatruces sat at last. Darius invisibly relaxed; it seems that his head will not be demanded of him this time. “What do we know about this ambush, Darius? What have you been able to learn from reports?”

“We have lost almost five thousand men, Oh Mighty King” Darius reported, glad to be able to deal with facts instead of explain away faults. “Most of those were due to the fire that swept down over the column. As well as the dead, we have another ten thousand suffering from burns, and not fit for marching or battle.”

“So we still have over one hundred thousand men fit for battle, then.”

“Yes, Oh Mighty King,” Darius agreed.

“What do you intend to do with the burns victims?”

“I was intending to leave them in camp where they are, with a small force to protect them. We can collect them after we have driven the Romans out of Armenia, and transport them either back home or forward to Tigranocerta.”

“How do you intend to feed them?” Sanatruces asked. “Have you not already foraged all available food in the areas behind your advance?”

“These men will not be marching or fighting, so half-rations will be enough for them. We can afford that out of our reserves.”

Sanatruces nodded in thought. “I am reluctant to feed useless men; but if you say we have enough...”

“We still have our month's reserve, and we will be advancing with twenty thousand fewer men from this point onwards, so foraging will not be as tight,” Darius explained. “And besides, even without foraging, Tigranocerta is less than six days away.”

“Then allocate the burnt men and their guards half-rations for fifteen days,” Sanatruces decreed. “Press on with the main army, but make sure we have no more disasters like today!”

“This is where it gets interesting, Caius Julius,” Sertorius smiled. “Starting today, as we fall back we will be offering fair prices for all the food not yet in Parthian hands, and safe passage to the north for all who want to come.”

Caesar nodded. “I was wondering if and when you would adopt that policy,” he commented. “It will be expensive to buy all that grain, but we can always sell it again later – perhaps at a profit, since we will have cornered the market.” Then he added “So you think the Parthians are far enough in now to have no choice?”

“Yes, I do,” Sertorius confirmed. “From this point onwards, they will be running down their reserves. That will start to chew at their morale after a little bit of time.”

“It will also mean that they will be marching through an empty land,” Caesar went on. “No Armenian in his right mind will chose to stay, even if he has food; he will be stripped bare by the Parthians, then left to starve. I will guarantee that every grain and every person will be coming north.”

Anyway, how are the defences coming along?" Sertorius changed the subject without a pause.

Caesar was not taken by surprise. The remaining veteran legion and the two novice legions had been working on that task since the day Silo had left, under the general supervision of the veteran officers; and Caesar had been given the duty of reporting back on progress. "They are now complete, as far as the design is concerned. We are now improving them even further, since we have the time. These improvements are additional barriers to infantry, to create additional killing fields, and artillery platforms to exploit them. Our latest intelligence suggests that they have few archers left, most of them being caught in the big fire."

"I would like to inspect the defences, Caius Julius. Let's go." Sertorius had himself designed the overall defensive system, and left it to his experienced officers to work through the details. He was pleased with the execution of the details; every strong point supported others, with excellent fields of fire. Behind the front wall there was a gap of over one hundred paces, completely clear of any obstruction; if the front wall was breached at any point, this provided a clear field of fire for the ballistae behind the second wall. These two lines of walls were connected by communicating walls at spaces of one hundred paces or thereabouts, to contain any possible breakthrough. In the grim calculus of siegeworks, Sertorius expected that the ballistae could take out so many enemy as they streamed through any breach that the gap would soon be blocked by the bodies of the fallen.

Then he came to a lookout where he could see the section of wall further along the front. There was an obvious and glaring error in the alignment. "Who is responsible for this section of the works, Caius Julius?"

Caesar smiled demurely. "I demanded the right to design this section myself, General."

Sertorius was taken aback. "I have developed a high opinion of your abilities and your brilliance in innovation, Caius Julius; but it seems static defences are not your strong point." He waved out to a small ridge running out from the main defence. "Had you fortified that ridge, you would have been able to take in a cross-fire anyone advancing up either side via these two valleys. But you have left it bare! And even worse, you have left a safe path up to it, one we cannot see to target; if the Parthians take that hill, an attack along the flat top of the ridge could turn this whole sector!"

"That is what I am hoping the Parthians will think, too," Caesar responded.

"What do you mean?" Sertorius asked, suddenly suspicious.

"If we make all sections of this line equally strong, then we will have no idea where the attack will come; so we will have no idea of where to concentrate our forces," Caesar explained. "So I have deliberately made this section appear vulnerable. Let the Parthians take that hill and mass for a breakthrough of our main line right here." Caesar turned and started walking further, beckoning his commander to follow. On reaching the end of the apparently weak section in the

wall, there could be seen a timber platform some ten feet wide, to permit defenders to patrol the top of the wall and to repel attempts to scale it. So much was standard practice. Caesar gestured to the cleared courtyard behind the wall. Over a hundred onagers were arranged in neat rows.

"I have measured the range and elevation of the wide point at the end of the ridge, and I have checked by throwing a few ranging shots. It is just within the maximum range of these onagers, throwing medium bombs. The far edge, where it drops away into the valley, is barely within light bomb range. They will not be able to marshal their ranks without being disrupted constantly, and light bombs will even be able to shatter on the top of the slope, and cut off their retreat." Caesar then beckoned again, towards some steps descending from the top platform. This led to a stone platform some ten feet lower. This was occupied by a row of ballistae, with a hole some two feet square in the wall immediately in front of each.

"There is a slight rise in the middle of the ridge, which masks these openings when seen from the end. The enemy will have no idea that we have ballistae here until they are well within range. Too late to call back the attack without suffering huge losses," Caesar smiled. "And the holes are just a little bit too small for a man to come through except lizard-style. He will be totally unable to defend himself, and can be killed as he makes the attempt. One gladius blow to the back of the neck, by a man standing to one side of the hole. End of Parthian soldier."

Sertorius looked along the row of ballistae, and then through the firing hole.

"Nice work, Caius Julius," was his only comment.

Darius adopted a totally different doctrine for his scouts after the Fire Ambush. They were now sent out in pairs, each pair riding as far ahead as they could without moving out of sight of the men behind. As the front ranks of the army came within sight of the rear-most pair, they would ride forward to their new position, pushing all those in front of them ahead in turn. Each was ordered to turn and run back to the army if the men in front were ambushed, or if they saw signs of the enemy on the road ahead. This was nervous work for the leading riders, but it provided certain warning for at least a mile ahead for the main column.

Caesar's anti-scout force adapted to this very quickly. Three or four times each day they would wait around a bend or in cover for the lead pair, and cut them down. This sent all the other scouts racing back to the main army, which was then halted while a full company of cavalry slowly probed ahead on a wide front, checking for Romans in concealment. Each halt cost an hour or more in marching time; the rate of advance was cut to a crawl. Eventually the Parthians remained in broad front formation, greatly slowing their advance.

The head of the Parthian army arrived at the defensive line ten days after the Fire Ambush, still a day's march out from Tigranocerta. They were stunned by the complexity and strength of the line, and spent two days scouting east and

west to discover its extent. Needless to say, these scouting expeditions were often intercepted and slaughtered; but enough was discovered to decide that marching a hundred thousand men across country far enough to by-pass this line was not going to be feasible.

“Well, Darius? We have eaten more than a quarter of our reserves now; what do you propose?” Sanatruces was in a business-like mood today.

“There are various options, Oh Mighty King,” Darius started. “The defences are too wide to march around; if we are to go on to Tigranocerta, we must break through. The only alternative is to fall back to our own lands.” This will reveal how intent the king is to take Tigranocerta, Darius thought to himself. Mentioning the possibility of a retreat will remind him that a withdrawal is still possible.

“How much longer can we make our food last, now that foraging is not possible?” Sanatruces asked.

“On standard rations, twenty-two days. But that can be made to last a bit longer if necessary, and longer again if we suffer significant losses.”

“No doubt you know how long it would take us to fall back to our own cities?” Sanatruces asked with a smile.

“Of course, Oh Mighty King; we are some fifteen day's march from our nearest point of supply.”

“So what option do you suggest, Darius?” Darius felt a dread rise in his stomach. He dare not suggest a withdrawal if the king is eager for victory; but those fortifications seemed substantial, and could take weeks of earthworks and other siegeworks to overcome. And he had only food for twenty-two days! And what if there was another barrier behind this?

“The barrier is generally well-sited and difficult, Oh Mighty King. To breach it could take longer than we have food for. However, there is one section that appears weak and incomplete, where it faces onto an extended ridge. Perhaps the Romans thought we would not be able to climb to the top of the ridge, so they thought themselves safe. I believe an assault force can ascend that ridge by a route that is difficult, but out of sight of the Romans; which will allow us to improve it. This will allow us to attack the weakest part of their line in complete surprise. Once that assault force has broken through, it can roll up their defences and force the road open from the Roman side.”

“How long will this take, Darius?”

“The difficult part will be getting enough men onto the top of the ridge quickly enough; this needs to be done overnight, so we can launch a surprise attack at first light, before the Romans know we are there. To achieve that climb by night, we will need to cut several wide paths and steps up the slope. I expect that this work will take three or four days.” Darius paused slightly before adding “At least, all this preparatory work will be out of sight of the Romans; we will retain the advantage of surprise.”

“If this fails, Darius, we will have to decide immediately whether to retreat, or to commit to a continued attack with no real hope of a safe withdrawal.”

Yes, Oh Mighty King.”

Sanatruces nodded. “Then prepare this attack.”

Darius had misread the situation only slightly. Although the slope he intended to use for his ascent could not be seen from the Roman fortifications, it was plainly visible from a small cave on the opposite side of the valley. And that small cave was visible from the fortifications. For a few minutes each morning and evening over the first couple of days there was a sheet of green fabric laid over the floor of the cave, just inside the entrance and barely visible from the Roman fortifications opposite. It could not be seen from the valley floor below; and even if it could be seen, it blended in with the vegetation on the hillside.

Strange things were happening in four of the towers along the line of fortifications, too. Each morning and evening, pennants were being run up flagpoles, left for a minute or sometimes less, and then be taken down; only to be run up again immediately. This would go on for up to an hour. What could these different parts of the Roman line be signalling to each other with such random-looking movements of flags? Whatever it was, these signallers were not very competent; sometimes they would become confused in their halyards, and start to pull a flag back up the mast as it was on its way down. Only for a couple of feet, but it showed they were not accustomed to this process, and could well panic under pressure.

But this all made good sense to the two men in the cave. Although the surrounding vegetation looked undisturbed from almost any angle, there was one line-of-sight to a signal tower that had been pruned clear. This was more than wide enough for them to stand a light square timber frame as high as a man, and with a single letter written large on it; large enough to be read from the tower. They had many frames in the cave with them, each with a different letter on it. Each morning and each afternoon they would hang out the 'X' to indicate they wished send a message, and watch the flags. As soon as the first double-dip occurred, this was the signal to start spelling out their message; each time a flag was pulled down thereafter, double-dip or not, they would place the next letter.

In this way Sertorius was kept advised of the works being carried out by Darius. From time to time he would send out a volley of onager bombs aimed at the main encampment in the valley, but these fell short of the open space where Darius was building a large armoured battering ram as a deception. It was best to keep Darius confident that his secret was still safe. On the afternoon of the third day, the cave signalled “Ascent complete. Twenty thousand men deploying at foot. Hundreds of grapples and winches.”

Darius was mightily pleased with the effort. There were now fifteen clear paths up the formerly steep face at the end of the ridge. Most of each path was in fact a stairway, with only short and steep inclines between the steps; but his soldiers could ascend ten of these routes at the rate of fifteen men per minute, even by the light of the moon now three-quarters full in the first part of the night. The other five, wider than the infantry paths, would be used to carry up the heavy

equipment at a slower rate. It should take less than six hours to get all of his assault force of twenty five thousand men to the top by moonlight, and then creep slowly forward towards the flimsy timber palisade in the two hours between moonset and first light.

They were equipped with grapples and over a hundred light capstans. The intention was to anchor the capstans back to the larger trees, throw the grapples over the parapets, and peel back the vertical facing members of the walls. The walls would be pulled flat within a matter of minutes, before the rest of the garrison could react, and his infantry would stream through the breach.

Caesar had been informed about the moonlight rehearsals of the previous nights, including the teams of eight men carrying each capstan platform. He expected the grapple men to approach the wall under cover of darkness, to avoid being noticed. But when should he launch his defensive barrage? Too early, and he will not entrap the enemy; too late, and he risks a catastrophe.

But he had not been idle himself during these three days. There were few trees along the ridge top, and all undergrowth had been cleared for a hundred paces in front of the wall; all invisible to the Parthians because of that crest in the ridge. Also, a fine network of tripwires had been installed, to warn of their approach. These were attached to bells back behind the wall. But tonight would be the night, he was sure. Probably only a couple of hours before dawn, because it would take most of the night to deploy and marshal enemy forces in the darkness if he aimed to confuse us, or perhaps at first light so his men could see well enough to cross the final gap as quickly as possible if he aimed to overwhelm us.

Caesar gave orders for all his artillery men to be well-fed and asleep immediately night fell, and to be woken to a hot meal at midnight. If the enemy did not attack by an hour before dawn, he would take the initiative himself.

"I cannot believe this Roman General's incompetence!" Darius exalted as the moon sank low enough for the valley to become a pool of darkness. "His officers know how to build an impressive defence, but he has not the wit to put a simple trench across the road! There is nothing to stop our ram from moving hard up against his walls."

"I thought you were relying on the attack along the ridge," Sanatruces commented reservedly. "This is supposed to be a diversion."

"Yes; but if they are going to allow us to punch a hole through here, then all the better a diversion it will be; and if it succeeds they will have two penetrations to contain, not just one."

The big armoured ram started trundling up the road towards the wall. In effect it was a pair of A-frames, one at the front and one at the rear, set on wheels with a large log suspended through the middle of the two end frames. Over the whole length it was covered with a steeply-pitched timber roof, to protect against dropped stones. It moved by treadmill power, geared down to the rear drive wheels.

Staying just below the level of the line of moonlit territory, it was almost at the Roman gate across the roadway three hours after midnight, when the sound

of its movement was noticed by the wall guards. A burning torch was thrown over the top of the wall, and by its flickering light the shape of this big timber box could be seen by lookouts on either side. Immediately the alarm horns on the wall were sounded. Flaming arrows started to pour onto the timber roof, but the timber had been thoroughly soaked for days. The response by the Parthians was to snipe at the Roman archers, their positions revealed by the flame on their arrow heads. The hail of fire arrows soon stopped. Small onager bombs started to fall, lobbed over the parapet by hand. These were not dropped on the ram, but on the road a few paces out from the base of the wall. Their intention was to burn the crew of the ram as they stood over these flames to batter the gate.

But Darius was aware of the Roman predilection for fire weapons. Soaked animal hides were draped over the burning oil on the roadway as the ram took up position; the flames were soon extinguished. Chocks were set behind the wheels, and the treadmill was disengaged from the drive wheels and became a capstan to draw back the ram.

The two-tonne log rose some four feet as it was swung back, then released. It met the timber of the gates at a speed of over ten miles an hour. To the total amazement of the ram crew, the wall did not shiver and splinter under the impact. Instead, the ram seemed to almost bounce off.

But the Romans were not surprised. The apparent gate was no more than a facade; behind it there was a solid barrier, with three-inch-thick planks running vertically and another skin of three-inch planks running horizontally to make up a six-inch thick barrier. And this barrier was strutted against the ground by a forest of inclined beams, each more than a foot square, at spaces of only a couple of feet.

The ram was drawn back again, as high as possible, and released again. Again it bounced off. "Pull the head to one side!" the ram captain shouted. A rope was passed around the head of the ram, and the ram head was hauled to one side. The rope slinging it was tied off to a beam in the roofing structure a few feet behind the head. The ram was drawn back a third time to its maximum distance, and released. Under the action of the sling around the head, the beam dipped and swung up and out to one side, hoping to find a softer part of the wall. Again it bounced.

The ram captain inspected the wall by the light of his torch as the ram was drawn back a fourth time. The timber of the wall was crushed inwards by the pressure at each of the impact points, but there was no splintering. This would not happen if it were a normal wall or gate, being held only by an iron or timber cross-bar; it was as though the timber were a facing for a stone wall. He watched the surface carefully as the ram came down a fourth time. He could see no appreciable inwards movement under impact. "Engage the drive gears!" he ordered. "Creep forward enough to remove the chocks! We are going back!" This was no gate, he concluded. This was a bait, to draw us out. The Romans have built a stone wall behind!

Sertorius heard the alarms from the false gate in the valley. Nice thinking, he conceded, to try to draw off any strength we might have posted on this quiet

section. But the moon had set long ago, and there was only one more hour before dawn.

“Caius Julius, your time has come,” he nodded to his protégé. “Time to welcome our guests.”

“But there has been no warning from any of our trip-wires, General,” Caesar countered. “If we fire now, we will alert them to the fact that we are expecting them.”

“Warning or not, Caius Julius, commence firing as per plan.”

Caesar saluted and turned towards the onager battery. “Tension onagers! Prepare torches!” he ordered. “Tension ballistae!” In less than two minutes every onager was at ‘stand ready’. “Use the light bombs, maximum range; Rapid fire!” Caesar barked.

In less than a minute the first bombs were arching through the night sky. In less than four minutes the end of the ridge was a wall of fire as the trees and undergrowth was ignited by more than six hundred bombs. “Onagers; heavy bombs, half range, Rapid fire!” Caesar bellowed over the din. The order was repeated down and along the onager battery.

The larger bombs, and the greater fire rate involved in half-range, brought the foreground to a blaze much more rapidly. The flickering light revealed a huge assembly of men caught between the two lines of fire. But more to the point, it also revealed the hundreds of capstans approaching the wall. Even as he looked, he noted that some were already tied back to a tree or large rock, and their grapple crews were standing ready, waiting for the order to advance on the palisade. They would have been ready to launch their assault if they had been granted as little as a few more minutes! Why had the trip-wires not given the alarm?

“Onagers; reduce to quarter-range, rapid fire!” Caesar ordered. He turned back to watch the fall of the bombs; they were landing among the closest capstans. The remaining capstan crews seized whatever anchor point they could find, even if short of their intended position. The grapple crews started running forward even before the capstan was anchored, all pretence of stealth now lost, and their way lit by the fires. Then he heard bells jangle. The trip-lines had been set too close to the walls; the capstans had been set up just a few paces further away than Caesar had anticipated, and therefore the tripwires had not yet been disturbed. A sign of their respect for our artillery, perhaps?

Caesar felt a chill run down his spine; for the sake of a few feet, the enemy might have had their palisade down before the artillery could be brought up to tension! He must never again rely so much on one critical assumption! “Ballistae; load porcupines, fire as targets present themselves!” The order was relayed along the row of ballistae on the stone platform below him.

Soon the snap of ballistae started to sound under him, and grapple crews fell in unison as if in a gruesome dance. “Onagers; increase range slightly!” he ordered, as he noted the bulk of the bombs were landing short of the main line of capstans. Within half a minute the bombs were landing more effectively. Whether we set fire to the capstans or not, the crews will not be able to endure the heat, Caesar mused with satisfaction.

“Onagers, Hold that range! Fire at will,” he confirmed the depth of draw-back, while allowing the crews to start pacing themselves for a protracted bombardment. Within minutes the whole ragged line of capstans was aflame. The palisade was now safe. The fires from the quarter-range were starting to merge with the flames spreading from the earlier 'half-range' bombardment; now was the time to annihilate. “Onagers; three-quarter range, heavy bombs, fire at will!” Caesar noticed with surprise that the sky in the east was starting to lighten. Dawn was approaching.

Sertorius appeared at his side. “Excellent work, Caius Julius!” his commander congratulated him. “But it will not work a second time. How will you defend this position tomorrow?”

“I will not need to defend it tomorrow, or any time after that, sir,” Caesar replied. “It will never again be attacked.”

Sertorius looked at him questioningly; his expression could be made out in the growing light. “If I may give you a word of advice, Caius Julius,” he said almost apologetically. “You are without doubt a genius. But you are also one of the most arrogant and conceited young men I have ever met. As your uncle Caius Marius once advised the whole Senate, so I advise you, as a friend who would like to see your prodigious talents bring glory to both Rome and yourself; beware hubris!” Sertorius held his eye, expecting a response.

“Yes, sir; I will,” Caesar said at last. He started to turn away, to gaze over the killing ground, but Sertorius spoke again.

“Caius Julius; believe me when I say I speak as a friend, desiring the best for you. But do you feel insulted, to the point that you no longer consider me a friend?”

“I consider you a friend, all the dearer because are prepared to speak so candidly with me, and counsel me in ways that might be painful,” Caesar lied. Who does this man think he is, Caesar fumed inwardly, that he thinks he is able to be my judge? A Grass Crown by the age of thirty certainly has some merit attached; but that was a long time ago, and is nothing to what I will achieve!

“That pleases me, Caius Julius. I served under the Great Marius, and learnt much from him. But I see more than Marius in you; you will surpass us all, so long as keep your feet on the ground,” Sertorius smiled warmly. “Carry on, and please prepare for another assault, just in case.” Sertorius strode back along the wall platform towards the false gate, his retinue of messengers following behind him.

Caesar smiled back warmly, but behind that face was a black rage. I will not be patronised by the likes of Sertorius; or at least, not with impunity! I will see to it that word leaks out about my contribution to this campaign; that the idea of strategic entrapment was mine, not Sertorius'; that the use of mounted infantry sprang from my mind, not his; that I was the architect of this great victory here today, the preparations for which victory Sertorius criticised until I explained the plan to him, like a man might explain how to fasten sandals to a dullard son!

Sertorius might return to the Triumph; but I will see to it that more than one of his officers writes an account that shows how heavily he leant on me to

achieve it! Caesar realised with a start that the onagers had fallen still. While he had been talking with Sertorius, and then inwardly fuming, their supply of ammunition had been exhausted. Keep your mind on the job at hand! He scolded himself. He swept his eyes across the killing ground. It was one dense blaze, and creeping closer to the walls in the still air of the morning.

“Onagers and ballistae; de-tension and stand easy!” he bellowed. “First Century, go forward from the walls, and clear a fire break!” The infantry detachment assigned to the fire break started stripping off their armour in response. He walked over to stand beside their centurion. “Take a torch from one of the onager crews, and set fire to the vegetation twenty paces out from the wall, in a long line parallel to the palisade. After a long summer and no rain so far this autumn, it should burn easily. Let it burn to within five paces of the wall, and then beat it out,” he instructed.

“You don't want us to clear the area by hand, sir?” the centurion asked.

Caesar smiled a friendly smile. “Digging all that out is too much like hard work! Let the fire clear it for you; just control the fire.” Great screaming idiot, Caesar thought behind his friendly smile. By the time he would be quarter-way through, the fire would be upon him! And questioning my orders! This has been a great victory, followed up by great imbecility!

“Yes, sir!” the centurion acknowledged gleefully. He went his way, shouting to his men to get a wet hide each, and then to a ballista port to ask for a torch.

By now the artillery pieces had been de-tensioned. “Onagers and ballistae; refresh your ammunition stores, then stand down! Second Century, take over watch duties!” Then he looked out over the fire-break team. “Centurion; three of your men should take a torch each, and start the fires in several locations. Get it done quickly, before the main fire is so close it drives you away!” The centurion looked up, acknowledged with a salute, and spoke quickly to his men. Three of them ran back to the wall for torches.

This should be under control now, Caesar muttered to himself, but I should stay and watch anyway. There is no telling what these idiots will do if they are not led by their hands! But there was no further cause for concern. By an hour after sunrise there was a strip of scorched earth thirty paces wide, and still burning in places on the edge away from the wall. The fury that had been the oil-enhanced scrubland fire had died down as it ran out of oil, to the point that it would not be able to leap this barrier. On one side it had already run into the fuel-starved firebreak, and was no more than a smoulder.

Caesar ordered that no-one was permitted to go out from the palisade until further notice. There were still hotspots out there, and he did not want any men to become unfit for battle because of burns while looting the fallen. Tomorrow would come soon enough. Then he handed over sectional command to the artillery officer and left for a meal.

“Well, Darius; your report, please?” Sanatruces was ominously controlled.

“Oh Mighty One, the main attack was unsuccessful. Eleven thousand men were lost, and most of the other fourteen thousand involved have injuries that make them unfit for battle. Only three thousand are able to take their place in the ranks today.” Darius knew that trying to put a gloss on the situation would not help.

“And what did we gain, if anything, from the day's work?”

“Oh Mighty King, we learnt that the apparently soft part of the Roman line had the sharpest teeth. We also learnt that the apparent gate is not a gate at all; it is backed by stonework, judging by the way the ram bounced. It seems that this Roman commander is not a total incompetent; but far from it. He seems to be a very skilled general, a man who feigns incompetence and thereby induces his enemy to make serious misjudgements.” Then Darius took a deep breath and dared to sound defeatist as well as defeated. “I must confess that even if he were to make a huge blunder tomorrow, I would hesitate to seize the opportunity; just in case it proves to be not a blunder, but another trap that he is luring me into.”

Sanatruces stared at his general for more than a minute. Darius met his gaze. If this means my execution, Darius thought, then let me meet it like a man.

“What would be worse for morale among the troops, Darius? To retain you in command, with the men knowing that the Romans have played you for the fool, or to dispose of you now?” Sanatruces compressed his lips. “To kill you now would be seen as an admission of despair; and there is every chance that the Romans will harry us as we withdraw. I don't want to put that thought into the men, and then ask them to conduct a fighting retreat under Diurges, a man with less fame than you,” Sanatruces stood abruptly. “So you will live; at least for the moment. How you conduct the retreat will determine how long you stay that way.” Sanatruces stared at him again. “Unless, of course, you feel that another attempt to break through would be worth the time and effort?”

“No, Oh Mighty King.” Darius replied. “I do not think we can afford the time for another attempt.”

“Well said, Darius; you are learning to recognise a trap when you see one.”

The first part of organising the retreat was easier than expected. The remaining food, which would have been eighteen days' standard supply for one hundred thousand men yesterday, will serve the remaining seventy-eight thousand men for twenty three days. The next point of reliable supply was fifteen days' march away. Those not fit to fight will be surrendered to the Romans, and not be a burden on his logistics or his pace of march. Sanatruces had told Darius to slaughter them; why should the Romans have the benefit of taking slaves? But Darius, emboldened by the expectation that he would survive only long enough to be tortured to death once back in civilisation, pressed his case. “These men were loyal soldiers, and had risked their lives for the greater glory of The Mighty King; should they not be spared? Besides, they were wounded and burnt; let the Romans slaughter them, not their beloved king! And any who were not killed would be a burden on the Romans to feed until they were recovered enough to do

useful work, and would draw off valuable Roman soldiers to guard them; and that would slow any Roman counter-attack.” Sanatruces had agreed, but Darius could sense that his defiance would be repaid in due course. Like Parmenes in the previous season, Darius found his mind entertaining the possibility of regicide.

At least we should make good time on the return march, Darius consoled himself. There is less scope for Roman ambushes and delaying tactics because we will be marching away from them. We will need to watch for harrying attacks on our rear, but that should not slow us down. He spent the rest of the day making up orders for the march, and allocating positions in the order of march. They would break camp at first light next morning.

Sertorius saw the smoke rising from the valley to his south. These were not just cooking fires, he thought, nor for warming their bodies, even though the night had been very cold. Winter could not be far away. He climbed the tower at the turn in the wall. There were bonfires throughout the Parthian camp. He made out the shape of the armoured ram in the middle of one set of flames, and watched more materiel being heaped for another fire. There were some tents among the fuel being piled up. We must have wiped almost a quarter of their numbers yesterday, Sertorius mused. They don't need as much accommodation now! In the far distance he could make out men setting off down the road to the south. Throughout the camp, there were knots of men forming into units and filtering towards the road. It looks like a withdrawal, and the destruction of anything that they cannot easily take with them.

Will I organise a sally? Sertorius asked himself. He swept his eyes over the area between the palisade and the Parthian camp. No, they have men on guard against that, he decided. A pretty obvious ploy, easily anticipated and obviously discouraged. Sertorius stamped to warm himself; the breeze through this exposed tower on the high ground was cutting through him.

“Watchman,” he turned to the lookout beside him in this tower, “I want you to note by types and number the soldiers marching south. “Heavy, light, archers, I want notes of their marching deployments so we know how best to harry them.”

“Yes, General!” the trooper replied, and reached for his pile of message paper and a quill. At least this watchman had the sense to come dressed for his duty, Sertorius observed. Woollen leggings in the Armenian style, and a thick jacket. Sertorius headed for the stairs, to get out of this windy bird-cage. “General!” That was the watchmen calling him back. “There is an enemy soldier approaching our wall!”

Sertorius looked down along the road so recently host to the armoured ram. There was a single man approaching the false gate. Sertorius hurried down the stairs and onto the palisade. He arrived just as the Parthian stopped a few paces short of the wall.

“General Darius wishes to parley!” the man called out in Greek.

“What does General Darius propose as terms?” Sertorius kept himself hidden from view as he prompted the guard to answer. He thought it foolish to make himself a sniper's target. The message was relayed.

“General Darius offers to withdraw from all areas under Roman control as of last winter. He offers to do no damage to property or persons as he withdraws, and set free all captives. Further, eleven thousand of his soldiers are wounded or injured, and unable to march; these he offers as captives, to be enslaved. In consideration of which, he requests a pledge that his army will be permitted safe passage from these lands; your forces are not to harry or pursue or otherwise do harm to this peaceful retreat.”

Sertorius paused a moment. Is this an appropriate time to reveal his secret? It would fore-warn the Parthians if they do not accept; but if it prompts them to accept, then it will save many lives, and result in great plunder. There must still be over eighty thousand fit men to enslave, each being in his prime and therefore worth a good price. Sertorius decided, and he relayed his words to the watchman.

“General Sertorius offers the following terms; he agrees to accept the surrender of your entire army, men both healthy and wounded, and to provide what care is possible for them and to not harm or torture them. He will subsequently ransom or enslave them;

“In consideration of which, he agrees to provide safe passage for King Sanatruces and all senior officers back to Ctesiphon. But this is to be achieved by surrendering here, and relying on Roman honour for that safe passage, for which we will provide transport in conditions commensurate with the status of each of those persons. Once at Ctesiphon they will be left in the care of the city officials, and your Republic escort will be permitted innocent passage back to Rome. General Sertorius will not guarantee the safety of any person who does not surrender.”

The man at the wall stood still for a short time after the response had been delivered, waiting to ensure that no more was to be said. “I will relay that message to General Darius.” Then he turned and strode back to the Parthian camp.

Caesar had arrived during this exchange. Sertorius beckoned him to his side.

“Caius Julius; how do you expect the enemy to respond?”

“They will most certainly refuse, General,” he answered. “As far as they know, the alternative of simply marching home will provide them with much greater certainty of a safe return than relying on the honour of an enemy; and they would expect to save the bulk of their army as well.”

“Absolutely correct, as usual, Caius Julius,” Sertorius approved. “So why would I offer such absurd terms?”

“So that when they find their retreat blocked, they are more likely to surrender then?”

“Exactly! Offer a King his life and safe return instead of death, and he will gladly throw away a million lesser lives in exchange. Especially a brute like Sanatruces! Be glad you live in a Republic, Caius Julius! But to make sure his officers will go along with the surrender, we have to give them a chance to save their own hides, too.” Sertorius smiled. “These Eastern potentates are absolute

bastards, the lot of them! And that is why we will beat them, Caius Julius; a commander who respects his men will always beat a commander who treats his men like mere animals.”

Caesar nodded. “So now, as soon as it gets tough, the King and the officers will have it in the backs of their minds that they can get out free, if only they abandon their men. And that is what they will do, in the end.”

The last of the Parthian units marched out just after midday. Or at least, no more Parthian units took to the road after that time, but there were still a considerable number of Parthians in the valley below. One of them came limping slowly up to the palisade; as well as the limp, his left arm was in a sling.

“We who remain surrender to you,” he called up to the guards.

“What sort of soldiers are you?” the guard mocked him. “Have you not been ordered to hold the road against us, and protect your army from pursuit?”

“No; we have been left to die, because we cannot march. We were told to count ourselves lucky not to have been killed, but to be permitted to surrender instead. However, we were left with no food.”

The guard paused for a moment. “Wait there; I will ask what the General wants to do.”

The Parthian lowered himself to sit patiently.

Sertorius arrived quarter of an hour later. “How many are you?” he asked.

The Parthian struggled to stand. “About eleven thousand.”

“And how many of you can walk?”

“None of us are able to march; most of us can move slowly or with help, as you see that I can.”

“Then why should we accept your surrender? Why should we not leave you to die?” Sertorius asked harshly.

“Because we are not your enemy; it is King Sanatruces who is your enemy, and we are surrendering ourselves to you as your slaves,” the Parthian replied. “That can be no worse for us than the alternative, and when we recover our health we will be of value to you.”

Sertorius pondered this for a moment. Eleven thousand prisoners would normally be either a threat or a burden; and he had plans for hot pursuit. “Those of you who can do so, should present themselves here, unarmed and unarmoured. Their surrender will be accepted.”

“And what of those who cannot move?”

“I have yet to decide,” Sertorius answered summarily.

The Parthian turned and started to make his slow progress back towards his own camp.

Sertorius turned to the nearest runner. “Find Mucius Flavius; I want him in my office immediately.” Then to another runner, “Tell Atius to prepare this field,” Sertorius gestured to the space between the first wall and the inner wall “as a holding area for prisoners.” Then to a third runner, “Go to the kitchens; order them to prepare enough bread and soup for another ten thousand men tomorrow morning. Then go to Caesar and tell him to draw up a guard roster for the

prisoners, starting in the morning, and to make proper arrangements. Only the Fourth Legion are to be rostered for that duty.” Sertorius descended the steps and made for his headquarters.

He returned to the wall two hours before sunset. On the road in front of him, for perhaps a mile, he could see the remnants of the Parthian army. Many were burns victims, others carried injured limbs poorly bound.

“Who speaks for you?” Sertorius called down to them.

“I am senior,” one man at the front called out. His face was bandaged, covering his eyes, as was his right arm.

“Are these men all who are able to walk here under their own power?” Sertorius asked.

“So I believe,” the Parthian officer replied.

“How many remain in your camp?”

“I do not know; I think it is about two thousand.”

“What prevented them from coming with you? What nature of injury?” Sertorius persisted.

“Mostly broken legs,” the Parthian replied. “We were the men who attacked along the ridge yesterday morning. Many of us were killed, many were burned, and many escaped the fire by going down the side of the ridge. But in the darkness, many fell over sudden drops, and suffered injury.”

Sertorius gestured up to the ridge. Men could be seen moving along it. “One of my legions is going down to your camp now. They have orders to kill any who resist, and to destroy any weapons they find. If their commander has reason to believe that this is an organised attempt to take us by surprise, then he will return up this road, slaughtering as he comes.”

“Then I have no fear,” the Parthian replied. “No-one left in the camp can even rise from his bed without help.”

Sertorius looked at these men with pity. They had been the cream of the Parthian Army, assigned the most difficult job of making the primary assault; and they had almost pulled it off, despite our knowledge of their plans, and despite having to move so many men over unknown ground in the darkness. They were a force worthy of respect. And this is the respect Sanatruces has shown them!

“You will be required to wait here for a while,” Sertorius advised them. “Make yourselves as comfortable as possible.”

Those within hearing and who understood Greek sat almost immediately. Their neighbours followed them, and a ripple spread back down the road.

The shadows were filling the valley and the cool of evening was starting to chill the bones when a double-blast from a trumpet came from the Parthian camp.

Mucius Flavius had found that the camp contained no threat to the Romans. The Parthian surrender was genuine. Sertorius called down to the captives. “Men of Parthia; your surrender is accepted. However, we do not have cover for you against the cold of the night. Please go back to your tents now; in

the morning return here and you will be allowed to pass. You will be given bread and soup, and your tents will be struck and re-pitched within our walls. We will also provide you with what medical attention we are able to manage. So one night of hunger; but all will be well in the morning. Go now!" The word filtered back along the line, and the captives started to shuffle down the road again.

Sertorius left the novice legions in charge of the prisoners and to hold the palisade protecting Tigranocerta, while he took the Second Legion and a substantial collection of artillery down the road after Sanatruces. He had given the Parthians two days head start.

He did not expect any ambushes; the Parthians wanted to make good time on their march, and had no interest in delaying tactics; but even so, he was careful to ensure his cavalry acted as a thorough scouting force.

On the second day after the Parthian withdrawal, the day on which Sertorius started his pursuit, the north wind returned with a vengeance. It turned bitterly cold, and the frost on the ground in the morning persisted until midday. On the next day it started snowing. On the fourth day the scout cavalry found the snow before them had been tramped. This put the Parthians one day of marching ahead of them; the Romans had gained one day of distance in the two days they had marched. Sertorius expected contact the next day. Then word arrived from his scouts; the tail of the Parthian column was only ten miles ahead of his own front. But unfortunately, the snow prevented him from re-deploying to a wider attacking front; only the road was passable. Fuming with disappointment, he maintained the ten-mile separation and waited for conditions to change.

The only change was that the snow came down heavier on the fifth day. The road became one long bog, having been traversed by the huge Parthian army. Progress had dropped to only four miles per day, and it was becoming impossible to find enough clear ground to pitch their tents. Fires to cook or warm themselves were no longer possible in the knee-deep snow.

"Caius Julius," Sertorius addressed Caesar on the evening of the fifth day after withdrawal. "Share your wisdom with me! What would you do in these circumstances?"

Caesar paused a moment before answering. "At this rate of march, it will take the Parthians fifteen days to reach our blocking force. If the snow continues, it will take even longer; in fact, even if it stops snowing, it will take longer as their men get weaker from exposure and lack of sleep. Even if the weather turns warm, which I doubt, the road will still be impassable for several days. So I expect the Parthians to die long before they reach our blocking force. Even if they do get that far, they will be in no condition to force their way through our men, who will be well-fed and well-sheltered. So why are we chasing them? Meanwhile, although we have only marched three days to get this far, the conditions on the way back will be much harder. I expect we will need ten days ourselves to get back to the palisade, and more to Tigranocerta. So I would recommend that we burn the artillery and turn back. If conditions get worse, we might even need to move into some of the abandoned housing in one of the towns to conserve our strength."

"I agree, Caius Julius," Sertorius confirmed. "You show excellent judgement. The Parthians are already dead."

Caesar nodded modestly, again masking his anger at this patronising attitude from Sertorius.

The snow stopped, but the cold north wind continued. The road back to the palisades, with the snow already trampled into the surface by the passing of so many men and then re-frozen, proved not too difficult on the first two days of the return. But then they came to the twenty five miles which they had covered on the first day of the chase. This part of the road had not been travelled since the snow fell on it. The snow in this section varied from knee-deep to hip-deep, and had developed a hard crust during the two sunny days since it fell. The crust was not hard enough to support any weight, but stiff enough to make it impossible to plough through.

The legion took refuge in a small village, and half of one century was sent out with shovels in the morning, then relieved by the other half in the afternoon. By sunset they had cleared barely 200 paces length of road.

"At this rate, it will take us five days to clear a mile; all winter to get back to the palisade," Sertorius observed glumly as he dipped his bread into his soup. "By then, it will have snowed again."

There is always a solution, General," Caesar said encouragingly. "We just have to find it."

The next morning dawned clear and bright. The air was still, with not a cloud visible. The snow had settled slightly more, and the crust on top was firmer. Caesar walked off in a new direction, to enjoy the crisp morning and glorious sunshine. "Like thin ice on a lake," Caesar thought to himself as he stomped through the crusty snow. Then he stopped, as if stunned. "That is the solution! Spread the load over a larger area of ice, and it will not crack!"

He quickly stomped his way to a tree, and broke off some branches. He placed them on the snow before him, a dozen twigs in one direction and then a second layer at right angles. Then a third layer the same way as the first. He looked at the square of branches in front of him, each side twice the length of his foot.

Carefully he lifted his left foot and placed his boot in the centre of the square. Then leaning forward, he lifted his right foot up out of the snow, and stood on the square. The matted timbers crunched down into the snow slightly, but did not punch through the crust. He bounced his weight up and down a few times, and still the crust of icy snow held firm. This is going to work! But to make up two squares like that, and then tie each of them together so they don't fall apart, and then bind one to the sole of each boot... That would be a cumbersome task, and walking like that for any distance would be very tiring. Is there a better way?

He looked around for some material that would be easier to work with. But there was snow everywhere, hiding anything on the ground. Right, so what can I find indoors? He asked himself as he stomped towards a nearby abandoned

hut. He tried the door; it would not open, so he put his shoulder to it. It wouldn't budge. Must be barred from inside, he concluded. So where is a window? He stomped along the wall to the shuttered window and forced it open with his gladius. As he swung a foot up to climb through, he looked at the window shutter again. One of these shutters could be cut lengthways, to form a solid piece of timber the length of his lower leg, from ground to knee. How wide would it have to be? He hacked at it with his gladius to remove the cross-pieces fixed to the back side. This released a short plank almost twice as wide as his boot. If that is wide enough, it will not be too awkward to walk with one on each boot. He threw it onto the open snow and stood on it. The crust held firm under his weight.

Caesar did some quick calculations. There were almost five thousand men in this force. No, no, that way of calculating is too cumbersome. The men are sleeping about twenty-five to each of these huts, so each houseful will need to be provided with fifty planks. He looked around. This house had three windows, and each shutter looked like it would provide at best four planks. That is twelve planks; not enough. The door could be cut up; one cut horizontally across the middle, and then split vertically into, say, six; that is another twelve. Half-way there. Oh, the table; he sized it up with his handspans; another twelve there, maybe fourteen. Still another twelve needed, preferably more because some houses might be more crowded. But there was no more furniture; and perhaps some houses did not even have so large a table. He threw his head back as he thought.

Then he realised that he was staring at the answer. The timber roofing! The roofing was made from planks of varying widths, but most were much wider than a handspan, and they were longer than a man is tall. The roofing alone would be ample for the whole company of men sleeping in each!

Allow a day for each man to make his own planks and attach them to his boots, and they will be able to walk out. How far would a man be able to walk like this in one day? Caesar made up a second plank, and then broke apart a stool for the twine binding the legs to the cross-bars. He pulled off his boots and carefully bound a plank to each. Then, carrying his boots to the door and throwing off the bar, he opened the door.

The snow had built up to knee-height against the closed door. He put his boots on the floor and eased his feet into them, and bound the lacing. He stepped up onto the crusty snow, left foot then right foot. The crust held. Then carefully lifting his foot for each step, he dawdled forward. The deliberate high-stepping action felt clumsy, but he made good speed. He set off across country to see how tiring it would prove. Two hours later he was with Sertorius, showing the general his new discovery.

"I walked for over an hour with these on my feet. Once I became accustomed to the strange gait, I found I could maintain at least half of normal walking pace without tiring." He looked into Sertorius' face. "This is how we are going to get our men to safety, in perhaps two days of slow trudge. We go for the first day until mid-afternoon, and then settle for the first reasonable shelter we see; then do the same the second day, or even make it all the way home."

Sertorius examined the fixing of the plank to the boot. "How durable do you think this will be? Two days is a lot more wear-and-tear than an hour."

"I have thought about that," Caesar replied. "Instead of being bound on by chord, I suggest that we nail a leather loop to the top of the plank, and insert the foot of the boot. The artillerymen always carry plenty of nails. That should last a few days."

Sertorius nodded. "Yes; and a loop around the back of the heel, so the boot doesn't slip out when going up hills." Sertorius thought again "Or perhaps we can nail up through the plank into the heel."

"Yes, if the nails are short enough to not penetrate into the foot," Caesar conceded.

"I have told you this before, Caius Julius; you are a genius. I will certainly make sure that your enormous contribution becomes public knowledge when this campaign is over," Sertorius was generous with his praise.

"Thank you, General." Caesar acknowledged, slightly mollified compared to his reaction in earlier episodes where he thought he was being patronised. If Sertorius is genuinely prepared to give credit where it is due, then Caesar would hold no grudge.

"Anyway, we can be sure that the Parthians are frozen meat by now," Sertorius changed the subject abruptly. "Even if they had some-one of your genius, they would not have had the materials to save anything more than a small fraction of their force; and the First Legion will handle them without trouble."

"If I may ask, General," Caesar decided to put the question that had been troubling him since the offer of terms to the Parthians, "When you offered safe passage to Ctesiphon for Sanatruces and his officers; did you intend to honour that?"

"Of course, Caius Julius. A Roman Commander must be a man of complete integrity."

"But Sanatruces broke the peace! How could you let him return to his kingdom unpunished?"

"Who said anything about returning him to his kingdom, Caius Julius?" Sertorius countered.

"But... to Ctesiphon..."

"Indeed, Caius Julius; but when he arrives, and is handed over into the care of the city authorities, he would soon realise that Ctesiphon was no longer part of his kingdom. Once there, I will have kept my word; and then he would be arrested and taken to Rome as a prisoner."

"What has happened to Ctesiphon?" Caesar asked darkly.

"By now it would be in the possession of Quintus Poppaedi; or at least, soon will be, depending on how fast he has moved. When I heard that Sanatruces was definitely marching against us, I sent a letter to Silo in Ephesus outlining our plans. I then asked him to sail as if to Rome; but he would then divert to Antioch, march to the Euphrates, and then down the length of Mesopotamia. While Sanatruces and his entire army have been freezing to death in Armenia, Silo's legions will have conquered Mesopotamia."

Caesar was stunned. "But if word had got to Sanatruces; perhaps a fast rider from Antioch... Why, Silo would have been cut off and crushed!"

"That is why it was so important that word *not* get to Sanatruces. Your idea of a blocking force to the south was the crucial ingredient," Sertorius beamed. "Between the three of us, we have conquered Parthia! How will that look on your record, when you stand for election?"

"Do you really think that Silo would have done as you asked? It would have been immensely dangerous!"

"I have total confidence in the Old Warrior," Sertorius said with complete sincerity. "He wrote back saying that he would do as I requested, so I have no doubt that he not only complied, but was successful as well. Apart from which, he hates Sanatruces with a passion."

"You did not tell me!" Caesar said accusingly.

"I told no-one. It was important that everybody should act as though Silo was going back to Rome. You are the first to know." Sertorius spread his hands. "But now that the task is complete, I thought that you, as the man who came up with one of the key aspects, should be told and congratulated."

Caesar smiled and his face reddened. He is actually blushing! Sertorius said to himself. But no; that glow in Caesar's face was barely suppressed rage.

This man sees my brilliance as only a component in his own overall plan! The manipulating bastard is riding on the back of my strategic vision and Silo's military genius; while having no competence of his own other than to claim credit! Caesar rose from his chair. "Tomorrow will be a busy day; I should get to sleep now," he choked out.

"Of course, Caius Julius," Sertorius excused his protégé. "I think your invention will be the salvation of this legion."

Sertorius called together all the centurions early next morning, and called them to order. "Listen carefully to what Caius Julius Caesar is about to explain to you," he started. "He has an idea that will be our way back to civilisation, and you will have to explain it in turn to all of your men. Caius Julius, please explain your invention."

Caesar not only explained his invention; he supervised as the fifty centurions stripped the roof off one hut and made their own snow boots. By noon he was satisfied that these men could instruct their troops in turn. His orders were clear; each man is to make four planks, in case of breakage. This had been done by nightfall. This required so much timber that the walls of the targeted huts were stripped down as well, rather than removing roofing from all the sleeping huts and having to sleep without any shelter from the snow; but even so, accommodation was very much tighter than usual that night.

They were back at the palisade two days later. After a quiet word from Sertorius to a couple of his centurions, some of the men started digging in the snow covering the old Parthian camp in the valley. The next morning Sertorius called a General Assembly of all soldiers in the garrison.

“Men!” he bellowed over the heads of the five thousand soldiers still in camp and the five thousand he had brought back from the pursuit; the others had left for Tigranocerta, taking their prisoners with them, leaving only one veteran legion at the Palisade to wait for his return. “This General Assembly has been called at the request of Mucius Flavius, commander of the Second Legion. Mucius Flavius, come forward!”

Mucius Flavius marched forward and climbed the low platform to stand beside his commander. He then snapped around to face the men. “I invite Caius Julius Caesar to stand beside me.”

Caesar stepped forward from his usual position behind Sertorius, and stood beside Flavius. Flavius saluted him, and then turned back to the soldiers. “Men of the Second already know this, and the men of the Fifth have probably been told. In our pursuit of the Parthians, we were trapped by early and heavy snow. The depth of the snow was so great that we were unable to march. With only ten days of food remaining, we knew we were in trouble.

“Caius Julius Caesar invented a way for us to march over the impenetrable snow. He saved the entire legion, in a battle more difficult than against any human enemy. It is customary for the Commander to be hailed 'Imperator' in such circumstances; but Caesar was not in command. I spoke to the General about this point. General Sertorius has agreed that, for the purposes of our victory over the snow, Caesar should be considered the leader in that battle. Therefore we hail Caius Julius Caesar as 'Imperator', and award him the Grass Crown!”

The legionaries erupted in repeated cries of 'Imperator!' as Flavius placed a woven crown of grass on Caesar's head. The Grass Crown! All other awards were bestowed by a commander upon his subordinates; this was the only award made by the men to a commander who had saved them from annihilation. But what an insult to Sertorius, to deliberately by-pass the commander and instead award the Crown to his subordinate. Caesar looked across to Sertorius; the General was smiling and applauding! And Flavius had said that Sertorius had agreed to this award!

Caesar was in a fog of confusion. How could Sertorius actually support so great an insult to his own dignitas? And as he asked this question of himself, the answer crystallised in his mind. It is because Sertorius knows he is doomed to mediocrity, but I am destined for great things. He is trying to ingratiate himself, to position himself for favour when I surpass him – as I surely shall!

It was at that moment that Caesar's anger against Sertorius curdled and became an immovable contempt. But even so, Sertorius still had authority over him, and could make life difficult if he so chose. It would be better to ensure the General will prove useful to Caesar's own ambitions. After all, he is a Consular, and the youngest-ever winner of the Grass Crown himself - Oh! Not any more! Caesar realised with a shock that his own age of 27 years compared favourably to Sertorius being twenty-nine when he gained his own Grass Crown. Sertorius had just surrendered to him that honour of youngest-ever Grass Crown!

Well, if Sertorius were that eager to curry favour with him, then Caesar would play along. He turned to Sertorius, took two steps to stand in front of him, and went down on his left knee to kiss Sertorius' hand.

"I give credit where it is due, Caius Julius," Sertorius congratulated him. "You will be twenty-eight soon, the minimum age to be elected Praetor. If you wish, I will release you from duty here, so you can go to Rome for the elections."

The Regent in Ctesiphon remembered well how Sanatruces had been isolated by a twin pincer movement in his previous campaign. This time he had stationed powerful forces to protect the flanks of his thrust. But the standing orders for these flank forces were precisely that; they were there to protect the main force against encirclement. The western force on the Tigris had fortified its position to repel a Roman attack; by the time they realised that Silo was not going to attack, but to by-pass them and march straight for Seleucia and Ctesiphon, he was well past them. Now, realising the danger to the capital, they were making a hasty attempt to overtake him.

That meant that they had been forced to leave their infantry behind; only the cavalry could move fast enough to force a battle before the Romans would reach Ctesiphon. The fifteen thousand cataphracts had tried their best. Their plan, as at the Battle of the Euphrates, was to attack the rear of the long Roman tail as it marched six abreast, strung out over a distance of some seven miles, then immobilise the Roman infantry or break them into small units, and finally take them in detail. What they did not realise until too late was that the inner files in the order of march were crossbowmen. As the cataphracts closed in to force the infantry into immobile box formations, these crossbowmen ripped into the horses. At close range a heavy crossbow bolt had no trouble penetrating the Parthian armour. As the Parthians recoiled in confusion, the lighter but more mobile Roman cavalry moved in to cut down any isolated groups. To Gnaeus Priscus, it was the Battle of the Euphrates all over again.

A third of the Parthian heavy cavalry were destroyed in their first charge. The Roman march continued, daring the Parthians to try again. But there seemed no sense in repeating a failed tactic, and the Parthians were content to follow at a distance, waiting for an opportunity.

The Romans broke from their march with three hours of light left in the day, the front legions preparing a fortified camp under the watchful protection of their crossbowmen as the following men marched to catch them and were set to work themselves. The Parthians, lacking infantry support and therefore unable to form a secure camp, withdrew five miles to camp the night.

"Septimus," Silo addressed the commander of the Seventh Legion as the sun was setting, "Do you recall your little night march last year?"

"Yes, General," Caretus replied. "Will we be doing that again tonight?"

"I'll let your men get some sleep first," Silo smiled. "You only have to cover five miles tonight, not twenty, to get to the enemy. So the whole mission should be over in – say – six hours?"

“That sounds about right if we have moonlight, sir,” Caretus agreed. “But I would prefer to do it in total darkness, or we could be wiped out once they realise where we are. I would like my men to be able to survive.”

Silo pondered for a moment. “The moon will rise just after midnight tonight,” he said. “That means you will have to go immediately if you want cover of darkness. But let me describe how I want this to work, and you might agree that working after midnight and by moonlight might be a better idea.” Silo laid out his plan.

Caretus looked at the moon. It was about four hours above the horizon, and by its light he could barely make out the two lines of eight thousand crossbowmen who had come with him on this mission. They were deployed in a wide 'V' formation, each arm almost quarter a mile long and eight men deep. A far cry from the mere four centuries he had taken on that other night raid! Behind them were the two centuries of light cavalry that would serve as bait; they were not a regular formation, but had been hand-picked from the available horse for their calmness; they did not want a noisy horse tipping the enemy about their presence until everything was in place.

About an hour before dawn; now was the time! “Cavalry; on your way!” he ordered. There was the creak of leather as the men swung onto their mounts, but not a whinny. This would be the most difficult part of the whole operation, but these men were veterans. Some had been under Gnaeus Priscus at the Battle of the Euphrates, and they would not be daunted. Each had a half-dozen small onager fire-bombs, with a four-foot long string attached; these were designed to be slung from horseback to gain as much distance as possible. The horses trotted out in a body.

It seemed to take forever, but it would have been only ten minutes before he saw the flash of sparks off flint and steel, and then the pinprick lights as the bombs were ignited. Then the arcs as the bombs were thrown. It seemed to be forever before the second volley of bombs were on their way, but time was not critical here; care was.

Even at this distance the shouts of alarm from the Parthian watch could be heard. The horsemen, concealed behind a low rise, could not be seen by the sentries; but the grass fire they were starting was only too obvious. After a hot summer and autumn the grass was tinder-dry, and the breeze was sweeping it directly towards the Parthian camp.

One hundred and sixty men throwing six bombs each amounted to almost a thousand bombs. This was going to be a serious fire, and the Parthians would need to get their horses and gear out of its path quickly. The Roman cavalry walked their horses around the fire front to view their handiwork, visible to the enemy now that they were no longer behind that low ridge. What nerve these men had! Caretus thought to himself. They knew that they must not simply run for safety, their task was to incite a chase and lead their chasers into the jaws of the crossbow placement. But the arrogance of revealing themselves so openly, so casually, was breathtaking.

At length Caretus saw them pull their horses around and set off at a slow trot back towards the 'V' formation. About a third of the way back they stopped, and turned back towards the enemy. After a short pause, they started moving back towards the Parthian camp.

It looks like the enemy are not going to follow the script, Caretus thought to himself. After another quarter of an hour loitering in clear view of the Parthians, the cavalry turned again and started back towards Caretus at a walk. The lead horses were soon back in the 'V'.

"They didn't take the bait!" the cavalry officer reported. "They probably thought that they would never be able to run down our light cavalry, so why bother trying."

"A pity!" Caretus said. Then lifting his voice, "Right, men! Back to camp! Form into squares, just in case they come after us!"

Three hours later Caretus was reporting back to Silo.

"We had an excellent killing ground, sir; and the cavalry were so brazen that I don't know how the enemy could have resisted coming after them," he said in summary. "But at least we know that they are very cautious, and that we have done some damage to their equipment. The cavalry said that they managed to get themselves and all their horses out of the fire path, but much of their armour and almost all of their food was burned."

Silo's disappointment showed. "Well done, Septimus. I can't ask any more of you or your men. Your boys will be excused watch duty tonight, so they can catch up on lost sleep. But you will still have to march!" Silo added with a smile.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Caretus was a realist; having the morning meal already cooked for his men when they returned, and the promise of a full night's sleep this evening was as much as anyone could have hoped for.

The march continued at the third hour of daylight, with a cavalry halo around the infantry. The remaining Parthian cavalry were seen to the north, apparently by-passing the Roman force to make their way to Seleucia.

"It might not be a good idea to allow that," Silo said when the scout reported back to him. "If they get back to a city, they might be able to replace their lost equipment. Go find Gnaeus Priscus and ask him to report to me. You should find him at the tail of the column, with the rearguard." If only I had Pontius Telesinus with me! Silo thought to himself. But Gnaeus will be up to it; he had proved himself pretty useful with cavalry in the Battle of the Euphrates.

It was an hour into the march before Priscus reported to Silo. "You sent for me, General?"

"Yes, Gnaeus; I have another independent mission for you," Silo smiled. "You are just the man for it, with your reputation against cataphracts! I want you to take all our cavalry except a minimum scout contingent, and destroy the Parthian force trying to sneak around us to the north," Silo explained. "I am told that they have lost most of their equipment and probably their food, but check before you do anything silly. They will still out-number you about five to one."

"Yes, sir," Priscus replied. "Anything else, sir?"

Silo's grin widened and he slapped Priscus on the knee, as far as he could reach from his mount. "Yes! Bring my cavalry back when you are finished."

"Yes, sir. I will call them together now; we should be on our way within the hour. Each man has three days rations with him, so there will be no delay." Priscus snapped off a salute and kicked his horse to a canter. He rode out to the centre of the three squadrons spread out a mile in front of the line of march, and ordered others to relay his orders to the outer two, and then three more riders back up the line of marching infantry to call his rear guard squadrons together. Four more men went out to call the flank guards in.

By noon there were two thousand light cavalry gathered around Priscus. He called together the squadron commanders to relay their orders. "Our orders are to eliminate the remaining Parthian cavalry passing to our north," Priscus told them. "We believe there are still ten thousand of them, but they are reported to be without their armour, and low on food. Now, these men and horses have been trained to be cataphracts; so these big, heavy horses will be slow and clumsy. They are without their armour, but will not know how to fight as lights. Although they might out-number us, they will not have the faintest idea of how to use those numbers effectively." He paused a moment. "So this afternoon we will do no more than find them, and satisfy ourselves as to their strength and how many of them managed to save their gear. Then we will make our plans. This should be a simple enough task, so long as we keep our wits and stay patient."

The enemy force was located two hours before sunset. A small detachment was sent forward to assess their condition. The Parthians saw them coming, but made no move to repel them. "They are travelling in a reasonably tight bunch, General," was the report back. "There would seem to be perhaps one in ten with full horse armour, and a handful of others still with their shields. The armoured horses are forming a screen on the south side of their main body, apparently to protect them."

Priscus nodded. "Tell your men to make up their meals now. We will be going into action tonight.

"The plan is for half of you to circle around to the north side of their camp, attack by surprise, and cut down as many men and horse as we can before they can respond. If they chase, then run for about five miles to exhaust their horses, and then rally; by then they should be strung out like beads on a string, and you can take them in detail. But if they don't follow, fall back half a mile and look threatening. That is when the other force will do the same thing on the south side of their camp. When the moon rises, we will meet up east of their camp; I will light a fire for you to come to.

"But remember; under General Silo, no plan is ever carved in stone. If it seems that the side of the camp you are to attack is too well defended, then adjust accordingly. This might mean a feint attack to draw off the defences, or it might mean a sprint to one side to go around them; use your own judgement and skill." Priscus looked around the faces of his ten squadron commanders. "Lucius, Milo, Parvus, Marcus, you are the northern force. Pontius, Herius, you stay with me as a reserve. The rest of you are the southern force, under Titus. Now, go give your

men their orders. As soon as it is dark, Lucius will lead the northern force out. Let's hope the Parthians like lighting lots of camp fires!"

The men ate and drank well until the last sign of light had left the sky. It was never a good idea to go into battle hungry or thirsty, or your endurance suffered. In the distance the glow of the Parthian camp fires could be seen, just as there was no doubt that the Parthians could see the Roman cooking fires. The horses had been watered and then allowed to graze as the men cooked and ate.

Lucius gave the word, and eight hundred men gave their last piss into the darkness and mounted their horses. They drifted into the darkness towards the east, to pass around the enemy camp.

Less than an hour later Priscus gave a nod to Pontius and Herius to spread the word among their own squadrons to mount up. Four hundred men followed Priscus eastwards into the night.

Priscus found his station due east of the Parthian camp in about half an hour. This gave him confidence that Lucius, with about twice the distance to cover, would also be in position by now. It was now a matter of waiting and responding to opportunities. He watched the enemy camp, as the stars in the background slowly dropped to the horizon. There were no tents; these must have been lost in the grass fire. Instead, it seemed that the men were sleeping on the ground, open to the stars. That would mean that they would still be in their armour, for the sake of the meagre extra warmth it might lend; or did it mean that they were only in their light clothing, having lost their armour as well as their tents in the fire? No wonder the Parthians had set up so many campfires; they must be freezing! Priscus hoped that their movements in these vital first minutes would be clumsy from cold.

There! Out to the right! He could just make out a ghost of grey on the edge of the reach of the campfire light. Lucius on his grey mare! Surely the Parthians could see him, too!

Priscus sensed rather than saw other shapes moving around that faint smear of grey; and then it was more obvious. Lucius and his men were moving in line abreast towards the camp, at a steady walk. A cry rose from the camp; Lucius held his sabre high, and screamed for the charge. Within the patch of light provided by the fires he saw men rising unsteadily to their feet.

Lucius and his men fell upon the thin line of sentries and swept over them. Then into the camp proper, slashing at men as they tried to run, others as they fumbled among their kit on the ground beside them, and at horses tethered to stakes in the ground. Priscus could see no armoured horses; apparently even those with full equipment had been relieved of the burden of its weight for the night.

Lucius and his men were well into the camp by now, when the glint of cataphracts swept in from the left. So that's where the armoured horses were; acting as a screen outside the camp, to the south! Reasonable enough, given that was the direction to the Roman camp fires, and they probably had too few to guard the entire perimeter. The blast of a Roman trumpet rose through the night

air. Lucius was calling his men to fall back before the heavies; now if only they would give chase!

But no; the Parthians still apparently held to the same doctrine as last night's attack; it would be pointless for the slower heavy cataphracts to try to chase down the Roman light horse. The Parthians came to a halt on the limit of the effective campfire visibility, to shield from a second sortie. In all this activity and distraction Titus had crept his force forward, and they were now in plain view to the south. Another flashing sabre, and the southern force swept into the camp's now undefended southern perimeter. By now the enemy were on their feet and many had found their equipment; but they had not formed into a formation to resist a cavalry charge. Titus' men swept through them as the cataphracts turned back into the camp to challenge this second attack. Another blast of a trumpet called the southern force men away, to the west. Priscus smiled to himself. Clever work by Titus, to fall away to the west instead of the south! That meant that the eastern quarter of the camp was now exposed.

"Let's do our bit, lads!" Priscus shouted, and charged forward. He heard his force of four hundred horse rise to a canter behind him, and then a gallop as the light improved. The crescent of cataphracts on the north and west of the camp were slow to react; Priscus was into the outer ring of fires before some of them turned towards him. All around him men were hacking and slashing furiously. Then he reached for his own bugle, and blew the loudest blast he could manage. His men turned east and galloped out of the camp and into the shadows. Again the pursuit ended at the edge of the firelight.

Priscus stopped, and turned to take in the scene. The camp was strewn with bodies, of men as well as horses. There was a small clump of unarmoured mounts in the north-west corner, apparently cowering in the protection of their fully-equipped comrades; but not a movement could be seen elsewhere in the camp.

As he watched, a Parthian officer was riding around the southern and eastern parts of the camp, apparently checking for survivors. The Parthian trotted over to the screen of cataphracts facing east and gave orders. The screen turned and walked back to the north-west corner of the camp. The crescent of cataphracts in that corner seemed to fall back slightly, and soon all the surviving Parthians were in a single ring, the armoured horses on the outside and a sorry clump of unarmed men and horses inside their protective perimeter.

Priscus estimated their numbers. About a thousand in full armour, and perhaps that many again helpless. The three raids had taken out eight thousand of the enemy, either dead or wounded so severely that they could not stand with their fellows. He now had a two-to-one advantage in numbers, disregarding the weaponless; but the element of surprise was no longer available.

"Herius, take command if I do not return," Priscus said as he kicked his horse to a walk. He entered the ring of campfires and approached the knot of Persians. He stopped thirty paces short of them. An officer walked his own horse around from the north-west of the clump to face him.

“Men of Parthia!” Priscus cried out in Greek. “Do not die in vain! Your king Sanatruces and his one hundred thousand are dead, trapped and frozen in Armenia. More than ten thousand of your comrades have died over the last few days trying to destroy us; but we have barely been scratched! And now you stand here, perhaps a thousand men and horse fit for battle, against our forces of over forty thousand.” Priscus paused. “You cannot touch us! If you try, you will be mown down by crossbows. And you cannot run from us; every time you try to catch an hour of sleep you will be exposed to a raid such as this; and next time we will bring cross-bows with us, so not even your box formation will save you!”

Priscus paused again, to let his words sink in. “So surrender to us now, and you will live! You have heard how we Romans prefer captives to corpses; so choose life!”

“You say that the Mighty King is dead, Roman; But how do we know this is the truth?” the Parthian officer scoffed.

“It has been two months since he marched north, towards Armenia.” Priscus answered. “By now, all of Armenia is under snow. So where is the Mighty King, if he is not dead? Trapped in Armenia by snow, where he is not able to defend his own territory? Is he really that foolish? Has he even sent back a message?” Priscus hectored him. “No! There has not been any sign of him since he marched into those hills; not even news of a defeat! If he had won that campaign, would there not be news of it? Even if he had lost, would he not have returned? But no, he has not only lost; he has been annihilated!”

“But even if he is alive, he is unable to prevent the capture of his kingdom,” Priscus shrugged. “And nor is he able to save you. If you want to live, that choice is in your own hands now. I will allow you until sunrise to decide.” Priscus turned his horse and trotted back into the darkness.

“Herius, pick four of your best, and tell them to report back to the General what has happened here. My recommendation is that the General send me two hundred cross-bow, and keep marching the rest towards Seleucia. We will destroy this force in the morning unless it surrenders.” Then Priscus turned to Pontius, “Circle around to Titus and Lucius; tell them to fall back half a mile, post sentries, and allow half of their men to sleep for three hours. Then the others can sleep until dawn, all things going well.” Priscus looked back to the Parthian box. He saw that the weaponless men in the centre were now off their horses and on the ground, apparently trying to sleep. “Well, we can't allow that, can we!” Priscus exclaimed. “They don't get to sleep until they surrender! Otherwise they can take turns at being on the cataphracts!” Then he turned to Herius again. “Take control!” before kicking his horse forward again.

He approached the Parthian box again, stopping thirty paces short.

“What is it, Roman?” the Parthian officer asked gruffly.

“Your men must stay on their mounts. They are not permitted to sleep. Any man who does not have a horse shall remain standing,” Priscus ordered.

“You gave us until sunrise, Roman,” the Parthian responded.

Until sunrise, provided you follow orders, you half-wit!" Priscus snapped back. "Next you will claim that we gave you until sunrise so you could attack us. Don't pretend to be even more of a fool than you are!"

"My men are not attacking you, so what is your problem?" the Parthian challenged.

"I don't have to answer your questions, village idiot; just do as I say, or you will regret it. I might yet make a slight change to my offer, and accept surrender only from someone who offers me your head!" Priscus pulled his horse around and trotted back into the darkness. Priscus didn't look back until next to Herius again. The men on the ground in the centre of the Parthian box were being told to stand.

"That's good, Herius," Priscus said. "If you see them trying to sleep again, trot down there and lob a fire-bomb into the middle of their box. Everyone should have two each, so we have plenty to spare. That should wake them up! In the mean time I am taking Pontius' men back to grab some sleep ourselves. Send for me in three hours' time, or when we get a reply from the General."

"Yes sir," Herius looked at the stars to the north, to get some judgement of the time.

Priscus was roused three hours later. He could not believe that he had been able to sleep so well! I hope everyone noticed how calm I am in command, he thought to himself. "Thank you, soldier," he responded. "Now go wake the rest of Pontius' men. Tell him to report back me as soon as his men are on station."

Priscus swung up onto his horse and went forward to find Herius. "The situation, Herius?" he asked.

Herius snapped off a salute. "No substantial change, sir. About an hour ago they spread out a bit more and started cooking on the fires. I told them that no cooking and no sleeping would be allowed until they surrendered." Herius looked a bit apologetic. "I took that upon myself, sir, thinking it was a logical extension of your 'no sleeping' policy."

"Good man! How did they take that?"

"They didn't. So I took out a bomb and lobbed it onto a fire they were cooking on," Herius reported with a shrug. "A few of them got burnt, and the rest got the message. There has been no cooking since."

"Thanks for that, Herius. Now you and your men can get some sleep as soon as Pontius reports in. I'll have Pontius' men cook breakfast for you all."

"Thank you, sir."

Pontius appeared next to him even as he spoke. "All my men are up, sir. Thanks for the sleep." Herius turned away to order his men to rest.

"Excellent! Pontius, have a man go around to Lucius and Titus, asking them to send a report of their situation. Off you go!"

Time passed. After an hour or so, the four messengers he had sent to Silo reported back.

"Sir! The General commends you for your work, and approves of your offer of terms," their leader said crisply. "He advises that he has detached two

hundred cross-bow infantry who should arrive here in a couple of hours. He will continue the march as you suggest, and directs you to continue acting on your own best judgement while reporting back regularly.”

“Have you been rehearsing that all the way back here, soldier?” Priscus asked.

The cavalryman smiled. “Most of the way, sir. It doesn't hurt to impress, if you ever get the chance.”

“You have impressed,” Priscus replied with his own smile. “Now, you have all earned a bit of sleep. Most of your squadron are about half a mile back, but feel free to flop down nearby if you like. We will know where you are when we see your horse by daylight.”

Pontius dared to make a comment about Silo's orders. “General, if my Commanding Officer gave me orders like that, I would take it as the highest possible compliment.”

“It is that, Pontius; but the General himself is the one who taught me how to earn it,” Priscus answered. “Whatever merit I might have as a soldier, I owe it all to the way the General has trained me.” Priscus drifted in his own mind back to that exercise on Rhodes, at the start of the Mithridatic War. “You would not believe how badly I commanded when the General first took me under his wing. Piso Gallienus and I were the worst of all his legates; and now Piso is Consul!”

The moon had risen a couple of hours after midnight, which had helped in finding his scattered forces around the cornered Parthians; but now there was a hint of the dawn in the east.

“I think it is time to start up some fires and start cooking breakfast, Pontius,” Priscus announced. “Have every contubernium cook double rations, then each will rouse some of Herius' men and share. They did not have as much sleep as your men. Oh, and I'll have some food too, please.”

“Yes, sir.” Pontius walked his horse back to give orders.

Priscus sat watching the Parthians. They were still in a box formation, so Herius must have made his point strongly enough. It must have been half an hour before Pontius returned with some flatbread and water. By this time there was ample light for the Parthians to see for miles in every direction; but the Roman cavalry were not visible, having concealed themselves in dips in the rolling terrain.

“Are all of Herius' men up and fed?”

“They are eating even as we speak, sir.”

“Then get around to Lucius and Titus, and make sure they are fully battle-ready. They must be ready to commence hostilities against the Parthians if they do not surrender, but not act unless ordered. They are to present themselves on crests, so as to be visible to the enemy,” Priscus instructed. “Then return to me here. Meanwhile I will command your men and Herius' to do the same.”

By the time the sun was clear of the eastern horizon there were two thousand Roman cavalry ringing the Parthians. Priscus rode forward to the enemy box.

“Do we have your surrender, Parthians?” he bellowed. “Or would you rather die?”

“You do not have the force to make good that threat, Roman!” the Parthian commander bellowed back. “We have sufficient heavy cataphracts to repulse any attack you might make!”

Priscus smiled, and extended his hands out to the sides. “Then we will not attack you!” he answered. “Instead, we will harry you so that you cannot sleep, cannot eat, and cannot find water. And if you try to chase us away, you will be leaving your unarmed comrades to our mercy.”

“You cannot fool us, Roman!” the Parthian shouted back. “Those of us who are fully battle-fit will ride right through you; and those who are not will surrender. You value our men as slaves, so you will not kill them. You will treat them the same as you would if we all surrendered. But this way there will be a thousand of us to warn Seleucia. The Mighty King will reward us well!”

“That is partly true, Parthian,” Priscus responded. “You are right; we will not harm those whom you abandon. They will live. But you will not live. You will not be rewarded by your Mighty King, because he is neither Mighty nor King; he is just so much hawk-shit by now. Instead, you will be harried all the way to Seleucia, not permitted to sleep or eat. Within two days you will be mad from lack of sleep, and weak from hunger, and you will be easy to pick off a dozen at a time when we bring in the cross-bows. My men will be able to sleep and eat in turns as our lighter horses can move at twice your speed.

“But as you rightly say; we value you as slaves, and would rather not kill you. So surrender now, or die over the next couple of days. Your choice!” Priscus offered. Priscus heard one man speak to the officer, but did not understand the language. Another joined him. The officer turned in anger and drew his sword.

The other two drew their swords in response, followed by a few more of the mounted men. The officer looked around him in surprise at this response, and then slowly re-sheathed his sword.

“We surrender to you, Roman!” he said bitterly.

“Then all of you dismount, tie your horses' reins together, drop your armour and weapons, and start walking to the west.”

The officer shouted out orders in some incomprehensible tongue, and the Parthians started to dismount and remove their armour. Priscus guessed from their promptness that this was a rather welcome decision. As the last of the Parthians left the circle of standing horses, Priscus shouted an order to Pontius behind him. “Secure those horses, Pontius; they are worth more than the men!”

Everyone in Seleucia knew that Sanatruces had led almost two hundred thousand men northwards, including his flank protection, and everyone with any authority knew that the Romans could oppose him with only six or eight novice legions, at most forty thousand untested men, led by a fresh governor.

But here, in front of them, was the legendary Silo! Sanatruces and his overwhelming force had not only been annihilated, but at such little cost to the

Romans that they could still march all the way down the River in less than two months with their full force intact. How could Silo, with only forty thousand men, confront and defeat two hundred thousand? And still have his original forty thousand battle-ready?

The Governor of Seleucia did not quibble when Silo presented the city with the usual conditions; officers would go free, half the soldiers would be enslaved and half would go free, and the city would not be subject to rape, pillage or destruction, but would be permitted to govern itself in peace; provided it surrendered immediately. The gates were opened that same day, and the five-thousand strong garrison ordered out to their fate.

That was when Silo used his secret weapon. He decreed that all surrendered soldiers, without exception, would be granted freedom in their own lands, as soon as all of Mesopotamia was subdued. Until then, the men would be taken to Syria to work as labourers, but they would not be abused and would be able to return as soon as resistance to the Republic ended.

Ctesiphon, only a few miles away, accepted the same terms and was similarly rewarded. Silo left a legion in each, and then turned north to liberate Assur and Arbela. By the time winter closed its grip, the whole of the lowlands north of Babylon had been pacified. Silo set up his headquarters in Ctesiphon, and ordered the captured garrison soldiers to be released as he had promised. This action, combined with his honouring of the other conditions of surrender and the discipline imposed on his soldiers, extinguished any remaining resistance. Silo was a more gentle governor than Sanatruces had ever pretended to be!

News of the fall of Ctesiphon and the presumed death of Sanatruces and his hundred thousand triggered the collapse of the western half of the Parthian empire. In January Silo sent four legions to the south, and quickly gained the submission of Susa and Charax without resistance. A new Pretender arose in Parthia proper, but he was not recognised by the myriad of petty states, cities and tribes that made up the Eastern half of the empire, and the whole region was fragmented. Silo claimed all the territory up to the foothills of the Zagros Mountains, and made treaties with the handful of petty princelings that sprang up in cities like Ecbatana and Persepolis. At last! Silo's long dream had come true; a peaceful, natural frontier!

By the time the Mediterranean was open for shipping after the winter, Silo controlled Mesopotamia all the way down to the Southern Sea and a peaceful frontier beyond. And once again, he had achieved this with almost no casualties.

Chapter 4 – 681 AUC (73 B.C.)

“Congratulations, Caius! Republic Praetor for your Tribe in your first year!” Aurelia said to her son when he returned from the Forum. The only mass votes still held in Rome were the Tribal Elections, all other matters having been devolved to the Roman Comitia to be decided by the Tribal Representatives. But of course, the elections of those Representatives still required a mass vote.

Caesar waved it away. “It is only the first step, mother. It is admission at the lowest level, and nothing to be proud of.”

“Not so! You are a Republic Praetor, not a pedarius. And not many manage to enter in their first eligible year,” Aurelia persisted.

Caesar tightened his lips as if to say 'How tiresome!'. As far as Caesar was concerned, better to not be in the Senate than to be pedarius! He walked past her into his office. Lucia walked after him, to convey her pride in him.

“Ah, Lucia!” Caesar suddenly took interest. “I hear that a new High Priest of Jupiter has been appointed while I was overseas.”

“Yes, Caius,” she answered.

“Good,” Caesar said with satisfaction. “That means I no longer need a Plebeian wife to ensure I am not made High Priest again. You have a month to move your things out. I will divorce you then.”

“Divorce?” Lucia repeated, stunned.

“Yes, divorce,” Caesar repeated. “I am Caius Julius Caesar, and I will have a wife of impeccable lineage. You are not it.”

“Yes, Caius,” Lucia said quietly, and walked away. Although she dare not show it, her heart sang within her. Free!

News of Silo's conquest of Mesopotamia with only eight legions was the wonder of Rome. Which left Caesar with a black rage which he concealed well in his chest. The entire campaign to entrap the main Parthian force in the mountains of Armenia had been reduced to a minor detail; his own genius in making possible the overthrow of Parthia was completely overlooked.

He would have to make sure that one of the minor officers wrote and published an account, taking care to highlight Caesar's brilliance at every turn. It might cost a few sesterces, but it would be a wise investment in his political career. And to make it as easy as possible for this other officer to get everything right, he set to the task of writing it for him. Meanwhile, he busied himself with studying the background of every matter to come before the Senate, and building a reputation for understanding even the smallest details, often better than the proponents themselves. He was intent on becoming an opinion leader. He was determined that by the time he reached his fortieth year, the youngest age allowable for a Consul, he would be the automatic selection as Senior Consul.

To do this he would need to align himself with either the Populares or the Italian Party; the Boni were a bunch of dolts who would never accept his innovative imagination. Until last year he would have thought that the antipathy of Uncle Sextus would make headway within the Populares difficult, but the old man had finally died. Young Marius was now the nominal head of the Populares, but other

prominent members were starting to see how shallow he was, and the gloss of the great Marius name was starting to fade as the generation that remembered the Cimbri died out. The Cottae and Carbo were the senior Popularis figures now, were still young enough to control that faction for years to come, and neither owed Caesar anything. Vopiscus had dropped out of politics now, and was back to writing plays, his real love. Caesar's only strong connection into the Populares was his up-bringing in the Subura; this stamped him as instinctively against the privileges of the Boni. On the other hand, he had no family links into the Italianist faction, but he had served under the legendary Silo.

So would he be better if he presented himself as a bridge between the two, a man whom both sides could respect? Perhaps so; but safer to do that from a position firmly inside one, and reaching out to the other. That settled it! Silo was the pin-up General now, and Caesar had served under Silo. That would be his path, and he would use that ladder. He would cultivate the legendary Silo and use the fawning Sertorius as much as possible.

“You great screaming idiot!” Claudius yelled at Bocar. “I have sweated blood trying to keep you within at least sight of the law; and now you go and do something this stupid! Stupid!” Claudius flopped his hands in exasperation. “You have probably stuffed my career as well! What a reward I get, for keeping you under control for as long as I have!” he spat out in self-pity. “I should have just written to the Senate a year ago and said you were a disaster waiting to happen; but instead I was patient; I thought you had at least enough rat-cunning to not do anything so BLOODY STUPID!!”

Bocar was no less furious with this scrawny administrator, whom he held in complete disrespect anyway for his lack of physical presence. To Bocar, a man was a warrior or he was nothing. “You call me stupid one more time, you desiccated little turd, and I will take your head off with my bare hands!” He roared back.

“Just try it, Sunshine!” Claudius yelled back at him. “One step towards me and these soldiers will make sure you don't take a second step!” The challenge to Bocar was almost irresistible, but with his last shreds of will-power he held back. “So let's try to solve this problem,” Claudius continued with only a slight reduction in volume and sarcasm, “and the first step in solving the problem is to recognise the cause. And the cause is that you are incredibly STUPID! So shut your face, speak only to answer my questions, and listen carefully to someone who not only knows better than you, but is also your best chance of escaping from this mess still alive,” Claudius ordered. “Now, sit down!”

Bocar forced himself back onto his chair.

“Now, the men who make up this Dam Authority you appointed while I was in Utica; on what criteria did you base your selections?” Claudius asked.

“I thought they would be good for the job.”

Claudius rolled his eyes in despair. “*Why* did you think they would be good for the job? What were your criteria?”

“Because they were from the area of the proposed dam; they know the country.”

“What utter bullshit! You picked them because they are your clansmen! I warn you, if you come up with an answer like that before the Inquiry, you will be torn apart.” Claudius shook his head in disbelief. “How can I keep you out of trouble?” He sighed. “Listen, Sunshine; you are walking around with targets on your chest, your head, and your balls.” Claudius told him. “If you want to survive this blunder, then you will have to have to do exactly as I say. Do you understand, you idiot?”

Bocar used his ultimate reserves of self-control to resist the urge to strangle Claudius on the spot. “What do you suggest?” Bocar asked.

“First, abolish this Dam Authority immediately, and withhold any payments out of Treasury to anyone connected with it. Pay out of your own pocket if you have to, but not a sesterius from Treasury or you will be charged with Fraud,” Claudius told him, ticking off one finger. “Next, if you really have your heart set on this scheme, do it properly. Declare an intention to build dams, and invite people to apply for a seat on the Dam Authority. All applicants must demonstrate that they have specific skills that would make their involvement beneficial to the province as a whole,” Claudius ticked off a second finger. “That means they must be engineers who have built or designed such works before and can estimate the costs and the water yields accurately, farming experts who know what crops are best suited to the lands you intend to irrigate and how much water they will need, bankers who know how to determine whether or not the cost is worth the benefits that will accrue, and how to raise the funds for the works and how to pay off the debt; or how to pay for it out of revenue, if that is possible,” Claudius explained. “This will include compensation for anyone adversely affected, so get it out of your mind that you can use this to plunge Bomilcar into an eternal drought.”

“And third,” continued Claudius, “invite suggestions from anyone about what dams should be built where, and what is to be gained from building them. Then, when all applications and suggestions are in, we will appoint an Authority of experts, and not just your friends, and they can read all the suggestions, consider their own ideas, and eventually make recommendations,” Claudius concluded. “And you'd better have bloody good reasons if you do not follow whatever suggestions they might make, because the Republic Senate will be watching over your shoulder.”

“Bah!” Bocar responded. “What you are describing is rubbish! I am in authority here; but you would turn me into the slave of those who are supposed to be my advisors!”

Claudius smiled a smile of pure joy. “At last you understand, Bocar!” he exclaimed. “That is exactly what good government is all about! Public money being spent for the public benefit, in accordance with the advice of men who know how to spend it most efficiently!”

Bocar sighed impatiently. “Then bugger this so-called 'good government'! I will privately suggest to Toba that he call together all the nobles of Numidia for

a friendly meeting. Just to discuss the weather and the prospects for a good harvest, you see, nothing illegal. And while they are there doing that, it is just remotely possible that they might think that Numidia should revert to its former independent status. 'Good-bye the Republic; we can run our own house better without your help!' Numidia might withdraw from the Republic, thank you very much!"

Claudius tilted his head to one side as he considered this possibility. He also considered several others.

"Well?" Bocar challenged him. "What is to stop that from happening?"

"Sorry to take so long," Claudius replied. "But there are just so many possible outcomes. I was trying to find one that you might like."

"Very smart!" Bocar sneered. "So amuse me; tell me some of these outcomes, and how they might be achieved."

Claudius looked around, saw a chair, and dragged it over to Bocar's. "The first and most obvious consideration affecting all possible outcomes is that sovereignty over Numidia rests with the Republic Senate, and not any haphazard group of Numidian nobles. From that basis, were you to suggest – which you haven't yet; we are just talking hypotheticals here – were you to suggest that possibility, the following possible outcomes can be listed." Claudius started counting off his fingers again.

"The first and most obvious is that I could ask these soldiers to arrest you on a charge of plotting rebellion against the Republic. That would cost you your head. The second is that we wait for you to make that suggestion to Toba, and arrest both of you. That would cost you a head each. The third is that we could wait for Toba to convene his little gathering, and round up all the nobles. That would cost a lot of heads. The fourth is that we could wait until the nobles actually proclaim an independent Numidia, and then we send in the legions. That would cost perhaps a hundred thousand heads, but there would be plenty of money to be made from confiscation of all property and wealth in Numidia, and enslavement of the entire Numidian population." Claudius smiled provocatively and leant towards Bocar. "I must apologise that I cannot yet think of a fifth possibility, but I am sure there must be others. Which do you prefer so far?"

That smile was the last straw for Bocar. Rising from his seat, he put all of his considerable strength into a backhand across that mocking grin. Claudius was sent sprawling.

"Arrest him!" Claudius shouted. Bocar heard the unmistakeable sound of half-a-dozen gladii being drawn, and the tread of sandals behind him. "Stand where you are, lord Bocar," he heard the order from the decanus behind him. "Do not attempt to move, or we will strike."

Bocar spread his hands wide, and turned slowly. "You heard that little piece of shit! I have put up with his insolence too long already. Now get him out of my auditorium!" he ordered as he dropped his hands to his side.

"If you would please come with me, lord Bocar," the decanus answered, gesturing towards the door.

"If you would please get rid of that bag of offal on my floor," Bocar returned. "I am Ethnarch; he is an insubordinate clerk."

"Decanus," Claudius broke in. "Take him to a holding cell, on my authority; I will go to my office now and write out a writ for his arrest and trial."

"What total bullshit!" Bocar exclaimed. "On what charge? I was simply swatting an annoying insect that had landed on your cheek!"

Claudius simply gestured with a flick of his wrist towards the door.

"Do not resist arrest, lord Bocar," the decanus advised. "It is sometimes difficult to poke hard enough to get a prisoner moving without poking so hard that it causes injury." A jab in Bocar's right buttock served to illustrate his point. Bocar roared his anger, and turned to stare down his assailant.

"Three of you go with him, to make sure he doesn't try anything really stupid," Claudius ordered. "All of you men," Claudius addressed the guards, "I would like each of you to write down the conversation you heard, as well as you can remember it. Do not discuss it among yourselves, just each man use his own memory. These statements may be used in evidence."

"Starting from what time, lord?" one of the men asked.

"Since I walked into this room, if possible," Claudius answered. "Exact words in so far as you can recall them, and general meaning where that is the best you can confidently manage." Claudius picked himself up off the floor at last. "I will send ink, paper and pens to you from my office."

"Right," the decanus acknowledged. Then to Bocar, "If you would care to walk behind these two soldiers to the holding cells, lord Bocar?"

Bocar looked from one grim face to the next. "I understand that you are acting under orders, so no harm will come to you," he pledged roughly. He turned to Claudius, "You will not be so lucky!" Then he turned and walked out of the room behind two of his escorts.

"I would not be too worried, good Father," Toba advised Bocar when he came to visit the next morning. "If these Romans intended to kill you, you would be dead already. It is much more likely that they are trying to intimidate you into doing whatever they say. They want to be the real power behind the throne and cream off all the wealth, while keeping you on hand to blame if things go wrong for them. You are their excuse!"

"You are right, of course," Bocar agreed with his son-in-law. "But I do not want to spend my days walking from this cell to the auditorium and back, their puppet. You must go to Rome, and find an ally who will have me freed, and these maggots done away with." He held Toba by the upper arms and smiled warmly. "I could not have asked for a better heir!"

"I will leave for Rome tomorrow! Be patient, and we will win!" Toba pledged.

That afternoon Lucianus walked into Claudius' office. Claudius smiled a lop-sided smile and stood to welcome his guest.

"Wow! Bocar's rings are a pretty nasty weapon!" Lucianus exclaimed as he saw Claudius' lacerated right cheek.

“You're not joking!” Claudius replied. “A couple of teeth loosened as well, but the dentist says they will survive.”

“So what do you intend to charge him with?” Lucianus asked as he slid into a chair.

“The first charge will be Perduellio. It seems popular around here,” Claudius said with a wry grin, referring to the executions under Telesinus. “I haven't decided yet whether or not to add corruption, citing the various attempts to use public money and property for his personal enrichment. I'm inclined to do so, just to paint a better background for the main charge.”

“Sounds like you are trying to use corruption to prejudice the main case,” Lucianus commented.

“It is not prejudicial if it is part of the charge sheet,” Claudius rejoined. “And besides, that bastard struck me, if you haven't already noticed, with a backhand. Like I was some female slave! My revenge might not be 'honourable' by his barbarian standards, but it will be all the sweeter for his powerlessness against it!”

“It sounds like you have a case of 'Short Man Syndrome' to me,” Lucianus commented distastefully. “I would never have guessed it of you.”

Claudius grimaced rather than smiled. “When a large man strikes back, it is considered 'Defence of His Honour'; when a small man does it, they call it 'Short Man Syndrome'! To me, this hair-splitting sounds like hypocrisy, whatever size it comes in.”

Lucianus raised his hands as if to ward off an attack. “I am not arguing, Titus! You are right; it is a double-standard, and I apologise.”

Claudius smiled more comfortably and visibly relaxed. “Us little buggers have got to fight twice as hard to get half as much, Gaius; so I suppose it does become a mind-set after a while. Which is why I hate bullies; they don't know what courage is themselves because they never pick a fight against a more powerful opponent; but they are always ready to call their weaker victims 'cowards'. I will guarantee that Bocar would have been able to control his temper much better if I had been twice his weight instead of only half it!” Claudius was obviously relishing the situation. “That's cowardice for you!”

“Actually, Titus,” Lucianus said after a moment of thought, “I agree that you should throw the whole book at him. Let this be not only a conviction for his big crimes, but also a humiliation for his petty greed. Let him stand as a warning to everyone who might even imagine doing the same! But that is not what I came to talk to you about,” Lucianus changed the subject. “Toba wanted to know if he would be permitted to take a couple of dozen armed men with him to Rome, or would that be against some law or other. At least he has the wit to ask first, I suppose.”

“So Toba is going to try to go over our heads?” Claudius muttered. “Excellent! The more he complains about how we have behaved, the more obvious it will become that we were trying to protect Bocar from his own idiocy. I will ask for any complaints against us to be heard by the Senate Committee for the College of Administrators, in accordance with the Rufan Law; they will know

what the issues are.” Claudius looked up. “When is he going to leave for Rome?”

“Tomorrow, he says,” Lucianus answered. “He wanted a century to act as honour guard and escort; not all of the local nobles like him.”

“Did you agree to that?” Claudius asked.

“Yes; two centuries are due for a month's leave in Utica, so I told him to go with them.”

“Good,” Claudius responded. “I will go with them too, and take Bocar with me to be tried in Rome. They will be a good escort for Bocar. I dare not leave him here. I'll make sure the guards have their statements ready and witnessed, and I'll start packing. If you would be kind enough to write a statement about the idiocies he has tried to push through you, too, I would be most grateful. You know, the intention to march on Bomilcar, and so on. He has suggested quite a few loony ideas so far.”

“I will get back to my office and start writing now,” Lucianus said with a grin.

Bocar was allowed the run of the city once they arrived in Rome, on no bond other than his and Toba's pledge that he would attend the hearings for the charges that he and Claudius had lodged against each other. He and Toba had enough sense to know they should engage a good Roman advocate before speaking to anyone. Bocar in particular was aware that Romans had an up-side down way of looking at the proper exercise of power, and that anything perfectly reasonable to him might seem barbaric to a Roman senator. That was how they came to find themselves in the office of Marcus Tullius Cicero on a cold afternoon in February. Bocar was confident that by the time he had finished his story any reasonable man would see how these upstart junior officials had thwarted him at every turn.

Cicero leant forward in his chair. “You understand, of course, that killing Hemsal does not make you popular here,” he commented.

“We have already been told that we have no case to answer for that.” Bocar answered. “That was known long before Telesinus appointed me Ethnarch, so it is not relevant.”

“It is relevant if you want to portray yourself as an eternal victim,” Cicero responded. “Rome has some sympathy for regicides; but only if they do not claim the throne for themselves. Otherwise, you are simply a ruthless rebel. And you, Bocar, do not seem the helpless victim type. So I would suggest that you do not provide the court with any more context than is absolutely demanded by the charges. The less you say, the better. Do you understand?”

Bocar nodded. This Cicero guy is supposed to be one of the best.

“Now, the big charge is High Treason, the specifics being that you threatened to lead Numidia to recant loyalty to the Republic and establish an independent kingdom.” Cicero went on. He looked up from his notes. “Did you do that?”

“Well, no,” Bocar answered uncomfortably.

“Then what did you say?” Cicero demanded.

“Only that certain Numidian nobles might discuss whether or not Numidia should be independent.”

“Which ones, and why?” Cicero snapped out.

“I don't know that I named any names,” Bocar answered evasively.

Cicero was growing impatient. “Are you telling me that Titus Claudius invented all this out of thin air?” he demanded. “If you tell me the whole story now, it gives me time to think of a way of handling it. But if the first I know about the details is when the prosecutor speaks, then I will have a much harder time when I have to argue in your favour.”

Bocar took a deep breath. “I had appointed a Dam Authority. I intended them to build a dam to irrigate some lands, but Claudius said I need to have selection criteria before I can put anyone on the public purse. I told him that I pissed on these silly Roman rules that only get in the way. That I had half a mind to have a meeting of Numidian nobles, and see if they would prefer to re-establish the kingdom the way Numidia has always been, instead of letting twerps like Claudius make us jump through Roman hoops all the time.” Bocar paused for a moment. “But that was not what he found objectionable; that was only an excuse. The real reason he is prosecuting me is that when I told him all this, he smiled at me, he mocked me. So I slapped him to the floor. And that is what this is really all about. That feeble little mouse dared me, and I rose to the challenge; now he is running to daddy like a girl instead of defending himself like a man!”

Cicero stared at Bocar for a minute. Then he spoke.

“Bocar, I am a good advocate. And I usually speak in defence, because a living client who is grateful is more politically beneficial than a dead enemy. That is how I made my reputation.” Cicero sighed deeply. “But that only works when the defendant has some redeeming qualities; otherwise I might become known as a friend of villains. Therefore, I cannot accept your case,” Cicero stood. “You might find someone to represent you, and you might even keep your head. But to be honest, I hope not. Good-bye, gentlemen!” he said gesturing towards the door.

Bocar's counter-suit alleged Wrongful Imprisonment and Obstruction of a Public Officer. It was no accident that Cicero offered his services as advocate for Claudius to defend these charges. Bocar's case was laughed out of court.

Claudius' main allegation, however, was not supported. It was clear that Bocar had not actually rebelled, nor had urged anyone else to rebel; he had only drawn a hypothetical. Bocar kept his head. But he did not keep his property. He was found guilty of Gross Corruption on several counts, sentenced to exile, and all his property was confiscated to the Republic.

Claudius welcomed the sentence. “That land will be useful for settling Roman soldiers one day!” he crowed. “All it needs is a good dam to provide irrigation. I'll get that project going as soon as I return.”

To Marius Egnatius and Caius Norbanus, Consuls of the Republic,

from Quintus Sertorius, Military Governor of Pontus and Armenia,

Greetings, and my congratulations on your election as Consuls!

I have already sent a Report to the Senate on the recent Parthian War, not knowing the outcome of the elections at that time. I have not received any confirmation that the news has reached Rome as I write this letter, so I beg your patience as I summarise the main points, in case my first Report has gone astray.

In the last months of last year Sanatruces attacked Armenia again, at the head of a force of some one hundred and thirty thousand men. This force was totally annihilated by my six legions. Quintus Poppaedius Silo, at the head of eight legions due to return home, launched a counter-attack through Syria and conquered all of Mesopotamia, as far as the Southern Sea. Republic casualties in both theatres of war were very light. Quintus Poppaedius has worked tirelessly over the winter to organise the proper administration of the new lands.

The remainder of the Parthian Empire collapsed in a series of local revolts, and treaties were made with all of the successor-states bordering our new territories. The last significant power that could threaten us in the East has now been destroyed. This completely changes the strategic situation of the Republic for the better.

Therefore I seek permission to hold a Triumph in celebration of this successful war, featuring those eight legions who were due to return home at the end of last year but who were instead diverted to the Mesopotamian campaign. I expect this might best be done in Quinctilis. I await your response.

Egnatius passed the letter back to his colleague.

“I understand why he would want a Triumph more than the average general,” Norbanus said. “I know he felt humiliated by his electoral loss to Caesar six years ago, and this Triumph would wash away that stain.”

“And as an Italian, I am still embarrassed that we allowed that to happen,” Egnatius replied. “You can be certain that no Italian would deny him whatever he asks, to atone for that insult. Certainly, give him his Triumph! That has been done in the past for many victories less impressive and less important than the conquest of Parthia!”

“Conscript Fathers, it is two years since the death of King Hempsal of Numidia.” Telesinus turned on his left heel as he paused. “Those two years have been turbulent, culminating in the trial for corruption of the Ethnarch, and what amounts to the effective appointment of Titus Claudius to administer Numidia until the Senate decides whether to appoint another Ethnarch or a regular Governor.

“As the man most closely associated with the extension of our Republic to Numidia, and aware of all the background that might not be generally known, I am as unhappy with both of these future options as I am with the current management. I am also aware that the Lafrenian Law requires that a Tribe be an

entire community, and not only part of a community. At present we have Africa Tribe, which is only a small part of the total Berber Nation on the southern coast of Our Sea. This Berber Nation is currently divided between the Tribe of Africa, the Province of Numidia, and the Kingdom of Mauritania, our Friend and Ally. This is not in accordance with the Lafrenian Law.

“I recommend that Africa Tribe be extended to cover all the Berber lands under the control of the Republic. At present that means that Africa will be increased to include Numidia; and if at some future time the King of Mauritania should bequeath his lands to the Republic, then Africa should be expanded yet further. The only difficulty I see is that the Tribal Stipend for Africa was originally assessed three years ago on the basis of the much smaller area and population under Republic Administration at that time. The transfer of Numidia to Africa would deprive the Republic of the taxes and other revenues that would otherwise be due to it, while Africa Tribe would enjoy an unwarranted benefit.” Telesinus started pacing the floor slowly.

“It would also put in front of any future African Comitia a sore temptation to repeat the crimes of two years ago; to provoke a war with our Friend and Ally Mauritania, so as to gain the benefit of Mauritanian assets; a war that the Republic would be dragged into and have to pay for, while Africa Tribe gains all the benefit. This difficulty can be overcome by increasing the Tribal Stipend in proportion to the value of the additional territory. Therefore, I propose that Africa Tribe be required to administer the former Numidian lands as part of its own territory, and in consideration of the additional Tribal income generated from these lands the Tribal Stipend shall be increased. Now, I realise that these new lands are somewhat wild, with little if any infrastructure, and will therefore not be as productive at first as they will be eventually; so I will allow a ten-year transition period, in which the additional Stipend is increased by one tenth of the additional amount each year. I commend this proposal to the Senate.”

Several men on the front row popped to their feet immediately. Unfortunately Metellus Pius, being an ex-Censor, was the most senior of these, and was entitled to the call.

“I warned you not to accept Africa as a Tribe, Conscript Fathers!” Metellus started his usual harangue. “I told you there would be problems, and since that fateful day we have had nothing but problems! The whole fabric of the Republic will fray if we do not turn away from the idiocy enshrined in the Lafrenian Law! This Senate must re-assert control over the Republic, instead of giving its authority away, one slice after another!

“So what does Pontius Telesinus recommend? Precisely the opposite! He recommends giving away yet more land to a Tribe that is not even a Tribe! His advice to combine Africa and Numidia is the only intelligent thing he said; but this consolidation must be to re-establish Africa as a Province, not as an even larger and more unruly Tribe! Even when he gets it right, he manages to get it totally wrong!” Metellus waved a hand in annoyance. “Return all of Africa and Numidia to Provincial status, and when you see how well that works we can then do the same to Italian Gaul, and then Sicily.”

Lafrenius stood and was recognised. “Caius Norbanus,” he opened acknowledging the Consul. “Quintus Caecilius always says of any proposal that 'there will be problems'. And he is always proved right, eventually. That is because no-matter what we do, or don't do, problems are what happen in this world.

“Perhaps he forgets that there were 'problems' in Asia long before the Miletus Decree was posted. Perhaps he forgets that there were 'problems' in Sicily before it was granted Tribal status. In fact, I recall Gaius Aurelius Cotta asking him to predict exactly *what* problems would arise if Italian Gaul were granted Tribal status. Well, Italian Gaul is now a Tribe. What terrible problems have arisen?” Lafrenius looked around the chamber. “Have we had an increase in the number of horses born with two heads? Have those savages north of the Rubicon started howling at the moon? Have the augurs noticed birds flying backwards?” A ripple of chuckles ran through the audience.

“So far, in a career of doom-saying over a period of almost twenty years, Quintus Caecilius has not got one specific prediction right; not one! And of all the problems that actually have arisen over that time, he has foreseen none; not one of them!” Lafrenius started strolling casually. “Now, I personally don't mind this state of affairs,” he confessed. “I find it quite entertaining, in a satirical sort of way! And anything that makes my political opponents look so silly has got to be good for me!

“But I don't think it is fair for the more intelligent of the Boni to be trapped in this way of guilt-by-association. And it is also not fair to them that the whole tone of the debate on their side is poisoned by their first speaker. Now, Quintus Caecilius is an ex-Censor; nothing should ever take away his seniority and his right to speak ahead of any other person except another Censor. But I do propose one slight change to our Standing Orders; that whenever Quintus Caecilius speaks against a proposal, he should be followed immediately by *another* speaker against the proposal, to reduce the damage he does to his own side.” A chorus of chuckles ran around the chamber as Lafrenius sat.

Cato stood and was recognised.

“I must say at the start that I am not impressed by what Titus Lafrenius seems to consider a display of keen wit.” Cato said heavily. “However, I have in the past been guilty of similar disrespect in this chamber, so I suppose it is not for me to rebuke him; I can only ask him to turn away from disrespectful language, as I have tried to do myself. So let us consider the substantive issues here, and not play personalities.

“I do not see any way of undoing the fact that Africa has Tribal status, short of them staging a revolt against the Republic and thereby forfeiting that status. I doubt that will happen; I pray it will not. Nor do I think that we can demand that Africa increase its Stipend; that has been fixed. It could be argued that the Lafrenian Law requires Africa to take control of Numidia as part of a single Berber community, but that is a different thing from demanding an increased Stipend if it does so. So I would suggest that we need to negotiate this with Africa, rather than coming in with a heavy hand. Let us agree on a new

Stipend; and if the Africans are unwilling to pay what we can accept as a fair Stipend, then we will continue to administer Numidia as a separate Province until an agreement is reached.

“But I trust that will not take too long,” Cato said with a surprising shift of countenance. “Because the Republic is probably the largest purchaser of grain in the world. We could let it be known that we will not feed our armies from grain grown in Africa, but grow our own on the land confiscated from Bocar. We will not allow Republic ships to dock or provision from African ports. We will close our naval yard in Carthage, and instead use Caralis in Sardinia; which would be of great assistance to that Province, and allow us to reclaim our expenses there in increased taxes, which we do not get from Africa any more.” Cato nodded, as if to himself. “Yes, I think we could come up with a whole range of measures that might encourage genuine dialogue and negotiation on this question.” Cato sat and a murmur ran around the chamber. This was a total fracture of the Boni leadership; Cato was supporting the expansion of Africa, and even giving Lafrenius the tools he needs to achieve his aim.

Cotta stood, and received the call. “Conscript Fathers, even when I disagree with Lucius Porcius, I acknowledge that he rarely, if ever, makes an error in Law,” Cotta commenced. “But on this occasion I not only acknowledge that he is correct in law; I also agree that the solution he outlines is worthy of fuller consideration. I move that the debate on the proposal by Pontius Telesinus be suspended for two months; during which time Pontius Telesinus, the two Consuls, Lucius Porcius and Quintus Caecilius are asked to meet with the African Republic Praetors to negotiate a more refined proposal.

“I choose these members of the negotiating Committee deliberately, Conscript Fathers. Pontius Telesinus selects himself, by virtue of his understanding of the history of Numidia over the last few years. The Consuls, as the Chief Magistrates of the Republic, are an automatic selection as well; as are the African Republic Praetors. My inclusion of Lucius Porcius is in recognition of his vast experience as a five-time Consul and a Censor, as well as his contribution to the issue from a perspective not politically aligned with the first three members. I add Quintus Caecilius also for his experience as a Consul and Censor as well as his political perspective; I would very much like there to be a consensus on this matter, and his inclusion in this negotiating team will ensure that the widest possible variety of opinions is taken into the discussions.” Cotta sat, and Lucius Julius Caesar rose to speak.

“I support the proposal by Gaius Aurelius, and ask the Senate to resolve this question immediately.”

Norbanus looked around the terraces. “Is there any objection to the proposal by Gaius Aurelius, that the debate be suspended and a negotiating Committee be formed, to report back within two months?” There was silence.

“Then I put the question; those in favour?” A strong response of 'Aye' arose. “Those against?” No voices were opposed. “Then the question is resolved in the affirmative. I would be grateful if those seven men could meet and deal with the issue of Numidia as a matter of urgency.

The African Praetors rose. Norbanus recognised the Senior. “Yes, Lucius Carenius?”

“We call upon the patience of the Senate and the other five members of the Committee. We feel it is proper for us to return to Utica to discuss this matter with our Comitia, and return with better instructions.”

Norbanus flicked a glance to his colleague Egnatius, who gave a slight nod. “That would be most helpful, thank you, Lucius,” he responded. “Our next order of business is a letter from Quintus Sertorius, the conqueror of Parthia. He has requested the right to hold a Triumph on the Ides of Quinctilis.”

The Populares Senators, who had already discussed their response to this, leapt to their feet to applaud this proposal. They were followed quickly by the Italianists. The front bench of the Boni looked to each other and also rose, to be followed by the remaining Boni who took their cue from this.

“Then I will write to confirm that the Triumph will be held on that date,” Norbanus announced as the applause died down.

Aurelia had moved into Caius Julius' house after the divorce, to act as Domina and care for young Julia. She rose to greet Silo as he was conducted into the Atrium. “Quintus Poppaadius! What a delight to see you back in Rome!” She walked forward to greet her guest. “And thank you so much for taking Caius into your staff; he speaks well of your care for his military training.”

“Caius is an excellent officer, an opinion that Quintus Sertorius will endorse when he arrives,” Silo assured her. “Is Caius available at the moment?”

Caesar walked into the atrium as the question was being asked. “Hello, General!” Caesar said as he towelled his hair. “You caught me in the bath!”

“Hello Caius Julius!” Silo responded, offering his right arm. “And congratulations on your election.”

“Thank you, General.” Caesar replied. “What can I do for you?”

“A couple of things,” Silo started his list. “First, you can stop calling me 'General' now that you are not under my authority. I would prefer 'Quintus Poppaadius', if that is good with you. Second, could you make a point of being in the city and with no other appointments on the Ides of Quinctilis?”

“Why, yes, Gen... Quintus Poppaadius,” Caesar answered with a frown. “What is happening on that day?”

“Were you not in the Senate when the Triumph for Quintus Sertorius was agreed to?”

“Oh! That!” said Caesar, underwhelmed. “It should be a Triumph for you, Quintus Poppaadius; not for Sertorius.”

“Oh?” Silo said with a more interested expression. “Why would you say that? I was under the command of Quintus Sertorius at the time.”

Caesar looked annoyed. “Tell me if I am wrong here; but did he give you any orders except 'Go and march on Ctesiphon!' As far as I know, every decision and every order on that campaign was yours, not his.”

“Not true at all, Caius Julius. In fact, most of the orders in that campaign were given by my subordinates, like Gnaeus Priscus and Septimus Caretus.” Silo

corrected him. "I just told them 'Go and neutralise that enemy unit!' Don't you remember the latitude I give my officers?"

"Yes, I know the 'Silo Touch', and I admire you for it," Caesar agreed. "But they are men whom you have trained yourself. Sertorius did not train you! He is taking the credit that properly belongs to you!"

"What about the entire strategy of the War, Caius Julius? Including the fine calculations that he could keep a hundred and thirty thousand Parthians out of Tigranocerta with only his handful of legions? Was that not excellent judgement and excellent work?"

"Yes, it was excellent judgement and excellent work," Caesar blurted out. "Because it was *my* judgement and *my* work, not his! Sertorius is a passenger, riding your genius and mine! And even more spineless, he has been sucking up to me, currying my favour, because he knows that in years to come I will be everything he is not, and he hopes to find favour with me. In fact, he is not worth my sandal laces as a soldier. He knows it, and he fears the whole world knowing it."

Silo looked intently at Caesar for a few moments, and then nodded slightly, as if to himself, before speaking again. "By the way, Caius Julius; the reason for my visit today is personal and secret," Silo changed the subject. "Quintus has asked me to discuss his triumph with you, on a completely confidential basis. In recognition of your contribution to the campaign, and out of a sense of duty to Sextus Julius and Caius Marius, your esteemed uncles; and in recognition of my role in Mesopotamia, he is offering to share his triumphal chariot with both of us. A bit like I did with Lucius Glaucia a few years ago. Will you accept his offer?"

Caesar sneered. "As I said, he is trying to gain my favour, and yours as well it would seem. But I will wait for my own triumph, thank you. I do not want it said in years to come that I owe anything to Sertorius who sponsored me in my youth, when in fact it was my glory that he appropriated to himself." Caesar then added. "And I do not see why you should accept crumbs from his table, either."

Silo nodded his understanding of Caesar's response. "Caius Julius, would you accept advice from me?"

"Of course, Quintus Poppaadius!"

"I recall a great man several years ago. A man who was gracious and well-loved by his men. But there came a time when he lost his modesty, and started to think of himself as the Greatest Roman in History. He even organised a coup against the Republic, and had himself installed as a virtual Dictator, because he was convinced that only his own genius could save Rome. But the gods are just. He died before he even saw the enemy; and those who came after him achieved more than he could have dreamed possible.

"So I remind you of some words he said to the Senate when he was of sounder mind; beware hubris! Because you are not yet thirty, and you already have enough of that quality to supply a thousand Greek plays! The truth is that you are an arrogant child with delusions of grandeur; you cannot tell when your betters are trying to lift you up because you think you are already higher than they

can reach,” Silo started to develop some momentum. “Sertorius is not trying to curry your favour; rather, he is a man more generous than you can imagine in your own selfish little framework. He is a man of such immense dignitas that he does not begrudge bestowing some of it on you.

“Because that is what truly great men do, my little pup; Caius Marius supported Lucius Cornelius, who supported me, just as I have mentored and supported my best officers in turn. In the same way, Quintus is doing all he can to help you, if only you had eyes to see it! If you do not learn that principle, Caius Julius, then you will not only fail to be great; you will also fail to be good.” Silo stood. “I will now let Quintus know that the sparrow refuses the assistance of the eagle.” Silo turned and walked to the door, calling his retinue after him.

Aurelia turned a sour face to her son as the door closed. “You really are very good at gaining political support, aren't you? You had him eating out of your hand!”

“I will not be mocked, woman!” Caesar thundered.

“In that case, perhaps you should never go outdoors again, my son!” Aurelia snapped back. “Quintus Poppaedi was right! You have a completely ridiculous opinion of yourself; you are indeed a sparrow who fancies himself King of the Eagles!”

“Silence!”

“Or what? You will throw me out on the street? You will have me beaten? Crucified, perhaps?” Aurelia taunted him. “Show me your greatness, Caesar! Show the whole world! Show how you are greater than Romulus. He only murdered his brother for mocking him, but you would murder your mother!” Aurelia hissed her anger as she stood. “The sooner you wake up to yourself, the better your chances of actually achieving something worthwhile!” She stamped out of the room.

Caesar watched her go with fury in his eyes. She will regret she said that! He promised himself. But not right away; his mother still had her uses, in particular as guardian for Julia. And the connection into the Aurelii was also useful. But the time would come. In the meantime a little discipline would be in order. He called for Atticus, his Master of House. The slave appeared almost instantly, dreading to be the substitutionary target for his master's rage.

“Atticus; tell all the staff that my mother shall be on bread and water only, morning and night, for the next ten days. No midday meal, but as much water as she wants.

“Yes, Master,” Atticus nodded, and went to escape the room as quickly as possible, but Caesar called him back.

“And anyone who tries to provide any more or any better shall be crucified.”

“Yes, Master.” This time his escape was made good.

“What Cato said about my speech was fair criticism,” Lafrenius admitted to his friends as they gathered in one of the rooms in Italia House. “I will apologise publicly to Metellus next meeting.”

Drusus nodded. "You all know that I consider Lucius Porcius a personal friend, however much we have opposite politics. I know he was getting a bit hysterical a few years ago, when he started to insult you and Lucius Glaucia, but he pulled himself back from that abyss. You should take his advice and do likewise. Keep it civilised."

Marius Egnatius nodded his agreement as he took his cup of watered Falernian wine from the low table between them. Then gulping down the mouthful, "Yes, I recall that we were worried about the Boni, and in particular Cato, doing something extreme back then. What happened to moderate them?"

"I think it was precisely what Gaius Papius said at the time," Drusus answered. "Their world-view works on the assumption that they were born to rule; and if they are not in charge then they can't handle reality. But then, when Lucius Porcius was re-elected Consul, the world was turned right-way-up for him again, and he could put everything back in perspective. You might remember that he did not apologise for his insults until after he was elected."

"Well, since that time he has remained conservative, but he is at least being creative about it," Cotta conceded. "We can live with that; in fact, I am thankful for it, because he is more likely to see where we are making mistakes, so we can correct them in time. But I dread to think what might happen when he is no longer around. Who will head up the Boni then? Surely not Metellus!"

"I don't think so," Drusus offered his opinion. "They respect him because he has been Censor, and that means a lot to these conservative types; but Cato, Lucius Julius Caesar and Gnaeus Octavius are the thinkers among them."

"Excellent!" Lafrenius responded. "We can work with either of those other two." Everyone gathered around the table seemed content with this view into the future.

"Anyway, to change the subject..." Egnatius said. "What do you gentlemen think about Africa and Numidia? Any suggestions on what should be my main focus?"

"I think that we could do worse than go along with what Cato said," Lafrenius offered. "If we support him, then the other Boni will follow him as well. That gives the Africans no-where else to go."

"And you think Caius will take the same line?" Drusus asked Egnatius. "Remember, he is a Popularis, and disagreeing with Cato is a reflex action for them."

Egnatius shrugged. "Let's get together with him, Gaius Aurelius and Vopiscus; we should be able to work something out. Such a pity old Sextus is dead, but at least Young Marius is still under control." There was general agreement around the table.

"Good; then I'll send a runner to Caius now, asking when he and his trusted friends will be available to discuss this question," Egnatius said, beckoning to a serving slave.

Sertorius was settling into his new province very quickly. Of great interest to him was the trade coming from the east. "Marcus!" he called. Marcus Tollianus, his Administrator, appeared in the doorway almost immediately.

"Yes, sir?"

"Correct me if I am wrong here; but do we not have a 'Friend and Ally' treaty with Ecbatana?"

"Yes; Silo negotiated that during his campaign."

"And is it in the usual format? You know, free passage for our troops, mutual defence?"

"Yes, Silo wanted every city in the mountains to be on the same terms, to avoid confusion or jealousies."

"Very wise of him," Sertorius said as a standard courteous response. "But we have no arrangement with Arsakia, do we?"

"No. Silo was content to secure the borders, but did not commit you to anything further away than the frontier."

"Very wise of him," Sertorius said again. "Please order five hundred cavalry to prepare for a State Visit to Ecbatana, and then on to Arsakia." Sertorius at last looked up from his papers on the desk. "I feel they are at risk of being troubled by a resurgent Parthia, and I must offer them the protection that can only be provided to Friends and Allies."

Tollianus acknowledged this with a nod. "When will you set out?"

"I will not be going, Marcus, but more of that later. Please ask Septimus Caretus to report to me." Tollianus started to turn to leave. "Not so fast, Marcus," Sertorius interjected, then smiled. "Also, I want the Chief Engineer to report to me as well. What is his name again?"

"Do you mean Arius Claudius, sir? Tall, red hair?"

"Yes, him. And finally, send for Lucius Marius. All three to be here two hours after noon today. Thank you," he said to dismiss Tollianus.

Sertorius dropped his eyes to the map on his table again. That trade route to the east was definitely worth investigating as far as he could; then he would decide whether it would be worth the effort to extend the Republic's rule as far as required to cut out the middle men creaming the profits, or simply present them with a free trade treaty.

Almost as important is the northern frontier. The Albanians and Iberians seem to be thoroughly daunted by the ease with which Silo had cleaned up both Pontus and Armenia, so there should be no problems there; but the Samartans were troubling the trading colonies on the northern shore, inherited from Pontus. These colonies were isolated, and the surrounding natives thought that meant vulnerable. He would have to convince them otherwise! And there were plenty of opportunities to plant more trading colonies on the western shore, north of Thracia. There was plenty of gold in those barbarian lands north of the Danube, and he wanted a good flow of it coming down with the river. Not quite part of his territory, he knew; but so long as they weren't part of some other province, they were fair game. He intended to make this Eastern Frontier so profitable for the Republic that the Senate would defend it to their last gladius.

Aurelia was not surprised to hear what her son had ordered. She simply raised her eyebrows and asked “Really?” That evening, when a plate of bread was placed in front of her and a goblet of water, she reached over and took a grape from Caesar's plate and popped it into her mouth.

Caesar leapt to his feet in rage. “What do you think you are doing, woman?”

“I am testing the food laid out for the King of the Known World!” Aurelia replied sarcastically. “Do you not think that you are important enough to have a food tester?”

“You will eat the bread and water you are given, and nothing else!” Caesar bellowed.

“Caius, my son; I am doing you a huge favour,” Aurelia smiled back at him. “I am teaching you, as gently as I can, that you are not in control of the whole world. The sooner you understand that you are just a man, the better. A very clever young man, true; but only a man, just the same.”

“I do not claim to be in control of the whole world, woman,” he glowered, “but I am in control of my own house! Go to your room and stay there until I give you permission to leave it!”

Aurelia smiled sweetly again, and stood. She walked to the rear of the house, where her apartment was. Caesar sat again and turned his attention to his meal. A few minutes later Aurelia came out of her room, wrapped in a cloak with a hood and accompanied by her five large Gallic bodyguards.

“What do you think you are doing?” Caesar demanded. Aurelia continued walking at a serene pace, glancing across to bestow upon Caesar yet another smile. But not a word was spoken. Before Caesar realised what was happening she had opened the street door herself and was outside. Caesar was fuming, but would not be seen chasing after his mother in the public street. He turned back to his meal.

“Master!” One of the kitchen slaves came out to him. There was a note in his hand. “I found this note in the kitchen; it looks like it was written by the Mistress.”

The slave was illiterate, but had seen the name 'Caius' often enough to recognise it.

Caius, my son,

Yes, I am only a woman. But what a woman! The daughter and granddaughter of consuls, sister to the current Censor, and I controlled my husband's house while he was away for years on end.

So I am not a woman to be subjected to such humiliation by my own son! But nor do I wish to humiliate you. I want only that you take your hands off your own prick long enough to realise that you are not a god.

'I am Caius Julius Caesar, and I will achieve great things!' you proclaim. If you had the wisdom of a gnat, you would keep your mouth shut until you have

actually achieved these great things, instead of mouthing such foolishness and humiliating yourself! I will be staying with my brother Gaius until you start to show some sign of wisdom. The sooner you reach this stage, the less damage you will do to your reputation in the meantime. It will not take too long before tongues start wagging, and familial impiety makes such good gossip!

She could not have composed and written this in the short time she was in her room! And look! The ink is dry! This letter had been written some time ago, perhaps after she had been told of her new diet.

She set this up! Caesar said to himself. She knew what she was going to do when she sat to the meal, and she knew how I would react! Am I that easy to predict, to manipulate? A sudden chill ran through him. He remembered how close he had come to disaster on that last line of defence before Tigranocerta; how he had staked all on the trip-wires that did not jingle because he had misjudged their placement by only a few feet, and how this had almost cost him the battle. For just an instant, self-doubt swept through him.

But no! Everyone said that he had been the brightest of children, and since then he had shown stunning imagination and ingenuity. He could read twice as fast as anyone else, spoke three languages fluently, was Republic Praetor at the youngest legal age, and was the youngest ever winner of a Grass Crown! He was specially gifted by the gods, and those gifts are never given in vain! He would visit uncle Gaius tomorrow.

"Hello, Caius," Gaius Aurelius Cotta stood and greeted him with courtesy but little warmth as Caesar was led into the triclinium. He saw his mother was already sitting on the high-status side, but she rose to welcome him. "Please, take a seat so we can chat," Cotta indicated the lower status side.

"Thank you for allowing me to visit unannounced," Caesar responded.

"Unannounced, but not unexpected, Caius," Cotta responded with a wry smile. "If I may be so presumptuous, I offer my services to you as a moderator, to help iron out any problems in your household that you might care to bring to me; after all, we are related."

"Thank you, uncle." Then Caesar flicked his eyes across to Aurelia, and then back. "What have you been told?"

"I have been told that you are displeased with your mother; and that she has asked to stay with my house until this difficulty has been overcome."

"Then she may return now," Caesar answered simply. "The difficulty will be overcome as soon as my mother accepts my authority within my own house." Four eyes turned on Aurelia.

"I will accept your authority, Caius, if you will pay proper familial respect to me as well," Aurelia responded. "But I do not accept humiliation at your hands."

"I will impose such discipline as I think fit. Not humiliation, but discipline," Caesar explained curtly.

Aurelia looked to her brother. "I am sorry, my brother; but that is not an accurate description of the specifics of our difficulty, nor a satisfactory way to resolve it. I ask your sanctuary."

Cotta looked from one to the other. "Unless certain specific details can be discussed more openly, I do not think we are going to make much progress."

Caesar stood. "Thank you for your offer to mediate, uncle. But it seems that we two will need to sort this out ourselves," and then to Aurelia, "Come, mother."

Aurelia stayed in her place. "Until we meet again, Caius," she replied evenly.

Cotta broke into this stand-off. "I expected this might happen," he said with a sigh. "You are both too stubborn for your own good." Then he looked directly at Caesar. "If my sister refuses to go with you, then I will not throw her out. But you, Caius, cannot afford to have this grow out of proportion. Either start talking this through, or suffer the political consequences."

"There will be no adverse political consequences for me, uncle, only for you," Caesar answered. "So you should care for your own good name. Your sister is guilty of impiety, and so long as she stays here I will be seen as a wronged paterfamilias, and you will be seen to be aiding, abetting and encouraging impiety."

"Caius; please sit," Cotta said with weariness. Caesar sat.

"You might not have noticed, Caius," Cotta started, as if talking to a simpleton, "but I am Censor. I have completed the cursus honorum. You are a first-year Praetor. So when people see us apparently on opposite sides in this dispute, whom do you think outsiders will assume is in the wrong? Not that I would start any rumours, of course; but I would not put it past some of your political enemies to suggest that the cause of all this is that you have beaten or otherwise abused your mother. Think about that! What would you say in your defence? Even to deny the rumour would feed it!"

"I am Caius Julius Caesar!" Caesar asserted. "The spite of uncle Caius did no more than delay me, and the contempt of uncle Sextus was easily skirted. The murmurings of the masses will do me no harm, and the mocking smiles of Senators who think they know something but actually know nothing will be irrelevant. I have been gifted by the gods to achieve great things, and these gifts are not given in vain!"

Cotta shook his head as he smiled. "The gods certainly bestowed many gifts upon you, but they held back on a few as well. Such as modesty, wisdom and a sense of proportion. The truth, Caius, is that you are an exceptionally gifted fool, and a total arsehole as well. Aurelia is free to stay here for as long as she wishes, and I could understand if that turns out to be for the rest of your life; in the meantime I have an idea that might save you from becoming a total laughing-stock. But I will have to talk to the Consuls first."

"I don't need your insults, uncle; and I don't need your help," Caesar objected. "But if you care to offer some ideas, I will consider them."

Cotta shook his head again. "I'll be in touch," he said at last. "You can go now," he said with a flick of his wrist. Caesar bit back a retort, and turned for the door.

"What do you have in mind, Gaius?" Aurelia asked her brother as her son closed the door behind him.

"I have to get him out of the city," Cotta said flatly. "Your marriage to his father worked well, so long as old Caius was overseas; perhaps the same trick with work with the son."

Aurelia frowned. "Is that wise? Young Caius has the diplomatic skills of an elephant, and there are a lot of important people with connections to Asia."

"Hm. True," Cotta agreed. "Perhaps a frontier province might be better. Mesopotamia under Sertorius seems the obvious choice, and Quintus did speak highly of him."

"No! Definitely not under Sertorius!" Aurelia exclaimed.

"Oh?" Cotta raised an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"A conversation between Quintus Poppaedi and Caius yesterday triggered this whole explosion," Aurelia explained. "Through Silo, Sertorius offered Caius a share of his triumphal chariot; Caius responded by calling Sertorius a parasite on everyone else's abilities, and refused."

Cotta shook his head again. "Another example of Caius' political brilliance!" He sat in thought for a moment. "Well, it can't be to Mesopotamia. And it can't be anywhere with connections to important people, which rules out anywhere in the East. Perhaps the Spains, perhaps Transalpine Gaul or Numidia."

"Yes, that sounds better," Aurelia agreed. "And it might knock some sense into him, too, when he sees that he is not the centre of the world as well. He might come back a bit more level-headed."

"I'll see what I can do," Cotta promised his sister as he stood. "I'll see if Caius Norbanus is available; he might have a suitable posting for him."

Sertorius looked around the table. These men were the core of what would be his administration in Mesopotamia, which he intended to organise as a separate province within the greater Eastern Frontier under his command. Marcus Tollianus, his Administrator, was at the far end. Septimus Caretus, a very competent legate he had inherited from Silo, sat to his left. Caretus had no great family behind him, having risen from centurion, but his steadiness had been proven on several specialist missions. These beginnings and his proven competence made him a highly respected commander among the ranks. Arius Claudius one seat further left was a brilliant engineer. He had been the design genius behind the rafts at the Battle of the Euphrates, and then the bridge over the river when the battle had been won. Lucius Marius on his right was not directly related to the great Caius Marius, but a member of a cadet family. Even so, he was both prudent and imaginative, having served under that magical odd couple of Gallienus and Priscus and learnt well in that time.

Gentlemen," Sertorius opened, "You are going to be the heart and mind of Republic administration and development of this new province. You are going to

act as my Supreme Council until we have made this frontier province ready for regular provincial administration.” He paused a moment to let this sink in. “It is not my intention to continue in the style of Quintus Poppaadius; he is perhaps the greatest general in history, and I am not capable of anything like his achievements. I am a governor, a developer, a diplomat, rather than a soldier. I hope to complete by means of diplomacy and prosperity what he started by feat of arms.

“But I cannot do this alone. I need a team around me which can drive this process forward. I need men who know the shape of the vision, and have the intelligence, the initiative, the imagination and the perseverance to guide their own areas of responsibility. Arius; your task is to provide everything this province needs to be wealthy. You will provide water supplies, roads, bridges, sewerage, dams, irrigation, whatever is needed to produce enough food to feed a growing Republic. You will provide roads and bridges for efficient transport of this produce; perhaps re-building the old Royal Road of the Persians might be a first step, or you might have better ideas. Whatever engineering works are needed, you will ensure they are done efficiently and effectively.

“Lucius, you are to command the army. But not to conquer, only to defend as and if the need arises. Your main task is to eliminate banditry and ensure public order. A province cannot prosper unless it is at peace, and the Middle Classes have enough confidence to invest their money. So make this province peaceful and secure.

“Septimus, I am sure that you are every bit as good a soldier as Lucius; but you have other skills that I would prefer to be used in other ways. You will be used for special missions, and as my personal representative. More about that later.

“And Marcus; your job is to hold the whole show together. You will be responsible for all administrative matters, collecting revenue, establishing the Rule of Law, and most particularly for presiding over meetings of this Council when I am not available.” Sertorius paused again and scanned the faces before him.

“This Council will meet the first, the tenth, and the twentieth day of each month, and as often in between as circumstances require. You are to each report on the status of your own areas of responsibility, propose any initiatives and make recommendations, including costings, and we will all discuss and determine what is to be done. Think of it as the 'Silo Touch', but without the warfare!” There was the obligatory chuckle at the Governor's little joke. “In the meantime,” Sertorius went on, “I will be going back to Rome. The Triumph will be a nice bonus, but my real reasons are more complex. I want several practices to be made official. The first is that I want Ctesiphon to be renamed New Babylon; the locals were never content under the Parthians, and I want to make them feel that their own heritage is being recognised. I want a College of Administrators opened here, with admission open to the locals. I want Greek recognised as a language as acceptable as Latin in courts and public administration, since no-one here understands Latin. And I want authority to conduct foreign policy without first

gaining permission from Rome.” He looked around the table again. “This is a big step, I know. I am prepared to have that authority subject to qualifications and general guidelines, whatever; but we are just too far away from Rome to send a message and then wait for the Senate to meet, argue, decide, and then reply; specially if they don't understand the details of the case. I will be asking Marcus Livius and Quintus Poppaedi to argue the practicalities on our behalf; everyone remembers his triumphal speech, where he praised the initiative of his subordinates as the living proof of Republicanism; so I am hopeful. But I am not going to waste time waiting for that question to be resolved.

“In the meantime, Septimus, you will lead a delegation to Arsakia, offering them Friend and Ally status in the face of any Parthian revival. Assure them that we will do all within our power to protect their independence, and that includes the elimination of remnant Parthia if push comes to shove. Then you are to go on to Hekatompylos and negotiate terms with what's left of Parthia. They can have Friend and Ally status too, if they want.

“In return, we require free trade and innocent passage for our legions and merchants through their territory. Also, Republic citizens are not to be subject to their taxes or laws. If any of our men commits an offence, then it is to be referred to the Ambassador we will station there at our own expense, and he will deal with it. Other details are yours to negotiate.

“Then keep moving along the Trade Route to the east; I want to extend free trade and Republic immunity along the entire length of the Route, or at least as far as possible. While you are at it, take advantage of any other opportunities you might find. When can you leave?” he asked abruptly.

Septimus barely paused. “I can leave tomorrow, sir, if that is what you require.”

“Good. Marcus has already ordered five hundred cavalry to prepare for a State Visit, ready to leave tomorrow. But feel free to take an extra day in preparation if you want to.” Sertorius smiled. “Now, all of you; get your heads around your new jobs, and report back in ten days’ time. I hope to leave for Rome immediately after that meeting.”

“Caius, a word with you, please?” Cotta asked his nephew as the Senate chamber started to fill.

“Yes, uncle?” Caesar replied.

“I have spoken to Caius Norbanus over the last couple of days, since we two met in my house; he is prepared to give you a letter of introduction to the Governor in Narbo, asking you to be appointed his legate,” Cotta went directly to the point. “This will provide an honourable reason for Aurelia and Julia to move in with me, as well as provide you with more experience in the provinces. So unless you are prepared to put aside your arrogance towards my sister, I suggest you take this opportunity. The third alternative is to become the butt of everyone's jokes. Which will it be?” Cotta's fixed gaze left Caesar in no doubt that his uncle was deadly serious. But to apologise to his mother was unthinkable.

“Thank you, uncle; I would very much like to spend some time in Gaul,” he answered.

Cotta's stance slumped almost imperceptibly with disappointment. “Well, the second-best choice was about as much as I could have hoped for,” Cotta replied. “Caius will give you his letter today; he has already written it, just in case.” Cotta turned away and walked past Caius Norbanus, giving a thumbs-up as he passed. Norbanus nodded to him without breaking what he was saying to one of the African praetors.

The Senate meeting went smoothly. Of particular interest was a speech by the senior African Praetor, in which he offered to triple the Tribal Stipend over the next five years, in steps of 40% of the existing Stipend each year, in consideration of the extension of the boundaries of Africa Tribe to include all of Numidia. Cato stood to propose that the offer be accepted, a sign to the Boni that this was the best that could reasonably be hoped for. Metellus, although visibly unhappy, did not rise to oppose it. The Numidian Question had been resolved.

Then Egnatius rose to read a report from Mutilus, who was nearing the end of his five-year tenure of the Spains.

*To Marius Egnatius and Caius Norbanus, Consuls of the Republic, and to the Senate of the Republic,
From Caius Papius Mutilus, Governor of the Spains,*

Greetings!

As I write this letter, I am aware that I have only eight months of my current term to run. Therefore it is fitting that I advise you of the situation here in the Spains, so you might be better informed as you decide on my successor.

The Rufan System has been established in even the more remote parts for two years now, and has gained widespread acceptance among the natives. The laws enforced by the System are largely a codified version of their own customary laws rather than transplanted Roman law; this has made the transition much smoother. This codification has resulted in greater uniformity than was the case ten years ago, but there is still not a single, province-wide legal corpus for fear of alienating one region for the sake of administrative neatness; I felt it better to lead gently rather than drive harshly in this matter. I recommend that this situation stay largely untouched, at least for the foreseeable future, and brought into closer alignment only as the locals themselves sense the need.

Standard Republic weights, measures and coin have also been adopted throughout the region, except in the most rural of areas where barter remains common practice. However, I have attempted to connect these areas into the main cities and towns as much as possible, building roads and bridges to more fully integrate their local economies into a wider provincial context. As a result the cash economy is spreading quickly into these more backward areas. I expect that within the term of the next governor there will be virtually none of the

traditional weights and measures in use, and barter will be restricted to household-scale transactions.

I have retained the general administrative division which I inherited from Quintus Sertorius, finding these eminently sensible and practical. My only adjustments have been to abolish the peak Councils for the two separate provinces and establish a single Provincial Council based in Toletum. This location is central to all, notionally just outside the old boundary of Nearer Spain; it thus gives all the Celtiberians a sense of common identity, and specially gives the more conservative tribes of Further Spain a sense that they and their traditions are being fully respected.

With the consent of the College Committee of the Senate, I have also opened the Administrators College to local non-citizens, with the pledge that graduates will be granted citizenship. This is aimed at making sure the more prominent local men can see a path for their sons to become fully involved in the Roman world. Within a generation or two this should weld the Spains to the Republic as closely as Sicily is today. It also establishes Latin as the language of the elite in this society, which will doubtless have an effect on the lower classes over time.

This initiative is being supported by provision of free education to any males between the ages of five and ten who can attend on alternate days. This education consists almost entirely of literacy in Latin, and basic mathematics. Celtiberian languages having no written form, this will enhance the spread of Latin and subsequent Romanisation.

No doubt my successor will need to make his own changes over time, but I strongly urge him to act with patience and in consultation with local opinion-leaders. One must make mild this rugged people through soft degrees.

Egnatius lifted his eyes from the paper. “Conscript Fathers, I urge you to consider carefully this advice from Gaius Papius, and consider the appointment of the next governor carefully before this is resolved in the later part of this year.”

At the end of the Senate meeting Cotta beckoned Caesar to his side, and then approached Norbanus. “Caius,” Cotta addressed the consul, “This is my nephew, who has also received high praise from Quintus in the East. You might recall that you agreed to ask Gaius Flavius to accept him as a legate.”

“Ah, yes!” Norbanus recognised Caesar. “Here, I have already written the letter for you.” Norbanus gestured to his slave to bring his pouch.

“Thank you, sir,” Caesar broke in, “but I notice that only half of Iberia is included in the Spains, and I am impressed with how Gaius Papius has a vision to combine the Spains into a single province. Is it possible to amend that letter, and send me to the Spains with a few legions to incorporate the north-west?”

Norbanus glanced to Cotta, who winced. “I must apologise, Caius,” he said to the consul. “I repeat my request, that young Caius be given an appointment under the Gaius Flavius in Narbo. He is a military genius, but still needs considerable guidance in matters of politics and diplomacy. I am sure he will learn much in Narbo.”

Norbanus frowned, as if he were re-considering the whole matter. But he handed across the letter the slave had given him. "Just stick to your orders, Caius Julius, and you will do well. Initiative is good, but only within the allowable boundaries."

"Thank you, sir," Caesar said, taking the letter and turning away.

"Oh, Gaius Aurelius," Norbanus interrupted Cotta's turn, and waited for Caesar to move out of earshot. "Please, do not let that hothead do anything stupid. I do not want my recommendation of him to be used against me in years to come."

"I will write to Gaius Flavius myself, Gaius, impressing upon him that I fully expect young Caius to be kept on a short leash," Cotta offered. "Gaius Flavius is not known for his reluctance to impose discipline."

Norbanus nodded, and turned to look for his next target for conversation.

Silo, Drusus, Lafrenius and a host of others went out to greet Sertorius when he sent word that his ship had arrived in Ostia. It was quite a party! Silo confirmed that the arrangements were in place for the Triumph; in an echo of Silo's own triumph a few years earlier, there would be only two legions involved, men who were due for their retirement farms and the payout of their accrued loot money. The other six who were due to return had been retained in Mesopotamia for another year. There were no conquered dignitaries to parade, Sanatruces having perished in the winter, but a model of the Palace and the Great Hall in Ctesiphon had been built to scale. This amazing hall, more than a hundred feet high and eighty feet in clear span in reality, was modelled complete with little figures of men to give a sense of scale. This would be set up in the middle of the Forum for three days after the triumph, for public viewing. It was also arranged that Sertorius would address the crowd from the top step of the great Houses, and not the Rostra as had been tradition. Sertorius wanted his triumph tied firmly into the Republic.

"Just one minor change, if it is acceptable to you, Quintus," Silo ventured. "Rather than riding with you, I would be pleased to march with the men. I do not intend to try for election, so there is no need to treat me as I did for Lucius Glaucia. Let all of Rome see you alone."

Sertorius looked at the Old Warrior for a moment. "Does this have anything to do with the Sparrow?" Sertorius used their derisive term for Caesar.

"Not at all, Quintus," Silo re-assured him. "If anything, I am urged to ride with you just to spite the little prick! But I would settle for the chance to say a quick word to introduce you."

"Not a problem, Quintus Poppaedi. What do you intend to say? I would hate for you to embarrass me!" Sertorius quipped.

"Nothing too much," Silo replied. "But you will have to wait. Trust me!"

"Fair enough," Sertorius concluded. "But I have much more important things to discuss with you all, now that I have you all together." He started to outline his plans for the Eastern Frontier.

It was a fine morning, with the promise of turning into a hot day in the afternoon, when perhaps the smallest Triumph in Roman history made its way to the Forum to celebrate its most prodigious victory. There were no long lines of captives, no wagons loaded with booty, and only two legions due for retirement. The model of the Palace in Ctesiphon was interesting, but not remarkable.

The only point that struck the audience was to see Quintus Poppaedi Silo, now acknowledged as the greatest Military Man in history, even overshadowing Alexander, marching on foot in the train of the Triumphator. How could Silo accept such a subordinate role without great damage to his own reputation?

Then another surprise; Sertorius did not continue around the forum to the Rostra, but stopped at the foot of the stairs to the Great Houses built by Sulla five years earlier, and climbed the steps. He took care to stand on a mark precisely in front of the centre of the semi-enclosed garden, midway between the Great Senate on one side and the Republic Comitia on the other. Silo broke away from the marching columns of legionaries to mount the steps and stand beside him.

The crowd, recognising the Old Warrior, erupted in a great cheer and started chanting 'Silo! Silo! Silo!'

"I do not want to silence them," Silo muttered to Sertorius at his side. "It will be seen as a sign that I am in control here. I will not do that to your triumph."

"But if I try to calm them, it will seem arrogance on my part," Sertorius responded. "Let us act in unison. On the count of three."

The noise from the crowd tapered into a hush as both men raised their arms in an appeal for quiet. Then Sertorius gestured towards Silo.

"Citizens!" Silo bellowed. The crowd rose in a roar, and then fell silent again. "Eight years ago, I was granted a Triumph." Another wave of cheering rose, and then fell away. "At that time, I made it clear to all of you, that the victories we won were not mine alone. They were the result of excellent team work." He paused for a moment, expecting another wave of cheering, but the crowd were hanging off his words. "Over the last year, the gods granted me the privilege of being part of a team even greater than the one I led. I was part of the team led by Quintus Sertorius!" he gestured with a full arm towards his commander, and a roar broke out of the crowd. As it fell away, Silo continued.

"A better team, I say, because it had a better leader. Because I tell you all here today, that Quintus Sertorius has achieved something that I would never have thought possible. Quintus Sertorius, with barely twenty thousand men in front of Tigranocerta, did not simply survive an attack by a Parthian force of over one hundred and thirty thousand men; he annihilated them!" The crowd erupted again, and took a few minutes to quieten. "Never before has such a feat of arms been even imagined! But Quintus not only did it; he did it virtually without loss to his own men!" Another wave swept through the forum. "The man who was the youngest-ever winner of a Grass Crown continues to grow in glory; may he serve the Republic for many years to come!" Silo stepped back to be a few paces behind Sertorius as the cheering of the crowd rolled on. Eventually it started to

fade. Sertorius sensed it was time to take one step forward, to the edge of the top step, and signal for quiet.

“Behold, the ancient temple of Castor and Pollux!” Sertorius threw out his right arm to indicate the building immediately to the side of the Great Houses. The crowd responded with cheers, which soon resolved into a chant of ‘Hail Castor! Hail Pollux!’ It soon faded as the full forum waited to hear what would be said next. “Now, behold the Great Houses, the new temple of Castor and Pollux!” Sertorius turned away from the crowd, and threw both his arms out towards the Senate and Comitia wings. The chant started up again, but soon faded. Sertorius turned again to face the crowd. “When Castor was killed, pious Pollux shared his own immortality with his brother. Neither could live without the other.” Sertorius looked over the masses. “So let it be with this Republic! Let the Senate love the People better than their own lives! And let the People forever be in harmony with the Senate! Neither house can survive without the other, nor can our Republic survive without both!” Cheering erupted again.

“Sanatruces of Parthia was a king. Therefore he had no concept of how to govern, because he had no idea of a Republic. He had no love for the People. Great Jupiter, who guarantees justice, intervened and destroyed him. In starving and freezing, Sanatruces became the equal of the lowest of his slaves, brothers in their common death. Let this be a lesson for any man who would consider himself even a hair's width above his fellow-citizens!” The cheers swelled through the forum. “Not once, but twice Sanatruces attacked our Republic without cause. Mars, who protects us in time of danger, intervened. Parthia is no more! Let this be a lesson to any foreigner who would harm the Republic blessed by all the gods!” Yet again a cheer rolled around the huge open space.

“This is why today's Triumph seems so small, so poor; because it was not Quintus Sertorius who conquered. It was not even Quintus Poppaedi Silo, the greatest General in history, who conquered; it was the gods who protected us, and avenged us! So let all of us, whether Senator or Head Count, take away this lesson from today; we are all in the hands of the gods. Let no man think himself greater than any other. Some are called to spectacular service, some are called to a lower station. But both are called to the service of the one Republic! Some are granted great success; let these men be alert to the dangers of hubris, lest the gods strike them down for their presumption. Some meet with less success; let them remain dutiful, and they will be vindicated by these same gods.

“And may the gods favour and protect our Republic always!” Sertorius stepped back to signify that he would speak no more.

Aurelia sent a copy of these speeches to Caesar in Narbo. Pellius had developed and refined his Stamp process over the years, and now owned hundreds of different printing shops throughout Rome and the provinces. Some of these specialised in printing Senate and Comitia papers overnight, others printed text books for Colleges and private tutors, some published histories, commentaries and books of poetry for private authors, and others put out occasional pamphlets such

as this. Many wondered how Rome and the Republic had managed to function without mass printing. And Pellius had become stunningly rich in the process.

Caesar read it with chagrin. His three-quarters finished commentary *de Bello Parthiano* had been effectively spiked even before it was completed. To publish it now would seem to be an example of the very hubris which Sertorius had condemned. He would have to find some other way.

He leant back in his chair and considered the opportunities. Fimbria, his Governor, was a fundamentally lazy, corrupt and brutal man, more interested in becoming rich than in governing or soldiering. The Rufan System made opportunities for milking a province fewer than had been the case ten years earlier, but there was still considerable scope so long as the interests of powerful Romans were not infringed. And the illiterate Celts in the back blocks of the province were important to no-one. So Fimbria had started a campaign of extortion from the Allobroges, favourites of no-one since their little case of spite fifty years ago had resulted in the incorporation of their territories into the province. They responded by non-co-operation, hiding their treasures and produce to avoid taxation as well as less formal shake-downs. Fimbria was not happy with them. Perhaps, if Caesar offered to march a few legions into the hinterland and teach them better respect, he could both gain the support of his superior, and provoke some of the Long-Haired tribes into a war. Rolling up Long-Haired Gaul would have to be a simpler matter than fighting a civilised nation like the Parthians! Within a year he would add a province to the Republic, get his own Triumph, and become a front runner for the Consulate by the time he reached minimum age.

But timing would be the critical factor. He was not going to win a campaign, just so Fimbria could take the accolades! And his earliest legal consular year was still ten years away, so he was in no rush. Caesar considered his timing more carefully. The first step would be to ensure that the real warfare did not start until he was not subordinate to the governor. Well, Fimbria's term had a year and a half to go. The second step was to make sure he was Fimbria's replacement. I must make this a province that needs an experienced hand, he thought to himself. If I can arrange for Fimbria to do a few stupid things that bring the Gauls to the edge of rebellion, while myself presenting as one who has their trust and is therefore the best man to restore peace...

Caesar made his decision. He would learn to speak the Gallic language, to earn their respect as one who respected them. Meanwhile, he expected Fimbria to enforce his extortionate demands using the legions at his command. But Fimbria, hearing that Caesar was going native, would not trust him to do the dirty work; he would probably head up the legions himself, or appoint another officer whom he could trust to be a bit rougher with the locals. Then, when the province is getting steamy, Caesar would offer himself to the Senate as the man to calm things down. Then he would calm things down his own way. This would have an additional benefit that news of unrest would mean more legions would be stationed in the province; all the more troops for when Caesar took over!

Plan complete! That was easy!

Drusus, along with the other major voices among both Italianists and Populares, was convinced that Sertorius was just the man for the job in the East. His success in winning hearts and minds in the Spains, a fractious province if ever there was one, was proof enough. But the placidity of Armenia, Pontus and Mesopotamia was further demonstration that he had not lost his skills. If anyone was able to be trusted with effectively dictatorial powers, Sertorius was the man.

Because that was effectively what he was asking for. Certainly, he was introducing the Rufan System as quickly and as efficiently as could be hoped, so he was obviously sincere in his commitment to the Rule of Law; but the power to determine the Republic's foreign policy was very jealously guarded. This was all the more so since the Numidian Affair. So if anyone could be trusted as a virtual dictator, Sertorius was the man; but that begged the question. Should *anyone* be trusted? It would be better to have that responsibility subject to a veto, as were all other Republican authorities. That was what the *Mos Majorum* was all about. Authority shared is the Republican way.

It was also important that a reform so significant should be above factional politics; it must be supported by the Boni as well as the ruling Popularis-Italianist coalition, to ensure that if anything went awry there could be no talk of unconstitutionality. How could the Boni be brought alongside? Drusus thought he saw a way. But first he would need to get Sertorius to agree to it.

"Conscript Fathers," he opened his address, "unusual times call for unusual measures. At the moment, the Republic controls Mesopotamia." Drusus looked around the terraces. "Think about that! It would have been unimaginable not so long ago, when Mithridates held all of Asia and was advancing through Achaia!

"But yes; now we control Pontus, Syria, Armenia and Mesopotamia!" he continued. "Do any of you remember when Lucius Cornelius of glorious memory urged that we respond to Mithridates by sending six or more legions to Rhodes? 'We are so far away from the action that by the time we get news, decide how to react, and then send orders back, we will be too late', he warned us. Distance is death when it comes to timely responses, and the distance from Asia to Rome was considered prohibitive. We needed someone on the spot, to make decisions as soon as the information was available!

"Well, if that was important for a war in Asia, only five hundred miles from Tarentum, then how much more important is it for our foreign policy dealings in Persepolis, which is four times as far away? I think it is vital that we have a man on the spot, able to make decisions when they are needed, rather than a message service that will take months between sending a report or request and receiving an answer; and probably a wrong answer, because we here in Rome will not know all the context behind the questions put to us. We need a man on the spot, with plenary powers!" He could see that Metellus was itching to leap to his feet and shriek his shock at appointing what he would call 'a King', even if his powers are limited to foreign policy only. That did not worry him; Metellus had

been turned into a laughing stock, ex-Censor or not. He was more worried about men with the credibility of Gnaeus Octavius and Cato.

“Of course, such authority should not be bestowed on any man, willy-nilly, but only on a man of proven integrity, of impeccable credentials, of extensive experience, and utmost dedication to the *Mos Majorum* underlying our Republic. But not only that; he must also be given the most explicit bounds to his authority, so there can be no confusion as to the legality of what he determines. And he must also be required to report back promptly whenever he exercises this authority, being answerable to this Senate for his every action, and subject to recall or replacement at the will of the Senate. Therefore I propose that we appoint such a man, with the title 'Eastern Proconsul'; that this office carry no authority over the Army; nor authority over any part of the Provincial Administration; and that he have no authority over any citizen or Provincial other than his own staff. But he is to have absolute authority in the area of making treaties with friendly powers, and of issuing ultimatums to hostile authorities if the need arises. And that he be required to report back to the Great Senate every exercise of his powers as soon as possible; and that the Provincial Administrator also be required to report back the same, under an independent authority and in a separate report.

“Make no mistake; this man will not be a 'King'; he will have no authority over citizens, over soldiers, or even over provincials. He will be subject to removal by the Senate at any time, for any reason. He will have no authority, not even over himself, except as granted and maintained by this Senate. He will not be a master in any sense, but the servant of all. He will have an authority comparable to the Master of House in any of our homes; the chief slave, but a slave none the less. A slave trusted with authority, only because his master is satisfied that he can use such authority wisely, and in the best interests of his master. But it is substantial authority, nonetheless, and therefore requires a man of proven integrity, of impeccable credentials, of extensive experience, and utmost dedication to the *Mos Majorum* underlying our Republic. Therefore I further propose that there is only man among us worthy of so great a responsibility. I nominate Lucius Porcius Cato the Censor!” Drusus had timed his strolling to ensure that he could sit immediately he said the name of the leading Bonus as his nomination for the position.

Metellus, having already made up his mind to oppose anything proposed by Drusus, was on his feet immediately. Then the shock of the unexpected name registered on his face. He gaped, looked around, and then sat.

Egnatius, whose turn it was to hold the fasces, had been primed. “Lucius Porcius, you have been nominated for what can only be described as a most unusual office,” he commented. “Do you wish to accept the nomination? Or perhaps you might care to speak to the proposal?”

Cato rose uncertainly. “I understand the reasons put forward by my esteemed colleague Marcus Livius. Proximity is essential if correct decisions are to be made. And in foreign relations, time is often of the essence.” Cato's mind was abuzz as he tried to think through the situation, even as he spoke. “I only

wish he had discussed this with me before speaking publicly.” If I do not accept, the Italianists and Populares have the numbers to appoint one of their own instead, he thought quickly as he paced. Or perhaps not, the thought occurred to him. Many of the Italianists are quite conservative in their own way, and perhaps they will go along with this scheme only if I accept.

But then again, their bargain might have been that they will agree only if I am offered the job first; and if I refuse, they will appoint Drusus himself instead. Then another thought occurred to him. “Yes, there is, I believe, a definite need for such an office,” he spoke again. “But to keep the principle of the *Mos Majorum*, that all authority be subject to veto by a colleague, perhaps we should have two men appointed, neither able to act without the consent of the other.” Cato paused as he paced. “This is a proposal with the deepest consequences. I think it would be better if it were open to discussion for a longer period of time. I suggest that it be left on the table until next meeting. In the mean time we can all think about the implications more thoroughly.”

“Marcus Livius,” Egnatius spoke. “You are the proponent; is that acceptable to you?”

“Yes, Marius. As usual, Lucius Porcius has shown his customary wisdom.” Drusus sat, well pleased with the outcome.

Cato called a meeting of the leading Boni that very evening.

“This is absurd, Lucius Porcius,” Metellus insisted. “It is an innovation, and putting you into the office does not make it any the more respectable.”

“You know something, Quintus Caecilius?” Octavius commented. “Lafrenius was right. You have nothing to offer in any conversation about policy. Either start saying something that advances our position, or shut up.”

Metellus drew himself up to counter this insult, but was cut off short by Vatia. “Don’t argue the point, Quintus Caecilius; he is absolutely correct. You can either vote against this proposal and let the Populares have their own way, or you can try to hammer it into something less objectionable. Can’t you tell that Drusus is doing his best to pull the teeth out of it by nominating Lucius Porcius? And remember that all of Italy is in his clientele, even though he tends not to flex that power. You can either share the lolly-bag with Drusus, or you can lose the whole lot to someone like Gallienus. Take your pick!”

“Right!” Cato took control of the meeting. “We know well enough by now that something like this is going to become law, whether we like it or not. So the question is, what sort of law would we like?”

Octavius spoke first. “I think it is interesting that Drusus spoke in the singular throughout, and only nominated one man. He clearly has in mind that this would be a single position. Now why would he want that, and why should we accept it?”

“I think it is because he sees it as effectively a veto over Sertorius.” Cato suggested. “So long as Silo the Italian was military governor, he felt safe. From time to time Silo would do something that was effectively the same as this new office; remember how the Battle of the Euphrates was part of Silo’s invasion of

Armenia, and how he came back to put Glaucia in the chariot with him? It was how his faction kept up a supply of consular candidates. But now with a Popularis in the seat, he is afraid that Sertorius will manage to engineer a Popularis hero every year to become Senior Consul. That would weaken his side of this unholy alliance between Popularis and Italianist. He wants me there to keep Sertorius under control by stopping him from doing what Silo managed with impunity.”

“That sounds a reasonable interpretation,” Octavius said, nodding. “I think Drusus personally would prefer to ally with us rather than the Populares, but keeps getting outvoted. This proposal is his code for asking us for help, with the hint that if we are reasonable he might be able to pull his faction back to our side.” Cato and Octavius looked to Vatia for his turn to speak.

But Vatia first turned to Metellus. “This is what Octavius meant when he told you to be constructive.” Metellus glared back in response as Vatia turned away from him. “Yes, but why only one? There is no doubt that if two were appointed, at least one would be from their side. I can only imagine that the second one would be a Popularis, because Lucius Porcius would be the proxy for the Italianists. And Drusus does not want the Populares to get even a small look-in.” then Vatia turned back to Metellus. “Now, Quintus Caecilius, you've seen how it is done. Now try it yourself.”

“I don't need the insults, Publius Servilius, thank you,” Metellus said primly, “but I think it is important that whatever is said is based on first principles.” Then he drew himself together. “Fundamentally, I do not like anyone other than the Consuls having the authority to make war. Now, I realise this position is not leading an army; but ever since Sulla appointed Silo as Commander in the Field we seem to have moved right away from the tradition that the Consuls were in direct command. Now everything is done by appointment of Military Men as Commanders under delegated authority, or as Military Governors. It is just not right! But you want me to be positive? Here I go! If there is a need for someone to have that authority, and to be on the spot, then let one of the Consuls be sent!”

There was silence for a moment as his three companions stared at Metellus. At last Octavius spoke. “Tell me, Quintus Caecilius; would you send Egnatius the Italian over there? Or would you prefer Norbanus to go, leaving the Italian here in sole charge of the whole Roman world?” Octavius shook his head as if in pity. “You are an idiot for making that stupid comment, Quintus Caecilius; but at least you didn't say it in public, so your secret is safe with us.”

Cato looked embarrassed, and tried to get the conversation going again. “So do we agree with this proposal or not?” he asked. “One man to have Consular foreign powers, but no domestic powers, and at all times subject to recall? That should be an adequate limit on him; it is certainly more restrictive than sending a Consul, well out of range of the veto of his colleague, in command of the army, and not subject to recall!”

“Putting it that way, Lucius Porcius,” Metellus tried to salvage some dignity, “I think you are right.” Vatia and Octavius nodded their approval as well.

“We have some business left from the last meeting, conscript Fathers; the matter of the proposed 'Eastern Proconsul',” Egnatius called. “If Marcus Livius would care to put the question?”

Drusus stood at the invitation. “Conscript Fathers, I spoke to this question only eight days ago, and I am confident that you have understood the thrust of my proposal very well. All that remains is for it to be debated, and perhaps clarified, before a vote. In summary, it is to appoint an Eastern Proconsul, with powers and authority limited to foreign relations and no other powers whatsoever. He is to be required to report and explain every exercise of his authority, and subject to immediate recall by the Senate. I propose that only a Consular, who has already been entrusted with this authority by virtue of his election, should be considered eligible for this office. I also nominated Lucius Porcius Cato, five times consul, for this office.” Drusus sat.

Cato stood and slowly walked to the centre of the floor. “I have thought about this proposal by Marcus Livius, and compared it to how such a duty would ordinarily be carried out without such an office. To be strictly legal, it would require a Consul to discharge such a duty. And given that the practical needs of government require a Consul to be in Rome as well, that would mean that only one of the Consuls could be at the frontier to make such decisions. Thus, a single 'Eastern Proconsul' would effectively have no more authority than would inevitably devolve upon a single Consul, anyway. In fact, he would have less; he would not have all the other powers vested in a Consul. So I see no problem with a single 'Eastern Proconsul', subject to the constraints laid out by Marcus Livius. I support his proposal.”

“Is there a speaker against the proposal?” Egnatius asked as Cato sat. There was silence. “There being no speaker against the proposal, I believe that it should go to a vote. Is there any objection to the question being determined immediately?” Still no objection. “Then I ask the Question,” Egnatius continued. “That the Senate shall create the office of 'Eastern Proconsul', subject to the limitations and requirements as set out in the note circulated by Marcus Livius. Those in favour?”

A solid chorus of 'Aye' rose from the terraces. “Those against?” There were no voices against. Then I declare the proposal carried,” Egnatius completed the formalities.

Drusus rose. “I nominate Lucius Porcius Cato to be appointed 'Eastern Proconsul'.

“Lucius Porcius, do you accept nomination?” Egnatius asked.

“Yes, Marius, I accept,” Cato responded.

Lafrenius stood. “I nominate Pontius Telesinus,” he declared. “Pontius has already performed in precisely this role we have discussed during the recent Numidian Affair. He was authorised to act by both consuls at the time, namely Marcus Livius Drusus and Lucius Porcius Cato, who are the nominator and the candidate already before the Senate; so he has enjoyed the confidence of both these men to act on their authority. And in fulfilling this duty, he was scrupulous

to report back to the Consuls every action he took under the authority of his proconsular powers. Thus, Pontius not only qualifies under all the criteria required for the office; he has also acted in that office and performed flawlessly, all to the satisfaction of both the other nominee and his proposer.”

As Lafrenius sat, Cato looked across to Drusus. Drusus looked shocked by this second nomination. The vote was brought on, and Cato was supported by his own Boni faction and Drusus. Telesinus was elected by the combined votes of most Italianists and all Populares.

Cato approached Drusus after the meeting was concluded.

“What happened there, Marcus Livius?” he asked courteously.

Drusus gestured his confusion. “I supported you, but my colleagues did not.”

“Did none of them tell you?” Cato asked.

“When Quintus Sertorius first asked to be given Proconsular authority in addition to being Governor, I refused. I insisted that this should be a position completely separate from Commander, to provide an effective veto such as Consuls have over each other. I also demanded that this should only be done if all three factions agreed to it,” Drusus answered. “And I knew that the Boni would only agree if one of their own were appointed, as an independent check on him.

“So I suggested that I should nominate you, as the most experienced as well as the most rational in your faction.” Drusus shrugged again. “It seems to me now that Quintus was only half-convinced. He was prepared to have the 'Eastern Proconsul' office separate from Commander; in other words, he accepted the principle of a veto power. But it also seems that he was working the numbers, to make sure that you Boni were cut out of the actual appointment.

“You have to understand, Lucius Porcius; ever since the farce of Ahenobarbus ten years ago, the Italianists as well as the Populares have one overwhelming image of the Boni; that image is of Lucius Domitius suspending the Senate to prevent the Administrators Law from being passed. The greatest single reform in Provincial Administration in history, and now known to be indispensable to the Republic, yet he was prepared to paralyse the Government rather than allow it to be voted on! Since then, the words 'Boni' and 'Good Government' have been considered opposites.

“Certainly Vatia, Lucius Julius Caesar and your good self have been consuls since that time, and performed admirably; but that is considered the result of the personal qualities of you three, the exceptions among the Boni. I thought that they would continue to treat you as the exception they could trust; but apparently they would rather deal with one of their own. My guess is that Sertorius arranged this among the Populares, and then co-opted Telesinus as his choice to bring enough of the Italianists with him.”

Cato nodded, as if to himself, at this explanation. “Before Lucius Domitius became Consul, you Italianists had always shared the Consulate with us Boni. Everything was under control and working well. But when that idiot interposed his veto, the whole shape of our relationship changed. I remember that Gnaeus Octavius and I spoke to Lucius Domitius that afternoon, and told him he

had done more damage to the Boni than the Gracchi and Caius Marius added together. Then we went around to apologise to Lucius Cornelius and promised it would not happen again," he sighed. "But we knew at the time that things would never be the same again," Cato continued. "You and Lucius Cornelius did all you could, I know that; but it was obvious that neither the Populares nor your Italian followers would forget that act of idiocy."

Sertorius returned to Ctesiphon, now called Babylon, well pleased with his mission to Rome and the man appointed his nominal Proconsul. Telesinus' record proved he could recognise an opportunity and seize it with both hands; he was not the sort of man to vacillate, much less impose a veto, when there was a victory to be snatched. Sertorius called the meeting to order. "Gentlemen, I do not know if you have already met Pontius Telesinus, who was Consul three years ago," he introduced the new member at the table. "He has been appointed as 'Eastern Proconsul' by the Senate. He has absolute authority to deal with foreign powers, including diplomacy, the making of treaties, the threat of war, everything. But he has no role whatsoever in the administration of the Province, and no command in the army.

"He answers directly to the Senate, not to me. Nor do I answer to him. But we are expected to discuss matters with each other and work consensually," Sertorius explained. "It is an unusual arrangement, but one I am sure we will get used to quickly enough. Pontius, I introduce to you Marcus Tollianus, the Chief Administrator," Sertorius gestured towards Tollianus, who stood to offer his arm to Telesinus. The two took hands and greeted each other.

"Next is Septimus Caretus, a legate who has proven his competence and steadiness under pressure while serving under Quintus Poppaedi. He is specially respected by the rank-and-file, having risen from centurion purely on the basis of his outstanding merit. Septimus has served me on certain special missions that we will discuss later." More greetings were exchanged. "Arius Claudius is next. He is a brilliant engineer, and I have charged him with building the roads, bridges, water supplies, sewer systems, irrigation works, and anything else needed to increase the prosperity and productivity of these new lands.

"Lucius Marius is a dependable Military Man, both prudent and imaginative. He served under Gallienus and Priscus and learnt well in that time. He is my right-hand man in command of the Army, and has been charged with ensuring the defence of the Frontier and establishing peace within our lands. Lately his chief task has been eliminating some remnant Parthian forces which have turned to banditry."

Sertorius waited until all the greetings had been exchanged and looked around the table.

"Pontius is a member of the government of this Frontier Province, no less than any of us, and with a rank equal to my own. His responsibility is specifically foreign policy, but he is free to express his opinions on any other matter that comes to this table, just as we are all free to comment on each others' work. I hope that he will also welcome our views on matters within his own purview, but

because his appointment is from the Senate and not us, he is not bound to follow anything that anyone else says. Within his own area of responsibility, he is sovereign.” Sertorius looked around the table again, and was satisfied that all understood the new structure. “Now, let us get down to business,” Sertorius picked up the agenda sheet in front of him. “It’s time I was brought up to date.”

Telesinus poked his head into Sertorius’ office the next day. “It seems I have plenty to report back to the Senate already, Quintus,” he said wryly. “Septimus has given me his notes about the various agreements he has made with the eastern cities; I am impressed with the concessions he was able to gain, and I have no problem at all in signing off on each of them.”

“The trick now is to make sure these petty princelings abide by them,” Sertorius said flatly. “Right now we are held in awe for spanking Sanatruces so thoroughly, and no-one wants to be the next victim. But over time that might wear off if we simply rely on fear. So I want to move onto phase two as soon as possible; perhaps next year. That will be a bit more complex.”

“Phase two, Quintus?” Telesinus asked, entering the office and dropping onto a chair.

“Yes. That involves winning their trust as well as their fear. I intend to make sure that any offences by Romans against these cities are punished properly and publicly,” Sertorius explained. “You were with Quintus Poppaedi during the War against Mithridates, so you should be the first to understand how powerfully a bit of justice and generosity can impress the locals, who expect nothing except greed and brutality from their kings. My five-year plan is to show the local common folk that they would be happier if they were ruled by the Republic instead of their own kings. Only then do we push the kings out the door.”

“My guess is that it will take more than punishing the occasional Roman to achieve that. Specially as the Romans learn what will happen to them, and they become more careful not to offend. Your examples will dry up,” Telesinus commented.

“Oh, that is only the first step,” Sertorius waved the objection away. “I will also do a range of things to keep our generosity in the public eye. A bridge here, a water supply there, improved roads, hunting down bandits that their own rulers tolerate rather than eliminate; every city and every region will have things that need to be done, and we will do something in each of them. The commoners will soon be asking why they are being taxed by their kings and getting so little in return, while the Republic is so generous. But to know which specific things are the most cost-effective for each area, we need eyes and ears on the ground. That was intended to be the job of the various Ambassadors I appointed; to feed me that information. But Foreign Relations is part of your duty now, so I would be very pleased if you would consent to maintain this overall plan,” Sertorius finished his outline.

“Sounds good in principle; but how are you going to pay for all this?” Telesinus asked.

Sertorius smiled broadly. “Why do you think I wanted free trade all the way to the Far East? By cutting out all the middlemen and local taxes and duties, and carrying that trade myself, I will have more than enough revenue.

“The local kings would be spending that on themselves and luxuries, and doing squat for their people; but I will be seen to be providing all these benefits, while turning off the revenue stream that would allow the kings to copy us even if they wanted to!”

“Do you expect the local princes to let this just happen?” Telesinus asked. “Once you start biting into their revenues that heavily, they are going to object.”

“They can object all they like; but what can they do about it?” Sertorius asked. “That is, if the Eastern Proconsul is firm enough, and I have troops to back him up.”

Telesinus sat in silence for a moment. “It should work,” he conceded at length.

“It will work, Pontius,” Sertorius urged. “And the best part of all is that it is completely without a down-side risk. The worst that can happen is business as usual; no-one is going to be insane enough to attack us! But if they do, that is where your part starts, Pontius. All I need is a legitimate *causus belli* and your agreement to act in response. Whom do you think the locals will support? The prince who taxes them, or the Republic that provides benefits to them? Opposition will melt before us, just like when Quintus Poppaedi marched through Syria to depose the Seleucids. Within four or five years we will be able to extend the frontier as far as the Indus, all with the enthusiastic support of the people who really matter; the merchants and traders in those places.”

Telesinus stared into the distance. “I’ve never been accused of being timid, Quintus, so I’m prepared to work with you on this one. If we can take effective control of Persia, that will be the best defence this frontier could ever hope for.” Now he fixed his gaze back on Sertorius. “But keep me informed at all times, Quintus. Make sure you keep nothing from me, and do not presume that I will do everything you want. I take my independent duty to the Senate very seriously, and if you try to force my hand I am quite capable of walking away from you.”

Sertorius returned the gaze. “I originally wanted the foreign policy power in my own hands, but Marcus Livius persuaded me otherwise. ‘Two heads are better than one’, he argued. So I decided to go along with him on that one, so long as I got to pick the other head.” Sertorius paused. “You were the head I chose, precisely because of what you just said. I wanted a man with the vision to see the opportunity, the wisdom to think through the consequences that might have escaped me, and the courage to stand by his decision. I think we will prove to be a very effective team, Pontius.”

Telesinus gave one curt nod, and then changed the subject. “What are your intentions in the north, Quintus? I have heard talk about more settlements around the Black Sea.”

“Yes, that’s right. I have in mind to set up trading colonies all around the coast, with the permission of the barbarians concerned. Both sides would gain

from the trade we could generate, and these colonies could also provide land for any of the Roman Head Count that might want to improve their status,” Sertorius explained. “We haven't raised the issue with your Italian faction yet, still in planning stages; but we Populares think the promise of a free farm will be a big vote-winner in the Roman Tribes. It will also help Romanise the Province, perhaps leading to another Sicily-type arrangement further down the track.”

“Free farms?” Telesinus queried. “How can you afford that on any significant scale?”

“A lot of the Roman budget is spent on subsidies, specially the grain subsidy,” Sertorius told him. “From talks so far among the Alani and Scythians, we hope to be able to buy good land from them very cheaply. One year's subsidy per capita in Rome would buy more than five iugera, depending on quality. So we are going to suggest to the Roman Comitia that they offer to pay for fifteen-iugera plots themselves, as a way of reducing their costs in future years. Now that we have peace throughout the world, and should stay that way for as far forward as we can imagine, the population pressures will start to build. Rome and Italy need to export this surplus; and probably Asia Province, too.”

“But anyone who takes that offer still has to eat for the first year or two, while he sets up his farm!” Telesinus pointed out.

“Yes, and the Roman Comitia will need to lend them money for those first two years; but this will be a loan, to be repaid at five percent interest, secured by the farm. The bankers among our supporters say that it should be reasonable to repay borrowings plus interest in ten to fifteen years,” Sertorius smiled. “That will help the Comitia to finance the scheme.”

Telesinus pursed his lips as he considered this scheme. “Very clever!” he said at last. “The Comitia would go close to breaking even, perhaps making a profit, instead of paying year after year of subsidies; the young Head Count lad gets himself a farm and a Class; the barbarians get a trading partner on their doorstep; our own traders and merchants get opportunities of their own; and the Republic gets to tax the whole process. Everyone wins!”

“The gentle art of Statecraft, Pontius,” Sertorius agreed. “Men like you and Quintus Poppaadius are excellent Military Men, and can make a fortune out of booty and enslavement; but making the process profitable in the long term requires a different skill set. My job is to make peace as rewarding as war, but without the costs and risks.”

Telesinus sat in silence for a minute. “A pity that the same scheme won't work for the Italian Tribes.”

“No,” Sertorius agreed. “It only works for Rome because of those subsidies, an incentive for the Roman Comitia to reduce its future costs. You can see the result of those damned subsidies just by looking at the Army; poor Italian boys sign on, to get his twenty iugera after fifteen years of service; but a poor Roman thinks Army service is below him, so he just lives on the subsidies. That's why four out of five legionaries are Italian.”

“That has to be bad for Rome in the long term,” Telesinus agreed, “but I am Samnite, not Roman, so I don't really give a toss. In fact, I have noticed that

quite a few Roman landowners are selling their estates in Samnium, to avoid the double tax; so these Roman subsidies are indirectly letting Samnites buy back their own lands.”

“You are not the only one to have noticed that,” Sertorius told him. “The Boni are still squealing like pigs about having to feed the urban poor; the fact that they are so poor purely because of venal government under two hundred years of First Class extortions doesn't seem to feature in their thinking. But it has meant that even they are prepared to support this free farm scheme now. At last they are prepared to lift the status of the average citizen, instead of pushing him ever lower. All it needed was a good dose of self-interest.”

“It seems that you have rather detailed plans in place already, to have quiet Boni agreement. Why haven't we Italians been told?”

Sertorius shrugged. “Caius Aurelius and Caius Norbanus effectively run the Populares now. They make these decisions. But I suppose they knew you Italians tend to not want to be involved in Roman matters, and they didn't see the need to increase the risk of word getting out prematurely. I am telling you because you have a need to know my plans for this part of the world, and I trust you to honour my confidence.”

“Thank you. And yes, you can rely on me to keep quiet unless I see a threat to the Republic; and even then, I will talk to you first,” Telesinus agreed. “But personally, I think this is an excellent idea that will strengthen the Republic. If asked, I will support you.”

Chapter 5 – 682 AUC (72 B.C.)

Sertorius and Telesinus were sitting in the regular Government Meeting in Babylon. There were six other men around the table now. Sertorius had added a Trade Delegate and a Naval Advisor to his original circle of advisors. Marcus Tollianus remained his Chief Administrator with largely Rufan-trained subordinates, but Sertorius still relied on his status as a Military Governor to avoid the full constraints that the full-blown Rufan System could impose upon him.

Telesinus reported first. “Gentlemen, Typhon and I have established a good relationship with Antioch Margiana, which we intend to refer to as 'Margiana' in the future, to avoid confusion with Syrian Antioch. We now have the right to set up our own trade centre there, guarded by up to a thousand men. It is our intention to intercept goods from the east at this point, and thereby monopolise trade in specific categories, starting with silk and tea.” Telesinus paused and looked around the table. “We will be able to achieve this monopoly, because we have agreed to pay the Governor of Margiana for this privilege. Any trader who tries to deal in these goods with anyone except us, or transport them through his territory, will have his goods confiscated. This will cost us ten talents of gold per annum for the silk, and ten talents of silver for the tea. Other commodities may be added, for an additional fee to be negotiated at the time.”

Sertorius broke in with a frown. “That is a pretty high price, Pontius,” he complained. “I only authorised four talents for the silk, and no mention of tea.”

Telesinus smiled. “You will have to learn to trust me, Quintus,” he chided. “But don't worry; once the routine is established, perhaps in two years' time, I have every intention of re-negotiating it. Either that or a takeover.”

“Septimus also managed to find a few of the local chieftains along the road,” Telesinus continued. “He suggested to them very politely that any caravan accompanied by Republic cavalry should not be attacked. In return for this courtesy, we would show our appreciation by giving one part in a hundred of the value of our goods, to be shared among them. We could also guarantee that attacks on other caravans would not be punished by Governor of Margiana. However, if a Republic caravan was attacked, then we would track them down, and every man, woman and child in the offending tribe would be slaughtered or enslaved. I am confident they understood, but I would suggest that we provide an escort of at least two thousand horse for each caravan.”

“Do you share that confidence, Septimus?” Sertorius broke in.

“Yes, sir, so long as we don't rely on it too much,” Caretus answered. “Two thousand cavalry on each trip should be insurance enough.”

Sertorius brooded for a moment. “I would prefer fewer caravans with better protection, at least until we have a better knowledge of the area. Septimus, I want four thousand cavalry per trip, with one thousand of them doing full scouting and reconnaissance. I want maps produced, showing where everyone and everything is. If anyone wants to hit us, I want to be confident that we know the country well enough to not charge into a trap when we respond.”

“Yes, sir,” Caretus replied. “Map-making and locating bandit headquarters is already part of our planning. Once this was completed, we intended to ask Lucius to annihilate them.

Sertorius looked back to Telesinus. “It looks like you are ahead of me! Please continue, Pontius.”

“On our return journey, the city of Nisa asked if we would grant it Friend and Ally status if it renounced the Pretender in Hekatompylos,” Telesinus continued. “I told them that they would have to raise their own army, at least strong enough to defend their walls if they are attacked; we would not be able to intercept an army from Hekatompylos if they were attacked, but we would march to their aid as soon as we could. They would have to be able to hold out long enough for us to get there. They agreed to this, but asked if we could provide a defensive garrison for the first year, while they get themselves organised. They offered to pay for this.”

“How much?” Sertorius asked.

“A fifth of a talent of gold for two cohorts for one year.”

“That works out at about five thousand sesterium milia; fair enough,” Sertorius commented. “They might as well be stationed there and paid for by Nisa, as camped anywhere else and paid for by us. But speaking of Hekatompylos, has there been any change of attitude there?”

“Not really, Quintus,” Telesinus replied. “Phraates still insists that he is the rightful Shah over all cities other than those occupied by us, and demands that we remove our protection from them. In return for which, he will recognise us in our current territories. But he also undertakes that he will not take any aggressive action to enforce his demands. How did he say it again? ‘Relying only on the Republic’s wisdom to agree to these most reasonable proposals’. In other words, he knows he has no hope of changing anything, but refuses to admit it.”

“Same old story,” Sertorius agreed. “That might change when Nisa declares itself independent, but I doubt it.” He looked back to Telesinus. “Regardless of what Phraates does, I am inclined to take Hekatompylos next year. If nothing else, it will send a message to everyone else, including those bandits you are buying off with your one percent.”

Telesinus pushed his lower lip forward, as he often did when thinking. “I agree, Quintus. It will make the Road a lot easier to police. So why don’t we send the troops to Nisa, wait for Phraates to squawk, and then hit him with an ultimatum?”

“Agreed!” Sertorius responded. “Any more to report?”

“Not from me,” Telesinus replied. “How goes our navy?” he asked, looking to Karmides on his left. Karmides had been the General at Sea in the Bithynian Fleet before Nicomedes had been deposed. Although he was pushing seventy years of age now, Sertorius considered recruiting him a coup.

“Our expedition was moderately successful,” the old Greek started. “We made good time down the Southern Sea and through the straits, just as the sailors from Charax said. We had no trouble with pirates; I expect they guessed we were warships, not traders, so we posed no temptation to them. The problems started

once we were out onto the Great Sea. The wind was blowing from the south-east, so we could not sail; and the waves were so large that rowing was impossible. We had to anchor until the wind changed; then, when it came in from the north, we were able to follow the coast south-east and then south-west.

“Thirty four days sailing after leaving the straits, following the coast all the way, we found the land turning north again. We were in the lee of the shore, so the waves were small enough to allow us to row from there. We saw the occasional town as we went north, until forty one days after entering the long, narrow sea, we saw a port that was unmistakably Egyptian. I went ashore with one boat, and was told it was the port of Berenice. I also discovered that some ships from great distances also call in with luxury goods such as pearls from time to time. Then we came back, mapping the coast as well as we could on the run. Sometimes we were delayed by adverse winds and high seas; triremes are not well suited to those waters.

“So we discovered that the old maps showing a vast ocean to the south are correct,” Karmides started summarising, “and we also discovered that our ships are very poorly suited to conditions out there. If we are to trade on that sea, we will need vessels that are able to sail at some angle into the wind if they are to not be completely at the mercy of the weather, and with much higher freeboard because of the size of the waves. I would like to see such a ship.”

“Did the locals not give you any descriptions of the foreign trading ships?” Sertorius pressed.

“Some strange comments only,” Karmides answered. “One was that they had triangular sails. I could not imagine at the time how triangular sails would allow better handling than square sails. And some told me their sails had ribs, but I have no idea what is meant by 'ribs'. But it occurred to me later that what these locals called 'triangular sails' might have meant a spritsail arrangement, like some small fishing boats in the Aegean use. They can work into the wind reasonably well, but I have never seen them on larger vessels.”

Sertorius stared at his unofficial Admiral. 'Can't imagine' and 'No idea' were simply not good enough. “Then what do you propose as a next step, Karmides?”

“I would like to take another expedition, this time following the coast to the east. Sooner or later I will find one of these strange ships; and when I see one, I expect I will understand how it works,” Karmides answered, “After that, we will build a few copies and experiment with them, until our ships are better than the originals.”

Sertorius nodded. “Do it! And if you can bring back an expert shipwright or two, all the better. Offer whatever pay you need to.”

He turned towards Lucius Marius. “And have you made progress towards eliminating those stray Parthian bandits yet, Lucius?”

“Yes, sir, and in a very pleasing way,” Marius smiled. “The local folk have been so impressed by our policies towards them that they are now actively helping us. We now have some informants in the villages and guides in the wilder country. Even a few deserters have responded to our offer of amnesty in

exchange for information. I expect to be rid of the last of them before winter closes in.”

“Excellent!” Sertorius approved. “And Arius; how goes the task of province-building?”

Arius Claudius sat straight to address the gathering. “It goes well, actually,” he summarised. “At first my biggest problem was making use of manpower; there were thousands of men unemployed during the growing season, between sowing, harvest and repairs; but I had no cash to offer them wages. I discussed this with Marcus, and we came up with a rather good idea. I’ll let him tell you about that; it is more in his department than mine.

“But because of this clever idea, we have been able to build roads and repair the irrigation system much more quickly than expected. I have also found that the annual flooding does not need to be as high as it usually is to replenish the fields, and we could save a great deal of re-building expense if we took the crest of the floods; and that another crop could be grown in most areas if there was more water later in the season. So I have started looking at the possibility of building a dam in the region of Dura-Europus to achieve this end.”

“Keep me advised of your budget before you spend any big money on that,” Sertorius ordered. “There is no point in spending more money than we can claw back in taxes on the increased production.” Then he looked to Tullianus.

“The spread of proper administration into the smaller towns is going well,” Tullianus answered the unspoken request. “We have also an effective public guard in almost every town with more than a thousand people, and this is keeping a lid on petty crime, much to the thanks of most of the population. But the big change is the clever idea that Lucius hinted at. I think we have solved the problem of not enough gold.

“The usual way to find gold when you need it is to simply find a gold mine and dig it up. Well, we had no gold mine; but we decided to make something that would be a good substitute for gold; a piece of paper that the Provincial Administration would treat as being the equivalent of gold. So we used that page-printing system used in Rome to print pieces of paper, each marked as being worth a sesterce, and some marked to be worth fifty sesterces for larger transactions. We put out a decree that the Provincial Administration would accept these papers at their printed value as satisfaction of all taxes and debts, and so must all other creditors under threat of being tried for Treason.

“The workers were a bit sceptical of it at first, but it was better than not working at all; and when we started providing food and rent for them and their families in exchange for these papers, they got used to it soon enough. The small businessmen were a bit resistant at first, but they soon realised that they could put these papers to one side for paying their taxes, and keep the real coin for themselves. So we now have the situation where everyone who is forced to accept the paper as payment is eager to use it to pay their own debts; no-one wants to be stuck with it if it suddenly becomes worthless.

“The end result is that most of the market place now operates on paper wherever it can. If we keep this going for a few years, then everyone will come to

accept the paper at its face value, and as the normal way of doing business. It is almost as good as creating gold out of thin air.”

Sertorius frowned. “It sounds to me as if these papers are just promissory notes; we can't go on issuing more and more of them unless we have the funds to cover them!”

“You are right, of course,” Tullianus answered. “So what we need to do is make sure that our revenue from taxes and charges is enough to redeem them at the end of the year. After all, these papers are worthless when it comes to trading outside our own province. But at least it lets us get the work under way immediately, so everyone else can get to work as well, which means more taxes raised at the end of the year. That is much better than doing nothing for a year until we actually receive all our revenue, because if we do that then no-one else is making money either, so we get less revenue. It is almost as though we are getting our income a year in advance, to kick-start the economy.”

Sertorius was still not convinced, but it was too late to stop it now. This is one of the risks of delegating power while away. “Well, go easy on that issue of paper debt,” he said grudgingly. “I want to be able to repay it if we have to, and hopefully we won't need to issue as much next year. I'll accept it as a temporary solution.” Sertorius turned to the last of his advisors around the table. “Typhon, Pontius has told us about the foreign trade; but what scope do you see for improving the wealth of the province from internal effort?”

“The Babylonians had a brilliant tradition in ceramics and glass, and this has not been entirely lost,” the Greek answered. “I think that a little investment and experimentation will allow these skills to be regained, and we would be able to sell to both east and west in these luxuries.”

“How much is 'a little investment' in your mind?” Sertorius asked. “And how would you spend it?”

“Twenty thousand sesterces a year for perhaps three years would be enough as a starter,” he answered with a shrug. “To be spent on wages for a few of the remaining masters, some apprentices and their materials. By then we should know where we are going with the programme, and decide if we want to go into serious production.”

“A pittance!” Sertorius waved away the cost. “Do it!” He looked around the table. “Any other points of interest?”

“Yes, sir,” Typhon answered. “I propose to do some calculations on the likely value we might be able to harvest if Arius can even out the flow of the Euphrates to provide enough water for a winter harvest. I will have these calculations checked by someone with farming expertise, and hand them on to Arius. When he has enough information to estimate the cost and effect of a range of proposed dam schemes, he will be able to evaluate what size and style of dam is needed to give the best return on the investment.” Typhon sat back slightly. “If any,” he added as an afterthought.

“Excellent idea, Typhon,” Sertorius agreed. “Well, we all seem to have plenty of work ahead of us. Let's press on!” He stood as if to close the meeting.

“Just a moment longer, please, Quintus,” Telesinus broke in. “If Karmides is going to sail east to look for foreign ports, then I want to be there for first contact. Foreign relations are my department, remember.”

Sertorius nodded. “I agree.” Then to Karmides, “See to it that you keep Pontius well-informed about your plans. He has complete authority to go with you, or send his own staff if he so chooses.” He swept around the rest of the table. “And he has total authority when it comes to accepting or rejecting anything to do with foreigners, including trade. Everyone remember that!”

Bocchus of Mauritania had mis-calculated badly. His brother Bogud had considerably more armed force behind him than had been apparent only six months ago, and had repulsed the attempt by Bocchus to re-unify the kingdom. It was obvious now that his brother had been making plans similar to his own all along, keeping his growing forces out of sight in the far south-west, hoping to gain the advantage of surprise for himself. So when Bocchus had sent his re-unification force across the Mulucha, expecting Bogud's capitulation in the face of such an army, it had been altogether too complacent. As it marched westward towards Tingis, Bogud attacked with his hitherto-unknown army and made short work of it. Now it seemed that there would indeed be a re-unification; but with Bogud as the king.

“Phartax, we have little choice left,” Bocchus said to his trusted Chief Minister. “If we can launch one good attack, we might be able to stop the invaders, at least for the rest of this year. That will buy us enough time to send to Rome for help.”

“But my King, why would Rome want to come to our aid?” Phartax argued. “I can see no benefit for them; and if the truth is told, they would probably be happy to see a single kingdom again; it would be simpler for them than the instability of a divided Mauretania. You would have to offer Rome a substantial inducement if you hope for them to intervene on your behalf,” the advisor summarised.

“Indeed,” Bocchus agreed. “So I will offer them my Kingdom. If I do not, I will lose it anyway under Bogud, as well as my life. At least this way I will retain my wealth and my life under Rome. But first, we need to keep Bogud at arm's length for long enough for the Romans to get here; and then he will back away rather than making war against Rome.”

Phartax nodded gravely. He had privately been of the opinion that this war could no longer be won; but one does not offer that opinion to the King and still expect to live. Now that the King had reached the same conclusion it would be safe to agree with it. “Then I will send an envoy to Utica immediately, my King,” Phartax summarised. “And shall I send orders to General Polites for a counter-attack?”

“No, Phartax; I will go to Polites myself. I want no excuses for inaction. And I want you to go to Utica in person, not a delegate. I want Rome to be confident that they are dealing with a genuine offer from the highest level. We can't afford to waste time.”

Karmides felt as though scales had fallen from his eyes. Here, in the port of Krokola, there were dozens of these strangely-rigged ships; but now that he had seen them, he was amazed that he had not been able to imagine them before. The principles of their operation were so simple, so obvious! The 'triangular sails' that had bemused him by their descriptions were exactly that; But it was not only the spritsail as he had guessed, but also a foresail run up the forestay, with the trailing corner stretched back and to the downwind side of the hull. This allowed the ship to have a positive forward component of force from the sail, even when it was facing half-way between dead into the wind and square across it.

But more striking was the sight of the 'ribbed sails' on the main masts. These were in some ways like the foresails, being based on a triangle with the leading edge secured to the mast; but timber battens were fitted horizontally into them at spaces up the sail's height. This allowed the back edge of the triangle to project well out beyond the straight line from mast head to bottom corner of the sail, and also forced the sails to hold a smooth curve that guided the wind past them more efficiently. Like the foresails, these were rigged fore-and-aft, allowing the ship to sail at an angle into the wind.

"Magnificent!" he said under his breath.

"They remind me of a bird's wing, but poking straight up from the deck instead of being horizontal," Telesinus commented at his side.

"Yes, I suppose they do," Karmides agreed. "And that is the secret of sailing into the wind, just as a bird can fly into the headwind created by its own speed. It is almost as though they force the wind to form a ramp for them to slide down."

"Well, it is about time for us to go now. I can see something official-looking happening on that dock," Telesinus said, pointing to some activity on the timber wharf in front of them. The five Roman ships were anchored about a hundred paces into the bay, rather than risking unintended offence by pulling into a wharf. A Greek-speaking officer had been rowed ashore yesterday evening to make arrangements for a formal meeting with the city's administration.

Typhon appeared on deck as Telesinus spoke. The Trade Advisor was wearing a full Ionic chiton, stark white with blue and yellow threads around the hem and neck. Karmides was in a shorter chiton, plain white and fastened at the left shoulder, bound with a rich green silk belt with the ends falling to half-thigh length. Telesinus was, naturally enough, in dress uniform less his helmet, his breastplate and greaves flawlessly polished. The three men climbed into the gig for the short trip to the wharf.

As they climbed the timber steps to the main platform three trumpets played a fanfare and a finely-dressed man who had been sitting on an ornate chair stood to greet them. Another finely-dressed man stood at his right shoulder.

Telesinus strode towards the man, Karmides behind his left shoulder and Typhon behind his right, to stop three paces short of their host. He smiled and inclined his head briefly. The Indian spoke first, in fair Greek. "My name is

Ranjut. I am the governor of this city, and I welcome you. This man is Adnan, the Harbourmaster."

"My name is Pontius. I am the Eastern Proconsul of the Roman Republic," Telesinus replied. "It is our wish to co-operate with you to ensure peace, prosperity and goodwill for both our peoples, and I thank you for your welcome."

Telesinus indicated Typhon. "This is Typhon; if it pleases you, he would like to discuss possible trade arrangements with the appropriate men on your staff." Typhon nodded acknowledgement. "And this is Karmides; he is the admiral of our fleet." Karmides nodded in turn.

"Your vessels are most unusual, lord Karmides. I do not recall seeing any like them before."

"They are not designed for trade, lord Ranjut," Karmides acknowledged. "They are more suited to ceremonial purposes, and for exploration."

Then Ranjut, gesturing towards one of the warehouses behind him, said "Let us go into the harbourmaster's office, and take refreshment as we speak."

"Thank you. We will follow you, lord Ranjut," Telesinus replied.

Ranjut smiled broadly. "No, lord Pontius; let us walk side-by-side. That is more fitting." He waited as Telesinus strode forward to his side, and then turned to walk with him. "Your man yesterday said that you are the conquerors of Parthia," Ranjut said, as if making small talk as he walked. "So I gather you are Greek, the heirs of Alexander who came this way more than two hundred years ago after conquering the Persians."

"You are very close to the truth there, lord Ranjut. I am Italian, not Greek, but you will notice that my two companions are Greek."

"But you speak Greek very well."

"Yes; many of our educated men speak Greek as well as our native Latin. To outsiders, there would seem very little difference between Italians and Greeks."

The harbourmaster's office was obviously more than a working office. It was a complete ceremonial salon, with fine art on the walls and pedestals around the room, silk drapes on the windows and plush couches. A finely-worked timber table with ivory inlay was set with cakes and drinks between two such couches. Ranjut indicated a couch for Telesinus and waited while his guest sat before sitting on the other himself with Adnan at his side. Typhon and Karmides stood behind Telesinus.

"Oh, please take a couch of your own, lords!" Ranjut asked, gesturing to some attendants to fetch a third couch. Soon all were seated.

Ranjut turned back to Telesinus. "Lord Pontius; it is refreshing to have you come seeking peace and trade. The Parthians also traded with us, but not in great quantities. We also carry on some trade with Egypt, but again only in small quantities."

"Our Republic consists of many provinces, set all around a great inland sea," Telesinus replied. "Trade between provinces across this great sea brings

prosperity to all our peoples, and we would like to extend this to your lands as well. Trade is good for everyone.”

“Indeed it is, lord Pontius!” Ranjut agreed with a laugh of joy. “I am sure that we can each provide the other with a vast range of goods. Please, allow your colleague Typhon to stroll around the city freely, and see what we have to offer. And if it meets with your approval, I would like you to permit our vessels to carry your preferred goods back with you, so our traders can see what wonderful things you can sell to us in return.”

“I am so glad that we agree on these things, lord Ranjut,” Telesinus replied with a brilliant smile. “This even better than I had hoped for as we journeyed from our own lands. I have here a draft of an agreement that our two peoples could endorse, for our common benefit.” Telesinus took a roll of paper from his pouch. “Please, read through it at your leisure, and consider it as a first sentence in our conversation. Let me know if you would like to see any additions, deletions or changes to its suggestions.”

Ranjut leant across the table to accept the paper. He unrolled the top of it, saw that it was written in Greek, and put it on the table. “You will understand, lord Pontius, that I am only the governor of this humble port, and I do not have authority to make treaties with foreigners. But I have already sent word to the King that you have arrived here; I expect he will send a competent official to deal with these issues. Please allow time for him to arrive. In the meantime, I will send this by fast rider, so his man will arrive well informed.”

“That is all I could have asked of you, lord Ranjut,” Telesinus smiled. “Now, would you like to inspect one of our vessels? You said earlier that they were strange to you.”

“That is most kind of you, lord Pontius,” Ranjut accepted the invitation. “But it is not right for so honoured a guest to be anchored in the bay as you are. Please, bring your own ship to this dock, so you may come and go more conveniently.”

“Thank you for that courtesy,” Telesinus responded. “If you would allow Karmides to signal to the ship to do that now, it will save you the boat ride out to it.”

Ranjut rose from the couch and gestured towards the exit. “Let us all go, and watch the skill of your sailors as they bring their craft to dock.”

They all rose and walked back onto the timber wharf. Karmides ordered the gig to return to the flagship with docking instructions. The bosun snapped off a crisp salute, knowing that Ranjut was watching, and ordered three of the seamen to stay on the wharf to handle the ship's cables when it came alongside. The gig was soon under way. Karmides was thankful that there was a slight on-shore breeze blowing; coming alongside the wharf by oar power could be a difficult manoeuvre, requiring good timing to ship the oars before they ran foul of the wharf. In these on-shore wind conditions the master need do no more than place the hull alongside the wharf an oars-length out, ship the oars at leisure, and allow the breeze to bring the vessel to dock.

Ranjut watched the process with obvious intelligence. This man was not unfamiliar with ships, Karmides thought to himself as the trireme hove-to ten paces out from the dock, shipped the port-side oars with crisp timing, and cast cables to the dock. At length it was snugged up to the edge of the timbers, and wide ceremonial boarding bridges were laid out for their guests.

"I gather this is a warship, lord Karmides," Ranjut commented as he looked to the beaked bow.

"Indeed it is, lord Ranjut," Karmides confirmed. "Its usual method of operating is to use oar power to manoeuvre, to allow it to ram and sink the enemy. Oars are not dependent upon the wind strength or direction, so they provide the captain with more tactical flexibility."

"Why would you bring warships on a peaceful expedition?" Ranjut asked politely. "I would have thought that a trading vessel, with samples of goods, would be more appropriate."

"You are right, of course, lord Ranjut," Karmides was careful not to disagree with the governor, "but we were uncertain whether or not we might encounter pirates on this journey. We were also unsure whether or not we might need to go up river, and a ship powered by oars is much easier to control if the wind is too light or from the wrong direction."

"Ah; I understand," Ranjut nodded. "As you said earlier, this type of ship is well suited to exploration." He looked at the mast and rigging, taking in the positioning of the shrouds and the yardarm. "Yes, this vessel would not be able to point much higher than square across the wind. That would serve you well in the right season, but seasonal wind direction is local knowledge, not available to explorers."

Karmides gestured towards the steps leading down into the main hull. Ranjut and Adnan complied. They glanced along the lines of oarsmen, standing to attention to honour their visitor.

"These men look in very good condition for slaves," Ranjut commented.

"They are not slaves, lord Ranjut," Karmides corrected him. "They are free sailors and soldiers; see the weapons within their reach, in case we come under pirate attack?"

"Ah, yes; I see," Ranjut said with surprise. "This must be a tough life for a free man to accept."

"These ships are designed for speed and agility in battle. But when not in battle, it is not difficult for a crew to maintain half-pace indefinitely; they cut through the water very cleanly, with little drag."

Ranjut nodded again. "Yes; the more I see, the more I understand how well these craft are suited to exploration. Adverse winds would not be so great a problem, and pirates would be fools to try to attack you." Ranjut walked over to a hatchway in the deck. All the deck hatches were open to ventilate the ship. Ranjut looked into the lower deck. "Another line of rowers!" he remarked. "How do you stop the water from entering through the oar holes?"

"That is one of the main problems with this type of vessel," Karmides confirmed. "See in here?" Karmides pointed to the place where the lowest oar

penetrated the hull. "We use these leather sleeves sealed against the sides of the oar holes and then tied tight around the oars. This solves the problem in calm seas, but when the waves are too high we sometimes need to seal the lower bank with timber shutters. We operate on the top two banks of oars at those times."

Ranjut nodded yet again. "A most unusual vessel, lord Karmides, but very well suited to your purposes, and very cleverly designed and built. Thank you for showing it to me." He looked out into the bay. "It seems to my inexperienced eye that all of your ships in this fleet are of similar design. Is it possible for me to see one of your trading ships?"

"You are right, lord Ranjut," Karmides agreed. "All our ships here are triremes, like this one; we did not bring a merchantman with us on this expedition."

"Then I must thank you for your courtesy towards me, lord Karmides," Ranjut smiled and bowed slightly. "Yours is a most remarkable ship."

"And I thank you for your interest, lord Ranjut," Karmides replied with a similar bow. "May I ask if I would be permitted to walk around your waterfront, and look over the ships in port? They seem to differ in some respects from our own designs."

"You and your companions have freedom of the port, lord Karmides," Ranjut assured him. "I am sure you will be careful to observe the usual courtesies."

"Thank you, lord Ranjut. Now, if I may escort you to shore...?"

Ranjut and Adnan turned back to the short flight of steps leading to the upper deck, and then to the boarding gangway.

"What do you think, Adnan?" Ranjut asked in Sindhi as they stepped onto the wharf.

"If this is the best they can do, then they present no threat to us," Adnan said while keeping a smile on his face.

"Indeed," Ranjut agreed. "It is little more than an overgrown rowboat! No doubt it could outmanoeuvre and probably outrun a sailing ship in light weather; but in any decent sea they will only be able to use their top two banks of rowers, and they would be in serious danger of capsizing if they were forced to take the waves on their beam."

"My thoughts exactly, lord Ranjut," Adnan agreed emphatically.

"So how would you sink one, if it came to a battle?"

"The trick would be to avoid being rammed; assuming I had enough wind, I would do this by running before them on a square reach and using archers to pick off enough oarsmen to cripple them. Waves on their beam would also make control difficult for them, reducing their efficiency and probably forcing them to close off the lowest row of oars. With any luck and a good swell, the sea would be able to capsize them without our intervention. But if not, when they were reduced to a slow enough speed, I would gibe under them, catapult a grapple across them amidships, and roll them over sideways by running before the wind." By this time the two had reached the office again.

“Yes, it all depends on having enough wind,” Ranjut said thoughtfully. “But out on the open ocean there is always at least some wind. If it is only light, then I would run from them as soon as they are spotted; by the time they cover the distance from first sight at any reasonable speed at all, their rowers would be too exhausted to maintain battle speed. Specially if you have archers, as you propose.” Ranjut dropped onto the couch and reached for the paper handed to him by Telesinus. He read through it, and then translated for Adnan.

*To the Governing Authority,
from Pontius Telesinus, Eastern Proconsul of the Republic,*

Greetings!

I am one of the three Chief Magistrates of the Republic, and have full authority to negotiate with foreign powers to the east of the Republic's territory.

Although we have conquered the Parthians we are a peace-loving people, resorting to war only under repeated provocations. Our primary wish is to live in peace with our neighbours, and to trade for mutual benefit.

We seek to formalise trading arrangements with all cities, kingdoms and States to our east. We expect such formal arrangements would include establishing agreed exchange rates for our coinage, and standardised measures for weights, lengths and volumes. We also hope that reciprocal rights to enter each other's ports for peaceful purposes can be agreed, and common efforts to suppress piracy can be undertaken.

But these are only our hopes and expectations, and should not be understood to be demands or any other show of arrogance. We seek talks to understand what your requirements might be for a smoothly-operating trade arrangement between us.

We await your response.

Ranjut dropped the paper back onto the table. “Rather open-ended, isn't it?”

“That is a matter for the King to decide,” Adnan replied non-committally, “and no doubt your advice will be valued.”

Phartax was shown into the office of the Chief Administrator of Africa Province. Claudius, who had returned to his position after the condemnation of Bocar, stood to receive him. Another man stood as well. “Lord Phartax; allow me to present to you Caius Tullius. The Republic Praetors are both in Rome at the moment, and Caius has been delegated by the African Comitia to act as Praetor in their absence.” Then turning to Tullius, “Praetor, I present to you lord Phartax, Chief Minister of King Bocchus of Mauretania.”

The two men smiled and took arms in the Roman way. Claudius gestured for them to sit on couches arranged at right angles, with a table bearing a bowl of

fruit and a flask of watered wine and two glass cups from Babylon. Claudius himself sat beside Tullius, on the side away from Phartax.

“My lords, I beg your indulgence for my impatience. But my mission is urgent, and I would like to set aside the usual formalities. My lord King Bocchus, a Friend and Ally of the Republic, is in great distress. His brother, Bogud, who was administering the western half of the Kingdom, has attacked and invaded the domain of King Bocchus, and presses hard. We seek help from the Republic.”

“You must forgive my ignorance, lord Phartax,” Tullius responded. “I had heard reports, obviously false in the light of your comments, that Bocchus had invaded Bogud's realm, and had been repulsed at great loss.”

“My lord King Bocchus had received reports that Bogud was amassing a huge army with which to attack. King Bocchus, in desperation, hoped to pre-empt Bogud's treachery,” Phartax explained.

“What is the law in this case, please, Claudius?” Tullius turned to his right to ask the chief Administrator.

“The law is clear on this matter, Praetor,” Claudius responded. “If two or more Friends of the Republic are in dispute, the proper course is to refer their dispute to the Republic Senate, who will delegate a mediator for them. But by launching this pre-emptive action, King Bocchus has turned what was merely a suspicion of war into the certainty of war. King Bocchus cannot claim the right in this matter.”

“What else could my lord King Bocchus have done?” Phartax pleaded. “If he had waited, the hammer blow would certainly have broken him.”

“He should have communicated his suspicions, set his army to defend his borders, and asked for the Republic to support him with reinforcements while the mediator acted to prevent war,” Claudius answered bluntly.

“Well, that was not a practicable option at the time, but what is past is past,” Phartax responded dismissively. “What we have now is a desperate situation. King Bocchus will do all within his power to prevent his people and lands from being ravaged by these nomadic barbarians making up the bulk of Bogud's army.” Phartax took a deep breath. “I am even authorised to offer the Kingdom to the Republic, if this is the only way to save these innocents. Let that be the punishment meted out to my lord King Bocchus, whose only crime was to respond to the practical necessities of the situation instead of the theoretically correct procedures which would have been ineffective in this case.”

Tullius looked to Claudius. “Titus, what am I authorised to do? This sounds like a Foreign Affairs matter, and that is a Republic concern, not Tribal. I don't want to be tried for Treason.”

“This is quite different from the Numidian Case, Praetor,” Claudius calmed him. “Those Numidian conspirators actively plotted the death of a sovereign Friend and Ally; so long as you do no more than authorise aid for Bocchus, without authorising action directly against Bogud, you will be safe.”

“So if I ask the local garrison commander to go into eastern Mauretania and take up a defensive position, Bogud would be in the wrong if he attacks?”

Claudius nodded. "That is correct, so long as you have a written request from Bocchus to do so."

Tullius looked back to Phartax. "So, do I have a written request from King Bocchus?" he asked.

"I have precisely that document in my papers," Phartax answered. "It can be in your hands before sunset."

"The next question is 'Why would I comply with such a request?'. Do you also have the offer to cede the kingdom to the Republic?" Tullius pressed.

"That can also be in your hands today," Phartax replied. "King Bocchus expected that you would demand such a document, so he has made the offer on the same basis as lord Sertorius extended to Nicomedes; Republic citizenship and retention of personal wealth for the King. But the King has not suggested that he retain the title of Ethnarch; he is aware that the Republic Senate has already resolved that there shall not be a separate Mauretania province, but it will be absorbed into Africa."

"That was very wise of the king," Claudius agreed. "But of course, we here in Africa do not have the authority to accept this offer; it must go to the Senate. We can only ask the garrison to defend our Friend and Ally, King Bocchus, until the Senate takes control of the situation."

"And you will do so?" Phartax asked.

"As soon as those papers are in our hands, the garrison will sail for Jol," Tullius smiled, "while you and I sail straight for Rome."

"That is excellent," Phartax smiled back.

Bocchus had not finished dismounting from his horse before he started speaking. "Polites, we must buy time. How do you propose we do it?"

"My lord king, come into my command tent and take some refreshments," Polites replied, studious to observe the usual courtesies.

"Stuff the refreshments, Polites; I want an update on what is happening, and what you intend to do about it," Bocchus snapped back. At last Polites realised that this was a business meeting.

"Yes, my lord. The enemy infantry are advancing at a forced march along the coast road, some thirty thousand strong. Some ten thousand cavalry are acting as an advance scout, a reconnaissance in force."

"How many do you have?" Bocchus demanded.

"Ten thousand infantry, seven thousand cavalry, my lord."

"So how do you intend to slow their advance?" Bocchus insisted.

"I had no intention of doing that, my lord," Polites responded. "My intention was to fall back on Jol, where we have fortifications that will be able to withstand their advantage in numbers."

"Then you are an idiot, Polites; Bogud will simply march around us and take the kingdom, leaving just enough of an investment to prevent us from interfering. You are showing the same idiotic complacency that lost my army on the road to Tingis! Be thankful that you are only being relieved of command, and not executed for incompetence as well!"

“Yes, my lord. Thank you, my lord,” Polites said sincerely. He had feared the king's anger ever since his main force was routed. “What do you require of me now?”

“Information, and your service as my subordinate. For all your incompetence, I know that you are loyal; and you are at least familiar with the Commanders of Thousands and their individual merits,” Bocchus conceded. “Now, let us plan our next move. Into the tent!”

Gomar knew his men were on the edge of breaking. They had all been conscripted, forced into Bogud's army, leaving their farms and their families in the far south-west. Since then they had been drilled and disciplined harshly, thrown into the Battle of Tingis as an expendable diversionary attack to minimise casualties among the King's favoured northerners, and now force-marched on minimum rations for more than a month. It was clear to everyone that they were too weak and exhausted for a battle, and just as obvious that they would be used in the front ranks again, to reduce northern casualties.

This could not go on. In fact, it would not go on. That was why he called the Commanders of Five Thousand together in his tent. “It is no secret what will happen when we finally meet Bocchus,” he said to them as he swept his eyes around the tent. “Our twenty thousand infantry will be brought through the lines and ordered to charge. Our eight thousand cavalry will be sent around the flanks. And the ten thousand Tinginese regular infantry will be held back as a reserve force, to exploit whatever breaks our men might gain. Their couple of thousand cavalry will be held back as well, rather than risked to the unknown. I have no doubt that our losses will be huge. We know we will die; or at least, most of us. So what do we have to lose? I suggest that we seize the supply wagons and fortify a position around them. Let the northerners attack us if they will, and spill their own blood! But it is more likely that will keep marching and try to live off the land. That will leave us free to make contact with Bocchus, and bargain for our freedom in the east. Or you can go back home if you dare.” Gomar knew from their faces that the seven other men in the tent agreed with him.

The arrival of the king had added a buzz to the atmosphere in the camp. There was a new urgency to everything, a more positive attitude. While falling short of actual optimism, there was at least a sense of purpose. The decisions had been made, the planning completed, and the orders were in hand. Six thousand infantry were deployed in concealment, with the bulk of the cavalry and the remaining four thousand infantry a further two miles back, also in concealment. Their orders were simple; remain in hiding until the scouting cavalry was almost upon them, annihilate the enemy, and then hide until more scouts came by. If they could not overpower the scouts, they were to form a defensive square and wait for their own cavalry to come to their aid. This skirmishing tactic demanded great discipline and cool heads; but with the king in the camp, the men felt they were up to it.

The remaining two thousand cavalry, commanded by Bocchus himself, had been ordered to ride through the night to circle around the advancing enemy, and then launch a raid in force on the baggage train at first light. This should break the forced march; an army can't advance as quickly if it has to forage on the way. It should also ensure that a larger portion of the enemy cavalry would be assigned to the rear guard, to reduce the number faced by the skirmishers.

Dawn was creeping across the sky as Bocchus looked down on the road from behind a low ridge. Cooking fires were sending smoke into the still air. Bocchus dropped back behind the ridge to give his orders. "Spread the men out, line abreast; I want to be in and out before their own cavalry can respond." The word went out along the line, and the men fell into position. Bocchus walked his horse forward for another look, before giving the order to charge.

As his head became high enough to look over the ridge, he saw a commotion off to the right. Cavalry! The enemy cavalry was riding back down the road at a trot, and the infantry were starting to cheer them as they passed. Draught horses were being yoked to wagons loaded with supplies and led forward. Or those to his left were being yoked; those to his right were remaining where they had been left the previous evening. Now the infantry were becoming active; they were starting to dig a ditch a dozen paces to the near side of the road.

Bocchus knew, with a sinking feeling in his stomach, that a charge now would be suicidal. But it would be helpful to know what was going on; this had all the signs of an army building fortifications for a camp, rather than setting off on another day of forced march. He dropped back behind the ridge again. "Tell the men to stand easy; we will not be attacking any time soon, and we might even be going home." Once again the word was passed, and horses started to drift out of line and into the dip further back from the ridge. "I am going to see what is happening further east; stay out of sight and quiet."

Bocchus rode out to the extreme right flank of his force, just over a mile, before breasting the ridge again. The scene was similar to what was happening out to the west, except that the supply wagons were being taken westwards and the infantry were straggling back with them. Officers on horseback were trying to hurry them. Then, even as he watched, ten cavalymen turned inland and started towards his line at a trot.

Bocchus was in an instant panic. These men would discover his force! His two thousand men, an impressive enough raiding party, would be heavily outnumbered by all of the enemy cavalry massing around this unexpected camp. "Fall back!" he cried. "Fall back, and return to camp!" There was total confusion for almost a minute as the subordinate officers queried this unexpected order and sought out the man giving it. By this time the enemy detachment was almost upon them.

"Wait! We want to parley!" their leader bellowed. The group dropped to a walk.

"Who are you?" Bocchus bellowed back.

"We are your friends," the reply came back. "Allow one of us to approach."

“Very well. One of you may approach,” Bocchus called back. Then, quietly to two nearby men, “Come with me.” Bocchus walked slowly towards the one man riding towards him. The man slowly drew his sword, held it aloft, and then conspicuously dropped it to the ground as he kept approaching.

“Stop there!” Bocchus demanded when the distance had closed to ten paces. The stranger obeyed.

The stranger smiled. “My name is Gomar. I am a Commander of Five Thousand, and I speak for seven of my fellows. Together, we command twenty thousand infantry and eight thousand cavalry in this force.

“We offer our services to Bocchus; in exchange for which, we ask for freedom and a year's pay for all of our men.”

“Why would you desert Bogud, your king?” Bocchus demanded.

“We come from the far south-west, and until last year we were our own masters. But then Bogud pressed us and our sons into his army, looted our towns and villages, and since then he has thrown away our lives like chaff, even as he protects his own northern tribesmen like gold. We owe Bogud nothing except revenge.”

“What are you doing on the road?” Bocchus pressed.

“We are seizing the supplies and fortifying a camp around them. If the twelve thousand northerners want them, they can fight for them. But if they are prepared to go their own way, so much the better.”

“And what will you do?” Bocchus asked.

“Whatever Bocchus asks of us, provided we are rewarded for our services,” Gomar answered with a shrug. “There is no going back home for us, so long as Bogud is on the throne.”

Bocchus saw his opportunity.

“But if Bogud were removed, would you want to go home?”

“Of course we would; but Bogud is a Friend and Ally of Rome, so how could we remove him?”

“I am also a Friend and Ally of the Republic. Join with me to re-unite the kingdom, and I will guarantee you and your people the autonomy that Bogud stripped from you; as well as reward you for your service.”

Gomar gaped for a moment. “And who are you, to be a Friend and Ally of Rome?”

“I am Bocchus,” he answered simply. “I will approach you now, and show you the signet on my finger.” Bocchus slowly walked his horse over to Gomar, his left hand held out in front of him.

Gomar examined the ring, and then looked up. “Deal with us justly, and you will have none more loyal.”

“I will do more than that; I will deal with you generously,” Bocchus promised. “Hold your position here, and I will be back tomorrow.”

The concealed infantry had been out all morning and half the afternoon in the sun, sweltering in their light armour. No cavalry had come near them. Then came the sound of hooves! A cautious look up; the horses, some thousand of

them, were their own, heading towards the enemy. The infantry in their path, concealed only by erratic boulders and long grass, rose from their hiding places to ensure they were not trampled. They saw King Bocchus at their head. Their king, leading a raid! Let no-one say that the king was not prepared to risk his own life in battle, beside his men! Another two miles on, and the simple overnight camp of Bogud's forward troops could be seen. Everything had been packed onto their mules, but no-one was going anywhere.

Bocchus halted the cavalry with him two hundred paces short of the camp, as he saw the enemy cavalry frantically readying their horses for attack. He sent three men forward at a walk. The enemy recognised what was happening, and sent three of their own forward.

"We know that the centre and rear of your column are now in mutiny," Bocchus' man said bluntly. "We know that you now have only ten thousand infantry, a couple of thousand horse, and no supplies. We will accept your surrender now. If you refuse, we will slaughter you instead. What is your decision?"

"I do not have the authority to make that decision," the leader of the enemy trio responded. "Wait and I will speak to my commander."

"We will not wait long," was his terse warning.

Five minutes later the commander appeared. "What terms are you offering?" he asked.

"Life instead of death."

"What do you mean by 'life'?" the commander asked. "We will surrender if we are allowed safe passage back to Tingis."

"I am authorised to offer you safe passage to Jol. Once there, King Bocchus will decide which of you will go to the slave market and which will be allowed to return home," was the flat response. "I suggest that if you want to avoid the slave market, you should agree promptly; the king does not enjoy sitting out in the heat of the sun while you waste his time."

The commander glanced up to the head of the larger squadron. Then he looked back to the negotiator. "Far be it from me to cause the King any discomfort! We surrender, and await your instructions."

"Then have your men strip to their loincloths and walk to the east, with no weapons, no mules, nothing. We will see to the baggage for you."

Bocchus had been much more meticulous in his westward march than Polites would have imagined. He had sent dozens of Gomar's men back to their homes as fast riders, urging the peripheral tribes to give Bogud no support, and await the benevolent rule of Bocchus. In this way the entire south had been neutralised; any recruitment units that tried to leave the region of Tingis had been ignored, if not attacked, by their targeted populations.

The men were not pushed too hard, and were well-fed. The march on Tingis had the flavour of a five-hundred-mile triumph, through cheering town after cheering town. Only the extensive scouting by cavalry and the insistence on battle-readiness reminded the men that the victory was not yet secured.

Word from home reached him on the road from Abila to Tingis, only one day out from his destination. Caius Tullius was shown into his command tent. "Good news, lord Bocchus! The Republic Senate has accepted your kingdom," Tullius announced breezily after the introductions were completed.

"But that offer is not valid. It was dependent upon Republic help in repelling Bogud; and you provided no help at all!" Bocchus protested.

"We provided plenty of help, lord Bocchus; we sent four legions to Jol immediately, to defend your capital; and another four legions were sent to the Mulucha River from Italy once we heard that Jol was safe; and the whole eight legions stormed onto the beaches near Abila only two days ago, believing that the city was still in Bogud's hands. Don't underestimate the difficulty and cost of an attack from the sea!"

"But it was all of no benefit to me! I won this war on my own; so why should I hand over my kingdom?"

"Well, let me put it this way, lord Bocchus; we have your written gift of the kingdom to the Republic; and we have eight legions at your back, with many more overseas if we need to bring them here. We have also told Gomar what the story is, and that we will honour your promises to him and his men. So he is most unlikely to throw that all away by committing Treason, which is what it will be if he takes up arms against an authorised Republic Army." Tullius smiled. "But look on the bright side; you still have your life and your wealth. I will even allow you to accept the surrender of Tingis yourself, if that is what you want. You deserve it!"

Bocchus swallowed his anger. "If I take Tingis, will I be permitted to dispose of Bogud?"

"What? Your beloved brother?" Tullius said with surprise. "Well, I'm afraid not; he still has not attacked the Republic, so he is still technically a Friend and Ally. If you kill a Friend and Ally, you forfeit that status yourself, and perhaps worse."

"Then what will you do with him?"

"That depends on what he does. If he surrenders, he will be allowed to retain his life and his wealth too. After all, what has he done that we could prosecute him for?" Tullius shrugged. "But if he refuses, then that would be a different matter. We would have to appoint a mediator to hear his complaint, and I expect he will be found innocent of any wrongdoing and still retain his wealth. The only thing that could trip him up is if he refuses to abide by the decision of our mediator."

Bocchus curbed his fury. "Then, if you are agreeable, I will reward and dismiss Gomar and his men while I am still king, and still have right of access to the Kingdom Treasury. Then I will hand over the kingdom and leave Tingis to you."

Tullius smiled. "I think that would be the wisest course for you."

Chapter 6 – 683 AUC (71 B.C.)

Caesar had spent the last eighteen months wisely. He was now quite fluent in Gaulish, finding it much easier than the Hebrew he had picked up as a child in Subura, and he was on good terms with the leading Allobroges and Arverni nobles. He had spent the summer touring central Gaul, meeting and greeting the long-haired tribes and learning all the alliances, animosities and feuds in the area. This knowledge was power. Fimbria had brought the province to boiling point with his extortions. This had become particularly bitter in the last few months as Fimbria knew he would be well out of the province in the new year, and his successor would need to tidy up the mess. The Allobroges in particular had been hit hard, and had complained bitterly to the Senate Committee for Colleges. They were demanding that not only Fimbria should be tried for Corruption, but also the Chief Administrator for his failure to report it himself.

The Committee had responded by asking for an audit, which unsurprisingly showed no irregularities; Fimbria and his Administrator were not so foolish as to put their extortions on the books. Then the Allobroges and several other tribes sent their most prominent nobles to testify direct to the Committee, which had certainly been enough to alert the Committee of the gravity of the situation. The two would be investigated as soon as Spring allowed them to return to Rome, which meant they would have ample time to stash their gains and intimidate their subordinates into silence. It also meant that there were now four legions in the province to protect the Republic's interests, and not just the usual two. They would be handy in the new year.

But best of all, Caesar had secured the governorship as Fimbria's successor. No-one else wanted appointment to so uncivilised a province known to be on the point of explosion, and his own care to befriend the leading Gallic tribes was well known. Thus far the plan was well on track. All he needed to do now was to re-assure the weaker Gallic tribes with soothing words to stay patient a little longer, and crush the stronger as they revolt.

In the process, it will not be too difficult to embroil other tribes beyond the limit of the province, in conspiracies real or imagined spreading throughout Long-Haired Gaul. Then, when the main centres of resistance had been devastated, the more compliant tribes would realise too late that their patience would be rewarded with subjugation. Caesar was certain that within his five-year tenure he would be able to subdue all of Gaul west of the Rhine. And perhaps he would find time for the north-west corner of the Spains as well, just to round out the frontier and to tweak the noses of Cotta and Norbanus for their condescending attitudes when they forced this exile upon him. That should give him the credibility to publish not only a commentary about this Gallic War, but also a belated account of the Parthian campaign.

“Believe me, Pellixus; the Helvetii, Aedui and Sequani are preparing for war,” Caesar urged his friend, the leader of the Allobroges. His Gaulish was now quite fluent. “The only doubt I have is which way they will march. It is possible that they will attempt to establish their supremacy over the rest of the Gallic

tribes; but if that is their immediate aim, what do you expect them to do next? I can only imagine that they will use the power of a united Gaul to wage war on Rome. And here are your people, caught in between. Not something I would look forward to! Or they might decide to just come straight through you to get to Massalia, and then call for the rest of Gaul to unite behind them. That would be just as bad for you.” Caesar paused to look his friend in the eye. “If you are prepared to unite with my legions and strike them first, your people will be safe; but if you do not come to our aid, I might be forced to pull my men to the south for their own safety. That will leave you vulnerable.”

The Celt looked worried. “I have to admit, Caius Julius,” he said with a shake of his head, “if they had come to us a year ago with a proposal to push Fimbria out of Gaul, our men would have taken up arms with glee to support them. Since you have taken over you have stopped the extortions, and many see you as a friend for that; but the bitterness of the last five years of Fimbria cannot be washed out that quickly. There would be many that would be quite happy to see Rome withdraw so we could come to our own arrangements with the Helvetii.”

“That could be considered a betrayal of the Republic, Pellixus,” Caesar warned.

“I know that, Caius Julius,” the Celt agreed. “But it is better that you know the sentiment of the tribe now, instead of being surprised when it is too late.”

“So you are telling me to not even ask for your support, because that could provoke a split within the tribe?”

“A split, perhaps an outright rebellion,” Pellixus agreed. “It would be better for you to leave that scab alone for another year or two, and then the anger might have abated. Unfortunately, Rome's reputation is mud right now, and even a man as good as you will need time to clean it up.”

Caesar nodded as if to himself, appearing to consider this advice. But beneath the mask of his face, he was outraged. Who do these Allobroges think they are, to even dream of refusing to produce a levy if required? It was only fifty years ago when they had the temerity to refuse handing over Teutomalius to Rome, and had their first lesson in obedience drummed into them by Quintus Fabius. Well, Allobroges auxiliaries would have made it a simple thing to launch a pre-emptive attack on the Sequani; that would have forced the Helvetii and Aedui to come to their rescue, and the War would be up and running. Now he would have to find a *causus belli* on a more modest scale. Then we will see how the Allobroges jump!

“Thank you for being so candid with me, Pellixus,” Caesar said with a smile. “It is good to have someone I can trust to tell me the truth.”

“And it is good to have a Roman Governor who will treat my people with respect, Caius Julius,” Pellixus replied. “The future looks good, so long as we are patient.”

Caesar was not happy. He had launched a lightning strike against the Aedui, accusing them of planning to attack Transalpine Gaul in the territory of the Allobroges. But contrary to expectations, this did not bring out the Sequani and Helvetii as allies of the Aedui, which could have been used to confirm his accusations of a conspiracy. Instead, the Helvetii and Sequani remained aloof. Pellixus managed to convince many of the Allobroges nobles that Caesar had protected them against a surprise attack, but there were still many who were sceptical of any Roman. Worst of all, the Aedui immediately denied the allegation and called for terms, rather than fighting. This made them look altogether too reasonable.

Caesar's terms were harsh. He demanded submission and incorporation into Transalpine Gaul, which the Aedui surprisingly accepted. This created an island of Roman territory in the middle of Celtica, exposed to the supposedly hostile Sequani on one side, the still-resentful Arverni on the other, and easily isolated from reinforcement. There were voices in the Senate that remarked how perilous this arrangement seemed if the alleged conspiracy was true. Why was Caesar creating so vulnerable a frontier? Then another Report from Caesar reached the Senate.

*To Pontius Pellius and Marcus Aurelius Cotta, Consuls of the Republic, and the Senate of the Republic,
from Caius Julius Caesar, Governor of Transalpine Gaul,*

Greetings!

I have reported to you previously about the plot by the Aedui to harm the Republic, and how my timely action has eliminated that threat. The occupation of their homeland has served as a forward base for gaining intelligence on the more remote tribes.

I recently became aware that the Senones, another tribe to the north of the Aedui, were preparing for war. These are the same Gauls who invaded Italy more than three hundred years ago and caused great distress to the Umbrians and Etruscans. That war, launched by these barbarians, resulted in the capture of Clusium and extensive lands in the north of Italy, and also the sacking of Rome itself. Their hostility towards Rome lasted for more than a hundred years, until they were driven out of Italy by Publius Cornelius Dollabella.

However, the passage of time has not reduced their anger towards Rome and the Republic; rather, they have nursed their rage for generations, and hate us still with a manic fury. Recently I became aware of their plans to stir up a confederation among the tribes of Long-Haired Gaul to drive us back over the Alps, and further if they could. Such a threat could not be neutralised merely by defeating them in battle, for they are too many and too widely dispersed, and they would pop up again later. Therefore I decided that only the total elimination of this pestilent people would suffice to ensure that they never rise again to harm us. This example would also tend to deter any others with similar ideas.

For this reason I have annihilated their warrior bands, destroyed their oppida and enslaved as many as could be captured, as well as ordering occupation of their territory to ensure no fugitives can return to carry the flame of their enmity into future generations. Their former lands will serve well as settlement sites for our veterans.

Pellius looked up from the page as he finished reading to the Senate. "My people, the Picentines, well remember these Senones," he said gravely. "Caius Julius is to be commended for putting an end to their mischief."

Egnatius stood.

"Marius, please speak," Pellius recognised the consular.

"I am uneasy about the direction of events in Gaul," he started. "You might recall, Conscript Fathers, that while Gaius Flavius was Governor of Transalpine Gaul there were several complaints lodged against him by these unruly Gauls, but nothing was ever demonstrated against him. Now Caius Julius is uncovering one plot after another. It is obvious to me that Long-Haired Gaul is itching for war, and part of their preparation is a concerted attack on the loyalty of those few tribes already under our governance. Just look at the case of the Aedui, as an example; Caius Julius protected the Allobroges against an incursion by the Aedui, and what thanks did he get for his troubles? The Allobroges did not even acknowledge the danger! This strongly suggests that they were secretly plotting to join with the invaders, rather than resist them. It is no wonder that Caius Julius chose not to include any Allobroges as auxiliaries in these campaigns!

"Thus far, Caesar has acted energetically and decisively to nip these two threats in the bud. But I fear that this wave of resentment sweeping through Gaul will continue to grow; and we cannot expect a mere four legions to be everywhere at the same time. It needs only two tribes at different ends of Gaul to rise at the same time, and our forces will not be able to handle both rebellions immediately; and whichever we leave untended will gather momentum as the surrounding tribes join in, and we will have Gauls flooding over the Alps yet again!

"Conscript Fathers, we must act with the same energy, the same prescience that Caius Julius is showing. We must send more legions into Gaul before it explodes, or we will face a disaster. At least four more legions are required, as a minimum!"

Norbanus stood next. "Conscript Fathers, Marius Egnatius has just laid out for you a very strong argument. It is the argument that Caius Julius would put himself, if he were here. It is strongly supported by the facts as relayed to us. But I am uneasy with so facile an interpretation. Allow me to build a different case, reaching a different conclusion; just as well supported by the known facts, as well as some others that are not common knowledge.

"It is true that there were complaints of extortion against Gaius Flavius Fimbria, but an audit showed no corruption on his part. It is also true that this audit limited itself to inspecting the official accounts of the province; it did not even attempt to seek witnesses to testify of extortions that were not part of the official record. So of course nothing was found! No-one carrying out the crime

of extortion would list it in the Public Record; just as a highwayman does not give out receipts for the goods he plunders! The Audit was a joke, and was always intended to be a whitewash; it looked precisely where everyone knew there would be no evidence!

"I do not know whether Gaius Flavius is guilty of extortion or not; but I do know that every care was taken to ensure that if he were, then the evidence would not be found." Norbanus turned in his slow stroll. "In the same way, there is no evidence that the Aedui were actually plotting an incursion, except the bare assertion by Caius Julius himself. In fact, the circumstances suggest otherwise; they did not resist our legions, but immediately capitulated. This tribe was totally unprepared for any attack against them, which would suggest they were *not* equipping themselves for war. And now we hear of a so-called plot by the Senones, the ancient terror in our history." Norbanus turned again. "There is only one problem here; The Gallic tribe called the Senones are not the same people that once invaded Italy! The traditions of not only the Gallic Senones, but also of the surrounding tribes, clearly tell of these people being in their lands for many hundreds of years, well before Dollabella's campaign. The Senones that were expelled from Italy were a completely different tribe, but with a similar sounding name.

"I know this because I have Gallic slaves from the area. And even more to the point, Caesar knows this himself; he speaks fluent Gallic! So why would he mis-represent them as nursing an undying hatred for Rome, when in fact they are barely aware of us? To answer that question, I will recount to you a discussion I had with Caius Julius and Gaius Aurelius Cotta two years ago, just before Caesar left for Narbo. It had been arranged that Caesar should go there as a member of staff for Gaius Flavius, but at the last minute he asked for a different commission; he wanted to go to north-west Spain, to conquer the rest of the peninsula. You see, Gaius Julius thinks of himself as a military genius; all he needs is a good war to prove it.

"So I suggest that he deliberately fabricated the story about the Aedui, hoping to provoke an uprising. But that didn't happen, so he imposed very harsh terms, and then stationed one of his legions in the most vulnerable position possible, hoping to entice a revolt. But that didn't happen, either. Then he cast around for another excuse to provoke a war; he noticed the Senones have a tribal name very similar to the invaders of three hundred years ago, and invented a connection between them." Norbanus paused and looked around the rows of seated Senators. "Caesar attacked them without any provocation, hoping that this would cause enough resentment and distrust against Rome that other Gallic tribes would unite to defend themselves. He was doing everything he could to trigger an uprising! But again, the Gauls showed themselves as too patient to swallow his bait. We have here a young man who will provoke a war; a war in which he hopes to conquer Gaul, for his own glory. Never mind the cost in good Roman and Italian lives; never mind the cost to the Treasury to pay for it; and never mind that we just might lose, if his provocations become so severe that not only the

Celts, but also the Germans become alarmed and are driven to unite against him for their own security!

“The way I see it, we have three choices. The first is to continue business as usual. If we do this, then Caesar will start a war that nobody wants, and will cost us too much money and too many lives in exchange for nothing of comparable benefit. The second choice is to do as Marius Egnatius has urged; we send more legions to Caesar. If we do this, we will only encourage his recklessness. The third choice is to recall this dangerous man, and replace him with someone wiser and more reliable, someone who can bring peace, not provocation. This third option is the one I commend to the Senate. It is the only way to prevent war and the likely loss of Transalpine Gaul, and perhaps even Italian Gaul, too!”

As Norbanus resumed his seat there was silence in the chamber. Senators sensed that a wrong decision here could be catastrophic; would support for Caesar prevent a war, or cause one? They were also acutely aware that Norbanus was a leading Popularis, the faction to whom Caesar himself nominally belonged, so such strong condemnation of one of his own men must surely be strong evidence that Norbanus was in no doubt. Eyes darted everywhere. Cotta, the other man privy to this reported belligerent conversation two years ago, was in Achaia; who else knew Caesar? Caesar had served under Silo and Sertorius; but Silo had retired to his tribal lands, rarely attending the Senate, and Sertorius was on the Eastern Frontier. Most eyes stopped on Fimbria.

“Gaius Flavius, could you please give us your assessment of Caius Julius?” Pellius asked. Fimbria reluctantly rose to his feet.

“Conscript Fathers, during the time that Caius Julius served under me, he seemed eager to befriend the Celts,” he began. “There were times when some of them, in particular those lying Allobroges, made groundless complaints and attempted to blackmail me by threatening to make false allegations against me. Only Caesar restrained me from punishing them more often and more severely than I did. He also made a point of learning their language, to gain their trust. My reward for my patience? They made good on their threat to make false allegations against me!” Fimbria almost shouted in his anger and frustration. “Caius Norbanus has just renewed these allegations against me, without any evidence, and disregarding the fact that I was found to be absolutely blameless. I do not appreciate his insult!” Fimbria paced the floor to collect himself again.

“But back to the question. At all times Caesar was eager to avoid war, and eager to prevent me from doing anything that could reasonably be construed as grounds for war. In doing this, he was betraying me! He was tacitly co-operating with the Allobroges in these baseless charges, appearing their friend, to ensure that my governorship would not be renewed, so he could present himself as the man to calm a troubled province; a province in which he had conspired to create these very troubles!” Fimbria looked around, his lips compressed. “Well, he got what he wanted! He got the governorship! And the Gauls got what they wanted; a pliable governor, one whom they thought would allow them free rein! Only now does Caesar realise that he has given them to think of him as their puppet,

instead of their master! They think that they need only make the same threats against him as they made against me, and he will buckle at the knees, for fear of them!" Fimbria paced the floor.

"So if you want my opinion, it is that both the previous speakers were right! Marius is correct, in that he says we need to send more legions to Transalpine Gaul as a matter of urgency. If we do not, the Celts will keep pushing until Caesar either breaks, or fights a losing war. But Gaius Norbanus is also correct; Caesar is not the man for the job. Not because he is provoking these barbarians, but because he does not have the spine or the credibility to pacify them. It is time the treacherous little weed was recalled, and replaced by someone who knows what should be done!" Fimbria paused, looked around, and struck an imperious stance. "I offer myself for that task," he concluded, and resumed his seat.

Murmurs ran around the chamber. There was one point on which virtually all Senators agreed; that Fimbria, guilty of extortion or not, should be kept well clear of Gaul. Herius Asinius stood after a few moments, and was recognised.

"Conscript Fathers, I think we need to be very careful how we approach this problem. We certainly need to strengthen our forces in Gaul, but we also need to ensure that we do this in a way that does not precipitate a crisis." He started strolling around the floor.

"I propose that we send more legions, but *not* to reinforce Caesar, just in case the fears expressed by Caius Norbanus are well grounded. Instead, these forces must be under the control of a man against whom the Celts could not possibly have any grudge, who is known to be fair and just, but who also has a reputation for taking no nonsense; a man who is skilled at war, but will try peace first." Asinius had timed his pacing so that he finished in front of Glauca. "Lucius, will you take this duty?"

Glauca looked startled momentarily, and then responded. "Herius, I am always ready to serve the Republic. But is that what this Senate requires of me?" Drusus was the first to stand and applaud; soon the majority of the Senate joined him. Even Fimbria, inwardly cursing, brought himself to stand, smile and join the acclamation.

Pellius stood, and after allowing generous time for the applause to die down spoke. "Lucius, please take command of the four new legions just coming to the end of their training, and march them to Transalpine Gaul. Once there, please investigate the circumstances on the ground as carefully and as accurately as possible, while trying to maintain peace as best you can. Then make your recommendations to this Senate."

Glauca stood. "I will do as you say, Pontius. I will leave for Campania tomorrow, to collect my troops."

'I'm making some headway at last!' Caesar thought to himself as he read the message a second time. Most of the larger Celtic tribes were in a flurry of diplomatic exchanges, a sure indication that they were starting to resolve to unite against the next provocation. Even Pellixus seemed reserved lately, as though he was starting to doubt Caesar's sincerity.

'I will give them a month to cement their agreements, and think about a good excuse in the meantime,' he continued to himself. 'There is no point in pushing them again until they are ready to push back; it might look as though I am inventing these reasons for action.'

Twelve days later word arrived from Rome. Lucius Glauca was on his way, at the head of another four legions. But these were not to be put under Caesar's authority; Glauca would retain command of them, independently of the Provincial chain of command. And Glauca's mission was to determine the facts and report back. Caesar rolled back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. How was he to convince Glauca that his allegations of a Celtic conspiracy were true? Well, for a start, the talks between the various tribes certainly looked like they might be plotting something, but they might well be able to persuade Glauca that they are only acting in self-defence against a paranoid Governor. Since they were still nominally independent Friends and Allies rather than part of the Province, they retained the right to their own armies. It might be better to make sure Glauca and the Celts never get to actually talk things through, Caesar decided. He needed to arrange something that would make Glauca distrust the Celts even before he met them. Then the thought struck him in all its elegance and force! The perfect *causus belli*!

Glauca had reached Massalia and set up a permanent camp for his four legions, and then sent legates to the more prominent Gallic tribes, both those within Transalpine Gaul and the nominally independent Friends and Allies in Celtica. He was hoping that enough of the leading chieftains and nobles would be prepared to meet with him in a council to discuss events under both Fimbria and Caesar, with a view to clearing the air and arriving at a more stable arrangement. His suggested date was forty days away, to allow ample time for the Celts to receive the invitations and consider their positions, and then attend. Until then, he would not move his legions any closer to the frontier, lest it be considered provocative.

His orderly knocked on his office door only four days after sending out these messages. "Yes, Caius?" he asked, not looking up from the supply estimates on his desk.

"Sir, five Celts are at the gates, asking you to meet with their leaders."

"That's impossible!" Glauca responded. "There hasn't been enough time for the invitations to get out yet!"

"I'm sorry, sir; I am only reporting their requests. They claim that they have been sent by the leaders of the Helvetii, Lingones, Arverni and two other tribes whose names I can't recall," Caius explained.

Glauca rose from his chair. "Then I suppose I should talk to them. Ask each of the legion commanders to meet me at the gate immediately. Five of them, so five of us to do them proper courtesy."

Fifteen minutes the gates of the camp were swung open and the five Romans marched out. "I am Lucius Glauca," Glauca announced. "I am told that some of your leaders wish to meet with me."

“Thank you for your courtesy and time, Consul,” one of them replied in clear Latin. “We have been sent by Orgetorix of the Helvetii, Dumnorix of the Aedui, Casticus of the Sequani, Porux of the Lingones, and Gobanitio of the Arverni. These are perhaps the most influential tribes in Celtica, and are eager to ensure peace.”

“I thank your leaders for their goodwill and eagerness for peace,” Glauca replied. “Be assured that my aim is the same; I have been sent by the Senate to discover the basis, if any, for the recent troubles, and to put an end to any discord. For this reason, my army is not under the command of the Provincial governor, but remains under my own authority.”

“So we have heard, Consul. That is why our leaders have come together, to speak candidly with you. They are currently guests of a nearby noble of the Vocontii, who has offered his villa as a suitable place for your discussions.”

“Then if your leaders are prepared to meet with me immediately, let us go,” Glauca suggested. “The sooner we start talking instead of fighting, the better.”

“Excellent, Consul!” the Celtic spokesman smiled with delight. “Do you wish to bring any staff with you?”

“My secretary would be helpful, and these four men who are my subordinate officers, if that is acceptable,” Glauca replied.

“Wonderful!” Another Celtic smile.

Glauca turned back to one of the sentries on the gates. “You heard that, soldier; send for Lucius Brutus, and our horses, immediately! We are going to speak with some of the most important men in Gaul.” The sentry set off at a run. “Now,” Glauca turned back to the Celts. “What is the name of our host, and where is his villa? I need to let my men know where I can be found.”

Less than half an hour later the six Romans and the five Celts were riding slowly northwards, the early autumn sun warming their backs. “How did your leaders manage to respond to my invitation so quickly?” Glauca asked their apparent spokesman, who identified himself as Ballarix of the Aedui.

“I know of no invitation, General,” Ballarix replied with a frown. “All I know is that there was a meeting of the five Chiefs ten days ago, when it was heard that you were coming to Gaul. They decided to meet with you as soon as possible.”

It seems these Gauls are as troubled by events as Rome is, Glauca thought to himself. “Are their thoughts typical of the other tribes as well?” he asked.

“That is probably best left for the Chiefs to discuss with you, General,” Ballarix responded. “But it is safe to say that these five, if in agreement, can persuade all of Celtica to go with them.”

“So there *are* some conspiracies being hatched?” Glauca asked flatly. “It is not all an invention by Caesar?”

Ballarix half-turned in his saddle to look directly at Glauca. “That is what the chiefs want to discuss with you, General. Give us peace.”

“Peace on what basis?” Glauca asked.

Ballarix turned back to a more comfortable riding position, looking ahead as he spoke. "That is what the Chiefs are here to discuss."

The fields gave way to more broken land, forested, and the shade of the trees was refreshing. Suddenly there was the rustle in the undergrowth off to the left, and dozen mounted men came out of the woodlands to join them on the road. Glauca's hand went instinctively to his sword.

"Don't worry about them, Consul," Ballarix said casually. "They are our guard; there are some unpleasant types around here who make a practice of waylaying travellers."

Three of the new horsemen took positions in front and three at the rear, line abreast across the road. The remaining six smiled and fell in beside the Romans, forming a third straggling line with the Romans in the centre file. Glauca relaxed again, and turned his thoughts towards the coming meeting.

A strangled grunt from behind him snapped him out of his reverie. He pulled his horse up to look around, and this small movement was enough to ensure the slash of Ballarix' knife missed his throat by the smallest of margins. As he drew his sword he saw that two of his legates had also survived the sudden attack and were also drawing their weapons, but the other two legates had been wounded. Lucius Brutus, at the tail of the Roman line was grimacing, and he saw the Celt beside him plunge a knife into his back, probably for the second time.

"Run for it!" Glauca screamed to his men, slashing at the Celt on his right-hand side in an attempt to break free of the press. He caught that man across the neck, and kicked his horse in an attempt to raise a gallop. But Ballarix, now unable to reach Glauca as the horse turned, could still reach the rump of his horse. He drove the knife into the left flank of Glauca's mount. The horse reared in pain. Glauca saw his two remaining men struggling against the surrounding Celts as he was thrown to the road. Half-stunned and winded, he saw Ballarix dismount, smiling grimly as he drew his sword. As Glauca struggled to his feet to confront the assassin, he barely had time to register the blade swinging in from his right-hand side before to bit deeply into his neck.

Petix, who had been known to Glauca as 'Ballarix of the Aedui', wasted no time. He met with Caesar immediately; Caesar had just arrived in Massalia to meet with Glauca, and had moved into an office he had under permanent lease for when he was in that city. "Everything went according to plan, General. Not only Glauca, but the four legion commanders and his personal secretary as well," Petix smiled. "There shall be no extra charge for the additional service; even though you will doubtless find their deaths convenient."

"Are you certain that no-one will guess?" Caesar asked.

"We were very professional about it, General; we even went to the trouble of finding the right tartans to match the five tribes," Petix assured him. "We might not be the cheapest men for hire, but we certainly provide a complete and seamless service. Speaking of which, there remains an outstanding balance of one hundred thousand sesterces, if you happen to have that much cash with you." Another smile.

Caesar smiled back. "I have no doubt that you have performed very well, Petix. But right now, I have no evidence that Glauca is dead, other than your word," Caesar held up a hand to forestall any objection. "Not that I doubt your word, Petix; but it is not good business practice to pay in full before delivery is verified. You already have the two hundred thousand sesterces I paid up front, so you can afford to wait another day for confirmation."

The smile that appeared on Petix' face was more menacing this time. "I have just killed one of the most renowned Consulars in Roman history, plus his senior staff; do not think for a moment that a mere Praetor-cum-Governor can survive if he breaks his pledge to me."

Caesar leant back in his chair and put his hands behind his head, as if relaxing. "Really, Petix; it is not good for either of us to launch into threats. I trusted you with two hundred thousand up front; you can trust me with half that amount for just one day!"

Petix glared appraisingly at this young Roman. "Very well, Caesar; I will wait one day. I will come back tomorrow."

"Thank you, Petix," Caesar said cheerfully. "You are a good man to do business with. But there is no need for you to come back; I will have the money delivered to your camp tomorrow, before noon. I would rather you not be any more conspicuous around my office than is absolutely necessary." Caesar stood to signify the end of the meeting; Petix frowned, but turned and left without further comment.

That should keep him nearby, Caesar thought to himself, and in the one place where I can get to him without being observed. Now that Caesar knew Glauca was dead, at the hands of representatives of the five most prominent tribes in Celtica for all the rest of the world knew, the next step was to remove any possible link between the assassins and himself. There must be no possibility of doubt that the Celts were to blame.

"Atius," he called to his secretary in the outer office.

"Yes, General?" Atius responded quickly, his thin body framed by the doorway.

"My spy has reported the location of a band of brigands that has been troubling the road north from Massalia. I intend to send a century of cavalry out to clean them up."

"Yes, sir," Atius answered. "Whom should I send; Fabius, perhaps?"

"Yes," Caesar agreed with a smile, the face of Caius Fabius, his most experienced and shrewd cavalry officer flashing into his mind's eye. "Caius would be excellent. He is on a patrol at the moment, but I know where to find him and I need to take a ride anyway, to shake the rust out. So I will catch up with him before he gets back into town, I don't want too much coming and going or it could warn the quarry. Then I can explain to him in person where to find these criminals."

Petix had not survived this long in his chosen profession by being too trusting. He knew that Caesar was planning to do away with him; not only to

save the extra hundred thousand sesterces, but also to erase any links with the assassination. But unlike most of Petix' customers, Caesar had not just a retinue of bodyguards, but four legions at his disposal. On the other hand, Caesar would not want to be so obvious, and slow, as to use all this force. Petix was pretty confident that he would employ only as many men as he thought prudently necessary for the job. How many would that be?

When Caesar had first commissioned him, Petix said that he had twenty two men in his organisation. Caesar probably thought that was a boast, but he would be unlikely to be so foolish as to take the chance. But he would certainly not expect Petix to have understated his strength. Also, Caesar would probably be thinking about an ambush, where the attacker always has the advantage.

So on balance, he expected Caesar would send perhaps fifty men against him, and these would probably be cavalry, for the sake of their speed. So he will play it safe himself; plan on the basis of a hundred Roman light cavalry, and allow for the possibility that they might leave their horses some distance away from the camp to ensure they are not heard approaching. Yes, his own entourage of forty six men should be able to handle that without too much trouble.

Caius Fabius was a cautious and experienced soldier. This particular mission was not complicated, but it still required due care. He studied the sketched map carefully, committing it to memory because he would not be able read it during the mission; the moon was not full enough to allow that. His main concern was how accurately the map conveyed the true lay of the land, but those adjustments could be made as he went. So far everything was going smoothly. His men were not wearing any armour, so there was no risk of metallic sounds giving them away as they moved. Unsurprisingly, the track into the canyon was comfortably wide and worn, open enough for the half-moon to guide them.

The first landmark! He indicated for three of his men to branch off and climb up a small ridge leading to what would obviously be the best lookout post. He did not want any alarm to be raised. It was almost an hour before the three returned.

"No-one there, sir. And no sign that anyone has been, either. These criminals must be pretty complacent, sir."

"Did you see any other places that might serve as a lookout instead?" Fabius asked.

"No sir. That point was the only place where trees would not block the view."

"Did you have a line of sight to their camp?" Fabius pressed.

"Yes sir. There is a canyon, with cliffs all around and what looked like some shallow caves in the cliffs. There were fires in front of three of them, and what looked like barrack buildings under the cover of the overhanging rocks. These bandits seem to like their comfort in winter; no tents for them! The floor of the canyon itself was clear in front of those caves, but there were some trees near the entrance. And there is a small waterfall; that should cover any noise we make."

“Good; at least we will all be able to get through the gap without risk of being seen or heard. Very well; let's get moving,” Fabius concluded. He had left twenty of his men with the horses; the other sixty rose to their feet to follow.

Fabius rounded the point of the cliff at the entrance to the canyon. A small stream bubbled out, running beside the path now reduced to only two paces wide before expanding again into an amphitheatre some forty paces across. The gap between the walls of stone to either side at the entrance was little more than four paces wide. He led his men into the canyon, creeping carefully to avoid any obstructions on the track. It was still very open and clear; a track that gets used by dozens of men every day, he thought to himself. Too easy! He looked up at the moon, still not yet near its zenith. There was still at least an hour before dawn. The best time to attack!

They were now almost through the trees and into the cleared area that apparently served as a central square for the small village that formed this bandit's lair. Fabius moved across to the east, into the shadow of the cliff, as he approached the fires and the sheds behind them. He beckoned his men around him and divided them into three squads, one to attack each hut on his signal. Fabius led the first group, to sneak away to the furthest hut. They were now plainly visible by the light of the fires.

A volley of crossbow bolts felled all twenty, like a scythe cutting standing grain. Alarmed, the remaining forty drew their daggers and looked around for the source of the threat, and any cover that might be on hand. Then another volley of bolts swept into them as they crouched. And then another. After a fourth volley the Celts climbed down from their ledge, swords in hand.

Petix prided himself on his sense of humour. A rather quirky kind of humour, he was the first to admit, but he couldn't help that. And there were also times when his sense of humour aligned itself with his self-interest. This was one such time. The Romans who were only wounded by the crossbows were quickly gathered together. Any equipment or other material on them was scrutinised at first light for identifying marks. Similar searching was done on the dead.

“Excellent!” Petix exclaimed as he saw the wealth of identification found. Then turning to one of the wounded, “Which of these men was most senior?”

The soldier pointed towards Fabius, who was lying still with a bolt through his throat. Petix immediately went to the body; he saw that the weapon at his belt was distinctive. He turned it in his hands, and saw that there was a name engraved on the hilt. 'FABIUS'.

“Right, someone grab that body and bring it with us. And bring three of the walking wounded as well, ones with identification on them,” Petix ordered. “We are going back to the ambush site.”

They arrived at the scene of Glaubca's ambush soon after sunrise. Immediately Petix sent scouts a mile down the road in each direction; he did not want to be disturbed in this work.

Fabius' body was dropped in the undergrowth by the side of the road, and then the two crossbow bolts in his chest and throat pulled out. The wounds were

then disguised by stabbing with a sword. Petix ensured that the distinctive dagger was still on his belt.

“Not enough blood,” Petix said with disappointment. “Bring one of the captives over here!” he ordered in Gallic.

One Roman soldier was led over and told to stand above the body of his commander. Petix walked around behind him, and then nearly decapitated him with a single slash. The victim’s blood soaked Fabius' body as well as his own. Swords were placed near the hands of the two dead Romans.

“And slash the bolt wounds as well,” Petix ordered. Two more Roman daggers were dropped a few paces away from these victims. “Once they find these bodies, they will suspect the assassins were Romans, not Celts; and if they can trace them back to Caesar's men, all the better!” Petix let out another laugh. “Now get rid of the other two!”

The other two captives taken a short distance off the road and killed, their bolt wounds also disguised by sword thrusts.

There was some concern at Glauca's camp. Neither he nor his senior officers had returned from the talks with the Celtic chiefs, nor had any message been sent back to advise how much longer the discussions were expected to take. Marcus Parrius was Prefect of the Camp, and therefore the most senior officer available. When no-one had returned by the third hour after noon, he sent a contubernium of cavalry up the road to the north. They had the name of the meeting's host, and directions on how to find the villa, all as explained by the five Celts before they left.

It was almost sunset when they returned at the gallop. Parrius met them at the gate. “Sir, all of them have been slaughtered!” the decanus reported in horror. “Lucius Glauca; they decapitated him! The bastards!”

“All of them dead?” Parrius asked in amazement.

“Yes, all six, sir.”

“Oh, Mars!” Parrius said in his distress, and then made the effort to start thinking what should be done. “Go, take the news to the Governor; he should have arrived in Massalia yesterday.”

Caesar was dismayed. Sixteen men had returned to his camp well after sunset. The two decani reported to him in his office.

“We don't know what happened, General. We were told to wait by the horses until Fabius returned. He expected to be back by the third hour. When he had not returned by noon, we sent four men in, to investigate. It should have taken them only a couple of hours, but they were not back after four hours. That was when the two of us decided that reporting back to you should be our next priority.”

Caesar sat in silence for a moment. He had been to this camp himself, and was well aware that the track was easy and short. An hour would be enough for a round trip in daylight. “You did well,” Caesar said tersely. “I will think about

sending in a full cohort, in daylight. Stealth obviously did not work.” He stood. “Now, go and get some rest, men. You must be tired.”

Caesar arrived in the camp two hours after sunrise the next morning, and asked to see the camp log. He read the entry about the Celts. “Representatives from the Aedui, Helvetii, Lingones, Sequani and Arverni, eh?” he repeated with his voice dripping with disgust. “I knew the Aedui were plotting against us; that’s why I moved against them! And those old women in Rome said I was jumping at shadows! The Helvetii and Arverni have also been restless lately. If we allow this atrocity to pass unpunished, all Gaul will be encouraged to rise up against us!” He looked ferociously at Parrius. “Call an Assembly!”

A quarter of an hour later Caesar was on the platform in front of almost twenty thousand men. “Soldiers of the Republic! You all know that Lucius Glaucia was the greatest soldier still on active service! You all know why he came to Gaul. He came here to determine whether or not there was a genuine threat to the Republic here; and if he found there was, to act accordingly.” Caesar paused, looking out over the sea of faces.

“There can be no doubt now that this mission caused great concern among the leading tribes of Gaul. They knew that Lucius Glaucia would get to the bottom of things; and that when he did, his military brilliance would put an end to them in short time! If only we knew before, what is now so obvious in hindsight! The Celts had only one chance of prospering in their treachery against the Republic; that was to remove Lucius Glaucia before he could act! Taking that one man out of the situation would be as good for them as Arausio was to the Germans! After that, they needed only to pray to their barbaric gods that the Republic did not have another Caius Marius up its sleeve!

“So they have compounded treachery upon treachery; to come asking for parley, only to kill under a flag of truce! And let us be honest with ourselves here; it worked! Had Lucius Glaucia lived, he could have reduced all of Gaul in one quick campaign! Now, without his brilliant leadership, we are thrown back onto the few remaining officers who have seen active duty. These filthy Celts have almost balanced the tables! But they have forgotten two things, soldiers! They have forgotten that I have served under Quintus Poppaedi Silo! And I have forgotten nothing I learnt from him! But that is a small thing compared to their second big mistake. Their greatest blunder is to under-estimate you, the rank-and-file legionaries that have made the Republic the ruler of the whole world!” Caesar paused here, deliberately inviting a roar from the men. The roar rose as expected. He waited for it to fade.

“What Quintus Poppaedi and his glorious veterans did to Mithridates, and then to Tigranes, and finally to Sanatruces, we will do to Gaul!” Another cheer erupted, and Caesar waited for it to fade. “And you men, you will grow rich in the process!” he promised them. And yet another great roar rose from twenty thousand throats, as it always did when loot was mentioned. “Prepare to march!” Caesar shouted, his right fist punching the sky, before he left the platform.

“Parrius, I want you to appoint new legates to each legion; I need a command structure, and you are most familiar with the officers available. I want all the supplies and equipment for a two-month campaign against the Arverni, and I want it ready and transportable to move the morning after tomorrow. Such a shame that it is too late in the season to go through them all before winter!”

“But Governor; the Senate was specific that these legions are not to come under your command!” Parrius argued.

Caesar looked at him as though he were the most offensive idiot he had ever met. “You might not have noticed, Parrius; but the commander and all his legates have been murdered, and I am the only Praetor available. Or would you rather write back to Rome for further orders, and sit on your hands while you wait for a reply? By then winter will be on us, and these bastards will have managed to get away with the most treacherous rebellion in history! By next campaigning season they will have raised enough allies to be unstoppable! We must act, and we must act immediately!” Caesar snapped. “And next time you dare to contradict me, expect to be tried for mutiny!”

“As you say, Governor!” Parrius snapped off a salute, and turned away to get organised.

“Not so fast, Parrius! I haven't dismissed you yet!” Caesar's annoyance showed in his voice. “What have you done with the bodies of the victims?”

“I sent out some wagons and a century of cavalry, to bring them back for a proper funeral, sir.” Parrius was glad he had at least done something right. “I expect them back before sunset.”

“Thank you. You may go now,” Caesar dismissed him.

The wagons trundled in through the camp gate. There were ten bodies carried in them, not just the six expected.

Where did the other four come from?” Parrius asked.

“They were off the road, in the bushes. That's probably why they were not noticed yesterday,” the centurion in charge replied.

“But who are they?” Parrius continued. “They didn't leave with the General.”

“I don't know, sir; but it looked to me as if they were killed in the same fight,” the centurion answered. “And there were probably more, as well. We found a couple of legionary issue daggers nearby.”

Parrius looked worried. “Come to my office, centurion. Let the men take care of the rest of this business.”

The centurion followed Parrius down the cardo, the main street of the camp, and into his timber hut.

“Centurion, I am worried,” Parrius said. “If these men did not leave with the General, but died in the same fight, then it seems reasonable to believe that they were with the attackers.”

“But sir; why would the Celts take the risk of using Romans?” the centurion was confused. “Using their own men would be much more sensible.”

“Who said the Celts killed them?” Parrius asked. “How do we know that the Celts were not killed too, but their bodies taken away to make it look like they were the assassins?”

The centurion gaped as he saw the implications. “Are you saying that Romans killed the General, and the Celtic nobles as well? But why?”

“Perhaps because someone wants war?” Parrius suggested. “Now, who in Gaul has legionaries under his command, and seems to be in favour of war?”

The centurion felt as if the earth was opening beneath him, ready to swallow him up. “The Governor?” he asked in a small, tight voice.

Parrius sat in silence. At length he nodded to himself and stood. “One of Caesar's underlings might be able to identify these strangers. Let's find out.” Parrius headed out his door and walked over to where Atius was busying himself taking stock of the grain supply. “Excuse me, Atius; but we have found more murdered Roman soldiers. If you would be kind enough to see if you can identify any of them...?”

“More killed?” Atius was visibly angry. “The bastards! Yes, I'll come with you.” Atius tramped with Parrius to the wagons, and looked at the first, then the second. When he looked into the third he gasped. “That is Caius Fabius, one of the Governor's best cavalry men!”

“Are you sure of that, Atius?”

“Yes, I'm sure. Look, his own dagger; it was given to him by Fimbria, for his good performance.” Atius removed the dagger and sheath. “It has his name engraved on it.” He turned over the dagger to show 'FABIVS' etched into the handle.

“What was he doing?” Parrius asked.

“Caesar had sent him on a special mission; he was ordered to clean out a bandit's den.”

“When did he leave barracks to do that?”

“He didn't; he was on patrol, and the governor rode out yesterday to find him and give him his orders directly.”

“So no-one has seen him for how long?” Parrius continued.

“About four days, I suppose. Apart from the governor, that is.” Atius walked to the next wagon. “And I think this was one of Fabius' men, too. But I can't be sure; I didn't know everyone in the legion.”

“Thank you, Atius; please ask anyone who might be able to identify these other three men to come here; perhaps others in Fabius' century. We owe it to these men,” Parrius concluded.

Atius nodded his agreement, and turned towards the compound where his horse was being held. Parrius turned to walk slowly back to his hut, the centurion still at his side.

“I think I know what Caesar's 'secret mission' was,” Parrius said softly, “and I think he was set that mission four days ago. The ride out yesterday by Caesar was probably to look for Fabius and ask for a report.”

"But sir; if they went to so much care as to remove the bodies of the Celt nobles, then why did they not also remove the bodies of their own men? Isn't that a bit obvious?"

"You forget, centurion; Fabius was their commander, and he was dead. The surviving senior officer was probably in a panic; perhaps he had been told the plan was to kill everyone and take away the Celts, but leave the Romans. He didn't realise that only the General and his staff were meant to be left behind; he thought that order included *all* Romans, even his own casualties. He just did what he had been thought was the plan, and then got out of there as quickly as he could." Parrius shrugged. "Men make the most obvious mistakes when put under pressure, specially when they are surprised by unexpected responsibility."

The centurion nodded at this explanation. "Well, what next, sir?"

"What's next is that Atius will talk about this. Caesar will soon know that his men have been discovered. In itself, that is not a problem; the men who come over from Caesar's legions will know who they are, but not where they were found, and the men who found them have no idea of who they are. But only Atius and we two know both the identity of those extra bodies, and also where they were found; and that would have to worry Caesar. So Caesar might decide that if we die, his secret will be safe again." Parrius stopped walking and caught the centurion's gaze. "Anyone who would assassinate Lucius Glauca, not to mention the Celtic nobles as well, will think nothing of adding us to the list."

"Oh, shit!" the centurion said slowly. "What can we do?"

"I am going to tell my aide that I have to go to Narbo to organise supplies. You can just disappear. Then we head for Massalia, change into civilian clothes, and jump on the first ship bound for Rome. Once there, I will find Glauca's friends or family, ask for their protection and tell them the story. You can do the same, but with different contacts; Perhaps Silo or Drusus, they were his closest supporters. That should guarantee that we will be safe," Parrius told him. "Unless you have a better plan?"

The centurion shook his head sadly. "I will grab as much cash as I can, and meet you in your office."

"No! Leave all your cash here!" Parrius said quickly. "The first thing Caesar will do is look through your gear, and if the cash is gone he will know you are on the run. Make it look as though you are just missing, but expect to return soon. I will take enough out of the Army purse to make him believe I am on a trip to Narbo to spend a few days doing the logistics. That will be enough to get us both to safety."

"Yes sir," the centurion agreed.

Atius opened the door and looked inside. "If I could speak with you urgently, General?"

"Yes?"

"I have found Fabius, sir. He is dead."

"I feared he might be," Caesar answered. "But how do you know?"

"His body was found by Glauca's men, sir."

"They are my men now, Atius," Caesar admonished him.

"Yes sir."

"Well, give me all the details," Caesar prompted him impatiently.

"His body was found in the scrub near the north road. He had been in a battle. I think I recognised another from Fabius' century, and there might be more; I should send someone who could recognise any of Fabius' men. The bodies are being held at the other camp."

"How many?" Caesar asked.

"I did not ask, but there seemed to be maybe ten bodies in the carts, all added up."

We lost more than sixty men with Fabius; why would they dump ten of them?" Caesar mused. "You would expect either none or all."

"I don't know, sir. There was no note or message with them."

Caesar gave a deep sigh. "Right. Wait until morning, and then you can go back with the rest of his men; those who survived. They should be able to pick out any that are ours."

"Yes sir. Good night, sir," Atius dismissed himself.

Caesar pondered this new information. Clearly, Petix did this to make sure I found out; he must have another way in and out of his lair, to have avoided the men waiting outside with the horses. He is sending me a message of defiance, and hinting that I might well be on his list myself. I would do that, if anyone cheated me like I tried to cheat and kill him! So yes; I will have to drop the attempt to keep things quiet; but at least this is now a pretext for wiping out his coven. There is now no need to be secretive.

But he will know that. And therefore he will not be so stupid as to sit there and wait for me. I have to make the attempt, I suppose; and then to search his den for any clues where he might be going, and then torch the place. But I doubt I will see him again, unless he comes at me for revenge. If he does that, then he will need all the luck he can muster, Caesar swore to himself. Anyway, he had given Parrius orders to get the four new legions ready to march the morning after tomorrow. So he will send in a full cohort of heavies tomorrow; cavalry would be no use in that broken terrain. The others can march out the next morning, and the assault force can too, if there is no-one still in that rat's nest as I expect. But at worst, they might have to catch up later.

"The trade in silk and tea along the Road has increased dramatically in volume, with prices still holding up well. Our profit for the year just finished was just under one hundred and twenty-eight thousand *sestertium milia*, after deducting the ten talents of gold due to the Governor of Margiana under our monopoly agreement," Typhon reported. "Profits from tea were over eighty-three thousand *sestertium milia*, after all costs and charges. Now that Lucius has eliminated the bandits we were paying transit protection to, our profits should improve by another one percent even at the same volumes; but as I said, demand is picking up as the goods become more widely known."

“The spice trade with the Indians has not been so profitable, due to their insistence that our ships are not permitted to trade out of their ports. This has given them almost the same monopoly advantage that we enjoy with silk and tea. The imposition of import and export duties at our ports has managed to claw back some of the profit from that trade, but I suspect that a great quantity is being traded in secret, to avoid these charges. Also, we must remember that the Indians can trade with the Egyptians instead of us, if they so choose. It is a longer and more dangerous voyage for them, but the Egyptians have better access to Our Sea, so they can afford to offer higher prices. So we can expect smuggling to continue until we have the naval capability to patrol our coasts better. And until we can enforce trading rights in Indian ports, we will not be able to break their monopoly.” Typhon dropped his notes back to the table and looked up to the rest of the Council when he finished his Report.

“Karmides?” Sertorius invited his admiral to speak.

“We have tried to build a couple of ships along the Indian lines, but we have run into problems,” he confessed. “The sheer amount of sail they carry, and the load this imposes on the hulls, tends to bend the hull timbers so much that the leaks become uncontrollable. We need to find out how to build better hulls. With this in mind, I suggest that we secure the services of a good Indian shipwright, and bring him back to Charax to start training some of our own builders.”

“Do it,” Sertorius said simply. “Anything else?” Karmides shook his head. “Arius, how are you going with the dams?” Sertorius asked his engineer.

“We have finished the surveying well enough to do some estimates of costs and storage volumes, and for all of the last year we have had in place ways of measuring the total annual flow and how it is spread throughout the year, including the flood season. Now, we don't know how much it varies from year to year, but there seemed to be a general opinion that the height and duration of the flood last year was reasonably average.

“Right now I am using that information to develop what would be a better yearly distribution of flows, and from that I can work out how much storage I will need; and from that, what would be the cheapest way of providing that storage. It is a complicated business, and takes time. If it turns out that I cannot provide the required storage cheaply enough, the next step is to go through the process backwards; starting with an assumed available storage, what is the best I can do to reduce the peak, and shift it to the drier months, and see how much extra production would that permit, and would that be worth the cost.” Arius held his hands palms-up. “Every time you get an answer, it tends to change the question. Eventually you spiral in on the best balance between costs and benefits, but it takes time.”

“Lucius, congratulations on cleaning out the bandits and subduing Hekatompylos,” Sertorius turned to his Military Man.

“Thank you, sir,” Lucius Marius smiled as he accepted the compliment. “But now that the last remnants of the Parthian Empire have become a scattering of the splinter states, we should have no problem keeping everything in good

order. I believe now is the time to march to the Indus. If they refuse to allow our ships to trade out of their ports, then our best answer is to make them our ports instead,” Marius smiled again. “But I am sure they will be prepared to negotiate, once they see our legions outside their walls.”

Sertorius looked over to Telesinus. “That’s your department, Pontius. What do you say?”

“I’ve been thinking about these successor-states a lot, just lately.” Telesinus answered. “I have made a point of letting them know that I do not approve of them keeping their own armies, but they should rely on the Republic to keep the peace. Any who want to keep their own forces will be considered trouble-makers. They took the hint, and disbanded their forces.

“Now that they have peace and don’t have the burden of paying for their defence, many of these little princelings still refuse to lower their taxes but have turned to even more luxurious living. The common people see this, and do not like it when they realise that all their money and manpower could have been spent on the Common Good, as it is in the lands we administer. In short, I think they are ripe for a takeover. I suggest that we put an ultimatum to the most objectionable and least popular of their princes; cede your little kingdom to the Republic and you will receive a comfortable pension for life; or refuse and lose your head. They will yield, precisely because they know that they cannot rely on their own people to support them against us.

“Once we do this to a few, popular discontent will spread to the others. We send a few cohorts to support the uprisings as they occur, and dispose of the now-unwanted prince, and all the people cheer for us. All of Persia will fall into our lap, and willingly.”

Sertorius looked around the table. “That makes sense to me. It will also provide a secure base for a march to the Indus the following year; in fact, our borders will be so close that we probably won’t even have to march. Just the threat will be enough. Does anyone see any problems?”

“Not a problem, as such,” Tollianus said almost apologetically, “but we won’t have enough administrators. We have only enough for our larger towns even now.”

“As you say, Marcus, that’s not really a problem,” Sertorius agreed. “I will send to Asia and any other Colleges, and over time we will be able to pull it together. In the meantime we can have military oversight of the existing officials, with a few executions for corruption to keep the rest of them on the straight and narrow.”

“Yes, sir,” Tollianus agreed.

“Speaking of Administration, Marcus; what have you to report?” Sertorius moved on.

Tollianus took out his notes. “First, almost all of the notes issued at the beginning of the year have been redeemed. Many came back as taxes or other payments, and the rest were turned in when we announced the redemption. But just over three *sestertium milia* worth are still out there, perhaps as souvenirs. No matter; we will have ample funds to cover them, whenever they came back.

“Second, word of this note issue has got back to the Senate. The Colleges Committee has asked me why I should not be disciplined for issuing them without sufficient funds to cover them. I have responded, explaining that the allegation is false because we *do* have funds to redeem them. I have also explained that they have actually been redeemed, except for a small proportion; and that any outstanding notes will be honoured any time they are presented. I am hopeful that no further action will be taken against me, but I will continue to inform you all as events unfold.

“Third, I have been asked to explain on what legal basis the Provincial Administration has established the monopolies over trade in silk and tea. Apparently some Equites back in Rome would like to move in and take over that little money-earner. I have not responded in detail to that letter yet, explaining that it involves Foreign Relations with Margiana and I need to consult with lord Telesinus on that point.” He turned to Telesinus “I would appreciate your time to discuss that whenever you can make yourself available.” Then turning back to the table, “we will also need to think through how that monopoly will be affected once we take over administration of Margiana. If we say that it is founded in lord Telesinus' Foreign Affairs powers, what will happen when Margiana ceases to be independent and becomes part of the Province?”

There were concerned faces around the table. The profit from the monopolies was a large proportion of the Province's budget.

“Perhaps we might hold off the absorption of the Friends and Allies while we think through that issue, and get an idea of how the Senate will react,” Sertorius suggested. “Is that all right by you, Pontius?”

“Yes,” Telesinus agreed. “We shouldn't do anything until that matter is sorted out. Thanks for raising the matter, Marcus.”

“Does that mean that we march on the Indians instead, or do we put all plans on hold?” Marius asked.

“You really are eager for action, aren't you, Lucius?” Sertorius asked with a smile. There were chuckles around the table.

Marius gave an embarrassed smile back. “The sooner we move, the sooner we will be able to take over the trade by sea. We might need it very soon, if our own monopolies are ruled illegal.”

“Yes. Good point,” Sertorius agreed quietly.

“It would also give us access to the best shipwrights in Krokola,” Karmides added. “That would save us a generation or more in terms of getting the techniques right.”

“I am starting to think that taking the Indians might be a good option,” Telesinus commented. “If you are serious about that, Quintus, I'm sure I can find a pretext.”

Sertorius sat in thought for a moment. “There's no need to rush,” he commented at last. “Perhaps you should see what you and Marcus can come up with about the monopolies; I would like to keep them, even if it means leaving Margiana still independent. And it will be hard to take over the other petty states

and leave Margiana untouched. So let's hold that decision over until next meeting."

Sertorius looked around the table. "Any other business to be discussed?" There was no movement. "Very well; thank you, gentlemen," Sertorius stood to close the meeting.

Blast Parrius, Caesar thought to himself. What was so important in Narbo that Parrius had to go there in person? And so urgent that he couldn't wait half a day to tell me first? But anyway, Parrius' aide was still in camp, so he could take over those duties for the moment. And at least Parrius had appointed new commanders for the legions before he left. So there should be no more delays. They march in the morning! There was a knock at his office door.

"Come," he called.

An officer stepped into the room and saluted. "Titus Malius, sir, the new commander of the seventh," he introduced himself. "One of my centurions has gone astray, sir."

"Deserted?" Caesar asked in surprise. Desertions were rare, and unheard-of at the rank of centurion.

"I don't think so, sir. All his personal property is still here; just he and his horse have gone missing."

"Then tell one of his men to pack up for him," Caesar ordered. "When he gets back he will be able to catch up to us if he is mounted."

"Yes, General," the legate replied and started to leave.

"And please do not bother me with such trivia in the future, Titus," Caesar showed his annoyance. "If you cannot handle such issues yourself, you should not be in command of a legion."

Malius turned back to face Caesar again. "Yes sir. Sorry, sir." Caesar flicked a finger to indicate Malius should go now. Malius turned and left.

The quickest way to the lands of the Arverni was to follow the Rhodanus upstream through the Cevenna range, and then cut back to the south-west. This also had the advantage of looking as though he was heading back to the Aedui lands, and then on to the Senones, where his earlier attacks had been staged. He would have a certain amount of surprise. Once the Arverni were dealt with, he would continue west and force the submission of the Santones, turn north to the Pictones, and then it would not be difficult to follow the Liger river back upstream through the Carnutes, and then back to winter in the lands of the Senones and Aedui, already subjugated in his earlier campaigns. Half of Celtica in one sweep would be a good result for the year, and leave him well placed to take out Helvetii, Sequani, Lingones and then further north into Belgica next year. The north-west would be his aim in the third year, and then he would be free to take Aquitania and cross over into the north-west corner of Spain in the fourth year. What would have been difficult with four legions had now been made child's play thanks to Glaucia's extra forces! Yes; the Aedui lands were the perfect base for these next three years! He would move to Tolosa for the fourth.

Parrius had left the centurion in Rome, with the intention of him speaking to the man they considered the most trustworthy of all consulars; Marcus Livius Drusus. Parrius himself went into the Samnite lands. Glauca had been a Samnite, and Gaius Papius Mutilus was the only other Samnite consular as well as being a close friend of Glauca. Parrius was confident that he would get a good hearing from the legendary Samnite Bull, now retired after returning from his governorship in the Spains. He banged on the street door to Mutilus' house. After a minute a flap was opened and two eyes peered at him.

Excuse me, lord; but what is your name, and what business do you have here?" The voice was that of a young woman. Unusual, to have a female on the door. Not very secure.

"My name is Marcus Parrius, formerly Prefect of the Camp with lord Glauca in Gaul; and I have information that lord Mutilus needs to hear."

"One moment please, lord." The flap dropped back down.

It was not much more than a minute later when it was opened again, the eyes looked out to confirm all was well, and he heard the door bolt slide back. He stepped into the house.

"Please stand still for a moment. We check all strangers for weapons," the woman said. Parrius started as he felt a pair of hands pat him down from behind. There was the security! The hands found his short army-issue dagger tucked under his tunic and removed it. A man's voice behind him said. "He is clean now."

Please follow me, lord," the woman said. As Parrius started walking after her, the door swung back to close, and he looked over his shoulder to see an armed man had been stationed behind the door swing. Mutilus stepped into the triclinium as the slave led Parrius in from the other direction. He gestured towards the couch and smiled, but Parrius waited for his host to sit first.

"So you bring word from Lucius?" Mutilus asked.

"It would be more accurate to say 'word *of* lord Glauca', sir," Parrius said sadly. "He has been murdered in Gaul."

Mutilus gaped in shock. "Murdered? By whom? How?"

"I will relate the evidence to you, sir, and you will form your own conclusion," Parrius drew a breath. "My name is Marcus Parrius, and I was Prefect of the Camp under lord Glauca. Five Celts, claiming to be messengers from five of the major Celtic tribes, presented themselves at our camp gate. They invited lord Glauca to a meeting with these chiefs in a nearby villa. The General took his four legates and his secretary with him.

"He did not return that night, and the next day I sent out some cavalry to the address I had been given, to ask when he would return. These men came back, saying that they had found all six of them slaughtered on the road, and there was no sign of the Celts. I sent a message to lord Caesar, the governor, who was nearby. He took control of lord Glauca's legions, and threatened to try me for mutiny when I protested that the Senate had explicitly forbidden that these legions should come under lord Caesar's control.

"I sent out wagons to collect the bodies of our six men; but the soldiers doing that duty found four more men off the road nearby, also killed in battle. One of these men was Caesar's favourite cavalry officer, and we believe the other three were from his command. We also found two other army daggers nearby."

Mutilus frowned. "How did four of Caesar's men get involved, if they did not accompany Lucius from your camp?"

"That is the question that struck me too, lord," Parrius agreed. "I can only conclude that if they were not with lord Glauca, then they must have been against him."

Mutilus gaped again. "Caesar sent them to ambush Lucius!" Then he thought again. "But no! How would Caesar have known about the meeting with the Celts?"

"There was no sign of the Celts at the ambush site, sir. It is my guess that there were no Celtic chiefs, and no meeting planned. These men were sent by lord Caesar, not by Celtic chiefs; and their story was intended to lure lord Glauca into an ambush and make it look as though the Celts were the guilty party." Parrius took a deep breath. "Lord Caesar has already roused the men to follow him to a war against the Celts. He is using it as a *causus belli*."

Mutilus looked down. "Shit!" he exploded, and then thought for a while.

"Has word of this reached Rome yet?" Mutilus asked.

"It had not when I went through Rome. I came by fast boat from Massalia immediately the extra four men were found, but news like this would not be far behind me."

"Who else knows?" Mutilus demanded.

"One centurion came with me to Rome. It was agreed that I would try to speak to you, while he went to lord Drusus."

Mutilus nodded to himself. "A wise choice." Then he went on. "I am still shocked by this, but you have become accustomed to it. So let me think out loud, and I would welcome your comments." Mutilus took a deep breath. "First, I will not tell anyone, not even Lucius' family. They will find out about his death soon enough, and why let it be known that I have a private source of information. Second, I will send a message to Marcus Livius, asking if I could visit him as a matter of urgency. Third, I must ask you to go with me to Rome, where we old politicians can discuss this and agree on what should be done. It is not every day that a governor is accused of murdering a consular. And it is even more complicated if it means we are at war with all of Gaul." Mutilus looked up at his guest.

"I was hoping that you would do something like that, lord."

"Good. Now to write a letter to Marcus Livius." He clapped his hands twice, and a slave appeared. "Ah, sorry, but I have let your name slip my memory. I am getting old!"

"Marcus Parrius, lord."

"Ah, yes," then turning back to the slave, "Lord Parrius will be our honoured guest tonight. Please shown him the bath, and provide him with a room and a personal slave."

Drusus had been horrified when told of Glaucia's death and the circumstances pointing towards Caesar. His first instinct was to contact Pellius, the consul, who agreed that they should send letters to the leaders of the Italianist party. Those on duty overseas were asked if they could conveniently return to Rome for discussions, and those still in Italy urged more strongly to do so.

That very afternoon another ship from Massalia landed in Ostia, and the public knowledge of the assassination blazed through Rome. This allowed them to explicitly say in their letters that the discussions would involve 'matters arising from the death of Lucius Glaucia', but no further details. The first day in November was nominated, but when the letter from Mutilus arrived he was invited to Rome as a matter of urgency. Silo, who had retired to his Marsic homelands, was also asked to come as soon as possible. Asinius and Vidacilius, who were in Italy between postings, were also urged to visit immediately. The six met in Drusus' house to decide on what they should do until the others could arrive for a more rounded consensus.

"First and most important," Mutilus spoke first, "Not a word of this can spread to a Popularis! And that includes your consular colleague, Pontius," he said directly to Pellius. "Caesar is the nephew of old Sextus, and cousin to young Marius. Any hint that we disapprove of Caesar will offend a lot of the top Populares. At the very least, they will protect the little bastard; and who knows that they don't actually approve?"

"That's a bit unfair, Caius Papius!" Pellius responded. "Have you forgotten that Caius Norbanus spoke against him in the Senate; virtually accused him of trying to provoke a war? I don't think the leading Populares think very highly of him at all. They are afraid that he will be an embarrassment to them. It was our own Marius Egnatius who was his strongest supporter."

"That's true, Pontius," Drusus came into the conversation. "And they all agreed to send Lucius to get to the bottom of it."

"Well, maybe you're right," Mutilus conceded, grudgingly, "but if we don't tell them, we won't be taking any risks. I say we wait until everyone arrives who can get here, and then decide."

"Can we afford to wait that long?" Silo asked. "Every day we wait is another day Caesar has to start a war."

"It's already too late for that," Drusus replied glumly. "Our informers say that Caesar planned to start his march the day after they slipped away. He will be close to the frontier now, and over it by the time any orders from the Senate could get to him – even if the Senate can bring itself to act tomorrow!"

"So there is no way war can be avoided," Asinius said glumly. "And Celts might not be disciplined soldiers, but they are fearsome warriors. There's going to be a lot of blood."

"I agree with Caius Papius; we should keep the news quiet until we have decided what we want to do with it," Vidacilius tried to push some progress into the discussion. "But what are the options? Do we want Caesar to be tried for murder, or perhaps Treason? That might be hard to do; the evidence is pretty damning, but not beyond the skill of a good advocate to twist into something

plausible. Or do we just want to pressure him to pull his head in and stop the war? How can we achieve that without first taking away his excuse for going to war? He is hardly going to admit that Lucius was *not* killed by Celts!”

The six men looked at each other. “The bastard murdered Lucius,” Silo said through his teeth. “Lucius was a man worth a dozen Julii any way you want to judge them! Caesar has to be brought to account!”

“There are more ways of making a man pay for his crimes than prosecuting him in court,” Drusus said. “Do you remember when Philippus, Caepio and Varius went into self-imposed exile?” The others nodded; none of them had been in the Senate back then, but it had been a public scandal, a sitting Consul deserting his office. “That wasn’t out of high principles, as they proclaimed. It was because they conspired to murder me, and I had the evidence to prove it beyond doubt. But I didn’t want anything to distract anyone from the Enfranchisement Law, so I blackmailed them. Go into exile, or else you know what the penalty would be for attempted assassination of a sacrosanct Tribune of the Plebs!”

Eyebrows rose all around the room.

“Philippus tried to have you killed?” Silo was stunned.

“Yes. And in case you hadn’t noticed, the attempt failed,” Drusus joked.

“You’ll have to tell us the whole story one day,” Asinius broke in, “but I take it you are suggesting the same approach here? Give Caesar a choice between a trial or going into exile?”

“That’s too soft!” Silo exclaimed. “He murdered an innocent consular in the course of carrying out his Senate-given duties!” It was obvious to everyone in the room that Silo’s respect for Glaucia had been more than just a political relationship. The Old Warrior really had loved him like a son!

“Believe me, Quintus Poppaedi; Caesar is so full of himself that just preventing him from becoming Consul at the earliest legal age will be worse than death. He will fall on his own sword rather than face a life that will be anything short of legendary.”

“That’s true, too!” Asinius agreed. “I remember him speaking in the Senate when he was a Praetor. He obviously thinks of himself as the greatest man ever to live, just filling in time before everyone else realises it.”

“Yes, you are both right,” Silo nodded as he spoke. “I remember that Quintus Sertorius offered to share his Triumphal chariot with him as well as with me. Quintus and I had been asked to help him, for the sake of Old Marius and Sextus Julius, his two uncles. Would you believe he refused it, saying that Quintus Sertorius and I were not worthy of sharing a Triumph with the glorious Caius Julius Caesar!” A chuckle of amusement ran around the room. “Yes, pricking the bubble of his pride would be an excellent punishment!” Silo concluded.

“Well, it appears we have settled on a preferred course,” Drusus said briskly. “Subject to the others coming on board with us, of course. But if anyone has a better idea, bring it to another meeting. Have we finished now?”

“Not quite finished yet, Marcus Livius,” Asinius said. “Now, tell us about your assassination.” Drusus smiled, clapped for more finger food and wine, and started his narrative.

Three days after this first meeting Pontius Pellius had an unexpected visitor.

The officer stepped briskly into the doorway of the triclinium and came to attention. “Gaius Pollio, Consul, to make a Report.” The officer snapped off a salute.

“You said to my door slave that you have a report for my ears only, Gaius Pollio. I hope that what you have to say is worth it.”

“I wish it were not, sir; but I am prepared to be disciplined if I have acted wrongly,” Pollio said formally. “I was one of several riders sent by General Glauca to various Celtic chiefs, to invite them to a conference. I was sent to the Helvetii, Sequani and Lingones.

“I spoke in person to each of those chiefs. All of them agreed to attend the conference on the date set by General Glauca. They seemed relieved that he was taking this initiative, and they asked that lord Caesar should be restrained from further pre-emptive attacks while the discussions went on; they were willing to have the General place observers among them, to prove they were not preparing for war under this pretext. When I returned to the Camp, I heard that Orgetorix of the Helvetii, Casticus of the Sequani and Porux of the Lingones, had been three of the five chiefs who were responsible for the death of the General while I had been on my mission. But I knew this was impossible; they had been in their own lands at the time.

“I decided to rest my horse for two days before riding to join the main army which had started marching north, and during that time Cassius Dolorus also arrived back at the camp. He had been to the Arverni and Santones, and told the same story; even that Gobanitio of the Arverni had been in his tribal lands, while the local news was that he was another principal in the treachery. We feared that someone was spreading false stories about Celtic conspiracies to make trouble. But we did not know if lord Caesar was involved, or simply being deceived. So we agreed that one of us would ride to tell Caesar, and the other would come to Rome to tell the consuls. We drew lots, and I drew the mission of reporting to you, the Consul who originally commissioned General Glauca to go to Gaul.” Pollio fell silent, still at attention. Pellius managed to hold his face composed as he thought for a moment.

“You have done well, soldier. Consider yourself appointed to special duties under my direct command.” Pellius rose from his seat and paced briefly as he thought. “Please act as though a civilian guest in my house, and do not go outside unless I authorise it. I will allocate a personal slave to you for your convenience; please let him know what services, clothing and other items you might require, and they will be supplied to you. In the meantime, rest.” Pellius clapped his hands and a slave appeared almost immediately. “Lord Pollio will be my guest for a short time. Please show him around the house, allocate to him his

own room and a personal slave, and see that he has all that he requires. And please send in a runner as you go.”

The slave bowed, and turned to Pollio. “If you would care to follow me, lord Pollio...”

A young lad stood in the doorway soon after. “You want me to take a message, lord?”

“Yes. Please go to the house of lord Drusus. Ask if I and some friends could visit with him this evening. I have news.”

The Aedui had made not even the slightest show of resistance. Even Dumnorix had submitted to arrest, curious rather than fearful. But then, what reason did Dumnorix have to be fearful? He had done nothing to offend the Republic, despite the provocations, and he knew that Caesar knew this as well.

Caesar looked through the scouting reports on his table. It was obvious that the Arverni were ready to fight, but their deployments suggested that they would rather not. They were gathering for self-defence in case they were attacked themselves rather than massing for an attack of their own.

Good! That means that they might be more ready to accept terms, Caesar thought to himself. A quick submission from the first adversary will set the right morale for this campaign. “Atius!” he called. His secretary was at the door in a moment.

“Send a message to Gobanitio. Tell him that I have credible reports that he is planning an attack on the Republic. I require him to assure me that this is not so. To provide an adequate degree of certainty to me, he will need to accept absorption into Transalpine Gaul; that is, that all his men are to be disarmed, and a Republic garrison is to be stationed in his lands, and that the Republic is now their sovereign. If he does this, none of his people will be harmed. If he refuses to agree to these demands, it will be taken as confirmation that he is planning an attack on the Republic. He and his people will be subjected to slaughter or enslavement, and complete dispossession. Give him one day to talk it through with his nobles; if he cannot agree in that time, tell him that I will treat it as refusal.” Caesar gestured the man to go.

Gobanitio is probably confused, Caesar continued in his own mind. That rider from Glaucia who had reported to him a couple of days ago – yes, Dolorus! - Dolorus had told Gobanitio that Glaucia and the Republic wanted peace, so he probably still hopes that someone in Rome will come to his rescue. He will be thinking that forcing a fight will result in huge losses, perhaps even the destruction of his people; but if he yields now, then perhaps next year it can all be reversed. Yes, Gobanitio will choose to preserve his people, and win back its independence by political means. Well, political means can always be frustrated by a well-designed outrage.

Drusus looked out into his courtyard, where his guests were enjoying the autumn sun. Virtually all of the Italianist consulars had responded to his invitation; only Telesinus, stuck at the opposite end of the world, was absent.

Even Marius Egnatius and Piso Gallienus, currently serving as governors in Spain and Achaia, had sensed that Drusus and Silo would not ask for their attendance unless the issue was very pressing.

The 'Home Six' as those who had attended the first meeting viewed themselves, had briefed each newcomer as he arrived over the last month, their plans evolving and crystallising as the consensus was enlarged. Unless the last few days of private consideration and small-group discussions had come up with a radically new plan, this final gathering would be little more than a formality.

"Friends, if you could come into the triclinium now..." Drusus called over the murmur of their separate conversations. The nine men turned towards the house, continuing their conversations as they meandered into the large formal meal room. At length a hush fell.

"First, I would like to thank Piso and Marius for taking the trouble to attend today," Drusus opened. "It is a long way to come from their provinces on the basis of so vague a request as was made to them. I take it as an honour that they responded. It is also understandable that Pontius could not attend; you have all read his letter of apology, and understand the gravity of the situation on the Indus.

"Some of us have had a month to think through the situation before us; everyone has had at least four days. It is my impression that there has developed a consensus among us, but if there is any desire in any of you to either consider our response at greater length, or to adjust any part of it, I would be glad to hear." Drusus looked around his nine fellows. None made any sign to indicate they wanted to speak.

"Quintus Poppaedi, your thoughts, please?" Drusus prompted. He felt it important that each man show his commitment to the plan as it had been agreed two days ago.

"I can think of nothing better," the Old Warrior conceded. "I only regret that it gives Caesar the opportunity to escape a cross."

"Herius?" Drusus prompted the next man along the row of couches.

"My thoughts are those of Quintus Poppaedi exactly." Asinius said emphatically.

Drusus went around the room. All confirmed that they had not had any second thoughts.

"Then, Pontius, it seems you have the go-ahead." Drusus announced to Pellius. "Please keep us informed."

It was the next day before Marcus Aurelius Cotta could accept Pellius' invitation to a private meeting. Pellius stood as his consular colleague was shown into the triclinium. He smiled and offered his right arm.

"Thank you for making time, Marcus Aurelius. Here, take your place." Cotta sat on the couch indicated and Pellius sat with him. The house slaves brought in platters of fruit and light pastries, setting them on the table between the two men.

"I particularly wanted to talk to you about what is happening in Transalpine Gaul," Pellius started the conversation.

“Yes, I received another letter from Caius Julius just last night,” Cotta interjected. “Did he send the same to you?”

Pellius was taken aback by this information. “No, but I suppose he assumes that we will share information relevant to our office. What does he say?”

“He seems very driven at the moment,” Cotta commented. “As if he has to do everything in a rush. He has subjugated the Arverni; they surrendered without offering battle. And he executed their leader, Gobby-something, as one of the ringleaders in the assassination of Lucius Glaucia.”

Pellius was stunned. “In the name of all the gods!” he whispered.

“What is so shocking about that?” Cotta asked. “I would have thought that you would have had an even higher regard for Lucius than most, being Italian; doesn't that barbarian deserve to die for what he did?”

“What else did he tell you?” Pellius asked.

“The usual, self-serving stuff you expect from Caius Julius.” Cotta shrugged. “He likes to ensure that everyone is impressed with his genius. I'll have a copy made and sent to you; he should have done that himself.”

Pellius took a deep breath, and then said, “There are a few men from Lucius' legions that you should listen to. I expect you will be as shocked as I was.”

“Oh?” Cotta raised his eyebrows. “Who?”

Pellius clapped his hands and a slave appeared. “Please bring in our special guests.”

Within a minute Pollio, Parrius and the centurion were standing to attention in front of the two Consuls.

“Marcus, if you could tell the Consul your story...”

Half an hour later Cotta was still stunned.

“Pollio, the dispatch rider, makes it clear that the men supposedly enticing Lucius to that meeting were no-where near the area at the time. His companion specifically mentioned Gobanitio of the Arverni.” Pellius was putting facts from the two stories into a coherent shape for his colleague. “So it is clear that the ambush was not of their making. Parrius also makes it plain that Caesar's men were involved in the ambush. How did they know where to be at the right time? Caesar obviously knew, either from secret information or by other means. If the mission of Caesar's men was to protect Lucius, then why did they not simply appear at his camp gate and warn him not to go? I can only conclude that they were not there to protect Lucius, but to kill him.

“Also consider this; When Caesar raided the Aedui at the start of the year, they were taken completely by surprise, and asked terms instead of trying to defend themselves. Does that sound like a tribe arming itself for a war? The Senones were subjugated and destroyed almost as easily; because of Caesar's brilliance against a tribe on the path to war, or because they also were totally unprepared for war? And you have just told me that the Arverni also submitted without a fight, and that Gobanitio was executed. I ask you, why execute a man who submits, unless you had a need to silence him? And also a need to provoke the other accused into a war of self-defence?

“So it is obvious when you add it all together,” Pellius concluded. “The Celtic chiefs had nothing to do with the assassination; it was planned by Caesar, and carried out by his men. The aim was to provide an excuse for war, and his attack on Gobanito was intended not only as further provocation, but to silence a witness against him.”

Pellius steadied himself. “It is my intention, and that of all the Italianist consulars, to charge Caesar with High Treason, and demand that he return to Rome to face those charges. Quintus Poppaedi is prepared to go to Gaul immediately, hopefully to avert a full-scale war; but if he cannot avert it, then he will win it. It is only three years since the Old Warrior conquered Parthia, and he is as fit as ever. But if you doubt that, then other military consulars such as Piso Gallienus, Marius Egnatius, Titus Lafrenius and Herius Asinius have agreed to make themselves available.

“So do I have your support in that charge against Caesar, and the support of your colleagues? Or do we have to turn to the Boni for a more sympathetic colleague next year, and wait until January to bring the charge?” Pellius asked menacingly. “I know Caius Julius is your nephew, so you would naturally want to defend him; but this is a matter of duty to the Republic. Please, go talk to your fellow Populares, and I would like an answer within the next few days.”

Cotta shook his head as if to clear it. “No threats required, Pontius, but I can understand your fury. I think perhaps part of it is that you were the one who charged Lucius with this mission, and therefore you feel some of the responsibility. But you shouldn't; there is no fault in what you did. And even though Caius Julius is a Popularis, many of us are already uneasy about him. You heard Caius Norbanus yourself, when he spoke in the Senate. And my brother Gaius has told me some rather disturbing stories as well.” Cotta sighed. “So I will support you, and I expect everyone else will, too. But just see that you keep those three men out of sight and very safe. If Caius Julius is as ruthless as he seems, then do not assume any wickedness is beyond him,” Cotta advised. “Now, if I may leave and speak to my friends?”

“Thank you, Marcus Aurelius. I have here a copy of the letter I intend to write to Caesar, for your consideration. I am willing to re-phrase or even totally re-write it as required, to comply with your legitimate concerns. Please read through it and let me know your thoughts.” He stood and farewelled his colleague, handing him a folded sheet of paper.

Caesar was very pleased with progress to date. As soon as the Santones realised he was continuing to march westward they sent a delegation to him, to ask his intentions. That meeting had gone very well. After swearing that he would destroy all enemies of the Republic, but reward its friends, the next obvious question had been put to him. 'Did he have any reason to believe that the Santones were enemies of the Republic?'

'Not yet', he had answered. But he was determined to ensure that there was no doubt. He required the Santones to accept Republic rule as part of an extended Province. If this were done, then no-one would be harmed. And he

assured them he meant no-one; Dumnorix of the Aedui and Gobanitio of the Arverni had been executed for their part in the assassination of Lucius Glaucia, and everyone knew that the Santones had taken no part in that. The Santones would be guaranteed their rights under law, be subject to taxation on the same basis as those Celts already within the Province, and a small garrison would be stationed there, at Republic expense, to keep the peace.

The Santones accepted these terms, and made a great show of welcoming Caesar into Sarrem. Caesar played his part as well; the magnanimous liberator, rather than the oppressive tyrant. From there he sent letters to all of the surrounding minor tribes throughout southern and western Celtica, demanding the same submission. 'Only those who have devised to harm the Republic need fear me', he warned. 'And even those tribes will be spared if they submit; only those individuals who conspired against Lucius Glaucia will be held answerable.'

A carefully weighted strategy, aimed at securing the rapid submission of most of Celtica, while at the same time provoking certain war by targeting the leaders of the Helvetii, Sequani and Lingones for personal execution. Because he needed a war; he needed some serious resistance, or Rome would believe that the revolt that he had been warning about was a fiction.

Winter was closing in now; and serious action would be impossible within a matter of days. But he had reached his intended base in the Aedui lands, leaving century-sized garrisons in almost a hundred different towns throughout western Celtica, from the boundaries of Aquitania in the south to the Sequana River in the north.

There was a knock at the door; Atius stood in the frame. "General, there is a message for you, from Rome."

"Bring it in." Atius handed him a letter, and Caesar glanced at the seals before turning to over to crack them. Then he turned the letter back as the seals registered on him. Both Consuls! "Thank you, Atius." he dismissed his secretary before opening the document.

*To Caius Julius Caesar, Governor of Transalpine Gaul,
From Pontius Pellius and Marcus Aurelius Cotta, Consuls of the Republic,*

Greetings!

It has come to our notice that you have assumed command of the four legions originally under the command of Lucius Glaucia. It was the express will of the Senate, and of us, that these legions were not to become part of your command. We are concerned also that you seem to be acting with somewhat more initiative than was delegated to you.

Therefore we command you to return to Rome as soon as possible, so you can inform us in person of the reasons for these actions, and appropriate steps can be taken to ensure the legality of any future actions.

Caesar dropped the sheet on his table and leant back in his chair. They are going to try to clip my wings, he thought to himself. They phrase it to make it sound as though my authority is to be extended to permit me to take more independent action, but that is not what they have in mind; otherwise, they would simply authorise me to act, without requiring a trip to Rome.

What to do? He demanded of himself. Obviously I can't just drop everything and go back. I need an excuse to stay until the winter makes travelling impossible. And to organise something in Spring, before travelling is possible, to justify my remaining here. Not a problem! I'll send an ultimatum to the Lingones. Porux knows he's a dead man after the example of Gobanitio, and it is too late in the season for me to make good the threat, so he will refuse. It should force the Helvetii and Sequani to realise that they will be next in line, too; so I can expect them to prepare over winter and attack in the Spring. That will be more than reason enough to stay here in Gaul, and justification enough for taking Glaucia's legions.

"Atius!"

"Yes, sir?" A moment later, from the open door.

Write up an ultimatum to Porux, to be sent first thing tomorrow morning. I demand his submission on the same terms as the western tribes. And I demand it within ten days."

"Yes, sir. I will write it immediately," Atius answered. "Who will take it to him?"

Caesar thought for a moment. "Those leftovers from Fabius' century; they are veterans. Let them take it. Let Porux see the sort of men I command." Caesar thought again. "Actually, send the Second Cavalry Century as well. That will be one hundred men in total. Show him we are serious."

"Yes, sir," Atius withdrew.

The news reached Caesar eight days later, and it was better than he could have hoped. Porux had not only refused to submit, but had even annihilated the one hundred cavalry sent with the demand. At last, he had a real war! But he was not going to take the bait Porux had so carefully laid out for him. Their oppidum, perched on a rocky outcrop above the river, could not be taken without extensive earthworks and winter was too close. If he tried that now, he would be trapped in the open. When the snow came, he would be forced to either abandon the siege, which would harm morale in his army, or carry through at great risk to his men and their supplies.

On the other hand, he had to do something, and quickly, or he will seem weak. Devastation of unfortified towns and villages was the obvious answer. The men will like a bit of rape and plunder, and the slaves he could take would be a welcome bonus to their pay. That sort of work can be done quickly, and even in the snow if the weather changes early. The perfect excuse for not being able to return to Rome!

Chapter 7 – 684 AUC (70 B.C.)

Minnagara was not such an impressive city, Telesinus thought to himself with some disappointment as he and his delegation rode towards the basilica. It seemed strange to him that this far east the city was recognisably Greek in style, and used Greek names for the main buildings. After seeing the wealth pouring through Krokola and hearing the superlatives in the boasts of the King's envoys, he had expected something much more resplendent. This was the King's residence, from which he exercised hegemony rather than sovereignty over the dozen or so larger cities around the Lower Indus, Krokola being one of them. His was just one of several small kingdoms growing out of the scraps of the former Parthian Empire.

'If only Silo had kept marching east,' Telesinus thought to himself, 'instead of simply seeking a secure frontier! All of these cities could have been brought under the yoke within a year.' His disappointment was tempered by a large slice of relief. The King had been sent an invitation to accept Friend and Ally status for his small realm. His response had been polite, listing the great benefits of their existing Treaty and trade arrangements; why disturb a relationship that was obviously working so well?

So yes; it was a relief to see that the walls were low, badly set out, and flimsily defended. The main street was wide, and the other streets running off it considerable, offering no barrier to movement through the city. Should this upstart refuse to accept Friend and Ally status, there would be no great difficulties in subduing him instead.

Telesinus dismounted at the base of the steps leading up to the basilica, handing the reins of his horse to an attendant. A man in flowing silk stood on the porch, five steps above him, and smiled broadly.

"Lord Telesinus, welcome to our city," he proclaimed in accented Greek. "Please come this way," he swung an arm towards a double-door entrance. The official walked beside Telesinus down a corridor that seemed to pass down the centre of the building, with doors on either side. "It is customary to enter the audience hall on your knees," he explained. "Usually the petitioner remains kneeling, and the King then gives his judgement. But because you represent so mighty and noble a nation, the king will graciously permit you to stand, and offer you a seat to show his respect for the Republic you represent. You may take your seat, and then deliver your message."

Telesinus did not respond, but simply kept walking at a comfortable amble. After a short pause the official spoke again.

"Excuse me, lord Telesinus, but did you understand the procedure?" he inquired.

"Yes, I understood every word," Telesinus replied.

The official stopped outside a double-door at the end of the corridor. "Then I shall announce your arrival, and the king will indicate when he is ready to speak with you." The official nodded to the two doorkeepers, who pulled the doors

open to reveal a richly-coloured silk screen just inside the doorway. The official went down on his knees and started forward towards the screen, but Telesinus strode ahead of him, brushing the screen to one side as he did so.

A gasp went around the audience room as he entered on his feet. He saw a chair set half-way between the door and the king, so he strode over to it and sat uninvited. "It is customary, Gondophares," he admonished the king, deliberately omitting any title, "to stand when a representative of the Republic enters the room. You will be forgiven this time, but do not repeat your rudeness."

The king seemed stunned by this unexpected brashness. His jaw oscillated for a few moments before he could reply.

"You are our guest here, lord Telesinus," he managed at last. "It is good manners for a guest to abide by the customs of the host."

"Your customs are offensive to the Republic," Telesinus replied flatly. "However, we are a generous people, and we offer our services in helping you towards a more civilised set of customs. We call it 'Mos Majorum' in Latin, our native tongue. Are you willing to accept our standard 'Friend and Ally' status, or do you declare yourself an enemy of the Republic?"

"We already have a Treaty with the Republic, which means we are already friends. We see no need to change that arrangement," Gondophares replied tightly. "And our customs are our own, to retain or to change as we determine. Now, do you have any other questions?"

Telesinus did not respond. Instead, he stood and walked to the door, turning his back on the king without the polite three steps backwards first. Brushing the silk screen aside again, he strode with a firm pace down the corridor and out the double-doored entry, then took the steps two at a time. His delegation mounted their horses as soon as they saw him in the doorway; Telesinus also mounted and pulled his horse around. All five cantered down the main street to the city gates, and then turned towards their camp half a mile away. It was time to let Lucius Marius know that the attack could be launched the next day.

The sun had been up for almost two hours the next morning when the gates of Marius' camp swung open and three hundred soldiers walked out in a disorganised stream. They displayed no shields or body armour, wearing the long unbelted tunic that had become their fashion since their capture of Mesopotamia. They chatted in informal knots as they walked towards the city. The captain of the gate guard frowned as he regarded them. "Soldiers with a day's leave and a few coins in their purses," he snorted. "Let everyone double their prices today, specially the whores!"

The Republic soldiers walked through the gate, some waving casually to the guards as they did so, and dispersed into the city, still in their knots of six or eight. An hour ground by, and there was the blast of a trumpet from the direction of the Republic camp. Again the eyes of the gate guard were turned towards the foreign army base with concern, and preparations made to close and bar the gate. Ten minutes later a column of soldiers, in full battle equipment, could be seen leaving by one of the side gates. After marching six abreast for almost half a mile across the face of the gates, the front half turned away from the city and marched away

for fifty paces or so. The second half of the column continued marching along the road until they were beside and parallel to the first section. They halted momentarily, and then turned away from their first section, and marched about a hundred paces towards the city in lines abreast. The captain was about to order the gates closed when the second detachment stopped, then turned about to face the first section.

“Ah! I see!” the captain said softly. And then in his Commander's voice, “They are staging a practice battle for us! Let's watch, men, and see how these famous conquerors of Parthia handle themselves.”

All eyes on the gate and the nearby walls focussed on the opposing ranks outside, the nearest line less than half a mile away; the view was marvellous! Then came a second blast from the trumpet. The troops facing away from the city quickly deployed, the rear ranks stepping sideways and then forward between the men of the front ranks to create a tight defensive line only two deep men deep, but an impenetrable wall of shields with javelins over the top. The distant section, four ranks deep, started moving towards the nearer ranks with a measured menace. They stopped less than fifty paces short of the defenders, and then rapidly the rear two ranks started a deployment out to either wing, obviously attempting to outflank the defenders. The men on the wall roared their approval.

This was not the first time Septimus Caretus had been sent into a battle with only a few hundred men and no armour. But what he did have was three hundred of the most intelligent and capable fighting men in the world, able to seize any opportunity and alert to all threats. And he had a good plan to work to.

The first trumpet blast! The legion would be leaving camp in ten minutes! Then another fifteen minutes to take formation, perhaps a bit longer. Half an hour for all his men to inconspicuously drift towards their assigned jumping-off points.

In less than a half-hour Caretus was walking along the street backing the wall either side of the gate, casually glancing at one tent or stall after another. Most had a contubernium of his men, apparently haggling over possible purchases. All his men were careful to keep in apparent good cheer and not cause any alarm; the last thing they wanted at this time would be for a vendor to call for protection. It seemed to be so long overdue, but finally the second trumpet was heard. He saw his men flick their eyes up to the wall; but also did most others in the area, so it did not betray their tension. Caretus very openly walked slowly away from the gate for a few paces, stopped in the middle of the street as though confused, and then turned back towards the gate. He knew the timing of the next step was in his own hands, but that allowing perhaps three to five minutes for the guards to become engrossed in the battle outside would be helpful.

Then, just as he reached to centre of the street directly behind the gate, he heard a roar from the men on the walls. His heart leapt within his chest as he feared his scheme had been discovered. But his glance revealed that all eyes were turned outwards; the spectators must have been cheering some evolution in the show outside. So now, with their attention fully diverted...

Caretus quickly looked around to make sure he was clear, and then reached under his long tunic. The hilt of his dagger was at his left hip, and the scabbard

strapped upside down to his side to ensure it could not be seen hanging below the hem of the tunic. He tugged sharply at his dagger to break the thread holding it in place, and ran at the gate. Immediately the sixteen of his men standing either side of the gate drew their own daggers, and fell on the guards before they even turned from watching the mock battle outside. Caretus glanced both ways along the wall to see his men rushing up the steps to the top of the walls, ready to dispose of their garrison. Even then there was no reaction from the guards on the arch directly above him. 'That must be an excellent display the boys are putting on', Caretus thought to himself. 'These guards just can't take their eyes off it!' He quickly gestured to his men to seize the shields of the gate guard, left leaning against the inside face of the wall by their former owners.

Then there was a reaction as his men closed in from both sides on the defenders perched over the gate. The disturbance did not last long. Within a moment Caretus had organised his thirty-two men into an arc defending the open gate against any attempt to close it, and the other men had secured the top of the wall. The bows and ammunition kept on hand up there would now be in the hands of his own men, to assist in his defence. Caretus ran through the gate, to stand clear of the shadows and in front of the open gateway. He waved with both hands to the troops lined up on the plain in front of the walls. What a delight to hear that third trumpet blast in response!

The notionally defensive line, deployed with their backs to the city, responded instantly. They turned and started towards the gate at a jog, as much as any heavy infantry could sustain for the four hundred paces they had to cover. They angled slightly to the right as they came, in an attempt to make for the easier surface of the road. Caretus returned through the gateway, to see that the townspeople had realised what was happening. Stall owners were running for their lives, abandoning their goods where they had been displayed. 'How fast can the barracks respond to this?' Caretus asked himself. He could only hope that the heavies would get through the gate in time; unarmoured men with daggers and borrowed shields cannot be expected to hold out for very long against properly-equipped soldiers.

"On the walls!" he shouted to those above him. "Are there any bows up there? Grab whatever you can to provide support for us down here, and prepare to shoot. Then deploy four men to defend each staircase. The rest I want down here straight away!"

It seemed an eternity, exposed to any counter-attack the city forces might launch, but it must have been not much more than five minutes before the first of the legionaries came through the gateway and started pounding up the wide main street towards the basilica. Already they were breathing very heavily from the cross-country run, but they knew the importance of speed. An officer among them pulled out to one side. After allowing the first couple of hundred through, he then started to direct the later arrivals into two streams, left and right, along the base of the wall. At last the poorly armed special forces on the wall were safe from a counter-attack. Having done this, the following men were directed down the main street again, towards the basilica and the barracks beside it.

Now that the tension of the last two hours was past, Caretus felt completely drained. He motioned to his men on the walls that they could come down now, and they gathered to one side of the gate.

“Any casualties?” he asked as they formed up in their contubernia. The response was better than expected; only five of his men had been lost, including three from one contubernium to arrows while one brave defender had blocked a choke point on top of the wall. It could have been much worse, but Caretus felt every loss as a personal blow. The Caretus Cohort were all hand-picked, the absolute cream of the Army in the East, and used only for Special Missions like this; never in a set battle. They were a special band of brothers.

“Then let's get back to the camp, lads. Use the planks from some of these stalls to bring our boys back,” Caretus ordered. “No! Better still, dump the stuff off five of those drays over there and use them. The timber can go into their pyres.” The bodies of their five fallen were retrieved and placed carefully on the drays.

The men took it in turns to perform the solemn honour of pulling and pushing them back to the camp. There they called out the remainder of the Caretus Cohort, those who had not been required for today's mission, and the drays were carried on shoulders out into the ground beyond. The drays were broken apart and a funeral pyre constructed, draped with whatever dry scrub was nearby, and splashed with oil. All five of the fallen were put on a common pyre; they were brothers, who had lived together and died together; now they would all meet Charon together, if what the Greeks said could be believed.

Caretus placed a coin in the mouth of each, and then drew his dagger again. He sliced the back of his left forearm, allowing some blood to drip onto the heaped timbers. This was his fifth cut; five cuts representing twenty-seven men over five different funerals.

Each member of the cohort also sliced his left forearm and dripped his blood on the timbers as he passed in respectful silence. Then the two decani of the five dead were called forward, to light the timbers.

“Our blood goes with you!” the more senior decanus proclaimed.

“Our blood goes with you!” the cohort responded in unison.

All members stood in silent attention for an hour to farewell their comrades, as the flames grew higher, and then died down. Then they returned to camp.

News of fall of Minnagara spread rapidly to Krokola, just a short distance downstream. A message from Ranjut arrived on the second day after the capture.

*From Ranjut, Governor of Krokola,
to Lord Lucius Marius, Acting Governor of Minnagara,*

Long life and health!

Please be assured of the total and complete loyalty of Krokola to the Republic. Please inform us of any actions you might require from us, and be confident that your wishes will be satisfied.

Marius walked over to Telesinus' office in the basilica and nodded to the man on duty. The soldier knocked on the door.

"Enter," came the response from within.

"Pontius, I think our friend Ranjut has a very good survival instinct," Marius joked. "Listen to this," and he read the message.

Telesinus smiled broadly. "He forgot to mention that he agrees with everything you've ever said or thought," he responded. "But he certainly doesn't want us to be in any doubt, does he?"

Marius became serious again. "But he would say that, wouldn't he? I am inclined to take a legion down south, just to accept his hospitality; there are a few cities down that way, so it would be good for us to leave the others in no doubt, either."

"That sounds like a good idea, Lucius. Then, when you get back, you can take the other two upstream. I want the whole of the Indus valley subjugated before the wet season." Telesinus indicated a draft of a letter on his desk. "I am already writing to their princes, inviting them to accept Friend and Ally, and I want the lesson from Minnagara to be fresh in their minds when you arrive. There's no sense in giving them time to start trusting each other."

"Yes sir." Marius snapped off a salute. "I will be as quick as I can be," he added.

Priscus had never expected to become Consul. In fact, when he was thirty years old, he had never expected to be a Praetor. How the world changes! Then, in Silo's first expeditionary force, he had been one of the poorest commanders on staff. But now, because of the situation in Gaul, he had been put forward by his fellow-Italianists as a Military Man, the right choice for the times! Even Silo himself had endorsed him, a measure of how far he had improved.

His consular colleague was Caius Marius the Younger. Priscus had served under Caius Marius senior, when he had been a junior staff officer after Vercellae. His admiration for the Old Warhorse strongly moved him to think good of the younger Marius, now a man of forty and reaching the Consulate at the earliest legal age; but as he became more familiar with Young Marius he was becoming more disappointed.

Young Marius was even less competent militarily than Priscus had imagined possible, he was lazy in his preparation for policy discussions, and generally gave the appearance of coasting on the fame of his father. Priscus could see why the Italianists had been reluctant for him to stand as the colleague of this layabout; he was, in fact, a sympathetic Roman rather than Italian-born. Yes, the distinction between Roman and Italian was blurring, but it was still there and it was only the intervention of Silo that had talked them around.

"I am sorry, Gnaeus, but I cannot take any action against Caius Julius," Marius was repeating. "He is my cousin! I cannot prosecute my cousin for High Treason!"

Norbanus lost patience. "Listen, you imbecile! We are not asking you to prosecute him! We are telling you that he is guilty of High Treason, but that we will overlook that if you support moves to remove him from his command and recall him from Gaul."

"It is the same thing, you old fool!" Marius retorted with no less anger. "Caius Julius will not come back, regardless. He sees the pacification of the revolt as his first priority, and nothing will distract him from that. Not even if I go there in person! You don't know how stubborn he can be!"

Priscus compressed his lips as he thought for a moment. "Then I will go to Gaul," Priscus said with an air of finality.

"You can't be serious, Gnaeus!" Marius exclaimed. "This will divide the loyalty of our soldiers like nothing else imaginable! All of Caesar's men believe that the rumours of conspiracy are true, and that only he has the power to stop it. If you turn up and confront him, there will be civil war."

"Not just me, Caius," Priscus said grimly. "I will be taking with me four legions of veterans from the Italian tribes, with Quintus Poppaedi^{us} at my side."

Marius looked stunned. "In the name of all the gods, no! You can't go to war against one of our own Governors!"

"Caesar has already gone to war against the Republic, Caius, when he had Lucius Glauc^a murdered. That's what High Treason is, you know; an attack on the Republic. It is our duty as Consuls to defend the Republic. But if you won't do your duty, then I will, and so will our Italian citizens. Let us see who really deserves to call himself a citizen!"

"I will not permit it!" Marius jumped to his feet. "I will veto it!"

"Caius, you will *not* veto it!" Priscus demanded. "If you do, then be assured that I and Quintus Poppaedi^{us} will go anyway, and so will our veterans. And as soon as your consulate expires, then you will be charged with High Treason yourself."

"You will not be able to raise and equip four legions," Marius scoffed. "Not without Senate approval."

Priscus smiled coldly. "I expected Caesar would refuse to return, with your support or not; so I have done some research. I have already asked Quintus Poppaedi^{us} if he could start scratching together four legions. So far he has enough volunteers for seven, and we will need to sort out the fittest of them. So raising the men is not a problem; the only catch is the money to pay them."

"I will pay for them out of my own purse!" Norbanus jumped in.

"Thank you Caius," Priscus said to Norbanus, "but Pontius Pellius has already sent the cash; enough to equip them and feed them for eight months. We wanted to get moving as soon as possible, so Pontius was prepared to lend us an advance until the Senate appropriation comes through."

"You can't do that!" Marius protested weakly. "Only the Senate has the authority to raise legions."

"We can do it, Caius," Priscus said evenly. "Two Consulars, accepting volunteers to march to Gaul to put down a revolt. That is what we will tell the Senate; what would you say to contradict us?"

"I would tell them that..." Marius' voice trailed away as he realised what he had been about to say.

"You would tell them that we are on our way to arrest Caesar for the murder of Lucius Glaucia?" Priscus finished the sentence for him. "I'm sure Caesar would consider that a marvellous act of family loyalty!"

"Caius," Drusus spoke gently, his first words in this meeting, "You know how dearly I loved your father, even when the gods sent him mad. You know that Quintus Poppaedi loved him no less. Please do not tarnish his name by allying yourself with a murderer and a traitor like Caesar."

Marius looked around the room. "All right; I will support you."

"And you will agree to give Quintus Poppaedi full proconsular powers, should I consider it necessary?" Priscus pressed.

Almost silently, Marius whispered "Yes."

As Caesar had hoped, the Sequani and Helvetii joined with the Lingones when he started his devastation of the Lingones. Caesar had meant to be provocative, had done everything he could to give himself some justification for this war; but now he realised he had pushed too hard. He had thought that the garrisons in the west would keep the lid on resentment there, leaving him with six legions to deal with the three main target tribes.

But not only had the Sequani and Helvetii come out in arms; the previously-subdued Arverni and Aedui had also revolted, and the recently-submissive tribes of the far west had also risen and slaughtered the various century-sized garrisons that Caesar had left scattered among them. Two legions worth of men, utterly lost!

Now those six legions he had remaining would have to deal with a united Gaul! This was a bigger war than he had imagined, but he was confident that he could handle it. And perhaps it was better this way, he mused; the wider the revolt, the more credence his allegations of a widespread conspiracy would sound, and the more legions he could expect to be supplied to him. This war would be the making of his career!

Atius knocked at his open office door. Caesar glanced up. "A letter from Rome, sir," Atius said as he advanced into the office, dropped a letter on the desk, and retreated back to the door. After just a slight pause to see if Caesar wanted him to stay, he disappeared from sight.

Caesar picked up the letter, and noted the seals of both consuls. 'Another order to report back to Rome?' he mused. 'Surely they have heard about the general uprising by now!' Caesar sat back as he cracked the seals, confident that he could easily resist any recall action now that the war was in full swing.

*From Caius Marius and Gnaeus Priscus, consuls of the Republic,
to Caius Julius Caesar, Governor of Transalpine Gaul,*

Greetings!

We are shocked to hear that virtually all of Gaul has taken up arms against the Republic. We have taken immediate steps to raise four legions from recent retirees and march them to you as a matter of urgency. We feel that these will be of more use than new recruits, who would need to be trained before being fit for battle.

Subject to operational constraints, we suggest you await their arrival before undertaking any major action. Depending on circumstances on the ground, you might even think it prudent to march to meet the additional legions as early as possible. We expect they will be crossing into Transalpine Gaul in late March.

'It worked!' Caesar said to himself in exultation. Four more legions would give him a total of ten. He will send five against the western tribes who had slaughtered their garrisons; these can be enslaved, every last man, woman and child who survives, and the land can become a Republic estate. Then the central tribes; the Aedui and Arverni. The other five can be sent to reduce the Lingones, Sequani and Helvetii, then turn north to take the Leuci and Treveri, and perhaps the Remi if weather and time permit. Yes, these extra legions will be enough to re-capture the west, and catch up with his timetable. He will still have two years to secure Belgica and Aquitania, and then push into Iberian Cantabria and beyond to complete the possession of the whole peninsula.

'The new legions to arrive in late March is good,' he continued thinking, 'as soon as I could have hoped for. One month is barely enough time to get back to the coastal road and meet them if we get some more late snow. So I will go to them with one legion, while the other five I leave behind can become the western force. My one legion and the other four can then become the eastern force; less time lost from the campaigning season that way.'

"Atius!" he called. His secretary appeared in the doorway almost immediately. "Draft orders; the Third Legion is to be ready to march at dawn the day after tomorrow; Marcus Carro is to take command of the other legions and remain in camp for the moment. He will be required to re-establish our authority over the western tribes as soon as conditions allow effective campaigning. Call him to my office so I can explain my plans in person."

"Five years ago Titus Vidacilius spoke to us of the need to maintain a permanent army strong enough to deal with a major threat, without weakening our hold on the provinces by having to call upon garrison legions," Norbanus addressed the Senate. "He wisely suggested that we maintain a total of thirty legions; ten for garrison duty, and another twenty to be able to deal swiftly and effectively against a threat, whether it might come from Parthia, from Long-Haired Gaul, or even from the Germans again." Norbanus turned on a heel as he paused.

“Since then, Parthia has been subjugated.. This lulled us into thinking that now we were no longer under threat from Parthia, we could safely reduce that part of our standing army allocated to responding to any new threat. So we reduced our establishment to a total of only twenty legions; notionally ten for garrison duty, and ten for rapid response.

“What was ignored was that the former Parthian territories now require a garrison force which would be in addition to the ten suggested by Titus. These territories are even larger, in terms of square miles, than the extent of the Roman world when Titus spoke, and they are not yet fully pacified; so it would be reasonable to expect that we would need more than ten legions to garrison these lands, rather than less. It is a measure of the skill of both Quintus Sertorius and Pontius Telesinus that they have not only maintained the peace with only eight legions, but actually reached 'Friend and Ally' agreements with all of the bordering states.

“That listing, namely ten legions for garrison duty and another eight for the Parthian lands, takes up eighteen out of our total of twenty legions. So where are the other two remaining legions? The remaining two which were allocated to 'rapid response to a threat'?

“I'll tell you where they are, Conscript Fathers,” Norbanus roared with a vehemence totally lacking from his voice up to this point. “They are the two legions butchered in Long-Haired Gaul because Caius Julius Caesar fed them into that mincer, one century at a time, by ordering them to do garrison duty hopelessly out-numbered, isolated from help, surrounded by those very tribes that Caesar had deliberately provoked into a frenzy!”

“Where are those two legions?” Norbanus repeated in rage. “They are so much wolf-shit and vulture-droppings, after being left in the open by a commander who threw their lives away, just so he could provoke a war for his own gratification!” Norbanus glared around the chamber, as if inviting a challenge. “Caesar is the greatest threat that the Republic faces at this time! Caesar must be destroyed!” Norbanus sat, and a wave of shouting swept over the chamber. Almost every man present was standing, even the few *pedarii* remaining from before the Catonian Reforms.

Marius had to call repeatedly for order before the noise died down enough for a proper speaking voice to be heard. Then he stood himself. “Conscript Fathers, it is appropriate that I now inform you of certain measures that have been taken by my colleague Gnaeus and me over the last month.” He paced solemnly.

“We have recalled four legions of veterans to service under the command of Gnaeus Priscus, with Quintus Poppaedi Silo as his second in command.”

Again the cries, mostly of approval of Silo's name, from the terraces prevented any further speech for almost a minute. “These four legions have been sent to Gaul, to deal with the troubles there,” Marius continued when he had opportunity. “But unlike the tragic mission of Lucius Glaucia, this force has a different objective.

“Gnaeus Priscus and I agreed that Gnaeus, advised by Quintus Poppaedi, would take command of Caesar's legions immediately.” Another

wave of cheering arose. Every man present was confident that Priscus and Silo, having worked together since the earliest days of the Mithridatic War, would manage to do with ten legions more than anyone else could manage with thirty.

“Then Caius Julius will be ordered to return to Rome immediately, where his conduct as Governor of Transalpine Gaul will be examined, and he will be required to explain any of his actions that might seem questionable,” Marius continued. “Only after this initial investigation will it be known if he is to be re-instated as Governor or not.” Marius still could not bring himself to mention the possibility of formal charges being laid; but if others wanted to raise that issue, he would be quite happy to insist that nothing should be decided until all the facts were known. “I announce these measures now, because there is now no need for secrecy, which had been vital up to this point.” Marius explained. “I will now read to you a letter I received yesterday from Gnaeus.

*From Gnaeus Priscus, Consul of the Republic,
to Caius Marius, my colleague in that office,*

Greetings!

We arrived in Massalia on the last day of March, having made good marching speed for this time of year. The men are in good condition, despite their seniority, and their years of experience have stood them in good stead.

Caius Julius had marched down with one legion to meet us, the other five remaining in the Aedui lands. He was surprised to see me and Quintus Poppaedi; he had understood that these additional legions were to be added to his existing command. On this basis, he assumed that we had come with them for the purposes of obtaining a first-hand Report and some outline of his immediate plans.

Caius Julius told us that he had left orders for his other legions to enforce Republic authority in the western regions as soon as conditions allowed, and that the five in Massalia would be similarly used in the eastern parts of Long-Haired Gaul. Quintus Poppaedi then asked if all five legions in Massalia could be assembled into a single place; he would like to address the men, to encourage them, all the more so since many of them were his own veterans. Caius Julius was most eager to agree, apparently expecting a personal endorsement from the Old Warrior.

I will not reproduce in full what Quintus Poppaedi said to the men. Suffice it to say that he expressed his total confidence that every one of them will fulfil their oaths to defend the Republic against all enemies. He then informed them that both Consuls had agreed that I would now assume nominal command of all Republic forces in Transalpine Gaul, and that he placed himself at my service for as long as I required him. He then turned to Caesar and publicly informed him that both Consuls required him to report to the Senate no later than the Ides of May. He then surrendered the platform to me.

*As previously agreed between us, I formally appointed Quintus Poppaedi-
us my General in the Field over all forces in Gaul, with proconsular
authority. The cheering from the men was deafening! And why not? What
soldier would not want to be under the command of not only the greatest General
in history, but the one with the lowest casualty rate as well?*

*I am writing this letter the evening after that Assembly. Tomorrow
Quintus Poppaedi-
us will ride to the Aedui lands tomorrow with five hundred
cavalry, to inform the remaining five legions of the new command arrangements.
He hopes to be able to reach them before their commander, Marcus Carro, acts
on his latent orders."*

Marius had barely turned towards his curile chair before senators started leaping to their feet.

"Lucius Porcius, Censor and five times Consul, I believe you have seniority," Marius said mildly.

"Thank you, Caius," Cato said with a smile. "Firstly, let me congratulate you and your colleague for your excellent handling of this very fraught situation. Every detail of it is perfect, including the appointment of Quintus Poppaedi-
us as General in the Field. I cannot imagine how anything could have been done better." Then turning to the terraces, "But the question arises, 'What to do next?' A perfect start does not guarantee a perfect finish. What are your intentions in regard to the prosecution of this war?"

"It is the intention of both Consuls to bring about a negotiated peace as swiftly as possible," Marius replied.

Lucius Julius Caesar stood, and being the only Consular among those standing received the call.

"Excuse me, Caius; but is it your intention to negotiate a peace with the western tribes, who have just slaughtered ten thousand Republic soldiers?" he asked with a show of incredulity. "And what of the Lingones, who sparked this war by murdering a hundred men sent to them by Caius Julius under a banner of truce, to negotiate? They have already shown how they prefer to negotiate!"

"With respect, Lucius Julius; there are some facts that you are not aware of," Marius replied. "All will be revealed in due course; but for the sake of the delicacy of the situation, it would not be in the interests of the Republic to reveal all at this time."

Cato and Gaius Aurelius Cotta leapt to their feet immediately. "Lucius Porcius, you have seniority," Marius asked.

"Yes, Consul; firstly, I must say that it is improper for you to not fully inform this House of anything that might prove critical in its deliberations. And secondly, if you stubbornly refuse to divulge this information, then you should at least inform us of the extent of this secret. Is it your personal knowledge only? In that case, you come close to making yourself King! Or do you share this knowledge with your Consul? Or is the band of conspirators – yes, I use that word deliberately! – is the band of conspirators even wider?"

Before Marius could respond, Drusus stood.

“Yes, Marcus Livius?” Marius invited him, glad to not have to respond himself.

“Conscript Fathers,” Drusus addressed the terraces, “I am one of those whom my friend Lucius Porcius refers to as a 'band of conspirators'.” Drusus smiled warmly to Cato. “Do not be alarmed, old friend; the only people who know are those by whom the information reached the Consuls – yes, I use the plural there, because the *Mos Majorum* requires the Consuls to act in partnership, – and those whom the Consuls called upon for their wisdom.”

Then, turning back to the terraces, “I will not list the others who are aware of these secret facts; but I assure you that this is not a small clique who are misusing vital information for their own purposes. But nor is the spread so wide that unworthy men are privy. Apart from the immediate first-hand witnesses, the number of so-called 'conspirators' is large enough to form a mature and balanced judgement, and all of them senior enough to have held very high public offices. I beg of you to trust us for a little while longer, and all will be revealed.”

Then, smiling again at Cato, “After all, old friend; did we not keep a few secrets of our own during our shared Consulates? Would you like me to divulge them all, even now, years after the events? How much more disastrous would they have been if spilled into the open immediately? I need only mention how we conspired with a mere handful of men to restore Rome's proper government after the Sulpician Coup. That secrecy allowed Lucius Cornelius time to act in the best interests of the Republic, actions that would have been impossible if we had told everything to the Senate as soon as we knew of it. So please grant to the present Consuls the same latitude that we formerly assumed for ourselves.”

Cato responded from his chair, lifting his right hand without rising. “Marcus Livius; I yield to your integrity.”

Gaius Aurelius Cotta stood again.

“Gaius Aurelius, thank you for your patience; speak now,” Marius invited.

“As you all know, Caius Julius is my nephew, the son of my beloved sister. So I have a deep personal and familial interest in this matter.” Cotta spoke almost remorsefully. “From the context of previous speeches in this Chamber, I can only imagine that these measures against Caius Julius are based on some secret allegation or other information or evidence implying that my nephew was acting to provoke a war, rather than to avoid one. Is that so, Caius Marius?” Cotta asked directly. “And if so, when will the accused and his family be permitted to hear these allegations, and test their veracity? When will he be permitted to examine the evidence against him and explain that it has been misunderstood? It is not Roman justice for a man to be deposed from his properly-appointed office without being found to have committed some wrongdoing? But Caius Julius has not been found guilty! He has not even been charged! In fact, there has not even been produced any evidence on which to base a charge!” Cotta swept his eyes over the terraces imploringly.

“Conscript Fathers! All I am asking for is due process! If you do not uphold that sacred principle, then what checks remain against some future

magistrate abusing the authority entrusted to him?” As Cotta resumed his seat, Marius rose to reply.

“I understand your position, Gaius Aurelius. Do not forget that Caius Julius is not only your nephew; he is also my first cousin. Believe me, I was reluctant to agree to this course, but the evidence is compelling.” Marius started to pace, showing his inner tensions. “However, although the evidence is compelling, it is not absolute. For this reason, Caius Julius will be given an opportunity to examine these allegations and respond privately. If he can provide credible explanations, then he will be returned to his offices. Only if he fails to provide a reasonable explanation will he be formally charged. This secrecy is not aimed at depriving him of any of his rights in law. Quite the opposite! There are two reasons why the evidence has not been made available, either to him or to the Senate as a whole. The first reason is to ensure that if these fears are groundless, then no needless harm is done to his name or reputation. The second reason is that, if the allegations are true, Caius Julius will not have the opportunity to take actions which could contaminate or destroy evidence, or otherwise pervert justice.

“It with a heavy heart that I have agreed to this process, but I genuinely believe that it is in the best interests of not only the Republic which I am under a sacred trust to protect, but also in the best interests of Caius Julius, my kinsman to whom I owe familial piety.”

The Senate was hushed as Marius slowly walked back to the curule chair. Most Senators saw Marius as a lightweight, a man not worthy of the name he had inherited. This simple speech was forcing some revisions in their estimation of him. But more chilling was the sense that the evidence against Caesar must be brutal and damning, of a nature that hinted at gross turpitude, for such an approach to be warranted. What had Caesar done?

Caesar was stunned by this turn of events. Immediately after the army assembly had been dismissed, he sought out Silo. He dearly hoped that the sour note that finished his last conversation with Silo, years earlier when discussing Sertorius' triumph, had been forgotten.

“Quintus Poppaedi, if I might have a few moments?” Caesar asked politely.

“Why, certainly, Caius Julius,” Silo replied pleasantly. “It has been a while since we spoke, and I have not had the opportunity to apologise for my rudeness to you.”

“Oh, please, Quintus Poppaedi,” Caesar said trying to mask the depth of his relief, “One should never apologise for speaking the truth! Hopefully, as I mature, I will mellow.” In his gut, Caesar swore that he would never mellow; that is the path to mediocrity. But he must learn to appear less arrogant on the outside.

“Well, it is good that we have put that unhappy day aside,” Silo pushed through the immediate topic. “What can I do for you?”

“I was wondering what is behind the summons to Rome,” Caesar replied. “Although I have no resentment whatsoever that you have been sent to replace me as commander – I mean who could resent being replaced by the best in the world?

Rather, I am gratified that at last my warnings have been taken seriously. Yet it is not the usual practice to replace a Governor and Commander in the Field without good reason. The local knowledge and continuity of style is important, and should not be sacrificed too quickly. I would have thought that at the least I would have been retained as your subordinate, merely to provide that continuity."

"That might well end up being the case, Caius Julius," Silo answered. "If you can get down to Rome quickly enough, make your Report and answer their questions, you might well be back here before the end of May." Still a slimy little turd, Silo thought to himself behind his easy smile. He's just a little bit better at hiding it these days. The memory of Lucius Glaucia started to drift into his mind, but he pressed it down. That would ruin his own pretence.

"Do you know what sort of issues might be of concern to the Senate?" Caesar pressed. "So much has happened, especially in this last year or so, and it would be much more helpful to the Senate if I knew what might be of concern to them; I would be able to more accurately refresh my memory and expand on my records."

Silo tried to be nonchalant as he shrugged. "I do not know, and I rarely attend the Senate since I retired from the East. But I gather that they might want to know what sources you have for your warnings of war, how accurate and reliable they are, and what other possible responses you considered but rejected, and why. Perhaps you should talk to Gnaeus; after all, he is the Consul, and this whole exercise has Consular backing rather than a Senate resolution behind it."

"Thank you, Quintus Poppaedi," Caesar smiled. "I will do that. And thank you for your continued friendship," he added.

Caesar returned to his quarters and packed immediately. It was obvious that the Senate was going to investigate his notional intelligence sources. There was no way he would be able to assemble a credible intelligence network; not now that Gaul was in revolt. He would be discovered as a fraud. There was only one way out; he had to ensure that when the Senate asks him to name names, those whom he names will be both highly-placed enough to be credible, but also dead enough to be beyond cross-examination.

He went out into the yard by the stables and threw his saddle-bags over the rump of his horse. He tied the reins of a second mount to his saddle, then mounted and took off to the north at a gentle canter, a pace he would be able to keep up for hours. He must get to Carro and get those five legions moving west before word of Silo's command reaches them.

By alternating his mounts every hour or so, Caesar had managed to ride for ten hours a day, giving his horses four breaks per day to graze and water as opportunity arose. He reluctantly stayed in inns, primarily to ensure his mounts would be grain-fed for endurance and he could eat and sleep well himself, rather than taking time to prepare his own food. After four days, one of his horses went lame. A shoe had been lost, and the hoof was cracked. He tried to trade it for a fresh horse at one of the villages, but no Celt wanted what was obviously a Republic Army horse in his paddock; it would be too easy to be accused of stealing it. So he bought the best he could find, and pressed on. On the evening

of the eighth day he walked his mount through the gate of the winter camp, to be greeted by Carro's concerned face.

"General! What is it? You and your horses look exhausted! And what happened to your plans to lead the other five legions against the Helvetii?" Questions came pouring out of Carro.

"I will ask the questions, Marcus," Caesar replied testily. "Why are you not already marching against the Arverni, as I ordered?"

"There is still snow on the high ground, sir, when our scouts last reported two days ago. Another report is due tomorrow, and I am hopeful of moving out then."

"Stop being hopeful, Marcus and start being busy," Caesar snapped back. "You march tomorrow, come what may. You fall on the Arverni before they expect it; why wait until they are ready and prepared? Learn to use swift movement and surprise, Marcus, or you will be a legate no longer!"

"Yes sir," Carro snapped to attention. "We march tomorrow; I will spread the order."

"I will not be able to go with you, Marcus; I need to see to a few things first, down south. But I had to get up here to make sure you were rolling, and not just sitting and waiting. So make all possible speed, forced march where possible; and when you get to the Arverni, waste no time. I want them towelled up immediately, every last man killed, specially all the nobles. Every last one of them! Only women and children are to be taken as captives. Speed is absolutely essential; you understand?"

"Yes, sir. Not a minute to be wasted!"

"Good man, Marcus!" Caesar finally smiled and put an approving hand on his subordinate's shoulder. "Excuse my brusqueness, but I wanted to make sure you were fully seized of the urgency."

"Yes, sir. Non-stop marching and fighting," Carro replied.

"Excellent," Caesar replied. "Now I want a bath, a bed, and two fresh horses. I am in a hurry too, in case you had not noticed."

"Yes, sir. Your quarters have been kept prepared for you, just in case."

"Good man, Marcus!" Caesar repeated, and left the man to carry out his orders.

Caesar gratefully lowered himself onto his familiar bed. He had told Priscus that Carro was under orders to attack the western tribes as soon as conditions allowed; but there was still snow on the high ground, and he would not expect heavy infantry to try to move until the snow was not only gone but also it was well enough into the season to be confident there would not be a late snowfall. For the same reason, he doubted that Priscus would try to bring the five legions in the south to link up his forces until he was confident of good marching weather. Carro would have a month's head start, more or less; enough to obliterate the Arverni, and possibly get into the Santones as well.

The next morning dawned fresh and clear. Two horses were ready for Caesar, both with saddle bags waiting for Caesar to pack them. Caesar looked around the camp, noting that the barracks were being emptied and marching packs

prepared even as the breakfasts were being cooked. There was the bustle in the air of a camp being broken, and Caesar was pleased. Carro called upon his General, hoping that he was early enough to impress but not so early as to annoy. "We will be marching out in less than an hour sir. Are there any additional orders?"

"No, Marcus; you have done well." Caesar looked around. "You have impressed me. Keep up this standard, and all will go well."

"When can I expect to see you again, sir?" Carro asked. "Or will this be an independent campaign, while you take control of the east?"

"Time will tell, Marcus. Time will tell."

"Yes, sir. Have a safe journey, sir!"

The journey southward was not so hectic as the sprint to the north. Three days on the road, and Caesar heard the sound of a large number of horses coming towards him from the south. Fearing it might be a Celtic band with no particular love for him, he pulled well off the road to allow it to pass. To his dismay, he saw it was Republic cavalry. He thought that he saw Silo at the head, but he had pulled so far off the road to ensure he could not be detected that recognition was a matter of guesswork. They would arrive at the camp in three days! Carro would have only six days' head start, and heavies do not move as quickly as cavalry!

Caesar did some quick calculating. If Silo pushed, he could probably move at twice the speed of an infantry march. So a six-day head start would mean another six days before they were caught; and then, only if Silo pushed. Yes that should be enough, Caesar thought to himself. But just to be sure, what could he do to influence events?

Show himself to Silo? No! That would only raise questions about what he was doing this far north, instead of heading to Rome as ordered. Go back to Carro and tell him to push harder? No! Carro was already fully convinced that he mustn't waste time; but if he reports to Silo that Caesar had come back a second time to hurry him along, after saying he had urgent business in the south, that would look too suspicious. Visiting once before returning to Rome could be made out to be diligence to get his men moving against the enemy as soon as possible, instead of allowing inertia to develop; but twice would imply a hidden agenda.

If only he hadn't burnt his bridges with Petix! He would have been the perfect way to eliminate a few highly-placed Celts! Then Caesar could have claimed that these victims had been his informers, and that the rebels must have discovered them and executed them for providing him with his secret intelligence. Blast! It is too late now! He will just have to name an Arverni noble or two, and trust that Carro will see to them in good order.

'The die is cast,' Caesar said to himself. He waited for the cavalry column to pass, and then resumed his journey south.

The Mesopotamian Council had gathered again, for the first time since Marius had returned from the east.

"As the first item of business, I would like to congratulate Lucius and Septimus on a brilliant campaign in the east," Sertorius started. "It was

reminiscent of Quintus Poppaadius at his best!” There were smiles all round and polite applause. “I understand Karmides has already sent several shipwrights over to Krokola to examine their shipbuilding technology in detail, and Typhon's men are doing an audit of their trade logs.” Both Karmides and Typhon nodded confirmation.

“Arius, what progress on the flood controls?” Sertorius shot across the table to his Chief Engineer.

“This has proven to be a much more complex exercise than it seemed at first,” Claudius replied. “The control of these floods is not only dependent upon the volume of water held back at peak flow and released at low flow; it is also a matter of the precise timing within the cycle of high and low water. If we start to hold back the peak too early, the dams will overtop, and that will result in a sudden increase in flow. This could prove very dangerous, because in such circumstances the wave front tends to build as it goes downstream, becoming a wall of water eventually. But on the other hand, if we start to hold back the water too late, we not only have higher floods than necessary; we also have insufficient water for the extra crop in the low flow season.” He looked around the table. “The only safe way to handle this is to be deliberately late, but by as little as possible with the information at hand. This means that if the floods come early, we should start to close the gates later because the expected peak will be higher. It runs contrary to common sense, but that's how the mathematics works out.

“So that means, of course, that we are sacrificing efficiency for safety. How much efficiency we are prepared to sacrifice determines how cost-effective the scheme will prove. My personal opinion is that we can build the system and operate it at the economic break-even point in almost complete safety; and as we gain experience, we can then modify our operating procedures to gain more productivity while retaining adequate safety.”

“How much will your preferred scheme cost to build?” Tollianus asked.

“About three hundred thousand sestertium milia, over a period of six years,” Claudius answered. Eyebrows were raised around the table. “And maintenance and running costs after that would be about one thousand sestertium milia annually.”

“That is a lot of money,” Tollianus said flatly. “But when you say 'operating on the break-even point', have you allowed for the fact that we could lend that money out for interest? If you can't equal a reasonable interest rate return, then we are actually costing ourselves that extra income.”

Claudius nodded his understanding of that point. “It will save, on average, about ten thousand sestertium milia annually in damage avoided, and provide another fifteen thousand sestertium milia per annum in extra taxes on the increased production. Take out the running costs, and that is twenty-four thousand per annum return on an investment of three hundred thousand. That is not a bad return; about eight percent. So we can be confident of an eight-percent return to start with, and probably more as we gain more experience,” Claudius summarised. “That sounds good enough for me!”

“The only problem is finding the cash to pay the up-front costs,” Tollianus responded. “Spreading the cost over six years certainly helps the cash flow; but even so, this one project will be more than a fifth of our total budget.”

“Can we print more paper?” Claudius asked.

Tollianus looked over to Sertorius. “I gather you are not comfortable with the printing idea, Quintus.”

Sertorius frowned. “I remember the Senate Committee was asking you about that. But you are still here, so I suppose you must have convinced them.”

“Yes, Quintus. The fact that it worked seemed to be the big factor; we were able to redeem every note that was presented. But what impressed them even more was that some notes were not presented; they took that to mean that there is a body of opinion out there that these papers really are as good as gold.” Tollianus smiled. “So long as enough people think that, it becomes the truth.”

“So it is clear for us to do it again? And over a period of six years?” Sertorius asked.

“Only if you get away with it,” Tollianus answered. “But if there is a rush to redeem, and you can't pay up, then you can expect to be tried for fraud.”

“Bastards!” Sertorius said with a grin. “We are conducting an experiment into a completely new paradigm for public finances, and they are taking careful note of what happens. All the risk is on us if it fails, and all the benefit is to the Republic if it works!” He shook his head. “And these Administrators claim not to be politicians!”

“While you are thinking about that, Quintus, here is some more information that might influence you,” Tollianus went on. “We have been told that the Provincial Monopolies Agreement with Margiana is illegal. We must open the trade to any merchant willing to operate. We may, however, tax the trade.”

“But how do they suggest we deal with Margiana, with whom we have a treaty explicitly allowing only the Province to deal with that territory?” Telesinus asked.

“I put that very question to them, Pontius,” Tollianus replied, “And they wrote that they would need to consult with the Senate on that point. They acknowledged that you had authority to make treaties as you considered appropriate, but it was unclear whether or not this authority extended to putting aside the normal protocols.”

“Well, I have had no letters from either Consul, nor from the Head of Senate, to say that I do not have that authority,” Telesinus asserted, “so I will continue to act on the basis that I do. I recommend that the monopolies stay in place, but we make contingency plans in case the Senate rules otherwise.”

“What sort of contingency plans?” Tollianus asked.

“One possibility would be to do exactly as they say; allow any and all traders access. But to set the taxes so high that there would be no profit. Then we approach merchants with a proposal that the trade must continue, for the sake of the Province, and that we will guarantee that we will cover any unavoidable losses; at worst they will break even.” Telesinus smiled. “There would be no

profit, but there should be one or two merchants out there prepared to operate at bare cost, just because they love the Republic.”

“You seem to have a high opinion of the Second Class, if you think even one of them would carry out trade at the end of the world for no profit except patriotism!” Sertorius commented.

“Oh, I’m sure I can find at least one,” Telesinus said easily. “One of Marius’ clients, perhaps, or even one of Marcus Livius’ if we have to. After all, every noble in Italy has sworn himself as client to him, back during the Enfranchisement debates. Just because he has never enforced it does not mean we Italians are no longer aware of it.”

Sertorius smiled slowly to himself. “Yes, I see. We only need one, who can then personally take a monopoly because no-one else wants it; and it would be so much simpler to tax one trader who operates in bulk than a hundred little retailers!”

“And for what it’s worth, we wouldn’t have to pay the annual fee to Margiana, either,” Tollianus contributed. “More money saved.”

“Bugger the Province Monopoly, in that case,” Sertorius decided. “Why fight a battle we don’t have to win? I will write to Marcus Livius today, asking him to arrange such a patriotic trader. As soon as he can start operating, we will relinquish the monopolies and open the trade up to anyone who wants to waste his time and effort for nothing!”

“That’s one problem solved,” Tollianus mentally moved back to the previous question. “So what does that mean for the Dam Project?”

“I have an idea about that,” Sertorius said. “When I was appointed to govern Armenia, I had in mind to buy up bulk land, develop it, and then use it to settle my veterans, charging the value of the land to the Treasury. I hoped to make a denarius or two out of that.” He smiled at Tollianus. “But I never got around to it, so there is no need to investigate, Marcus!”

“So why can we not place a higher valuation on the land that will benefit from this scheme, and tax in on the basis of that higher valuation?” Sertorius went on. “If anyone is unhappy with the higher valuation, then we could offer to buy the land. Then, when the project is completed, these lands will be less vulnerable to flood damage, and more able to grow an additional crop; we could sell them at a profit.”

“That might be a good investment over six years, Quintus, but I don’t see how it would help our cash flow in the meantime,” Tollianus commented. “We would have to find the money not only for the Project, but for the land as well.”

Sertorius looked a bit crestfallen. “Then we don’t buy it automatically. We just increase the taxes, and only buy as much as we can afford.”

“That would make more sense,” Tollianus agreed.

“Just a moment, everyone,” Marius broke in. “You are forgetting that Minnagara is not a Friend and Ally, and did not voluntarily become part of our Province; it was conquered! Krokola and the other cities can claim to have not resisted incorporation, so they have rights under the Miletus Decree; but Minnagara and all debts due to it are ours as spoils. And I think you might even

find that a lot of the treasures in Krokola and other cities are not the property of that city, but were technically Minnagara Crown property, and therefore is also part of our booty.”

Everyone around the table looked at each other. This was the answer! Or at least, a large part of it.

“Marcus,” at length Sertorius turned and said to Tollianus, “I want a full audit of everything in Minnagara. Not just the gold and silver and other transportables, but right down to a valuation of every parcel of land as well. It is all forfeit to us. As for land and buildings; we will permit the current occupants to continue as tenants paying a modest rent, with the right to buy it back at half-valuation if they wish. The same with minor personal property; but any precious metals, jewels or artworks are to be listed.

“The same process in all the other cities; anything that belongs to the former Crown comes under the same policy.” He smiled to Marius. “Lucius, you are a genius! So bleeding obvious once you said it, but no-one else had the wit to think outside the box!”

“So I take it that we will start printing,” Tollianus concluded, “now that we will have the assets to back the paper?”

“Absolutely!” Sertorius agreed. “In fact, I am inclined to pay all our bills with paper. The more there is in circulation, and the sooner people get accustomed to it, the better. Just so long as we have enough asset backing that we can demonstrate the worth of our paper to the Administrators Committee, I would prefer to see all the gold and silver in our vaults, and nothing but paper and bronze in the marketplace.”

Caesar was lead into the triclinium, and immediately noticed that the arrangement was not the usual layout for a friendly chat. Gnaeus Priscus and Caius Marius were seated on their curile chairs in the centre, with the two Censors, Marcus Livius Drusus and Marcus Aurelius Cotta, seated either side of them. Pontius Pellius was out to the extreme left, with a gap between himself and the other four.

“Thank you for making yourself available to us, Caius Julius,” Drusus started the interview speaking in a mild tone. “I will be the chairman for this discussion, by reason of being a current Censor and the most senior in terms of Consulships. Marcus Aurelius is here as my colleague in the office of Censor, and also by virtue of being Consul when you were first requested to report back to Rome.

“Pontius is here as the other Consul who first requested you to return, and obviously Gnaeus and Caius as the current Consuls and the prime movers in your most recent recall.” Drusus shifted slightly on his curile chair. “Are there any others whom you think should be here? And if so, for what reason?”

“If the reason for this interview is for me to report, as outlined in the two letters you refer to, then I see why Caius, Marcus, Gnaeus and Pontius are here,” Caesar replied evenly. “But I do not see why you should involve yourself, Marcus Livius.”

“I am here because the other four have asked me, as the Senior Censor, to chair this meeting, rather than one of them,” Drusus replied in a tone that showed he would take no nonsense. “Do you see any reason why any others should be here with us?” Drusus repeated the original question.

“Thank you for clarifying that point, Marcus Livius,” Caesar tried to retreat graciously. “I see no need to include others in hearing my report.”

“Thank you,” Drusus smiled formally. “Now, if you would please walk us through your major decisions and actions since first becoming aware of any threat of hostile actions by the Celtic tribes outside the borders of Transalpine Gaul...?”

Caesar took a moment to pull his thoughts together. “There was considerable resentment in Gaul when I became Governor, principally due to the extortions of my predecessor. I had learnt Gaulish, and because of this I was held in some respect by certain nobles. Through them, I heard of a plot by the Aedui, Helvetii and Sequani to attack the Province, calling all Celts to fight with them.

“I mentioned these rumours to Pellixus, a member of the Allobroges within Transalpine Gaul, and warned him that the attack could come through his territory. I asked him if the Allobroges, who had been particularly badly treated Fimbria, would fight with the Republic, or turn against it. He suggested that I should not allow them the choice, but should instead use purely Republic forces to nip this in the bud; otherwise the Allobroges just might turn against us, such was their residual resentment towards Rome.

“So I struck at the Aedui pre-emptively. At the time I thought this would be sufficient to kill all talk of an attack. But I am sorry to say that I had misjudged the situation. The rapid submission of the Aedui was designed to make them appear the injured party; and the Senones, who bordered the Aedui and have long resented Rome, agitated even more vigorously. I had no choice but to put out that fire before it spread.

“Then I heard that at last the Senate was taking my warnings seriously, and sending Lucius Glaucia to assess the situation; and hopefully intimidate the rebels back into line. You cannot imagine how shocked, how appalled I was when I heard about his assassination! I swore there and then that the men responsible for his death would be punished. When I went to his camp, I was told who these men were. As of that day, to my mind, Orgetorix of the Helvetii, Dumnorix of the Aedui, Casticus of the Sequani, Porux of the Lingones, and Gobanitio of the Arverni were as good as dead.

“So I addressed the men, and started planning reprisals against the tribes guilty of Lucius’ murder, starting with the Aedui and Arverni. I subjugated them and executed Dumnorix and Gobanitio. While there, I toured the other tribes in the west, inviting them to become part of the Roman world and leaving small garrisons as a liaison between them and me.

“Then I sent an ultimatum to the Lingones. They responded to a banner of truce by slaughtering my men! This re-ignited the conspiracy; the other tribes recognised in Porux a man who would be ruthless towards us; and therefore no less ruthless to them if they did not make a show of support. All of my garrisons in the west were annihilated by their hosts, out of fear of Porux if they remained

faithful to the Republic. But winter was almost upon us. There was not enough time to properly subdue Porux, but I had to show that the Republic would not be treated like that with impunity. So I devastated as much of the rebellious countryside as I could before the winter closed in. I have already planned my next campaign, but Gnaeus arrived with new orders before I could move.”

Caesar halted, apparently finished his summary.

“Thank you, Caius Julius. That was a very lucid and well-organised summary,” Drusus said. “Now, if we may ask you to expand on a few points in more detail... Did your forces suffer any casualties before leaving Massalia?”

“Yes; I lost sixty of my best cavalry in a police action, intended to capture or destroy a local brigand.”

“Did you indeed capture or destroy this brigand?” Drusus pressed.

“I have reason to believe he escaped,” Caesar confessed. “I am told that the bodies of some of my men, including their commander, had been dumped by a road remote from his lair, probably to warn me to not pursue him any further.”

“Did you pursue him further?”

“No. I expected he would have left anyway, but I had other priorities after the death of Lucius, which happened at the same time.”

“What is the name of this brigand, please?”

“He is known as 'Petix', but I am not convinced that this is his real name.”

“And what was the name of the cavalry commander you lost?”

“Caius Fabius. He was an excellent man, well experienced and admired by all.”

“Admired by all, Caius Julius? What did his previous commander think of him?”

“Caius Flavius Fimbria, my predecessor, regarded him as his 'special missions' man, and even gave him a personalised dagger as a show of appreciation.”

“Tell me, Caius Julius; who were your sources for all this information about the Celts conspiring?”

“Pellixus of the Allobroges was of some help, but my main source was Haramix of the Arverni.” Caesar responded.

“Why would one of the Arverni provide you with secret information? You say yourself that they were discontented.”

“I can only guess at his motives, but it seemed to me that he was worried about the discontent you mention. He knew that if it came to war, the Republic would triumph. He did not want to die, or have his children enslaved.”

“Were there any other sources?” Drusus pressed.

“From time to time I received anonymous notes. These seemed to be from two different men, judging by the writing. One of these sources delivered letters to my office under a seal I did not recognise, but always written in good Latin. Most of the information from this source seemed to involve the Aedui, so I presume he came from that tribe. The other source used a variety of lower-class men to deliver notes to my retinue as I went walking. These seemed to centre on information about the Helvetii.”

"You did not try to trace the identity of these men?"

"No. I thought that if I did, they would avoid further contact. I did not want the flow of information to dry up."

"So how did you know their information was reliable?"

"Because what was said in one source was complementary to others, and also supported by or consistent with information from Pellixus and Haramix."

"Going back to your first strike against the Aedui," Drusus asked, "You say they submitted rapidly. In fact, did they put up any resistance at all?"

"Protests, but no armed resistance."

"Were they well prepared for war?"

"By the time I arrived with my infantry, they had concealed all preparations for war."

"How well had these preparations been concealed?"

"Very well concealed indeed. In the time available I could find nothing. It was my guess at the time that they had sent all their materiel to the Senones or Lingones."

"Then you marched on the Senones, if I recall correctly?"

"Yes. I wrote back to the Senate to report that."

"In fact, you virtually annihilated them, and devastated their land," Drusus continued.

"Yes," Caesar agreed.

"How strongly did they resist you?"

"They were completely surprised. They had no opportunity to resist."

"Did you find any substantial preparations for war as you went around their oppida and villages?"

"Again, they had been very cunning in concealing their intentions," Caesar explained. "I found no more weaponry that might have seemed reasonable."

"Did you find any of the Aedui materiel?"

"No; that must be with the Lingones, even to this day."

"So the Senones were taken totally by surprise, so much so that they were unable to even take up weapons; but still managed to find time to conceal these weapons that they had been unable to pick up?" Drusus asked skeptically.

"I would suggest, Marcus Livius, that they had concealed their preparations for a long time, and it was this very concealment that limited their ability to respond quickly," Caesar replied with a tinge of sarcasm.

"You mentioned the sixty cavalry you lost in a police action," Drusus worked through the story. "When did this happen, and how many men were in the total force you sent?"

"This action was in the few days immediately before the murder of Lucius. It involved a full cavalry century," Caesar replied. "Eighty men."

"You said sixty of these were lost. Did the survivors return in good condition?"

"Yes; they had been detailed to guard the horses, instead of being involved in the attack."

"Where are they now?"

"They are dead," Caesar answered flatly. "They were among the men killed by Porux, when I sent them to parley. Treacherous bastard!"

"Moving on," Drusus said, "After the murder of Lucius Glauca, you moved against the Aedui again, and then the Arverni. Why did you do that?"

"Because Dumnorix of the Aedui and Gobanitio of the Arverni were two of the principal members in the conspiracy to murder Lucius."

"Did the Aedui resist you?"

"No. They tried to behave as though nothing was out of the ordinary."

"And Dumnorix, their leader. Did he surrender to you quietly, or did you have to search for him?"

"Dumnorix was so brazen it took my breath away!" Caesar replied. "He even had the balls to come out to welcome me and offer his arm!"

"And you arrested him."

"Yes I arrested him. He kept up the pretence; he acted as though this came as a surprise to him, and even asked why. I told him he would find out in good time, but for the moment I just needed to ensure stability."

"You gave him no hint that he was going to be executed for conspiracy to murder?"

"Of course not!" Caesar said scornfully.

"When you moved against the Arverni, how vigorously did they resist you?"

"They submitted," Caesar replied.

"Again I ask; what evidence did you find that would indicate advanced preparations for a revolt?"

"I did not stay to search," Caesar replied. "My sources told me that the western Celts were restless, so I immediately made a tour of the western lands and left garrisons in the main towns to keep an eye on things."

"You are telling me that you had good intelligence that the Arverni were plotting a rebellion, and in response you marched through their territory, executed their leader and also the leader of the Aedui in their main public square, and then left without even attempting to disarm them?" Drusus could not help but sound sceptical.

"Time was of the essence," Caesar replied. "I had to hose down the west before it ignited."

"Even at the risk, to use your analogy, of piling more fuel on the seat of the fire and then leaving it untended?"

"That was my judgement at the time," Caesar said solidly.

Drusus shrugged. "And after touring the west, you sent an ultimatum to Porux."

"Yes. He was one of the five chiefs responsible for the murder of Lucius Glauca."

"So you sent a hundred cavalry into the heart of territory you believed to be hostile and armed to the teeth, with a demand that their leader should surrender himself to you. And given the example you made of Gobanitio, this could only mean his execution."

“I confess that the submission of the Arverni and the western tribes had left me expecting this pattern would continue,” Caesar explained. “Porux proved me wrong, and in the most treacherous way possible.”

“Why did you send a hundred men, Caius Julius? Why not just a handful?”

“As an indication of my determination, Marcus Livius.”

“Then why not confront him with your full force?” Drusus countered.

“That would not have been logistically feasible.”

“Caius Julius, you have just marched eight legions all around southern and western Gaul. Why could you not march the six legions still with you a mere hundred miles to confront Porux, whom you had every reason to believe would be among the most defiant?”

“It was getting late in the year. I wanted as much time as I could gain to set up winter quarters.”

“Yet after hearing of Porux' response, you spent a further month and a half devastating his territory!”

“I had to be seen to respond firmly, or all of Gaul might have taken it as weakness.”

“I suggest to you that leaving isolated garrisons of eighty men or less scattered among tribes which you yourself say were simmering with resentment, and then feeding another hundred into the mouth of the lion himself, was as much weakness as anyone could ever show.”

“With respect, Censor, you are not known as a Military Man,” Caesar replied in almost a sneer.

“Nor are you, Caius, except in your own fevered imagination!” Cotta could not tolerate this discourtesy towards Drusus. “Why do you think Lucius was sent north last year? And why do you think Gnaeus and Quintus Poppaedius were sent this year?”

“Thank you for your support, uncle,” Caesar responded off-handedly. Cotta bit his tongue; this was why Drusus had been delegated the role of inquisitor, because he had a gift for keeping control.

“I repeat my suggestion, Caius Julius, and ask you to rebut it,” Drusus took up where he had been interrupted.

“The purpose of what you refer to as 'isolated garrisons' was to provide me with complete and up-to-date information on what was happening behind my back,” Caesar explained, as if to a dullard. “As soon as any garrison noticed any movement at all towards gathering men or weapons together, they were to report to me, and I would be able to send an appropriately-sized force to control the situation.”

“That might have been the plan, but that was not the result.”

“No, unfortunately; the response of the Lingones acted as a trigger for all to rise in unison,” Caesar admitted. “I did not have the forces to control so many different crises at once. Now that there are ten legions available, there will be no need to spread our forces so thin.”

Drusus looked to the other four men in his committee. Priscus nodded slightly.

“I put it to you, Caius Julius, that you have not been entirely accurate in your explanation and responses today,” Drusus said gravely. “I put it to you that you either had no informers, or if you did, that you had no reason to believe their gossip was accurate. No reason, that is, except that it was what you wanted to hear. I also put it to you that your behaviour over the last two years has been a carefully planned escalation of provocations, with a view to inciting a response from the Celts. Far from trying to avoid a war, you have been deliberately trying to cause one. I further put it to you that by leaving isolated centuries of your men all over western Gaul, instead the same two legions worth of men in a single defensible camp, you were dangling a bait that you hoped the Celts would rise to. In other words, you were sacrificing your men in order to provoke a war that would result in the deaths of yet more of your men.

“And I further put it to you that all of this has been done because you crave a reputation as a great Military Man.” Drusus paused. “How do you respond?”

“I deny these allegations as a fantasy,” Caesar answered as though through clenched teeth.

“So you had no doubt at all that the five Celtic nobles were responsible for the murder of Lucius Glaucia, and that your response was demanded by the circumstances?”

“That is correct.”

“Tell me; why were you so convinced that these five men were responsible?” Drusus asked. “What information did you have, apart from the representations of the five otherwise unknown Celts who appeared at the camp gate?”

“My informants confirmed that these five had been in the area of Massalia at the time, and were meeting together.”

“Which informants?”

“The two anonymous sources.” Caesar replied.

Drusus looked incredulous. “You mean, on the basis of messages from two men whom you have never seen, two men whose credibility could not be established; in fact, it might have been only one man, using two different channels to re-inforce his lies; on this basis you were prepared to go to war with all of Gaul?”

“Not only those two,” Caesar responded. “Haramix of the Arverni told me that Gobanitio had left the Arverni lands to go east, and he believed it was to meet some other leaders. This confirmed the two anonymous sources, but without the full detail.”

Drusus again looked to the other four. “Time for our first guest?”

They nodded, and Pellius rose and crossed to the doorway. “Eutyches; please ask lord Pollio to come to us.”

“Caius Julius, please meet Gaius Pollio.” Drusus introduced them. Caesar stood to offer his arm but Pollio did not approach, stopping just inside the doorway.

“Caius, please tell us what your mission was when you arrived in Gaul with Lucius Glaucia,” Drusus invited him with a smile.

“Yes, my lords.” Pollio was obviously anxious, in the company of so many of the great. “The General told me to ride with all haste to deliver a message to the leaders of the Helvetii, Sequani and Lingones. I was to invite them to a conference with lord Glaucia and other significant Celtic leaders. The idea was for the Celts to air their grievances, and the General would do all within his power to address them.”

“And how did these chiefs respond?” Drusus coaxed him to continue.

“Orgetorix, Casticus and Porux all agreed to attend the meeting with the General. They said they were pleased that he had arrived to talk peace, and urged him to restrain lord Caesar from any more aggression. They offered to host observers in their own lands, to show that they were not preparing for war.”

“And on what date did you meet these men, and where?” Drusus prompted.

“I met Orgetorix on the third day of May, in his own lands. I met Casticus on the sixth of May, in Vesontio, his native town. I then went on to meet Porux in his oppidum on the eleventh day of May.”

“And what did you do next?”

“I returned to Massalia to report to the General; but I was told the General had been killed.”

“Lucius Glaucia had indeed been killed, on the sixth of May,” Drusus agreed. “How long did it take you to reach Orgetorix after you passed through Massalia?”

“Six days, sir. I was under orders to make good time.”

“And after you left Porux in the far north, how long did it take you to return to Massalia?”

“The return trip took me seven days, sir.”

“So would it have been possible for Orgetorix to leave his homelands after meeting you on the third of May, and be in Massalia on the sixth?”

“No, sir. Not unless he had a horse that could fly.”

“And could Porux have been in Massalia on the sixth, and returned in time to meet you in the north on the eleventh?”

“I very much doubt anyone could make that journey in five days, no matter how good a horseman and how good a horse; and Porux is an older man, and very fat. I do not think it possible.”

“So could any of those three men you visited have been near Massalia on the sixth day of May?”

“I do not believe it would have been possible, sir.”

Drusus turned to Caesar. “Do you wish to ask any questions, Caius Julius?”

Caesar stared at the man, thinking furiously. “What did you do when you returned to Massalia?”

“I found the camp had been deserted, and was told that everyone had marched north on the ninth of May. My horse was sore from the long return ride, so I decided to let it rest for a few days before re-joining the army.”

“Then why did you not follow, and re-join? What are you doing here?” Caesar demanded.

“While I was resting my horse, Cassius Dolorus arrived back. He had been sent to the Arverni and Santones, and spoken to their leaders. One of them was Gobanitio, who was also supposed to have been one of the murderers. As we talked about our missions, we realised that these four men could not possibly have been involved, and that we could be going to war over a mistake. So Dolorus agreed that he would go after the army and report his and my findings to you, lord Caesar, while I should return to Rome and inform the Consuls.”

“No cavalryman named Dolorus ever reported to me!” Caesar asserted. What we have here is two deserters, one of whom disappeared. This man,” waving a hand contemptuously towards Pollio, “probably panicked, thinking he had been discovered, and made up this story as a cover.”

“That's interesting, Caius Julius,” Drusus remarked. “Desertions in the Republic Army are very rare, specially by men with a considerable balance of booty due to them, not to mention the retirement farm. Have you suffered many desertions?”

No, Marcus Livius. But remember that these two did not desert my army; they had never come under my authority, so I cannot be held responsible for them.”

“What other desertions have you suffered?” Drusus pressed. “Any at all?”

“Not that I can recall; and I am sure I would recall one if I had become aware of it,” Caesar boasted.

“Do you recall the name 'Marcus Parrius? I believe he was one of your senior officers.” Drusus prompted.

“Yes, he was the Prefect of the Camp. But he did not desert; he went on business to Narbo, and never returned. All his equipment and a good sum of money had been left in his quarters. I concluded that he had met with foul play or misadventure. An officer of that rank does not desert.”

“And what of Atius Callius?” Drusus continued.

“Was he the centurion that also disappeared? The same circumstances, the same time. I assumed he had gone with Parrius, as an assistant.”

Pellius broke in here. “Do we have any further questions for Gaius Pollio? If not, perhaps we should ask him to leave.”

Drusus looked inquiringly to Caesar.

“The testimony of a deserter has no credibility,” Caesar said dismissively.

“Then thank you for your time, Gaius; please return to your room,” Drusus said more graciously. Pellius went out of the room to ask for Parrius to be brought in.

Parrius entered shortly afterwards, and snapped to attention.

“Marcus, please stand easy,” Drusus invited him with a smile. “Now, I think we are all familiar with the story of how Lucius Glaucia left the camp, and the discovery of his body and those of his companions the next day. Could you please take up the story from that point?”

“Yes, sir. I sent word to the Governor immediately. He arrived soon after sunrise the next morning, was told the facts as we knew them at the time, and then he ordered me to call an assembly of the soldiers.

“He spoke very strongly to the assembly, rousing the men to avenge the General. Then he assumed command of the legions.”

Drusus broke in here. “But did you not tell him that the Senate had explicitly forbidden these legions to be put under the command of the Governor?”

“Yes, sir; I told him that immediately. He replied by threatening to have me executed for mutiny. Given that all four legion commanders had died with the General, a situation that the Senate could not have foreseen, I thought a case could be made that the closest Praetor would be the natural commander, so I yielded. If I acted wrongly in doing so, I will accept my punishment.”

“Go on, please,” Drusus prompted.

“Yes, sir. The Governor gave me orders, and then left for his own office with his own legions. When the wagons arrived back with the bodies late that day, there were ten bodies on board, not just the six we expected. The other four had been found in the bushes off to one side of the road. The Governor's aide was on hand, and recognised one of the unexpected bodies as the Governor's favoured cavalry officer. He had an engraved dagger to confirm his identity. Another was tentatively identified as from his century, according to the Governor's secretary who was there at the time.”

“Where were these extra bodies discovered?” Drusus asked.

“Just off the road, near the place where the General's body had been left.”

“And how had they died?”

“Stab wounds, sir. And they had apparently died at the same time as the General, more or less, from the condition of the corpses.”

“And was there any sign that they had died where you found them? Or had they died elsewhere, and their bodies dumped?”

“They were covered with blood, and the ground around them was blood-soaked. It was clear that they had died where we found them, not somewhere else.”

Caesar felt the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. Atius had told him these four bodies had been found near the road; but he had not bothered to tell him about these circumstances of the find!

“So if I may summarise, and please correct me if I am wrong,” Drusus was pulling the threads together, “These four men had died of stab wounds, in the same place as the General died, and had died at about the same time. But they had not been part of a guard for the General.”

“That is entirely correct, sir,” Parrius confirmed.

“Caius Julius; could you explain what your men were doing at the same place and time as the General was being murdered?” Drusus asked almost casually.

“No, Marcus Livius,” Caesar shook his head as if wondering. “At that time they were supposed to be attacking the brigand.”

“The other men in that century, who survived the attack on this brigand; where are they now?”

“They are all dead. They were among the men murdered by Porux.”

“Caius Julius; I put it to you that these men, or at least some of their number, were *not* attacking a brigand. Perhaps some of them were indeed taking part in what you call 'a police action', but I put it to you that at least a number of them were diverted to attack the General's party, and kill them.

“I further put it to you that they knew where and when the General would be passing, because you had hired those five Celts to masquerade as emissaries from the five Celtic leaders; which is why the bodies of those Celts were never found. Whether they got away clean, or whether one or more of them were killed by the General and his staff we might never know; but it seems that the six innocent officers managed to take their toll on at least Fabius and three of his men before they were overcome. And I put it to you that the only survivors from this century of your men were specifically chosen to be part of the bait you threw out to Porux, because you wanted the last witnesses to this assassination to be silenced, preferably by the notional enemy.

“And I suspect, though it cannot be proved with the information to hand at the moment, that you were also responsible for the disappearance of Cassius Dolorus as well, because he knew that Gobanitio was innocent of the murder of Lucius Glaucia.

“How do you respond, Caius Julius?” Drusus finished with an inviting countenance.

“This is absurd!” Caesar exclaimed. “This is a total fabrication, based on the excuse of a deserter! It cannot be sustained.”

“Not just a deserter, Caius Julius; we have others as well. And if we have need, we can recall from Gaul the work detail that found the bodies of your 'special missions' man at the ambush site. Plus any number of Celts who will tell us where their leaders were when Lucius died. We might even bring to Rome your supposed informers, Haramix and Pellixus; it will be interesting to hear what they claim to have told you!” Drusus paused a moment, then turned to his colleagues. “Which of you think that Caius Julius has explained to your satisfaction why he should not be brought to trial?” No-one moved.

“Then what do you say should happen?” Drusus continued. “You first, Pontius.”

“Trial for Treason, in that he ordered the murder of a proconsul in the course of his duties;” Pellius intoned flatly. “Trial for murder as a component of that treason; trial for a second count of Treason, in that he has attacked Friends and Allies of the Republic without due cause; and trial for gross incompetence, even if his own explanation is accepted at face value.”

“Caius Marius?”

Marius looked dismayed; he had no doubt that his cousin was guilty. “I cannot deny what Pontius says.”

“Gnaeus?” Drusus asked.

“All the above, but I would add a third count of Treason for lying to the Senate in his Reports,” Priscus said with venom.

“Marcus Aurelius? What say you about your nephew?”

Cotta was simply disgusted. “I have never heard of such turpitude! It is the worst type of impiety, the worst conceivable abomination! I would feel nothing but shame for the world to know that such a man could be my nephew, and nothing but joy and relief to be seen to be the first to disown him forever!”

Drusus looked back to Caesar. “Caius Julius, please do us all a favour. Please do yourself a favour. Go home and fall on your own sword. We will report our recommendations to the Senate in two days' time.”

“This is outrageous!” Caesar protested. “Who do you think you are, to...” his protest was interrupted by the most enormous backhand from Cotta.

“Who do we think we are?” Cotta shouted back at him. “We are five Consulars of the Republic, including two Censors! And who do you think you are, you puddle of dog vomit? Oh, that's right! You are Caius Julius Caesar, and you are destined for great things!” Cotta scowled. “Well, keep out of my sight in public, or I will mock you so much that the lowest of all the whores in Rome will feel free to spit on you. And be assured you will not be allowed in my sight in private!”

As soon as Cotta had turned away, Priscus spat in Caesar's face. “I served with Lucius. He was not only a brilliant general; he was one of the noblest men I have ever met. To think he was murdered by the likes of you!”

Next in line was Pellius. “I was in Rome when Pompeius slaughtered the Chief Augur and the leaders of the Tribal Comitia, raising a revolt against the Republic. Had I been in Ancona, I would have been one of his victims too. But in the afterlife, Pompeius should be entitled to wipe his arse with your face.”

Caius Marius had already left the room. Only Drusus was left. “I think it is time for me to fulfil my last duty as a host towards a guest, and accompany you to the door,” Drusus said with a gentle smile and complete courtesy. “After that, I hope I manage to get to the latrine before I vomit.” He stood and gestured with his left hand. “This way, please.”

Carro had made good time for the first two days, but by the third day the pace was starting to tell, and the country was getting rougher. At the end of the fourth day he was entering Arverni country, and there was a late flurry of snow. Combined with the poor road, his pace dropped to less than a third of normal marching. On the fifth day he discovered that the Arverni had not been wasting time over the winter. His advance scouts reported trees had been felled across the roads, taking valuable time to clear them for the supply train.

Then came the first of the ambush attacks. Carro's men were marching under pack, which meant that their body armour was worn, but their shields,

javelins and gladii were strapped to their backs. Bands of Arverni would wait in concealment for the mounted scouts to pass, and then break out to attack the infantry three or four miles behind the head of the march. After cutting to pieces a couple of hundred surprised infantry, they would run into the forest. Cavalry sent to chase them were not well suited to such uneven and heavily-timbered country, and were ineffective. Sometimes they even ran into a secondary ambush.

Reluctantly, Carro ordered men to march in full fighting equipment. This was not only slow and exhausting; it meant that much of the supply train had to be dedicated to carrying packs. Supplies and equipment had to be left behind to make room, and all but the most essential tools. Thereafter, the ambushes tended to concentrate on the animals carrying their supplies and equipment. Soon they were left without any supplies except what could be carried on the back of a fully battle-ready soldier. This amounted to a couple of day's ration, and water whenever they could find it.

Late on the ninth day of the march, a report came from the back of the column, strung out along eight miles a track. "Sir, There are Republic cavalry at our rear, commanded by General Silo. He demands that we turn back."

"Silo?" Carro asked again in his confusion. "General Silo retired years ago. What is he doing in the middle of Gaul?"

"Ordering you to turn around, sir," the courier replied, unaware of how impertinent he sounded.

Carro called to the leading centurions "Right, men! Stop here! Set camp for the night! Set pickets to both sides!" and then pulled his horse around to ride back to the rear.

It was almost half an hour later when he finally met Silo riding up his column of infantry to find him.

"General! What are you doing out here! There are ambushes everywhere!"

"Yes; I've seen what they have been doing to you," Silo said drily. "Have you turned your men around yet?"

"My orders from the Governor are to make all haste to the Arverni, and subdue them before they can organise against us," Carro explained.

"Then you are too late, legate; they are already organised better than you are."

"Well, I have my orders, sir. And the Governor does not like it if his orders are not followed to the letter."

"You are Marcus Carro, I gather?" Silo asked.

"Yes, sir. Sorry to not identify myself, sir."

"Well, Marcus; if you had been one of my legates during the wars in the east, I would have sent you back to Rome. Everything I look for in a subordinate commander, you lack. You have no imagination, you have no skill, and you have no confidence in your own judgement. At least the third is well-founded, because you have no judgement.

"If you have men's lives entrusted to you, then you have to know when to follow the letter of the orders, when to follow their spirit but not the letter, and

when to think only of the objective and achieve that by other means. And if the circumstances are such that you conclude the Commander simply got it wrong, then you face up to reality. I never gave a subordinate an independent mission unless I was first convinced that he would ignore my orders if he felt they were wrong! I even *trained* them to ignore orders if that was what the situation on the ground demanded. That was what made Lucius Glaucia such a good general; and why you need to completely re-think your approach if you want to be one.

"But back to the present; it is obvious that the assumptions underlying your orders are wrong; therefore your orders are wrong; therefore, you should not follow them. Let's save the lives of your men, instead of wasting them."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

The spirits of the men lifted the next morning when they were ordered to about-face. What had become an interminable march into an exhausting, hungry exercise in fatal futility suddenly became tinged with some hope that they might survive after all. And assuming the enemy were preparing more ambushes ahead, that would mean there would be none behind them.

And so it proved. The raggedy column was unmolested for the whole day, until two hours before sunset they came to a single Celt standing in the track ahead of them. Silo ordered a halt, dismounted, and walked forward to speak with him.

"Our leaders are divided in their opinions, Roman," the warrior said in good Latin. "Should we destroy a broken enemy as they retreat, or should we be merciful to demonstrate our desire for peace?"

"Both opinions are sound ones, my friend," Silo answered. "The correct choice depends on what manner of enemy you confront."

"Then tell me, Roman; what manner of enemy do we confront?"

"Caesar has been stripped of authority and recalled to Rome to face trial. But he had left orders for this force to attack you at the earliest opportunity, and I have travelled as swiftly as I could to catch up before it could do you any harm. Be assured you confront a Republic that regrets the damage that has been done in its name by a madman, and seeks to make amends."

"And who are you, to make this promise?"

"My name is Quintus Poppaedius Silo." Silo saw the man's eyes widen momentarily.

"I mean no offence, Roman; but I am not sure I believe you. General Silo retired years ago, so why is he running messages in the middle of Gaul? A younger man could do that."

"I take no offence, friend," Silo smiled. "But the Republic is of the opinion that Caesar's madness has done so much damage that we must send our best to make good the damage. That was why Lucius Glaucia was sent last year, only to be murdered by Caesar himself and made to look like he had been killed by Celts." Then his smile widened even more. "This year, they decided to send someone older, and therefore more expendable."

The warrior met Silo's smile with one of his own. "I like you, Roman. For the moment, I am prepared to believe you are indeed the famous Silo. If you

would care to come with me, I can guarantee that your men will not be molested as they leave.”

“If I might tell my men to continue back to the Province, and that I go with you of my own accord....?”

“Yes,” the warrior answered.

Silo did not even walk back to his men. He just turned on the spot and called “Carro!”

“Yes, sir?”

“We have peace! Take the men home to Massalia, and do no harm as you go about it. I'm off to talks, and I'll be back in my own good time.”

“Yes, sir. May we camp at the next suitable site?”

“Yes, but do no harm,” Silo turned back to the warrior. “Please lead the way.”

“Do you not want to retrieve your horse?” the Celt asked.

“But you are on foot, why should I ride?”

“I have a horse nearby; please retrieve your own,” the Celt urged.

Silo walked back and took the reins of his horse, and then walked it back to the warrior. “Let's go.”

The two men walked about a hundred paces off the road to find a group of mounted men with a spare horse. The Celt swung himself up into the saddle. “By the way, my name is Celtillus. Our camp is a few miles to the south-west; we should be there before dark.”

Caesar sat in the office in his house, strangely calm. He could even appreciate the cunning of Petix. False evidence, to make me look like I'm guilty of a crime I actually did commit! The irony of it was rich.

But underneath that calm was a howling rage against the Aurelii. His mother, daring to mock him in his own house; uncle Gaius, sheltering her and threatening to hold him up to ridicule, and now uncle Marcus eager to shun him publicly. They will pay for that! He swore to himself. Caius Julius Caesar is not your common man! He will not fall on his sword in the face of adversity, like that insipid Drusus suggested. No! Caius Julius Caesar took such difficulties head-on, and overcame them! Just like when he had been made Jupiter's high priest by Mad Marius, to stop him from having a military career. He overcame the impossible there; he would do it again!

But it would be even more difficult this time. Too many people knew! Well, all was not lost yet. He could rely on Carro killing off Haramix, so that remained a credible source of intelligence that could not be disproved. He felt his enemies would have trouble proving that the ‘Celtic Conspiracy’ was entirely a fabrication. And as for Glaucia's death; there would be no difficulty proving that there had been an assault on Petix' hideout, and drawing the conclusion that the Celt had taken the opportunity to plant Fabius at the assassination site to implicate him; there was no need to say any more.

Yes, there was every chance he would see off this threat, so long as he held his nerve. Then he would see to his Aurelian uncles, and that upstart Italian Pellius who had dared to spit on him. Yes, and Parrius as well!

The Senate naturally adopted the unanimous recommendation of the five interviewers. A court was formed headed by Flaccus, the Head of Senate, with six other prominent consulars as the jury. These were Lucius Porcius Cato and Gnaeus Octavius from the Boni, Titus Lafrenius and Gaius Papius Mutilus from the Italianists, and Gaius Aurelius Cotta and Gnaeus Papirius Carbo from the Populares. The trial was set to start on the Ides of Quinctilis, to provide time for witnesses from Gaul to be summoned. Caesar was told to write a list of witnesses he wanted by then. But he was not permitted to personally approach any of the court, nor any prosecution witnesses; there was to be no opportunity for intimidation.

"Atticus!" he bellowed for his Master of House. The slave appeared promptly; it was always a wise move to obey instantly, and Atticus made a point of never putting himself in a situation that would inhibit an immediate response. He lived in dread of a summons while taking a toilet break. "Send for Marcus Tullius Cicero. I have need of his services," Caesar ordered. Atticus withdrew to send a runner. Caesar took a sheet of paper and wrote a heading. 'Witnesses required by Caius Julius Caesar'. And then, under it, the following names; Haramix of the Arverni, his nominal source of intelligence, and Atius Farrius, his secretary in Transalpine Gaul. Haramix would be dead soon enough, killed by Carro; so how unfortunate that he would not be able to confirm his story! But at least it would create the impression that Caesar did indeed have the informant he claimed, but tragically silenced by death. And Atius knew only what Caesar had told him, so he would be of no help to the prosecution. His mere presence and parroting of what Caesar had put in his mind would add the illusion of depth to Caesar's own story.

Much to even Caesar's surprise, Cicero's reply came back promptly. Cicero would call by in an hour.

"Thank you, Marcus Tullius, for attending to my request so promptly," Caesar stood and smiled to greet the guest being led into his triclinium.

"Not at all, Caius Julius," Cicero smiled and held out his arm in return. "Am I right in guessing that this has to do with the trial you are facing?"

"Yes, sadly," Caesar took the offered arm for a moment, released it, and gestured for Cicero to sit.

"I fear this will be a very difficult case, Caius Julius, even though I have not seen any evidence or heard any witness statements. Just to be charged with the assassination of a consular going about his duty is itself highly prejudicial; but a victim of the repute of Lucius Glaucia, and to have those charges backed by five consulars, two of them Censors and three of them your own kin..." Cicero shook his head as he left the sentence unfinished.

"Indeed," Caesar agreed. "That is why I ask for your help. You had the courage to defend Sextus Roscius all those years ago against a charge of parricide,

an allegation no less scandalous; and you are a better man now than you were even then.”

“Thank you for those kind words, Caius Julius; now if you could please walk me through the events as they actually happened, and then explain how these facts have been woven into a charge against you?”

Caesar started his account, and then explained how these events, combined with the accusations that had been presented by Gaius Pollio and Marcus Parrius, had been shaped to support these charges.

“I must say, Caius Julius, how well-organised and lucid your account is!” Cicero beamed. “Very few can tell a narrative so clearly, without backtracking or explanation. But now, you must tell me how you expect this explanation of events can be overthrown. What can they say to replace it? What can you bring to bear that will show their version is false?”

“I will call for Celtic witnesses who will confirm that they were informing me of conspiracies by the relevant tribes. I will call Atius, my secretary, to confirm that there was a Celtic informer in my office immediately before I rode out to give Fabius his orders to strike the bandit nest. And I will point out what is obvious to all; that there is no connection between me and the ambush site; other than the bodies of my soldiers, deliberately planted there as false evidence.”

“But what about the testimony of Pollio, who says the Celtic leaders were no-where near Massalia at the time of the ambush?” Cicero pressed.

“Well, they wouldn't be, would they?” Caesar countered. “They planned this ambush, so naturally they would place themselves as far away from it as possible!”

“And another point, Caius Julius; how did this bandit know about Glaucia's death, to plant your men there? It was not public knowledge at that time.” Cicero frowned. “You are asking the court to believe that you were getting secret information from Celtic informers; yet not one of them warned you of an assassination attempt on Lucius Glaucia, being organised by five different tribes spread across the full width of Gaul?” Cicero shrugged. “If not one of your informers gave warning of this, then how reliable is the rest of their information? Indeed, I have heard that you told the interview committee that more than one informer told you some of these chiefs were in the region of Massalia, which we know to be false from the testimony of Pollio!”

“There is an expression, 'the fog of war'. Any little slivers of knowledge are to be snatched at eagerly; but there is always much that is unknown until too late,” Caesar explained.

Cicero nodded, but did not look as if this would convince a court. “Then we have your own actions. You have made it very easy for your enemies to show these in a poor light. They will argue, and I think convincingly, that you deliberately used greater and greater force against tribes which offered you no resistance, as if actively trying to provoke some resistance; and that after the execution Dumnorix and Gobanitio without a proper trial, and then asking for a third alleged assassin to turn himself over to your custody, you really gave the Porux no option but to resist, whether he was guilty or not.”

Caesar nodded. "Yes, that was a mis-judgement. But I was zealous to show that the murder of Lucius Glaucia would not go unpunished."

"Unpunished is one thing, Caius Julius; but to execute a Friend and Ally without due process is itself a crime, one which you are as good as confessing to in your account. Surely you should know that! You were in the Senate when even the consular Quintus Sertorius was refused the right to set Republic foreign policy, but was instead put under the authority of the Eastern Proconsul. Yet you, a mere first-time Praetor, dared to act unilaterally!"

"We were at war; war suspends due process." Caesar explained.

"You were not at war with the Aedui or the Arverni when Dumnorix and Gobanitio were executed; those tribes had already submitted to you and the accused had surrendered themselves into your custody." Cicero held him in a gaze for a moment. "So tell me, Caius Julius; why did you execute those two men out of hand, if not to provoke exactly the reaction that any intelligent person would have seen as inevitable? I'm sure it is not because you are unintelligent yourself!"

"Success in war is not just about winning battles; it is just as much about instilling such fear in your enemies that they submit without a battle, or break as soon as battle is joined."

"Well, I am no Military Man myself, so I will take your word for that," Cicero slid over the top of that assertion. "But if that is true, then surely you also recognise the corollary of that; an enemy that sees capitulation as leading to certain death will not capitulate; he will fight to the death, whatever the chances, because he has no other option. And you deliberately backed Porux into such a corner." Cicero sighed and shook his head. "Every time you try to explain yourself, you only cast more doubt upon your competence if you are telling the truth, and your actual motives if you are lying. Remember, one of the charges against you is gross incompetence, so you are boxed in on all sides, and you are digging your grave with your own tongue."

Cicero put his fingertips together as he waited for a reply, but Caesar remained silent. "Finally, we have your most unusual tactic of leaving garrisons of one century each in a hundred different towns, all through the territories of tribes you have humiliated and intimidated. Instead of stationing those two legions in a single central location, in which they could defend themselves if attacked, and from which they could launch punitive raids if the need arose, you left them out like baits for wolves. How will you justify that?"

"Those tribes appeared submissive," Caesar replied. "Those men were not there to enforce submission, but to prevent banditry and gain intelligence."

Cicero stood. "When I defended Sextus Roscius, I did not think for a minute that he was one of the towering intellects of his generation. In fact, he was rather naïve. But he told me the truth. You, on the other hand, are too clever by half, Caius Julius, and a liar as well. I cannot defend a client who lies to me. So if you will excuse me now?"

Caesar pressed his lips together in annoyance. "It is unwise to make an enemy of me, Marcus Tullius," he said ominously.

"It is unwise to make an enemy of anyone, Caius Julius," Cicero replied evenly. "That is why, when an acknowledged expert offers me his advice for free, I do not make silly threats just because he tells me what I would prefer not to hear." Cicero turned and walked to the doorway before turning to speak again. "Because you do not have the courtesy to show me to your door when I asked to be excused, I will need to find my own way out," and then walked to the street door.

Caesar fought down the rage that welled up in his chest and throat. That arrogant bastard! Yet even so, he recognised that Cicero's critique of his story had been astute. If the prosecution took that same line, he would be lost. So, what to do?

There was no way Caesar would run for a self-imposed exile; were he to do that, then he would never be able to achieve the great status which he was destined to reach. He had to face this trial, and come out the other end vindicated. Then he was struck by a most amazing plan. He rushed to his office, quickly scratched out a letter, and then sat back to read it to himself calmly. An hour later, he wrote out a second draft, this time in a fairer hand, and studied it again more carefully than any Augur had ever studied a bird's entrails. A few adjustments to the wording followed, to give a smoother cadence to the phrasing, and then a final draft was written laboriously in immaculate handwriting. By this time it was dusking and the house was making itself ready for the evening meal. Caesar joined his daughter Julia at the table as the slaves waited upon them.

Caesar had loved few people in his life. Certainly not his absentee father. He had respected, feared and resented his mother as he grew up. He had few friends, none of them close. But he had loved Cinnilla despite the fact that she had been forced upon him by his uncle Mad Marius. And he loved Julia, their only surviving child, even if she were a daughter rather than a son. But tonight he looked at his eleven-year-old with new eyes.

"Is there something wrong, father?" she asked at length. "Do you not like my hair?"

"There is nothing wrong, my darling," Caesar answered with a smile. "I like your hair gathered up like that; it just made me realise that you are growing up so fast. Before I left for Gaul you were a pretty child, but now you are becoming a beautiful woman."

Julia beamed at this praise. Caesar was always very sparing with compliments.

"You are beautiful, and you are descended from both the Julii and the Aurelii. What more could any man want in a wife?" Caesar asked rhetorically, and then gave a deep sigh. "Yet, if these swine who persecute me have their way, you will be a penniless orphan soon enough, with disgrace hanging over your name. We must act immediately."

"What must we do immediately, father?" Julia was worried about her father's anxious manner.

"We must find a husband for you," Caesar explained, "and for you, only the best is acceptable."

"Father, I am only eleven years old!" Julia protested playfully.

"Your mother was only ten when she married me," Caesar pointed out.

"But who would want to marry an eleven-year-old?" Julia answered, still smiling at this grown-up game her father was playing with her.

"Not *any* eleven-year-old," Caesar protested. "We are talking about you, the most beautiful woman in Rome, and of the best breeding. Only a fool would *not* want to marry you now, before some-one else claims you." Caesar paused. "What sort of husband would you want?" he asked.

Julia rolled her eyes up and put her hand to her chin as she thought about this new idea.

"Well, I have always wanted my husband to be noble and famous, of course," she answered at length. "And of course, he would have to be important and well-respected; at least a Praetor, and maybe Consul one day."

"Only Consul?" Caesar said in mock-horror. "Why not Censor?"

"Oh, Father!" Julia giggled.

"No, my darling," Caesar said earnestly. "I am serious. For a woman like you, only the best is good enough. I intend to marry you to a man who has twice been Consul, has served as Censor, is now the High Priest of Mars, and also the Head of the Senate. But if we do not arrange that soon, then after my trial you might not be able to find anyone of suitable status, despite all your good breeding and beauty."

Julia suddenly realised that this was no longer a game her father was playing. "Oh!" she put her hands to her face. "You mean lord Flaccus! But he is so old!"

"He is over seventy years old," Caesar agreed, "which means he will probably be dead before you are old enough to go to his bed. But with the status you will gain from this marriage, you will be able to take your pick of your next husband."

Julia's eyes opened wide. "Do you mean that, father? That you will allow me to choose?"

"Yes, Julia; I promise you that. Whomever you choose as your second husband, I will approve," Caesar smiled and patted her hand. "But that will be a hollow choice if you do not have the status of lord Flaccus behind you."

"You are so good to me, father!" Julia gushed. "When will you introduce me to him?"

"It is not that easy, my darling," Caesar eased back. "The Senate has forbidden me to approach any of the panel in my trial, or any of the witnesses against me. So you will have to go to his house and introduce yourself. I will give you a letter for him."

"May I go tomorrow?" Julia asked eagerly.

Caesar smiled at her enthusiasm. "Yes, tomorrow would be good."

Flaccus was intrigued that a young girl, accompanied by the usual retinue of bodyguards but without an adult relative, would appear at his door.

"She is Julia Caesaris," the slave explained.

“Oh. Then admit her. Take her to the atrium, and ask young Marcus in from next door to come here, if he would be so kind. Then, when Marcus arrives, let me know.” Flaccus was very suspicious of this development. It would not be politically wise to send her away unheard, in case that dog's turd of her father later claims that he had unreasonably refused to listen to a reasonable request; but he also wanted a high-Class witness in case Caesar later accused him of any impropriety with his daughter.

It was almost half an hour later when Marcus, the twenty-year old son on his neighbour, came to the door.

“My apologies for the delay, Lucius Valerius; I was asleep after a late night last night, and had to make myself presentable.”

“Not at all! Thank you for your time, and my apologies for disturbing you.” Flaccus gestured towards the atrium, “Could you please join me, as a silent witness?”

The two men entered the atrium together. As they did so, Marcus was surprised to see a young girl rise from her seat to greet them. There was not another person in the room, other than a slave standing in attendance for her.

“Marcus, this is Julia Caesaris; Julia, this is Marcus Flavius,” Flaccus introduced the two to each other as a courtesy. “Please, Julia; take your seat.”

Julia was confused, but tried to show no doubt on her face. “I have a letter for you, lord Flaccus; but my father told me it was for your eyes only.”

“I would understand that to mean that he wanted you to deliver it personally, rather than relying on the door slave,” Flaccus answered. “Once it is in my hands, I would obviously be able to show it to whomever I choose.”

“Yes,” Julia agreed. “That would only be common sense.” She stood again and crossed the two paces to where Flaccus was sitting, and held out a folded sheet.

Flaccus took the sheet and looked at the seal. Yes, it was from the turd. He showed the seal to Marcus, who nodded his recognition, and then cracked it. He unfolded the sheet and read it carefully. By the time he finished the three short paragraphs he felt incredulous. He read the letter again, even more slowly, to make sure he had made no mistake. His incredulity was turning to a rage, which he warned himself to contain.

Then, a third reading, this time aloud, for the benefit of Marcus and Julia.

*“To Lucius Valerius Flaccus,
from Caius Julius Caesar,*

Greetings!

I must first apologise for my failure to relay to you my sympathies on the tragic passing of your wife, the esteemed Atia Cornelia. I can only plead that I was on duty in Gaul at the time, and pre-occupied, so I beg your forgiveness.

Being prevented from visiting you myself, I have asked my daughter Julia to deliver this letter to you. Otherwise I would most certainly have paid you the

honour and respect of approaching you in person. But unfortunately, this means of communication will need to suffice.

I present to you my only daughter Julia, and offer her to you as an intelligent, dutiful and worthy wife. I invite your response on all details pertaining to the wedding, such as dowry, timing and so forth. In all these matters you will find me most co-operative and eager to please you.

Flaccus handed the note to Marcus. "Here, read it yourself, to confirm I have read it correctly," he asked his guest and witness. He fell silent for another minute as Marcus read through the short letter for himself, and handed the sheet back to Flaccus.

"Julia, were you aware of the contents of that letter when you handed it to me?" Flaccus asked Julia.

"Yes, lord Flaccus," she answered confidently.

"Leaving aside your duty as a daughter, what are your personal thoughts on the proposal that we two should marry?"

"It would be an honour for me, one I would eagerly seize!" Julia said with a smile on her lips and a gleam in her eyes.

"But why? I am already in my seventies, and by the time you would be of child-bearing age I will be much too old to give you a child. I might well be as dead as that already!" he said with a wry grin.

Julia was intelligent enough to not seem eager for his early death. "My mother was married at an even younger age. And who is to say what the gods will decide in regard to either of us?" she replied.

Flaccus nodded. "Yes, you are an intelligent girl," he agreed. There was a pause in the conversation. Julia cautiously took the initiative.

"My father asked me to relay to you his desire for a prompt resolution," she ventured. "If at all possible, before the Ides of Quinctilis."

"Yes, I think I can understand the reason for that," Flaccus replied, the allusion to the trial date causing the anger to well up again in his chest. "Is there any more that needs to be said?"

"Only what you would require me to say, lord Flaccus," Julia said submissively.

"Then I should detain you no longer, young lady," Flaccus said as he stood. Marcus and Julia stood with him, and all three walked to the street door. Julia's retinue was assembled, and they left for home.

"Thank you for your time, Marcus; but I would be grateful if I could impose upon you to make a record, as complete as possible, of the conversation you just witnessed. I might need to call upon you in court," Flaccus asked as he farewelled his neighbour. He carefully folded the letter and filed it in his office.

Celtillus swung himself out of the saddle with an easy grace and handed the reins to an attendant. Silo followed his lead.

"In here, please, Quintus Poppaediis," Celtillus gestured towards a rough hut.

Before Silo could enter the hut a very large Celt walked out of it. "Greetings, General," he said with courtesy, if not friendliness.

"Greetings, lord Porux," Silo replied, offering his right arm. Porux looked at it with suspicion, but accepted it.

"You are a brave man, General," Porux commented. "I would not go alone and unarmed into a Roman camp."

"You have good reason not to trust Rome," Silo replied. "Our Governor Caesar has dealt treacherously with you. But I have no fear, because you have dealt honourably with us."

Porux gave another glance tinged with suspicion as he dropped his grip. "Please, come inside."

Silo stepped into the hut, and four men stood as he entered. Celtillus followed him in. "General, allow me to introduce Orgetorix of the Helvetii, Casticus of the Sequani, Diviciacus of the Aedui and Baiorix of the Santones. You have already met Porux of the Lingones, and I speak for the Arverni. We are perhaps the most influential tribes in Celtica, and are eager to ensure peace."

"It is good of you lords to make time to meet me," Silo returned.

"It will not have escaped your notice, General, that four of us have very good reason to feel very aggrieved," Celtillus continued. "Caesar has brutalised the Arverni, Lingones and Aedui, and humiliated the Santones. He has also slaughtered or enslaved all but a few survivors from the Senones, who are now taking refuge with the Lingones; so in that sense, Porux speaks for two tribes. The other two, namely the Helvetii and Sequani, have not been directly harmed yet, but Caesar has made clear his intention to destroy them and murder their leaders." Celtillus gazed at Silo, inviting a response.

"Which is all the more reason for me to appreciate the depth of your courtesy in meeting me here today," Silo responded.

"Well, General; Rome started this war," Porux said gruffly. "Why should we not finish it?"

"With respect, lord Porux, Rome did not start this war, but Caesar did." Silo put his hands on the table. "He did so against the wishes of the Senate of the Republic, and even as we speak he is in Rome awaiting trial for his crimes. Rome sent Lucius Glaucia to speak with you; you might recall the riders Lucius sent to all of the major Tribes, your own included, asking for a conference."

"Yes, I remember the cavalry officer," Orgetorix agreed. "And the next thing I know I am being accused of murdering your Consul! How could I have done that, when your own officers will tell you I was in my own Tribal lands at the time?"

"We are aware of that, lord Orgetorix," Silo acknowledged his point. "In fact, one of the charges Caesar is facing in Rome is that he killed Lucius Glaucia, and set it up to incriminate you. But we now have those cavalry officers you mentioned, and other witnesses as well, who will establish your innocence and Caesar's guilt."

"So what do you propose to do, General, to set things right again?" Porux asked.

"Above all, I propose to listen carefully to what you propose," Silo answered. "You are the injured parties here, so you have the right to make your claim."

This was an answer the Celts had not expected. They looked to each other. At last Diviciacus, a young druid, spoke. "What claim can bring back our dead? Or the dead of the Senones, Lingones and Arverni? And will you release from slavery those who have been taken unjustly?"

"We cannot bring back the dead, sir," Silo conceded. "But we are prepared to pay compensation to next of kin, to demonstrate our regret for what has happened. And we will release all slaves."

"The dead will stay dead," Porux said angrily, "the slaves who have been abused, mutilated, prostituted will not be made whole again, and there is no guarantee that the next Governor will not be another Caesar or Fimbria! We need more than promises, General! We need something that makes a repeat of this atrocity impossible!"

Silo waited a moment before responding, to allow the tension to subside. Then he spoke quietly.

"We propose that the tribes of Gaul be invited to place their spokesmen in Rome itself, so any improper acts by the next Governor can be reported directly to the Senate. This will greatly discourage anyone who might try to be another Fimbria, or another Caesar. This is not a perfectly just world we live in, lord Porux. When one nation goes to war against another, it is rarely for a good reason; it is almost always out of greed or vainglory, or sometimes simply out of a craving to avenge the atrocities committed in the war before that. I know that from my own experience! When Mithridates overran Asia, he did it not because we had done him wrong; he did it out of lust for gain. And the Greek cities that joined with him acted as they did because Rome had been brutal with them in the past. But look at me! I am the man who wrote the Miletus Decree! I am the man who put an end to the endless circle of hate and revenge in that place! I could not do that by bringing the dead back to life, or restoring fortunes that had been pillaged; but I did all within my power to make sure it could not happen again. I have even ordered the execution of my own soldiers for harming conquered peoples; behaviour which, until that time, had been considered the right of victors.

"So to answer your questions, my lords; I cannot undo all that has been done; but what I can undo, I will. But more important is that I can prevent it from happening again." Silo raised his hands to shoulder height before dropping them palm-down in the table. "I agree that this is not good enough! But it is as good as possible." Silo took a deep sigh. "The Republic, for all its virtues, is not perfect. Not all of our officers are honest or virtuous. Sometimes a monster like Caesar manages to fool us, and it takes longer than anyone would like to discover his duplicity and stop him. That is simply how things are.

"So remember as you discuss things among yourselves, my lords; if you cannot make with me a peace that will endure, then the Republic will send someone else instead, to solve the problem some other way. And that other way

might be a war that would make the Senones look like the lucky ones.” Silo looked around the table.

“Listing your grievances, while allowing you to get your rage off your chests, will not bring peace. It will only serve as an excuse for another war,” Silo continued. “So tell me what you want as your price for peace, and I will see what can be done.”

“You make your point very clearly, General,” Casticus commented. “Perhaps we six need to talk, now that we have heard your starting position.” The others around the table grunted their agreement. Silo stood.

“Thank you, my lords, for hearing me. I await your responses.” Silo turned and left the hut.

It had taken eight days of talking, some of it quite passionate, but at last Silo had a draft treaty that he felt he could take back to Rome with a reasonable hope of success. Each of the six Celt negotiators had a copy, signed by all seven of them, to take back to his own Tribe for endorsement. Silo took leave of the others, sensing a considerable reserve of goodwill and respect, and mounted his horse. Fifty Celtic warriors rode with him as an honour escort. He reached Lugdunum a couple of hours into the journey. That was the first clue he had to his actual whereabouts; he had been blindfolded when on his way to the site.

“Excellent!” he said to the commander of his escort. “I was afraid that I would be off in the wilds of the north-east, with a month of riding ahead of me!”

“Don’t let the Pictones hear you say that!” the commander replied with a smile. “They think that they live in the most beautiful part of the land!”

Silo smiled back. “Yes, I suppose everyone loves his own homeland.” And then, changing the subject, “How far will your men be going with me?”

“All the way to Massalia, General,” he replied. “Just in case there is another agent from Caesar lurking somewhere. We can’t afford you to be killed, like Glauca was.”

“A sobering thought,” Silo responded. “Perhaps I should make a few notes and spread them around, just in case.”

But the journey was uneventful and pleasant, Spring being in full flower once out of the higher country.

Gnaeus Priscus and a century of cavalry met him a day’s ride north of Massalia. Word of Silo’s approach had not preceded them by very much because of his escort being entirely mounted.

“Greetings, Gnaeus!” He shouted as he recognised Priscus.

“Hail, General!” Priscus responded. Even though he was now consul in his own right, he would never see Silo as anything other than his Commander. The Celtic honour guard was thanked, and then dismissed. The two consulars rode together in the centre of the Republic cavalry troop.

“Things went well, Gnaeus,” Silo offered. “I think we have an agreement that will avoid war.”

“Just to see you alive and well suggests that, sir. When Carro said you had gone off alone, I feared you would be made a hostage. He wanted to send out

legions to search for you, but I thought that would only ensure your death if they were hostile, and destroy your negotiations if they were genuine.”

“You did well, Gnaeus.” Silo said approvingly. “When we find a place to rest for the night I will explain everything to you.”

It was the first day of Quinctilis when word reached Caesar that Haramix of the Arverni had arrived in Rome. Caesar was devastated. Haramix was supposed to be dead, killed by Carro! An omission that must be corrected immediately, Caesar said to himself.

“Atticus!” The slave appeared almost instantly. “Get together a retinue; I am going to visit some old friends.”

Piso Decimus and Caesar had known each other since childhood, when they were raised in Subura. Caesar's mother Aurelia had owned an insula there, and Piso's father had been one of her tenants. Together with Piso and a half-dozen other boys, Caesar had grown up in the rough and tumble of this Fifth Class and Head Count district.

Caesar was glad to see that Piso was still operating as a bootmaker, out of the same shop that had been his father's when they were boys. “Hello, Piso!” he said cheerfully. Piso glanced up from his last, but took in only the quality of the clothing and the retinue. “Hello, my lord,” he said as he nailed in the tack he was working on, and then gave the noble his full attention. “What can I do for you, my lord?”

“It's me, Piso!” Caesar's polished grammar dropping away from his language in true Subura fashion. “Caius! Remember?”

Piso squinted as he stared at Caesar's face. “Well, bugger me!” he said at length, and then hastily added “Excuse me, my lord!”

Caesar laughed and slapped a hand on Piso's shoulder. “Piso, don't worry! We said worse in each other's hearing when we were boys! I'm just trying to catch up on a few old friends. Have you kept track of any of them?”

“A few of them, my lord. Marcus Ruf...”

“Please stop calling me ‘my lord!’” Caesar cried out. “What is wrong with ‘Caius’?”

“Ah, yes Caius,” Piso said uncomfortably. “Marcus Rufus went to Ostia to work as a storeman, and then to sea; Marcus Niger joined the legions, and he is still in Mesopotamia. Gnaeus is in the army too, I think he is in Thracia right now. Clodius got himself involved in the College, like his big brother. Atius started working with his father in the kitchens, and is still there. He has been running the shop since his father died about five years ago. And Lucius works in the tannery; I see a bit of him, he delivers my leather.” Piso screwed up his face as he thought to himself. “I've lost track of the others.”

“None dead out of eight?” Caesar said. “Not bad.”

“Yes, we have been lucky,” Piso agreed.

“I see you are still in your father's shop, Piso. How is the old man?”

“He died about twelve years ago, soon after you were made Jupiter’s High Priest. Beaten up and robbed, and left in the street all night. He never recovered.”

“Sorry to hear that, Piso,” Caesar responded sadly. “But for old time’s sake, I would like to have a meal with each of you all in turn and catch up. When are you free?”

“You are inviting me to your house for a meal?” Piso was stunned. A Fifth Class man being invited as guest into a Senator’s house?

“Yes, please come!” Caesar entreated. “Your wife and children, too,” Caesar added as he noticed a woman in the back of the shop look up in surprise.

Piso was still blinking in surprise. “Well, would tomorrow night suit you, lor... Caius?”

“Excellent!” Caesar said triumphantly. “Arrive whenever would be convenient, and after we have had our fill of food and stories I will have my men escort you home for safety after dark. I’ll see you tomorrow, Piso.” He waved a farewell as he turned away.

It had been a tedious night, Caesar thought to himself as his guests left with his retinue, but well worth it. Marcia, Piso’s wife, had obviously been terrified of committing some breach of etiquette and had been silent unless directly asked a question. Young Piso, about eight years old, had been reserved, obviously coached by his mother, but had been persuaded to call him ‘Uncle Caius’.

But Piso had been able to tell Caesar how to track down the others, especially the one man he truly wanted. He would get in touch with Clodius tomorrow; dinner with the others would still go ahead, to cover his tracks, but time was short for the main game.

Early next morning Caesar was once again in the Subura, sitting in a drinking house with six of his armed men. He gestured to the landlord, who immediately responded. One always makes sure guests from the higher Classes are pleased; the can become troublesome otherwise.

“Yes, my lord?” he asked obsequiously

“I have come back to try to meet up with an old childhood friend, and I am told you know him,” Caesar answered. “Clodius Calleus? He has, or at least, he had, an older brother named Sextus.”

“I think I recall the name, my lord.” The landlord said hesitantly, “but how would a noble of your obvious excellence know about such men?”

“I was raised in the Subura,” Caesar explained curtly. “You might have heard of me; my name is Caius Julius Caesar.”

“I am sorry, my lord; I had not recognised you,” the host said quickly. “I will see if I can find out how to find your friend Clodius.” He hurried out to the back of the house quickly. Once the door was safely closed, he turned to one of his serving girls.

“Go upstairs immediately; tell Sextus that Caius Julius Caesar is asking after him and Clodius!” He ordered in a hiss. The girl hurried up the flight and

knocked on a door, and then entered the room when invited. A few minutes later a man came out, still pulling on his clothing, and dawdled down the stairs.

"There is a Senator out there, Caus Julius Caesar, asking for Clodius. He says he is an old friend," the landlord explained. Sextus looked around the door, into the drinking-hall.

"Caius Julius Caesar, eh?" Calleus mused. "I know Clodius did have a high-born friend when he was a lad, and the name 'Caius' does ring a bell. I'll talk to him."

Calleus strolled out into the hall, and headed straight for Caesar's table. He sat uninvited. "Lord Caesar, I am Sextus Calleus. I believe you are looking for my brother."

"Indeed, Sextus," Caesar said in good humour, fighting down the immediate reaction to tell the man to stand until invited to sit. "I am chasing up a few old friends from my Subura days. I had dinner with Piso Decimus last night; what a delightful son he has! I would like to catch up with the others, and Clodius is the next on my list, if he is available."

"I will see if I can find him for you. Will you be able to stay here very long, or should I tell him to send a message to your house?"

"That is very kind of you, Sextus," Caesar smiled. "Would it be asking too much if you could find him within an hour? Otherwise, a message to my house would be good."

Calleus thought quickly to himself. Better to keep everything here, in the headquarters of his College, than to leave possibly incriminating messages in the house of a Senator. "I am confident that I will be able to find him soon, if you could please wait," Calleus smiled. "If not, I will come back myself to apologise."

"I am most grateful, Sextus," Caesar smiled.

It was not that hard to find Clodius; he was in the room next to that occupied by Sextus. But for the sake of appearances, the two brothers waited just over half an hour before re-appearing. Caesar stood and held out his right arm as Clodius entered the hall, and smiled as he greeted his old friend. "Clodius! You have not changed that much!"

Clodius took the arm offered. "'But you look every inch a Julius Caesar now, Caius!'" Clodius replied with a huge smile. "Not the scruffy, stringy-haired boy anymore!"

"Yes," Caesar said as if a confession, "I have had to tidy myself up just a bit since those days. Appearances are everything in the priesthood, as well as in politics."

"Anyway," Clodius went on as he and Caesar sat. "Sextus tells me that you are trying to catch up with the old gang. Are you getting nostalgic already? You are barely thirty!"

"Well, not just nostalgia. If I hope to make any headway as a Popularis politician, I need to keep in touch with the man in the street. The rich merchants are good for funding, but the heart and soul is here in Subura," Caesar explained.

“Or at least, that’s what I tell people; but the truth is that I had some good times here as a boy, better friends than any I have had since. I don’t want to lose that.”

Caesar leant forward onto his elbows. “So could I entice you to my house for an evening meal and a bit of a catch-up? If at all possible, tonight?” He smiled brightly. “Please, you come too, Sextus; and bring your families!”

“Why would you want me there, Caius Julius?” Sextus asked politely but guardedly. “I would only get in the way.”

“Oh, I am sure that we could find something to discuss, Sextus,” Caesar answered, looking straight at him.

Sextus paused a moment as everything dropped into place, and then nodded slowly. Clodius was no more than a convenient excuse, a cover for what this Senator really wanted. His aim was to find the head of a College that would be able to act discretely but decisively, even if not lawfully. Caesar was not the first man to have come to him to solve such a problem. “Yes, I suppose we might. Yes, we will be there tonight.”

The summons to Haramix had explicitly asked him to report to the Head of the Senate as a witness, and not as an accused. Haramix was not entirely confident that this was true; he suspected that Caesar had embroiled him as one of the so-called conspirators organising a Celtic rebellion, and this ‘witness’ story was no more than a cover to entice him out of the comparative safety of Celtica.

He wasted no time in reporting to Flaccus, with three other Arverni nobles to stand at his side if required. His greatest regret was that Celtillus had been needed at the negotiations, and could not be here with him. He gave his name to the slave on the door and waited.

The slave returned soon enough, and the heavy door swung inwards. “Please, lord Haramix; follow me,” the slave asked with a smile. He was conducted into an elegantly restrained triclinium. An old man in a toga stood to greet him with a smile and an outstretched right arm.

“I am Lucius Valerius Flaccus. Thank you for arriving in plenty of time, lord Haramix.”

Haramix took the outstretched arm and smiled in return. “It is an honour to be admitted into the house of the Head of Senate, lord Flaccus. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me.”

Flaccus gestured to the couch, and Haramix sat. “The hearings do not start until the Ides, lord Haramix. So I presume you have come to clarify what the procedure might be.”

“That is one aspect, lord Flaccus, but there are other questions that I would like to discuss with you,” Haramix took his cue. “It is my understanding that Caesar is under investigation at this time. Am I to be asked questions concerning that, or am I also under scrutiny myself? Is that the real reason why I have been invited to Rome?”

“Flaccus held his hands out from his sides for a moment and let them drop. “I know of no charge, not even an allegation, that is to be levelled against

you, lord Haramix. I know only that Caesar has listed you as a witness whom he wishes to call.”

Haramix hardened his face almost into a scowl. “What questions does that dog want to put to me? What accusation is he going to launch against me?”

Flaccus raised his eyebrows in surprise. “I cannot speak for what Caesar will do; but it was my understanding that he named you as one of his allies among the Tribes, and that you had assisted him by providing information.”

The surprise on Haramix' face was obvious, transforming quickly into annoyance. “Please, I do not wish to be considered an ally of that beast! And the only information I ever passed to him was what everyone else was telling him; that all of Gaul wants peace, but that if he pushed too far he would force them to take up arms.”

“So you did not warn him that the Celts were preparing for war?” Flaccus sought confirmation.

“I *did* warn him, as did every other noble in Gaul, that if he continued his aggression then the Celts would have no option other than armed resistance,” Haramix repeated. “But preparing to take the offensive against the Republic? There was no-one who wanted that. What we all wanted was for Caesar to leave us in peace.”

Flaccus was confused. “Then why would Caesar call you as a witness? His defence is that you and others were urging him to take pre-emptive action.”

“No!” Haramix denied strenuously. “The opposite was the case!”

“That doesn't explain why he has called for you,” Flaccus repeated. Then he recalled the letter Priscus has sent from Massalia, something about Caesar leaving orders for his second-in-command to march against the western Celts as soon as possible. “Tell me, lord Haramix; before you came to Rome, was there any indication that the Republic soldiers were going to mount further attacks?”

“Yes, lord Flaccus,” Haramix confirmed. “Five legions were marching against us Arverni when General Silo intervened and told them to go back to the Province.”

“And did you find out why they were marching against you?”

“I heard only rumours, so I do not know how accurate they were,” Haramix replied, “but I was told Caesar had left orders for all Arverni men to be slaughtered and all women and children to be enslaved. It is what he had done to the Senones, so I believe it.”

Flaccus nodded to himself. “I see,” he said softly. And then, to Haramix, “Lord Haramix, I urge you to rent a suitable house for yourself and your staff. Let it be known that you will not accept any callers, for any reason. And then, you should sneak out in disguise and stay somewhere safe, where no-one knows who you are, not even the slaves of your host.”

“Why should I do that?” Haramix asked.

“Because I think I know why Caesar asked for you as a witness, and then ordered his subordinates to kill all Arverni. He wanted it to appear that he did indeed have an informer, but unfortunately the informer had since died. If he

discovers that you are alive and in Rome, he will want you dead before you can be called to give testimony.”

Haramix stared at Flaccus. “I don't know if I can trust you, lord Flaccus; but I know I can't trust Caesar.”

Sertorius was furious. “What the fuck, Marcus! Let me see that letter!”

Tollianus handed over the latest letter from the Senate Committee charged with the supervision of the Colleges of Administrators.

To Marcus Tollianus, Chief Administrator of the Eastern Frontier, Quintus Sertorius, Governor of the Eastern Frontier, and Pontius Telesinus, Eastern Proconsul,

From Lucius Valerius Flaccus, Head of the Senate Committee for Colleges of Administrators,

Greetings, and congratulations for your achievements!

I write to you after Senate consideration of your reports. Your actions in quelling the threat to the Republic's interests posed by the former Indus kingdom have been widely hailed as brilliant, and so they were. An almost bloodless victory worthy of Quintus Poppaediud himself.

However, the reports from both Pontius and Marcus raised some questions in the Senate. These questions were referred to this Committee, with a request for us to comment on the strict legality of the allocation of the confiscated treasures from the hostile cities.

Our opinion was delivered to the Senate yesterday, and the Senate instructed me to write to you along the following lines. Firstly, the Senate agrees with Pontius. Demanding that a Proconsul of the Republic must enter on his knees and await the pleasure of some petty princeling before being permitted to stand is totally unacceptable. Pontius showed moderation and wisdom in advising the Palace official of this dishonour, and urging him to adopt a more respectful procedure; and when this advice was ignored, Pontius did well to enter on his feet and address the Prince with proper dignity, and offer the full 'Friend and Ally' status as a promotion from the former status of mere trading partner.

The Prince's response was totally unacceptable. His assertion that he would dictate the terms of our relationship, and that the Republic must be grateful for his patience, was a grave insult which could not be allowed to stand as a precedent. To submit to such abuse would harm the Republic permanently. We approve your actions in the face of so blatant a declaration of superiority, amounting in effect to a claim to being the overlord to the Republic. Pontius would have been remiss had he not taken decisive action.

Secondly, we admire and applaud the courage and skill displayed in taking the city of Minnagara. Those involved in the initial infiltration and seizure are to be awarded a Corona Muralis each, and Lucius Marius is highly commended for his planning, his leadership, and the effectiveness of his training.

Unfortunately the foreshadowed allocation of the booty from the conquered cities has been found to be not entirely consistent with the law. While you are correct in your assertion that only those cities which submitted at the earliest opportunity should be accorded the benefits of Miletus Status, and all valuables in conquered cities may be treated as spoils of war, yet those spoils should properly be divided between booty for the soldiers involved, and property of the Republic. This treasure should not be retained by you and applied for provincial purposes. Although we can understand how you might sometimes feel as though you are, in effect, acting for the Republic yourselves, being at such a great distance and having such broad authority, yet you are still required to account for your expenditure, income and spoils no less than if you are in the nearest of provinces.

Therefore we ask that this innocent oversight be corrected as soon as conveniently possible, the soldiers to be credited with their bonuses, and the remainder to be converted into cash and sent to Rome as a payment into the Republic Treasury.

“Shit!” Sertorius shouted as he finished reading. “And I thought we had solved our budget crisis!” He looked around angrily. “Marcus, what have we reported back in the way of booty and our allocation of it? They seemed to pick out that part of your Report as being the bit got them going.”

“Only what I put across your desk two months ago, Quintus,” Tollianus explained. “I never report back without giving you a chance to read it first.”

“Right. Let's call a meeting, and just check what everyone has said to them,” Sertorius decided. “And I didn't mean to bite your head off, Marcus; sorry about that.” Tollianus just waved a hand and smiled to show he had not been offended.

The meeting started with a reading of the letter from Flaccus. Arius Claudius was devastated. “But I have already committed to this year's works!” Claudius objected. “I was given a budget, I have committed much of it, and if I don't complete the whole of the first stage then it will all be wasted, washed away in the next flood season!”

“Arius, I think you are not seeing the big picture,” Sertorius chided him. “This letter doesn't necessarily mean that all our booty goes to Rome; only that all the booty Rome knows about has to go to Rome.”

“Hey, wait a moment, Quintus,” Tollianus broke in. “It is one thing to be selective in our reporting; but it is totally different to make a false Report. We could all be tried for Treason as well as Fraud if we are found out. I do not intend to go down that path.”

“Nor do I, Marcus,” Sertorius reassured him. “This is why I need to know exactly what Rome has been told, so we can make decisions that are in accordance with our Reports to date. For example, we have only done an audit of the gold and silver and other assets in the conquered cities; we haven't actually declared them booty yet. Perhaps, instead of declaring them booty, we might be very generous and allow the cities to retain their fortunes.”

“But how will that help our budget?” Marcus demanded.

Sertorius shrugged. “We bleed them with Province taxes next year instead.”

The light went on behind Tollianus' face. “Of course! Taxes from the province go to Rome as well; but only after provincial expenses are taken out!”

“Yes,” agreed Marius. “Booty goes to the Senate in its entirety because the army's costs are paid by the Senate, not by the province. But please, Quintus; make the booty large enough to make sure the soldiers get a good reward in their share.”

“Don't worry about that, Lucius,” Sertorius promised. “Your boys will get more than they could have hoped for, all for less effort and risk than any other conquest. But I will make a point of being specially generous to the Caretus Cohort; they were the only ones who really risked their lives.”

Throughout this discussion of the soldiers' share, Tollianus had been scanning through the reports that had been sent to the Senate. “Gentlemen, it seems there is no actual value placed on the amount of booty we anticipate from this last campaign. The closest we come is in my report, where I say 'We have commenced an audit of the assets of the hostile cities, and will report back to you when this is completed. However, we expect this will be sufficient for the Eastern Military Province to undertake significant capital works in the years to come.’” Tollianus looked up. “That last sentence is probably what raised the alarm back in Rome,” conceded.

“Anyway, how is the audit going?” Marius asked.

“We have completed valuation of the precious metals and gems held by the hostile cities,” Tollianus reported. “These amount to just under six hundred and seventy four thousand talents of gold. The value of jewels in private possession is not yet known, but estimated at fifty thousand talents, and property at another eight hundred thousand talents.”

“Then let us report back, quite truthfully, that the total value of the cities is six hundred and seventy four thousand talents in precious metals and jewels,” Sertorius suggested. “We will tell them that to strip all of it would be counter-productive, because it would destroy their economies, making them incapable to supporting a significant on-going tax burden. This is how Silo acted in Anatolia, and his policy was universally approved, so we have precedent on our side. We intend to claim only thirty two thousand talents and leave the rest as a secure tax base.”

“How much will fall to the soldiers if we adopt that approach?” Marius asked.

Tollianus did some quick mental arithmetic. “About a thousand sesterces per man, if it is spread through the whole of our forces. But if we restrict entitlements to only the five legions involved in the campaign, that would be about two and a half thousand sesterces each.”

“That is a good bonus for doing little more than running through an open gate,” Marius commented. “I propose that we spread it over our entire army, but

with each man in the legions in the campaign being entitled to three shares, and the men in the Caretus Cohort each being entitled to fifty shares.”

Tollianus did some more quick thinking. “That would mean about five hundred sesterces per share. A nice bonus for the men not involved, fifteen hundred for the legionaries in the actual campaign, and ten thousand for the Special Forces men. That is about half a talent of gold for each of your boys, Septimus,” Tollianus smiled at Caretus.

“They deserve it.” Caretus was deadly serious as he asserted that.

“And the Republic gets a windfall of twenty-six thousand talents. That should keep them happy,” Tollianus finished.

“Then let it be so!” Sertorius decided. “Marcus, set the provincial taxes at a rate that will ensure we can cover our expenses this year, including the full first stage of the dams scheme.

“Next item; how is the tax on the Silk Road going?” Sertorius pressed on.

“It is going well,” Typhon responded. “The excise rate is almost 90% of profits, which has meant that no merchants are willing to take the risk so far away from home. The only man in the market is Lucius Gordo, an Italian client of Marcus Livius, acting out of gratitude to his Patron. I have informally promised him that if he suffers any losses, we will lower the rate so he can make good his losses the next season, as well as lending him any capital he might need to take advantage of that lower rate.”

“I approve of that promise, Typhon,” Sertorius responded, “but what is the net income to the province?”

“Three hundred and twenty four thousand sestertium milia in the year just finished, an increase of thirty one thousand from the previous year.”

“Excellent!” Sertorius was pleased. “That gives us the resources to keep up the improvements to roads and ports, even without sucking the reserves out of the eastern cities. And to build a navy, once we get the ship-building techniques right.” Then he looked back to Tollianus.

“What progress on the Black Sea settlements?” he asked.

“The first Romans have been allocated their farms and are settling in,” Tollianus replied. “But they apparently don’t have the faintest clue about farming. They are urban Head Count, and need to be taught. I recommend that we hire a few men who know about farming; old farmers themselves, or estate managers, and send them to the settlements as advisors and teachers.”

“How much will this cost, and how will we get the money back? Do you expect to charge fees for their advice?”

“The cost for ten such men would be around fifty sestertium milia per annum; and we will get it back with a bonus when these Romans start actually producing crops,” Tollianus urged. “Just bringing their productivity forward by one year will pay for more than ten years of our advisors, and increased productivity after that will be cream on top. After that, they should be experienced enough to teach their own sons how to manage the farms for themselves.”

“Then do it,” Sertorius agreed. “What next? How is the ship-building coming along, Karmides?”

“It is coming along much better since we took control of Krokola, sir,” Karmides said respectfully. It had not escaped his notice that Sertorius was starting to consider him an under-performer who needed to learn from these eastern barbarians. “Their techniques are completely different for those in the west, and they design their hulls in a completely different way. I have borrowed an experienced engineer from Arius to analyse their hulls from a structural engineering point of view, rather than a traditional shipwright's. I hope that this cross-fertilisation will result in an approach that takes the best from both traditions.”

“Good initiative, Karmides,” Sertorius said warmly. Now that the old Greek had lifted his game, there was no point in being anything but supportive. “Well, what else do we need to discuss?” Sertorius looked around the table. No-one moved. “We started on a sour note, with that letter from the Senate, but everything is in order now. Let's get back to work.”

Caesar was furious, though little of it showed on his face. Haramix had disappeared the day after he arrived in Rome, and Sextus Calles had not been able to find him, for all his efforts. The only thing that was known for certain was that the Celt was not in the house he had rented, and where callers were repeatedly told that ‘lord Haramix is not well enough to take callers’.

His absence had been confirmed by the most direct means possible; abducting one of the household messengers and torturing him for information. But the young wretch told them that he did not know where the witness was hiding; at least until the torture prompted him to invent answers in hope that the pain would stop. To a man with the experience of Sextus, it was clear where truth ended and desperate fabrication began. Eventually the lad had been killed and tossed into the Tiber. Equally annoying had been the absence of any response from Flaccus. Surely the old goat would like a nice, tight virgin, and one as high-born as Julia; but he had said nothing. Had the old man's balls fallen off, or something? How else could he pass up this offer, to marry the Daughter of Caius Julius Caesar!

The trial was to be held in the Senate Chamber itself, with the Senate in session. The panel itself was seated on chairs in a row on the floor of the chamber, and all other senators were permitted to attend in the terraces. Access to the public gallery above was restricted to Second Class or better. Caesar entered the front doors into the Public Lobby, then through into the senators-only ante-room at the back of the main Chamber, and then through into the Chamber itself. He took a chair in the group facing the panel, and slightly to their right. The Prosecutor was already sitting alone, on a chair to the left of the panel. It was Cicero. Caesar curled a lip at him in contempt, and Cicero responded with a cold but courteous nod. He stood as Caesar sat.

Flaccus, the Head of Senate, was seated in the middle of the panel, flanked by Lucius Porcius Cato, Gnaeus Octavius and Titus Lafrenius to his right, with Gaius Papius Mutilus, Gaius Aurelius Cotta and Gnaeus Papirius Carbo to his left.

Cicero paced slowly along the line of them, building the tension. Then, speaking with long pauses every few words, he started his presentation; not looking at the panel, but seeming to speak to himself as his eyes roamed around the brilliantly-lit dome above him. "This trial... is one which... I had never imagined... would be possible. The allegations... are so outrageous... that no-one... could have thought... they would ever be made... against a Senator of the Republic... or indeed against anyone... of such illustrious ancestry." Cicero swivelled suddenly.

"Even I... who in defence of Roscius... said that no crime... is so base... that no-one... will sink so low... to commit it... Yet not even I... can consider... this most criminal impiety.... without great dread... of the wrath of the gods!

"This man," Cicero pointed at Caesar as his voice rose, "This man... descended from two of the most prestigious Families... this man... has shamed his ancestors! This man... has murdered a Consul of the Republic! And not out of personal grievance... not out of hope for gain... not for any rational reason, however perverted... but purely because that Consul... was doing his duty conscientiously!" Cicero rounded on where Caesar sat. He spread his stance, one hand folded with the knuckles against his hip, the other jabbing a forefinger at the accused.

"Let me tell you what you did, Caesar!" Cicero thundered. "You deliberately abused Gallic tribes who were Friends and Allies of the Republic. That alone would constitute Treason! When these Friends and Allies, to their eternal credit, refused to rise in revolt in response to your provocations, you attacked them yourself. That alone would constitute Treason! When they asked for peace, and submitted to your abuse, appealing to Rome for justice, you annihilated their men and enslaved their women, in an act of abominable genocide. That alone would constitute Treason! In doing so, you had hoped that the other tribes, in an effort to prevent the same fate happening to them, would unite against you. You were attempting to provoke precisely the revolt you were claiming to be nipping in the bud! You were provoking all of Gaul to unite against the Republic, which alone would constitute Treason!

"But this Senate responded by sending Lucius Glaucia to determine the facts on the ground, and all of Gaul breathed a sigh of relief. Surely the Republic, that bastion of justice, would defend them against the depredations of this madman acting as Governor! There was yet hope for peace!

"So what did you do, Caius Julius Caesar? Because I must say, Caius Julius Caesar, you are no fool! You are one of the sharpest intellects of the Republic, however perverted your heart might be! So what did you do? I'll tell you what you did; you had a stroke of evil genius! Having failed to provoke the Celts to attack the Republic, you now devised a fabricated provocation that would ensure the Republic would attack the Celts! Yet another act of Treason!

“But what was this provocation that you devised? How could you persuade a man of the integrity of Lucius Glaucia to act hastily, unjustly? Of what crime, of what abomination, could you accuse these Celts, our Friends and Allies despite your provocations? Of what crime so outrageous that Lucius Glaucia, that paradigm of piety, would not first make his own investigation to determine the facts before acting?

“Well, there was no allegation, no matter how loathsome, that would prompt a man of the integrity of Lucius Glaucia to react without first confirming that the accused were indeed guilty. Lucius Glaucia was a man of the *Mos Majorum*, who believed with his whole heart in the need for Due Process! So how could your plan succeed? How could you provoke the Republic to attack the Gauls? The answer is blindingly simple, once one twists his mind to fit into the wretched perspective of your degenerate soul, once one plumbs the depths of your turpitude!

“You would remove Lucius Glaucia, the one man who could restrain your crazed bloodlust! And you would also make that very murder of Lucius Glaucia your pretext! Thus two objectives are achieved with the one act; you remove Lucius Glaucia and the barrier of his honourable, meticulous integrity, and you make it appear that it was the Celts, not yourself, who compassed this murder most vile!” Cicero turned away from Caesar and spoke to the panel directly.

“As this trial progresses, we will present evidence and witnesses that will confirm several key points in this allegation. We will present eye-witnesses that will prove that the Celtic nobles accused by Caesar were in their own homelands at the time of this murder, and not near Massalia as Caesar said to the Senate Committee when he was interviewed. We will present eye-witnesses that will tell you that Caesar’s favoured cavalry commander was in the gang that attacked and killed Lucius Glaucia. We will bring witnesses that will tell you that Caesar, ever despicable, ever treacherous, then arranged that the whole century of cavalry under this favoured assassin were then murdered in turn, to ensure their silence. And further, we will bring witnesses to tell you that his defence is a web of lies, from beginning to end.” Cicero strode firmly to his seat.

Flaccus addressed Caesar. “What do you say as a prologue to your defence, Caius Julius?”

Caesar stood to respond. “There is a poison abroad in this city, Lucius Valerius. This poison is called ‘abuse of justice’. I have not been able to engage an advocate; they all fear the consequences to their careers if they take the defence of a man who has already been condemned by a whispering campaign of lies even before the court sits. And now I see that Caius Aurelius has been drafted onto this panel. He is my kinsman! He is put there precisely to give the appearance of a panel not hand-picked to pre-judge my case; a sure sign that those secret enemies are already planning to defend against my claim that this panel is already decided against me!

“Even if Caius Aurelius dares to judge fairly and absolve me, what is his vote against the other six? I fear he will do no more than destroy his own career in the honourable attempt to save mine. I must also object that a witness I have

called for, Haramix of the Arverni, has disappeared within days of arriving in Rome. I fear he has been murdered and his body disposed of, before he had the opportunity to testify to my innocence.

“These many flaws in proper process mean that this Court is invalid. It has no option, if it is to act lawfully, other than to dismiss the charges against me on the grounds of these fundamental breaches of proper process.”

Flaccus waited for Caesar to sit and resume a dignified bearing before speaking. “I will take your points in order, Caius Julius. The first is that you claim you are unable to secure an advocate. That is not a fault of this court. Why can you not obtain the services of an advocate? I don’t know, but nor do I choose to speculate. I act only on the evidence, and your assertion of a conspiracy, unsupported by evidence or testimony, carries no weight.

“Your second point, your assertion that Caius Aurelius is merely window-dressing to an otherwise wicked panel, is an insult to Caius Aurelius that he would allow himself to be so manipulated. It is also an insult to the other six members of the panel. I could explain why this panel has been composed as it is, and anyone familiar with the factions within the Senate would see that considerable care has been exercised in the selection process to ensure as broad and fair a range of opinions as possible has been obtained, so that all evidence presented will be examined from all angles. But I will not waste my time to do so unless you present a prima-facie case that some justification is required.

“Your third point, that of the missing witness, is also unfounded. It is not the duty of this court to ensure the attendance of your witness. He has been summoned, and he presented himself to me upon arrival in Rome, and undertook to present himself at this trial when called. It is your responsibility, not that of the court, to ensure this duty is carried out. Your fears, whether well-founded or unfounded, are irrelevant.” Flaccus paused for a moment. “Do you have any other objections before you deliver your prologue?”

Caesar stood again. “I stand by my assertions that this court has no legitimacy.” He sat again.

“Then I have a declaration to make before we call witnesses,” Flaccus announced. “Almost two months ago I received a most unusual visitor, with a most unusual letter. That visitor was Julia Caesaris, a girl of some ten or eleven years. The letter she handed to me was most unusual; allow me to read it for you all. And if anyone doubts that I tell the truth here, I have a witness who saw the letter handed to me, and who read it himself. He will testify to that, should anyone challenge my word.” Flaccus then took out the letter and read it slowly and clearly. Then he looked around the chamber.

“This defendant, who has just now argued that this panel was selected precisely because of a bias against him, offered me his child as a wife.” Flaccus paused a moment. “Tell me; why would anyone offer his only daughter, and of immaculate pedigree at that, to one he considered a blood enemy? Surely this letter itself contradicts his allegations of enmity! But more to the point,” Flaccus went on, “Julia added a verbal message to the letter. She said that her father required a response by the Ides of Quintilis. Now, I wonder what is so

significant about that date? After all, he knew that he would be otherwise engaged on that day, did he not?

“Let us not put too fine a point on this issue; let us not hide behind delicate phrasing. I am now over seventy years old. Yet this man offered to prostitute his own eleven-year-old daughter in the hope that I could be corrupted by him.” Flaccus stared directly at Caesar. “Well, Caius Julius, I give you my answer now. No, thank you. Julia deserves a younger husband than me, and a better father than you.” Now he looked to both sides. “Do any other panel members have anything that should be disclosed?”

The day got no better for Caesar. Cicero introduced one witness after the other, in a seamless tapestry displaying his guilt. Caesar, in cross-examination, made himself look like a drowning man clutching at straws. At best, he could only gain an admission that some things might be co-incidental, but even these looked incredibly unlikely. He did not even dare to suggest that the bodies of Fabius and his men had been planted by Petix; he knew that Cicero would immediately ask how Petix could have known about the death of Glaucia so soon.

In desperation he called for Haramix. Haramix did not appear. “This demonstrates what I said at the start of these proceedings,” he cried. “Those witnesses who could exonerate me beyond all doubt have been prevented from appearing!”

“Tell me, Caius Julius; what evidence did you hope to obtain from Haramix?” Flaccus asked. “We are willing to hear your statement and give it such weight as we consider proper.”

“Haramix was one of three Celtic informers I had, supplying me with secret information about the various tribes. Unfortunately the other two were anonymous, so I have been unable to call them,” Caesar explained, “but I have no doubt that had I known their names and called for them, they too would have been prevented from testifying, just as has happened to Haramix.”

“So this Haramix was providing you with inside intelligence, and that is how you knew the Celts were preparing for war?”

“He was one of three sources, but the only one I knew by name,” Caesar agreed.

“Then we should make sure that he testifies, if possible. Perhaps he was taking a toilet break when first called,” Flaccus concluded. “Go, clerk; search thoroughly!”

Haramix walked into the chamber within a minute. Caesar was aghast.

“You witness, Caius Julius,” Flaccus said with a smile.

Caesar stood uncertainly. “Haramix, my old friend! It is good to see you again,” he smiled.

Haramix scowled. “Do not call me your friend, you butcher!”

Caesar affected to recoil of shock. Then shaking his head as though dazed, addressed the panel. “What have you done to him? What threats have you made against him or his family?”

“Do you have any more questions for your witness, Caius Julius?” Flaccus asked.

"This witness has been perverted. There is nothing to be gained from further questions," Caesar said sadly.

"Marcus Tullius, your witness," Flaccus announced.

Cicero was on his feet in one smooth movement.

"Lord Haramix, have you ever passed secret information to the defendant?" he asked directly.

"No, I have never passed secret information to that man," Haramix asserted firmly.

"Have you ever spoken to him at all?"

"Yes, a couple of times," Haramix conceded.

"And what did you say to him on those occasions?"

"I told him that he should stop his aggression against the tribes in Celtica," Haramix replied. "I told him that no-one wants war, but if he continues his unjustifiable outrages, then the tribes will have no option but to resist more forcefully."

"Did you tell him this publicly or privately?"

"I cannot recall ever speaking to him privately; I can only recall speaking to him as part of a delegation."

"When was the first time you spoke to him?"

"Less than a month after his first attack on the Aedui."

A servant entered the chamber as quietly as possible, and hurried over to Flaccus. He bent to whisper into the old man's ear. Flaccus nodded and whispered in response, then the slave left.

Cicero paced slowly until the slave had left the chamber and attention had turned back to the witness. "These warnings you gave him; could they be understood to mean that the Celtic tribes were conspiring to unite?"

"They were discussing common action, of a purely defensive nature. That is not a conspiracy to war," Haramix replied. "These discussions started after Caesar subjugated the Aedui and Senones, and threatened others. They were the result of Caesar's provocations. There were no such discussions beforehand."

"These discussions; was there ever any mention of attacking Caesar?"

"An attack on the Republic's territory was never even contemplated," Haramix explained. "There was not even any talk about attacking Republic troops, even if in Gallic territory, until the annihilation of the Senones. Up until that atrocity, all the tribes were prepared to allow innocent passage, and spoke only of resisting Caesar's attacks upon them."

"And how did the annihilation of the Senones affect things?" Cicero prompted.

"All of Gaul was stunned by such unprovoked barbarism," Haramix said harshly. "Gobanitio, Porux, Orgetorix, Dumnorix and Casticus all met together. They agreed that if any one tribe asked for help, the other four would provide it."

"Was this secret, or was it public knowledge?"

"It was not public knowledge, but nor was it a secret kept from Caesar. I was myself part of the delegation that went to Narbo to tell Caesar to his face.

This alliance was meant to deter aggression before it happened, not punish it afterwards.”

“So you did give Caesar information about a conspiracy among these five tribes!” Cicero exclaimed.

“The message I and nine other men relayed to Caesar was not secret information, nor was it news about a conspiracy. It was to inform him of a mutual-defence treaty that these five tribes had established.”

“These five leaders you named; were not these the same men whom Caesar accused of murdering Lucius Glaucia?” Cicero continued.

“Yes, and I do not think it was entirely co-incidental,” Haramix said grimly.

“Did this message have the desired result? Did it prevent further attacks by Caesar?”

“Quite the opposite!” Haramix answered. “Almost immediately Caesar fell upon the Aedui again, and then the Arverni. It was as though he was daring us to resist him!”

“Well, did you resist?”

“We were taken completely by surprise,” Haramix confessed. “We had expected our warning would be enough, and hoped for peace. So when the attacks came, the Aedui and Arverni both decided that they would submit, but send delegations to Rome to protest these actions against Friends and Allies. They preferred diplomacy to war. The other tribes in the west took the same course.”

“But not the Lingones,” Cicero continued the narrative. “Porux resisted.”

“Yes, Porux resisted, because Caesar’s sweep through the west had given the three eastern tribes time to prepare. And the murder of Gobanitio and Dumnorix had shown them what to expect if they submitted.”

“And the Western tribes also rose up against the garrisons Caesar had left with them,” Cicero added.

“Yes, that was something the eastern tribes did not expect,” Haramix agreed. “It certainly gave us Arverni more heart, to know we would not be squeezed from both sides. We sent delegations to the western tribes immediately, to add them to the alliance.”

“So all this happened purely as a reaction to Caesar’s aggression?” Cicero asked. “This alliance of virtually all Celtica was the result of Caesar’s actions, and not the cause of them?”

“Indeed. At every step, we were responding reluctantly, and not pre-empting,” Haramix asserted. “Even when the west rose, and while Caesar was destroying the villages and towns of the Lingones, we did no more than defend. There was never any intention to invade Republic territory. Our only aim was to protect ourselves as well as we could, until the Republic took that madman out of the province.”

“Thank you, lord Haramix,” Cicero said with a slight bow. “I have no more questions.”

Flaccus spoke as Haramix walked from the chamber. “I have been informed that Quintus Poppaedi Silo has just returned from Gaul, and has

information that could assist the court. Do either the prosecution or the defence object to hearing what Quintus Poppaadius has to say?"

"No objection," Cicero replied immediately. "The more facts the court has in front of it, the better Justice will be served."

Caesar couldn't really object after a comment like that. And besides, he felt he was doomed unless a miracle happened, and Silo just might say something that he could cling onto. "I have no objection either."

Silo was called into the chamber, still in his riding gear and with the dust of the road in sweat-streaks down his legs. "My apologies for my appearance, Conscript Fathers," Silo offered, "but I did not have the time to bathe and dress. I have only now returned from Gaul."

"We thank you for your dedication to your duty, Quintus Poppaadius," Flaccus acknowledged. "Now, what can you tell us that is relevant to this case?"

"I have been speaking at length with the leaders of the major Celtic leaders, much as Lucius Glaucia had intended. I found them eager for a just peace and on-going good relations with the Republic." Silo paced the floor, addressing himself to the Senators in the terraces more than to the panel. "However, they are very annoyed that the Republic appointed a man like Caesar as governor of Transalpine Gaul and allow him to wage war against them for two years, and are very concerned that this could happen again."

"They are so alarmed, in fact, that they are prepared to go to extreme lengths to prevent a re-occurrence." Silo looked around the chamber. "The disaster that Caesar brought upon them has changed them in several ways. The first is that they have been driven together, to form a single federation called 'Gallia'. In some ways it is like the federation of 'Italia' that the Italian tribes were contemplating before the Enfranchisement Act provided all Italians with citizenship, to curb Roman abuses. I am so thankful that those days are now so far behind us!"

"This federation of 'Gallia' is prepared to become a Friend and Ally of the Republic. But they fear that even that will not prevent a repeat of the Caesar Disaster, so they are prepared to go even further. They are prepared to accept the status as an autonomous Province within the Republic, subject to certain conditions. I will report these conditions in full to the next meeting of the Senate, but it is enough for the present to summarise my findings as follows."

"First, I am utterly certain that the Celts never intended or planned to commit any acts of aggression against the Republic. Caesar's conspiracy theory is totally unfounded. Second, I am very impressed by the patience shown by the Celts, in the face of intense provocation by Caesar, so great was their desire to live in peace with the Republic. Third, they are willing to become a Province within the Republic, provided the Republic will agree to certain measures designed to ensure they are not open to abuse in the future." Silo turned to the panel. "Now, are there any questions that you or either side in this case might wish to put to me?"

Flaccus looked to Cicero.

"I have none if the defence has none," Cicero stated, and looked over to Caesar.

"With respect to Quintus Poppaedi, his observations are based on Celtica as it is now, after I thwarted an uprising," Caesar stated. "They are irrelevant to the situation as it was before I took action, and this state of affairs exists now only because of my prudent but firm measures which drove the Celts to recognise their errors."

Silo could not restrain himself. "That is right, Caius Julius; the peace I have negotiated is entirely due to your brilliance!" he confessed with a smile.

Flaccus coughed to interpose himself in what might become an unseemly confrontation. "Thank you for your excellent work and your report, Quintus Poppaedi. It seems you are now free to refresh yourself." Flaccus looked to the panel members on either side as Silo left the floor. "First, the charge of High Treason, in that he is responsible for the wilful death of a Consul of the Republic. Do we need to retire to discuss our verdict, or are we all agreed?"

"I condemn," Lafrenius answered.

"I condemn," Carbo said.

One after another all seven jurors condemned Caesar.

"Caius Julius Caesar, you have been found guilty of High Treason, the punishment for which is to be hung from an accursed tree until you are dead," Flaccus said solemnly.

Caesar leaped to his feet. "I appeal! According to ancient law, a trial for Perduellio must be heard by duumvirs, not a panel of seven!"

Flaccus looked to the front and centre of the Senate terraces. Priscus and Marius were both in attendance, and had been all through the day. "Consuls? This is a point of law that should have been raised before the presentation of the defence. I am inclined to rule that it was not raised in a timely way."

Priscus stood. "I do not want there to be any doubt whatsoever about this trial. Therefore I propose that the two Censors, Marcus Livius Drusus and Marcus Aurelius Cotta, be appointed duumvirs." He looked to Young Marius, who stood more reluctantly.

"I approve of those two nominations," Young Marius agreed.

"They are two of the men who first recommended that I be tried!" Caesar exclaimed. "They have already resolved to condemn me! I demand that the duumvirs be two men who have not already committed themselves to finding me guilty."

"Caius Julius," Flaccus said wearily, "You are condemned out of your own mouth! You have just admitted that the two most senior magistrates in the Republic have heard your defence, and condemned you. So have the three next most senior magistrates. And their recommendation has been unanimously endorsed by this panel of seven, who were chosen for their dignitas as well as them being a representative cross-section of the Senate as a whole. How many more trials, in front of how many more magistrates, do you think you deserve?"

"It is not a matter of numbers, Lucius Valerius, but of proper legal procedure," Caesar asserted defiantly.

“In which case, there is no reason why the two men just nominated should not hear your case,” Flaccus concluded.

Priscus stood again. “If I may, Lucius Valerius,” he offered tentatively, “I repeat; I want no hint of doubt that this man has been tried in a completely legal manner. I am prepared to withdraw my nominations, and instead nominate Marius Egnatius and Caius Norbanus as duumvirs.”

“No!” exclaimed Caesar. “You have all heard the bile that Norbanus has poured on my name in the Senate while I was in Gaul, with no opportunity to defend myself against his lies!”

“Well, Marius has spoken in your favour, let us retain him, and I call upon Piso Gallienus instead of Caius Norbanus.” Priscus offered.

Flaccus looked to Caesar. “What possible objections can you have to those two men?”

“They have both been poisoned by the flawed judgements made by the initial hearing by the Five, as well as this farcical charade today,” Caesar replied with vigour. “There is no possibility of a fair trial, so I demand that the whole bundle of charges be dropped.”

“The defendant has no valid grounds for objection to the nomination of Piso Gallienus and Marius Egnatius as duumvirs,” Flaccus announced to the Senate at large. “Does Caius Marius agree to their nomination?”

“I agree to their nomination,” Marius replied dejectedly.

“Nomination by the two Consuls is not sufficient to validate their jurisdiction!” Caesar exclaimed. That nomination must be endorsed by the Comitia.”

“You cannot make that demand, Caius Julius,” Flaccus contradicted him. “Since the Catonian Reforms, all matters arising from abuse of office, treason or rebellion are within the jurisdiction of the Senate. The Senate now fills that role formerly served by the Comitia.”

Flaccus turned to the Senators. “Conscript Fathers, do you agree to the two nominations?” A chorus of 'Aye's rose. “Those against?” No sound. “Then I accept the appointment of Marius Egnatius and Piso Gallienus as duumvirs,” Flaccus concluded. Then, with a smile, “Who would have thought twenty-five years ago that two Italians would be sitting in judgement over one of the Julii on a charge of perduellio?” A grim murmur of a chuckle rose from the terraces as Egnatius and Gallienus stood and walked towards the chairs now being vacated by the panel of seven jurors.

Egnatius waited for Gallienus to catch up, and the two sat together. Gallienus gestured for Egnatius to take presidency, but instead of speaking, Egnatius leant towards his colleague and whispered. Gallienus whispered his response, and Egnatius nodded.

“We think we have heard enough of the prosecution case for the moment, Marcus Tullius,” Egnatius said towards Cicero. Then turning to Caesar, “Is there anything further the Defence would like to say?”

“I demand a complete new trial!” Caesar appealed.

"There is nothing in the law that says we must waste another day," Egnatius replied evenly. "Only that the duumvirs must hear the prosecution and defence arguments before making their judgement. We have heard both arguments, but we allow you the opportunity to produce further arguments in your defence."

"This is a sick joke! I appeal to the Comitia!" Caesar objected.

"You have already been informed that the Comitia has no jurisdiction in this matter. It is a case for the Senate's jurisdiction."

"Then I appeal to the Senate!"

"I take that to mean that you have no further argument to put before the duumvirs?" Egnatius asked.

"I will not abase myself by playing along with your silly game!" Caesar sneered. "I appeal to the Senate."

"Not so fast, Caius Julius! We have not yet given our decision," Egnatius said smoothly. "So let us do that now." He looked over to Gallienus.

"I condemn," Gallienus said.

"I also condemn," Egnatius agreed. "Head of Senate, please remind me of the penalty for perduellio."

"The traitor is to be hung from an accursed tree," Flaccus advised. "Flogging while hanging is also permitted."

Again the two duumvirs leant towards each other and exchanged whispers for several minutes.

"Our judgement is that Caius Julius Caesar is guilty of gross perduellio," Egnatius announced at length. "He shall be hung from an accursed tree, but the rope shall not be tied to a branch; instead, it will pass over a branch and a counterweight of one hundred pounds shall be hung from the other end. Thus his own weight will be sufficient to keep him on the ground, but with the counterweight keeping the rope taut. He shall be hung naked, and with his wrists shackled behind his back. He shall remain hanging until the flesh falls from his bones or it is consumed by the birds and the dogs, sufficient to allow the counterweight to fall to the ground. Then the disarticulated remains shall be thrown into the Tiber." Egnatius stood.

Gallienus stood as well. "I concur with that sentence."

"I appeal this grotesque mockery of justice!" Caesar shouted. "I appeal to the Senate as a whole!"

"Very well," Flaccus conceded. "The Senate shall meet tomorrow morning to hear your appeal. Until then, the defendant shall be held in custody."

Priscus was furious. He had taken great pains to ensure that no-one would be able to sneak a weapon into Caesar. He also ensured that no food would get past the guards unless the person bringing it ate half himself, and then was watched for over an hour to ensure he did not regurgitate it. This bastard murdered Lucius Glauca, and there was no way he would be allowed to take his own life in a suicide.

But Caesar had been too cunning. He had contrived to hang himself, using a twisted length of fabric from his sleeping sheet. It must have been slow and terrible, a death by strangulation rather than swift and clean; but it was not the public humiliation he deserved! "Why was he not being watched constantly?" Priscus demanded. "My orders were that he must never be left unattended."

"There was one corner of his cell that could not be seen from outside, lord. Around, behind the door, and not even big enough to stand in. But the very face of the wall was not visible. The guards thought Caesar was standing with his back to the corner, and did not realise until too late that he was hanging."

"But what about the noise, man?" Priscus insisted. "A man does not die by strangulation without making some noise, at least!"

"They say they heard nothing, lord," the captain replied. "Caesar was known for his stubborn self-discipline; he must have managed to remain quiet at least until he went unconscious."

Priscus stamped across the room, and slammed his palm against the wall. "Shit!" he exploded. "Nobody murders a Roman consular going about his duty, and then cheats the Republic of its revenge!" He rounded on the captain. "I don't care if he is dead or not," Priscus decided. "I don't even care that the Senate has not heard his appeal, so he might technically still be only accused, not finally condemned. That bastard is going to be hung from an accursed tree, naked and humiliated, until the birds and the dogs eat his flesh from his bones!"

"No-one commits so great an impiety as Caesar did, and escapes any of the consequences; none at all, living or dead!" Priscus decreed. "Get a rope and hang his carcass now, in the middle of the Forum; and if anyone would object, I will be there to interpose my veto! And send some-one to tell Caius Marius that I will not be at the Senate meeting; I will be ensuring Caesar's filthy carcass is being properly desecrated."

"But Consul," the captain had the temerity to object, "Caesar was related to half the nobility in Rome! Not only his own Julii, but also the Aurelii through his mother, and the Marii through his uncle, the Cinnae through his first marriage, and any number of others. Even the Cornelii by the marriage of his cousin to Sulla!"

"Then let anyone who wants to defend this traitor say so with his own lips!" Priscus snapped back. "Let the Julii or whoever else dares speak against me put it on the public record that they think this abomination deserves any better treatment! Let them disgrace themselves by saying so!"

"As you say, lord," the captain knew better than to object twice.

The crowd in the Forum had never seen anything quite like this before. A hastily-constructed frame had been placed in the middle of the forum. Caesar's naked body was dangling from it, his toes almost scraping on the ground. Members of both the Comitia and the Senate were on the steps in front of the new Houses built by Sulla. Priscus had erected a sign detailing the crimes of Caesar, and was standing by wearing his dress uniform.

All were hushed. Was this a sacrilege? Or was it an appropriate demonstration of how odious this criminal was? Aurelia stepped out of the crowd and approached Priscus, her face a mask of fury.

“How dare you commit such an obscenity in the Forum of Rome!” she shouted in her anger into his face. “His appeal was unheard, so had not even been legally condemned! So cut him down and allow me to bury him properly!” She glowered at him, nose to nose.

When Priscus was confident that she had finished, he looked around to the crowd. “Are there any other Aurelii here who would defend the most notorious criminal in our generation?” he called to the crowd. His searching eye fell upon his targets on the steps to the Senate. “Caius Aurelius, cognomen Cotta; you are a Censor! Do you stand by the Republic, or do you agree with this woman?” Then, turning slightly, “Marcus Aurelius, also cognomen Cotta and also Censor; Do you not agree with me that this man's turpitude is so great that even in death the punishment must be meted out in full?”

The two Aurelii Cottae glanced to each other; Marcus shook his head ever so slightly; 'Do not get into a public argument' was the clear meaning.

Then Silo strode out of the crowd in front of the Senate doors.

“Good morning, General,” Priscus greeted him with stern reserve. “What is your intention here?”

“You know how much I loved Lucius. With your permission, Consul, I would like to pay my disrespects to the man who murdered him,” Silo responded.

“Do as you will, General.” Priscus stepped to one side.

But Silo did not walk past him immediately. Instead he turned to speak to the Senators on the steps behind him.

“Conscript Fathers! The Republic has given you everything you have. It has given you life, wealth, honour, dignitas! In return, the Republic might demand from you your life and wealth; but so long as you honour that debt, you will never lose your honour and dignitas.

“This Caius Julius Caesar, this worm of a man, has committed the most wicked impiety imaginable. He has no right to any honour at all, nor compassion; no, not even in death does he have any right to a burial. Let him hang here until his body bloats and stinks. And let everyone who gets a whiff of his corruption say in his own heart, 'that corruption was there long before he died.'

“So odious was his crime that our ancestors rightly commanded that one who is found guilty of it must not be mourned, not even by his mother.” Silo glared at Aurelia, still standing nearby. “However, I will grant this reptile one last consideration; I will wash his face. Watch carefully, Aurelia, and learn how much respect your son deserves.”

Silo then turned abruptly and strode to stand a pace in front of the corpse. Silo spread his stance and pulled the front of his toga away with one hand, and grasped his own penis with the other. Soon he was directing a stream of his urine onto Caesar's face. The crowd of plebs roared their approval. Priscus' lictors moved quickly to restrain Aurelia.

When Silo had emptied his bladder he turned again to the Senate steps. "Whoever would object to what I have done, let him say so now!" he bellowed.

"I object!" Aurelia screamed. "You will pay for that, you puddle of Italian dog vomit!" The crowd roared again. A public screaming match between nobles was not something they saw every day.

Silo motioned to the crowd for silence. "Perhaps I will," he conceded in a voice that reached to the furthest corner of the Forum. "Perhaps the spite of the most arrogant mother of the most arrogant Roman who ever lived might yet bring about my death, just as this dangling turd brought about the death of Lucius Glauca, whom I loved like a son. So perhaps I might well be made to pay for that. But I will pay that price willingly, for the sake of the Republic. Traitors must be given no honour! And I will never regret it, for the sake of Lucius; the noblest and most competent man I have ever had the honour of calling a friend."

The crowd erupted in another cheer. And then the chant started. "Silo! Silo! Silo!" But Silo waved away the chanting almost brutally. It died out quickly, the crowd wondering what had triggered this reaction.

"Once before, in this Forum, I stood before you as you cheered. It was at my Triumph, and Lucius Glauca shared my chariot, and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with me on the Rostra." Silo recalled. "At that time, you started chanting my name, and I forbade it! You shall not chant my name now, either. If you must chant, then let it be the chant that Lucius and I taught you that day. 'Vivat Roma!'"

Immediately the chant of 'Vivat Roma!' spread through the masses of people. Silo strode through the ocean of plebs towards the Senate steps, pumping his hands as he chanted. He stood at the base of the steps, looking up into the ranks of the senators as they watched, urging them to join the chant. First a few joined in, mostly Italians who were Silo's greatest admirers but embarrassed to be doing something so plebeian; but then the pressure of the crowd and the moment swept away their reserve. Soon even the Boni were in the chant, eager to not appear unpatriotic compared to their political adversaries.

In the midst of all this, a few young men confronted the lictors surrounding the gallows and spoke animatedly to them. One lictor looked across to Priscus, and then walked over to speak to him. Priscus nodded, and spoke a few orders.

The lictor walked back to the group of youths, and started giving orders to his comrades. A cheer went up from the nearby parts of the crowd and a rough queue started forming. Groups of men, six at a time, were permitted to approach the gallows. And thus even the lowliest among the Head Count of Rome were permitted to piss on the corpse of Caius Julius Caesar.

The Senators gradually trickled into the chamber. The auspices had already been taken, and pronounced propitious. Caius Marius presided, despite it being Priscus' month with the fasces, because Gnaeus refused to abandon the guard over Caesar's corpse.

"Conscript Fathers," Marius said solemnly, "I can understand the anger against Caius Julius. But let us be careful to observe the law here; since his

appeal to the Senate, he still has not been finally condemned. Therefore it is a great impiety for his body to be desecrated as is being done now, even as I speak. I require a resolution of this Senate, demanding that his body be removed from public contempt, and be given a proper funeral. To do otherwise cheapens us all."

Several men stood to seek the call. Caius Aurelius Cotta was the most senior.

"Yes, Caius Aurelius?" Marius invited him to speak. It is good, Marius thought to himself, that so many senior senators were kin to Caesar.

"As most of you would know, Caius Julius was my nephew," Cotta started. "Therefore I have familial duties towards him." Cotta turned slowly and paused, to ensure that all senators would catch his next words. "I have already failed in one of those duties. While his father was away for so much of his childhood, I did not ensure that my sister raised young Caius as a true Roman noble, dedicated to the Republic above all things. It could be said that I have come to this realisation too late," he confessed. "Yet even now, I owe him the duty of proper discipline. As soon as this Senate meeting ends, I will join the queue, and piss on him myself. And if my sister objects, I will piss on her as well."

The Senate was shocked as Cotta sat. All eyes swung over to Marcus Aurelius Cotta, to see if his brother would respond. The silence lengthened, until the pressure of the gazes prompted Marcus to stand.

"Yes, Marcus Aurelius?" Marius invited.

"I have not had the opportunity to discuss this matter with my family in private," he opened, "but let there be no doubt that Caius Julius was guilty of Treason, and therefore worthy of contempt and excoriation by all. His appeal was not a genuine protest of innocence, but a ruse to delay final judgement while he took the coward's way instead of facing the proper penalty for his crimes. I move that this Senate, having heard his defence yesterday, complete the legal process by condemning him for the crime of Treason, and that all punishments applicable should be visited upon him and his estate."

That was the end of the story! Caius Julius had no brothers, and his only two living uncles had now condemned him. Even if his mother Aurelia stood by his name, she was only a woman; and if the words of Caius Aurelius were to be taken literally, in danger of being disowned by her own family if she remained obdurate. There was no-one to defend Caesar's name. Caius Marius, only his cousin, was not going to sacrifice his own career for a pointless gesture. But perhaps there was one hope left.

"Marcus Livius; you are Censor, and in the absence of Lucius Porcius the most senior magistrate available to this Senate; but you have not yet spoken. What wisdom would you impart?"

Drusus stood reluctantly. "It has been said 'Speak no evil of the dead.' But Caius Julius made it no secret that he expected his name to live on through the ages, as familiar to our great-grandchildren as that of Romulus himself. So I say that perhaps Caesar should be given his wish of an eternal name. Let the name Caius Julius Caesar stand alongside - no! Let it overshadow! - that of Gaius

Marcus Coriolanus.” A buzz went around the chamber as Drusus sat. In effect, Drusus had said ‘Let Caesar be remembered as the greatest traitor in all of Rome’s history’. Caius Aurelius stood again, and Marius gave him the call.

“Marcus Aurelius has moved that Caesar be finally condemned. I ask for this question to take precedence over all other matters today.” The rising murmur in the chamber warned Marius that he should comply.

“I agree, Caius Aurelius,” Marius assured him. “Unless there is a speaker against, I will ask for no other matter be discussed.” he looked around the tiers of seats, and saw no objection.

Silo stood. Others who had stood at the same time resumed their seats.

“Quintus Poppaedi?” Marius asked.

“Marcus Aurelius moved that ‘all punishments applicable should be visited upon him and his estate’. I support that broad judgement, and take the opportunity to spell out what the specifics should be.

“First, he is to be put to death. That he took his own life is a poor substitute, but it will have to suffice. Then he is to hang from that tree until his flesh decays to the point that his body falls apart. Next the disjointed body is to be thrown into the Tiber, for the fish to pick clean. Finally, all his property is to be forfeit to the Republic.” Silo prowled the floor. “Even these punishments are trivial, compared to the impiety he has committed. If I could bring him back to life, and impose them on him a thousand times over, that would not be punishment enough! But unfortunately, it is all that we have the power to exact.”

“What will become of Aurelia and Julia, if his property is seized?” Marius asked from the chair.

“Perhaps Caesar should have thought of that himself,” Silo snapped back the reply. “It was his duty to care for his mother and daughter, not ours.”

Marcus Aurelius stood to interject. “I will care for my sister and niece,” and then sat.

Silo took these interruptions in his stride. “Now let’s see if there is anyone here who is so shameless that he will speak for Caesar,” as he sat.

“Is there a speaker against the motion?” Marius asked. Not a soul stirred.

“Then unless there is an objection, I will put the question.” Still no sound. “All those in favour of the motion?” A chorus of ‘Ayes’ rose. “All those against?” There was silence. “Then I declare the question carried. Caesar is condemned of Treason, and those measures outlined by Quintus Poppaedi shall be put into effect.”

Marius then looked to Silo again. “I believe the next matter to be discussed should be the proposed treaty with the Celtic tribes. Would you please outline your negotiations so far, Quintus Poppaedi?”

Silo stood. “Thank you, Caius,” he acknowledged. Then turning to the terraced seats, “Conscript Fathers; there was a great desire for peace among the Celts; but there was also considerable fear that their trust could be abused by a future governor of Transalpine Gaul if the present system of provincial administration were to remain unchanged. For this reason, the tribes of Celtica had agreed to form a Federation for united action in their relationship and

dealings with the Republic. They insisted that this was purely a defensive measure against the possibility of another Caesar arising, and that otherwise they would seek active goodwill and mutually beneficial arrangements with our Republic.

“I acknowledged that their actions in forming this Federation were entirely understandable and justified. But I also suggested that in doing so, they would be playing right into the hands of the next Caesar if one were to arise. He would not have to allege a plot against the Republic; their very federation would be seen as proof of it. We discussed many possible ways of safeguarding the legitimate desire for peace by both sides, the need for the Republic to be confident that our land route to the Spains would never be under threat, and the Celts' insistence that arrangements be put in place to ensure that never again could a Republic Governor harm the rest of Gaul. Fitting all of these aims into a single package would not be easy; there seemed to be so many mutually exclusive imperatives.

“The breakthrough came from a most unexpected direction. Porux himself, who had been accused of being one of the ringleaders in this anti-Republic conspiracy, suggested that we might consider placing the armies of the Celtic Federation under Republic command. In that way, the Republic could be confident that these armies could not be used to harm its interests; and the Celts could be confident that any attempt to use these forces improperly would result in a mutiny that would make them useless in our hands.

“When this idea was put on the table, the Allobroges were very interested. Almost all of their territory is within Transalpine Gaul, and I saw ample proof that Fimbria had abused them almost as much as Caesar had abused the other tribes. The Volcae, from the far west behind Narbo, suggested that this pattern could be used in the existing province to repair the damage done over the last few years.

“That was when I started to feel nervous. I could see that this could lead to a weakening of our control over Transalpine Gaul, and a threat to our communications with the Spains. I told them that there was no way that the Republic would agree to any move towards autonomy for the Allobroges, the Volcae, or any other Celtic tribe within our province. If such was seriously suggested, it would trigger the very theories about Celtic conspiracies that caused the problems in the first place. At that point the Celts suspended the talks. I was asked if I wanted to return to Rome, or wait for them while they conferred privately. I took the offer of a return to show that they were still acting in good faith; it would have been so easy for them to treat me as a hostage. So I suggested that they should resume talks as soon as possible. It would help them enormously if I could return to Rome with a satisfactory agreement while the trial of Caesar was still being considered.

“A few days later we met again, and they proposed an unexpected offer. They suggested that all of Celtica should be added to Transalpine Gaul, greatly expanding the security of the province, and also eliminating any risk of Celtic aggression. But to protect their own interests, they would require agreement from the Republic on certain safeguards.

“The first was that the Republic would accept as Ethnarch whomever the Celtic tribes would elect as their leader. The Rufan System of administration could be introduced, and a Republic-trained administration adopted, but the Celts must be able to choose their Ethnarch.

“The second was that Republic officers shall control the army, which would be organised along Republican lines as legions, but the rank-and-file soldiers must be Celts, or if not enough Celts could be supplied, the number and distribution of non-Celts would be subject to the Ethnarch's veto.

“The third was that the Province would be responsible for the cost of equipping, training and maintaining the legions in the province as well as for their own administration and public works; and in return for this, there would be no Republican taxes levied.” Silo paused and looked around the chamber.

“In effect, they propose that they would have the same status as the Italian tribes, except that they would pay the costs of their garrison and would not have the rights of Republic citizenship. They would be half-way between a Province and a Tribe. This is the proposal I bring before you, and suggest that it could form the basis of further negotiations,” and here Silo gave a crooked smile, “preferably by a delegation charged with more formal authority than this old soldier held during the initial talks.”

Several men stood as Silo made his way to his chair. Fimbria was one of them.

“Gaius Flavius,” Marius said, “I have noted that you wish to speak to this matter, and I will call on you when there are none senior to you. Until then, I suggest you save your legs.” A chuckle ran around the chamber as Fimbria bristled his indignation and sat. Marius turned to Pellius. “Pontius, please speak.”

“I suggest that this matter is too complex to discuss in an open forum such as this, starting on the information we have to hand at the moment. I would like to have a committee consisting of all available consulars to meet and discuss this in detail, and then come back to the whole Senate with their recommendations. Then Senators may have the opportunity to discuss, accept, reject or amend that recommendation as they see fit.”

Silo stood again and spoke before being recognised. “If I may respond, Consul; I support that approach.”

“I also support it, Conscript Fathers,” Marius wanted to look in control again. “If there are no objections, I will consider it resolved.” A few on the second tier, the Praetors who were entitled to speak but did not always get the opportunity because the front row had seniority, shuffled uneasily. But none stood to object.

“Then it is resolved. Please, Pontius; it is your motion, so I charge you with the responsibility of chairing the committee and organising meeting times.”

“I have to admit it, Arius; I will never understand how you engineers can imagine ways of doing things like this!” Sertorius was looking out over one of the barrage sites. Spread out before him was what looked like a long, slightly-

curved ridge with its crest at a remarkably uniform height, and all faced with stone. It jutted out from his viewing platform, stretching almost half-way across the floodplain of the Euphrates, finishing in a rounded end almost at the river bank in the distance.

“There are some reasonably routine, standard techniques, Quintus; it is just a matter of choosing the most economical and appropriate of them, and then customising the specifics to the circumstances of the job,” Claudius confessed. “It is a matter of training and planning, not of genius.”

“Well, I can see what you have in mind now,” continued Sertorius, “but I still can't see how you will actually achieve it. Surely, as you try to close that last gap, the water will wash away your work as fast as you can build it.”

“Yes, that's the tricky bit,” Claudius nodded. “So I'll let you in on a professional secret.” He smiled conspiratorially. “You see that there are tunnels through the wall in places? Ten just over half-way along this wall?” Claudius pointed towards a series of arches.

“Yes,” Sertorius answered unsurely.

“Well, the bases of those arches are set a bit below the level of the river at low flow, what we get in the dry season,” Claudius continued. “Next year, as the water level drops, we will dig channels from those tunnels to the main river, one upstream and one downstream. Then, we will drop sandbags into the main river course, forcing the water level upstream higher and higher. But before the flow gets fast enough to wash away the sandbags, the upstream bank will overflow, and be diverted through the new channel, through the tunnels, and then back to the main river downstream. As it does this, it will erode the sides of the new channels more easily than it can pick up entire sandbags.

“Then, when the new channels are worn wide enough and most of the river flow is going through the tunnels, we will drop in more sandbags, close off the main course, and build the rest of the wall on dry ground.”

But won't the new flow also wash away the ground around the new wall?” Sertorius asked.

“We will provide a stone lining to the new channels for about fifty paces either side of the wall, to protect the dam,” Claudius explained.

The penny dropped in Sertorius' mind. “I see! So by the time the river rises in flood again, the new part of the wall will be complete and stone-lined!” And then he paused. “But next flood season, how will the water get through?”

“There will be more tunnels in the new part of the wall, too. Enough to let through the expected peak flow,” Claudius explained. “Even though the total cross-section of the tunnels will be much less than the cross-section of the floodplain, there will be the pressure of all that water stored behind the wall to push it through faster. We will still be able to pass enough water to stop the dam from overflowing, even in a wet year.”

“And after the peak flow is reached, and the water level behind starts dropping, how do you stop all that water escaping?” Sertorius asked. “How do you keep it back for the dry times?”

“In most of those tunnels there are slots in the walls that go right up through the dam, to the crest. See? If you look closely you can see the slots in the top of the walls.”

Sertorius looked hard. “I think my eyes are getting too old,” Sertorius confessed. “Can you take me down there and explain it all in detail?”

Soon the two men were walking through one of the tunnels, an arched structure so much larger than it appeared from the viewing platform that Sertorius could not help but be impressed.

“This one tunnel encloses more volume than any single space in any other building I know!” he said appreciatively.

“Yes, but it doesn't have to be decorated, so it is pretty cheap to build,” Claudius agreed. “In fact, building it is not much more expensive than not building it; think of the amount of filling we saved!” He reached a point where there was a neat groove in the side wall, a slot almost five feet deep in the rock facing and over two feet wide. The groove went up through the top of the arch, and a patch of daylight could be seen above. Sertorius noticed that the gap through the top of the arch bulged out towards the upstream side until it was ten feet wide in the middle. “You see that the downstream sides of the slot are faced in bronze?” Claudius pointed out a detail that Sertorius had not noticed. “When we want to reduce the flow of water through the tunnel, we drop a big steel plate down this slot from above. The steel plate has wheels mounted in its edges, to make it easier to pull up and down.”

“That would be some enormous weight to lift!” Sertorius exclaimed.

“It is not solid steel,” Claudius explained. It has a solid front face of steel plate less than half an inch thick, but with ribs behind it to support it against the water pressure. That's why the top of the slot is curved; the plate has to bulge out, almost like an arch on its side, to be strong enough. And also, you will notice that the slots are vertical, but when you see the plates you will see that they lean forward, into the water, so that the pressure of the water helps to push the plate back up the slot as much as it clamps it tight against the downstream side of the slot.” Claudius smiled. “Or at least, that what I hope will happen! We couldn't do full-scale tests to prove it, but we did do some pretty heavy work on a scale model and then some arithmetic to scale it up. But if the plate is lighter than it should be, we can always add some more weight to drive it down against the flood pressure, and when we have to pull it up we can remove as much weight as we need to by hoisting up the ballast.”

“So all of these tunnels will have plates like these?” Sertorius asked.

“Oh no!” Claudius corrected him. “We need some of these tunnels to stay open all the time, to pass the minimum flow. We will have these floodgates only in those tunnels we need to be able to open and shut as circumstances dictate.”

Sertorius looked around in wonder. “This dam wall will be almost two miles long when it is finished, with twenty tunnels like this; and this is only one of five such dams across this river! Amazing!

“We have both seen the Gardens in Babylon; in fact, you have done some repair work on them. And we have seen the Temple of Artemis. I have only read

about the Lighthouse in Alexandria. But I tell you, Arius; this scheme of yours is greater than the sum total of all other building efforts of men throughout all history! Just see to it that it works, and your name will live forever!”

There was no mistaking the pride in Claudius' grin. “It will work, Quintus,” he said confidently. “And your name will live as the man who made it possible. From the Spains to the Indus; what man has ever governed so widely or so wisely?”

“I agree, of course,” Sertorius agreed with dead-pan humour. “In fact, I'm so wise that I don't give out bonus payments for brown-nosers.”

Claudius gave a single roar of laughter. “Have you seen enough now? I could do with a bite to eat,” he said as he turned back to the entrance.

Silo, Cato and Gaius Aurelius Cotta arrived in Massalia in October to a welcome fit for heroes. There was one thing that everyone in Transalpine Gaul could agree on, whether they were Romans, Greeks or Celts; that there must be an enduring peace.

Lucius Scribo, the Chief Administrator who had been acting as governor during the interregnum, had already made arrangements for their accommodation in the Governor's House. Although Massalia was independent, a city-state with 'Friend and Ally' status, it served as a major administrative centre for the surrounding province and the Governor's House was large enough for an extended family and guests. It was ample for the three delegates and their staff travelling relatively lightly.

“Thank you for your troubles, Lucius,” Silo acknowledged. “But we do not intend to stay here for long. On the ship coming here we three agreed that we should meet the chiefs in their own territory, rather than expecting them to come to us. We want to dispel any hint of Roman arrogance. We will send messages out to the leading Celts, suggesting that we meet in Vienne on the first day of November. That town is nominally within the province, but the Allobroges still consider it their main city, and it is only a few miles from the frontier.”

“Yes, General. What assistance can I provide?”

“Please set your scribes to writing and sending the invitations as soon as possible, detach a century of cavalry as our escort, and provide us with transport and provisions for our party,” Silo summarised. “And continue acting as Governor while I am away.”

Scribo was well aware that any problems on this mission would reflect very badly on his career. He also knew that delays would not be tolerated, with winter approaching and Silo explicitly using phrases like 'as soon as possible'.

“Invitations to whom, General? Only those you spoke with in the Spring, or others as well?”

“Every tribe north of the Pyrenees and west of the Rhene, Lucius. I don't want anyone feeling as if his tribe is being ignored.”

“I will have a draft for your approval before sunset, General.”

Silo smiled and nodded in approval, then turned away to look for his colleagues.

Chapter 8 – 685 AUC (69 B.C.)

The advice to Porux had not been very detailed, but in writing to ensure there was nothing lost in the transmission. The Contract of Federation had to contain certain measures that the Republic would demand, if Friend and Ally status were to be conferred. The Treaty must also allow any tribe west of the Rhenus to join the Federation if it would subscribe to the Contract. A further point required that any dispute between tribes to be settled in a court to be appointed by the Federation Comitia for that purpose. Provided this was done, the 'Three Points' agreed to in Spring as a basis of the negotiations would be conceded in the ensuing negotiations to create an autonomous Province.

Porux had wasted no time in calling together Celtillus of the Arverni, Orgetorix of the Helvetii, Casticus of the Sequani, Diviciacus of the Aedui and Baiorix of the Santones, the same group that had met for the initial talks with Silo. Pellixus of the Allobroges, their host tribe, was also included even though his territory was already under Republic jurisdiction. The seven men quickly agreed with every point in Silo's list, and set to writing a draft Contract that would satisfy them. But once the meeting of all Gallic chiefs had convened, it had become obvious that there were a significant number of tribes that would not easily give up their independence. The talks dragged out through a very cold autumn.

'Now I remember why I moved my base in the East from the middle of Anatolia down to Antioch!' Silo thought to himself as he dreaded the winter that they must now endure. It was already too late to go back to Massalia; the snow had already arrived.

"I think the only way we are going to get any further movement on this question is to actually agree with what is on the table now," Cotta said.

Cato frowned and looked across sharply at this comment, and then his face cleared. "Ah! I think I see where you are going!" he exclaimed. "So long as the Remi think they can cripple the whole process by being stubborn, they will continue to be stubborn. But if we agree to accept the willing tribes while letting the stubborn ones go their own way, then they will soon realise that they are digging their own graves. They are making themselves fair game!"

"Exactly, Lucius Porcius," Cotta agreed.

"I'm sorry, but I don't see the point," Silo asked for an explanation.

"It is like this, Quintus Poppaadius," Cotta said patiently. "The Remi, most of the Belgae and the other hold-out tribes know that we are still working with the aim of all of Gaul being won over; they know we don't want a patchwork that would be administratively awkward. So they think that so long as they veto the idea of a Federated Gaul, we will remain confined to the far south. That is, well away from their territory, so they will not be threatened by us. But what will they do if we step away from an 'all-or-nothing' approach? How will they respond to us accepting the Aedui, Lingones, Sequani and the others, while leaving little holes in the map because the Pictones and the rest won't join?"

“Well, I suppose they won't like that,” Silo replied. “It will bring our frontier right up to their doors; some tribes will be totally surrounded. We could then swallow them one at a time.”

“That's right!” Cotta agreed emphatically. “That makes them vulnerable to another Caesar if the worst happens; but even in times of peace it means we can throttle their trade, demand high duty charges for imports and exports, and generally bleed them.”

“In other words, they would be forced to join us eventually,” Cato finished the line of logic. “And tribes like the Remi, right on our frontier and having already made themselves unpopular in Rome, could expect anything they do to be interpreted as hostility towards the Republic or our allies.”

The light dawned in Silo's mind. “Yes! Of course!”

“So are we agreed?” Cato asked. “Next meeting we simply announce that we are prepared to negotiate with a Gallic Federation that contains as many tribes as will join, and those that don't want to join can go their own way.”

“Even if the hold-outs remain outside, it will still be much better than the current arrangements. The southern tribes already in Transalpine Gaul will be the big winners, gaining autonomy instead of being a subject people,” Silo observed. “That should ensure peace; they will fight with us against any other tribe that threatens to overturn the new arrangement.”

“A bit like what you did in Syria,” Cotta quipped. Silo smiled back.

The hall was buzzing with conversations as the last of the Celtic delegates entered. Porux, acting as chairman at this conference, looked around to confirm that all of the major players were now in attendance, and then stood. The buzz died down to a murmur.

“Lords, I welcome you to today's session,” he opened. “I trust you have spent the last two days well in contributory discussions among yourselves, and are all prepared to move forward in this agreement.” He looked over to the seats customarily occupied by the Remi delegates.

“I have been given notice of three more suggested amendments to the current draft. Let us hear from lord Carlix of the Remi first.” Porux resumed his seat as Carlix stood.

“The draft as it stands at the moment proposes that disputes entirely between the Celtic tribes are to be settled in our own courts and according to our own laws, and that the Republic is to have no jurisdiction. However, there are two disputes currently outstanding between us and the Parisii, and a similar dispute between us and the Bellovaci. In both cases, our laws differ slightly from those of the other parties, so there is an underlying dispute as to which laws are to be applied. I believe we need to clarify our own internal legal framework before we can even start to take this proposed Celtic Federation seriously.”

Pardico of the Parisii sprang to his feet. “Those two disputes you refer to, Carlix. Are they not the latest land grabs you have made at our expense? Armed occupation of Parisii land, with the threat of war if we dare to reclaim it?” A flurry of calls and interjections flew around the hall.

Silo stood and waited patiently for the call. Eventually order was restored and Silo was given the call. "As we have maintained throughout these talks, we of the Republic do not want to be drawn into Celtic affairs. We totally respect your independence in your own lands.

"But in so far as the point made by lord Carlix is of any interest to us, I feel I should lay out the Republic's position. Yes, I think it would be helpful for the Celtic Federation to clarify its own internal legal framework. Exactly what form that takes is a matter for the Celts themselves to decide.

"However, that point is completely separate from the proposed Treaty between the Federation and the Republic. Whatever the Federation does, whatever legal framework it adopts, the Treaty with the Republic will respect Celtic autonomy. With that in mind, we in the Republic delegation have come to a conclusion. We have long hoped for a settlement that includes all the tribes of Gaul, but we now recognise that there are still some significant differences between some of the tribes. We do not intend to impose any agreement or uniformity upon you; that is part of your own autonomy. However, we have decided that we need not wait for all Celts to agree and form this Federation. We are prepared to make a treaty with a Celtic Federation that falls short of being universal.

"So we advise you all today that those of you who do not want to be included will be free to walk away, and the Republic will make a Treaty with those who remain. If this means that there are parts of Gaul that remain outside the Treaty, then so be it. But the members of the Celtic Federation will be considered our closest Friends and Allies. Those who wish to renounce Friend and Ally status by remaining independent of the Celtic Federation may do so, and live with their choice."

The hall was silent as Silo sat. This was a major change in the context for the negotiations, and each delegate raced to comprehend the implications. At length Carlix stood again. "And if one tribe is in the Federation, and another is not; will the Republic still be unwilling to interfere in Celtic matters?"

Silo smiled as he stood. "The Republic always stands by its Friends and Allies. Any governor who neglects this most basic duty, as Caesar did not so long ago, will be punished for his failure."

There was no doubt what the application of that principle would mean for those who did not join the Federation. Porux himself stood.

"Delegates, I think this changes everything. I suggest we break now, and think through the consequences. We will meet again in three days' time." There was an immediate response of scraping chairs and murmuring voices as the delegates rose and made for the doors. Cotta smiled to Cato. "I told you so!"

Silo rose from his chair and hailed Porux. The Celt turned in response, concern all over his face as Silo made his way towards the Chairman.

"Yes, lord Silo?" he asked with a frown.

"I am sorry that I did not have the opportunity to let you know about that earlier," Silo apologised. "We were not sure that it would be necessary to go that way, but Carlix made it obvious we would get no-where by staying with the same

agenda. But we did make a few notes for you just in case.” He pulled a folded sheet of paper from the bag over his shoulder and handed it to the Celt. “This might be helpful to you.”

There was a constant stream of delegates to the Republic delegation's villa over the rest of the day. All wanted to do the same thing; assure Silo that their own tribe was eager to be a Friend and Ally of the Republic, if only one or another tribe would not be so obstructive. To which Silo could give only one sentence of advice; 'Talk to Porux!'. Porux in turn, read them the draft Contract and invited them to a conference to be held on the day before the Treaty talks were due to resume.

Porux gave a wry smile to see that every delegate from the Celtic tribes had come to this meeting. Whether or not all of them would be in agreement or not would soon be seen; he expected that most of them were there mainly to see which way the wind blew.

“Lords of Gaul, you all know that I and six others have drawn up an amended draft Contract for a Celtic Federation; one which now envisages that there might be tribes outside the Federation. We have done this by including a new section titled 'Admission to the Federation', and re-numbering the following sections.” He looked around. “Presumptuous of us, I know; but some-one has to start somewhere, and we were the men who were in the original negotiations with lord Silo last Spring. But that does not mean that you have no influence. What we have written is only a suggestion; it is in your hands whether or not to agree with what we propose, to reject it, or to alter it to echo your own wishes. But I will start by reading the draft document again in its entirety, including the amendments we seven have proposed, and we will then discuss it piece by piece.”

Porux put the pages on the table in front of him and started reading.

A Contract for the Federation of the Gauls.

The tribes of Gaul who subscribe to this Contract pledge themselves to honour and observe all of its provisions.

Section 1 – The Council

The supreme government of the Federation shall be the Council. Members of the Council shall be chosen from each tribe, in proportion to the numbers of adult males in each tribe according to the most recent count. The total number of Councillors shall be set from time to time by the Council, but each tribe with more than ten thousand adult males shall be entitled to at least one member of Council. The means of choosing Councillors from each tribe shall be determined by each tribe.

Council members shall be chosen each year for a term of one year. There shall be no restriction imposed by any Federation law restricting the eligibility of any man to be a Councillor, or restricting multiple or consecutive terms. The Council shall appoint all officers of the Federation, either directly or by delegated authority.

The Council shall have sole authority to conclude treaties with foreign powers, and to make laws concerning any person who deals with foreign powers.

Section 2 – Admission to the Federation

Every tribe west of the Rhene and north of the Pyrenees shall be entitled to admission to the Federation upon their subscription to this Contract. No tribe may leave the Federation, nor be expelled from it; but penalties may be imposed for any action contrary to the laws of the Federation, such penalties to be enforceable by arms if the circumstances require.

Section 3 – Disputes

No tribe may unlawfully harm any other tribe. All disputes between tribes or individuals from different tribes shall be resolved by a court appointed by the Council for that purpose. An appeal from that court may be taken to the Council as a whole, in which case the decision is final. Any tribe or person not complying with that final judgement may be tried by a Federation court appointed by the Council for that purpose, and penalised accordingly if found guilty.

All disputes between individuals or groups within a tribe shall be resolved by that tribe.

Section 4 – Taxation

Each tribe shall pay a Federation tax directly proportional to the number of adult males in their count. The method of raising this tax within each tribe shall be determined by the tribe.

Section 5 – Changes to this Contract

This Contract may be changed only by a vote of two thirds of all members of the Council. Members absent or abstaining from the vote shall be counted as voting against any change.

Carlix of the Remi was first to his feet. Porux smiled. “I am not surprised, lord Carlix, to see that you have a gem of wisdom to bestow upon us.”

“Who would not see the lack of wisdom in this scratchy Contract?” Carlix sneered back. “It has flaws in every section; do you intend to work through the paper a clause at a time, or my I speak on points in any order?”

“Speak as you will, lord Carlix,” Porux invited. “Then, when we have gained an overview, we will work through from beginning to end.”

“The first point I wish to raise is that which would place all disputes between tribes under the authority of this Federation,” Carlix asserted strongly. “We Remi do not submit ourselves to the judgements of other tribes, who would undermine us whenever it suited their own purposes to do so. We reserve the sovereign right to protect ourselves, our friends and our interests. We also object to the provision that no tribe may withdraw from this Federation. What else can a tribe do, if it feels that it is being unjustly treated? Withdrawal must be an option.

“We also object to the reference to a 'Federation Tax'. We Remi do not pay tax or tribute to anyone. Nor shall we be bound by treaties negotiated by other tribes; we will speak for ourselves, thank you.”

“In other words, lord Carlix,” Porux interrupted with a smile, “the rest of us should carry on without you, because there is no way the Remi will be party to this Federation. Thank you for that information; now that you have made it clear that you do not intend to participate, you might as well leave now.”

Carlix drew himself up as his face darkened. “Are you telling me to go away? Are you dismissing me like a common slave?”

“Let me ask you a few questions, lord Carlix,” Porux replied. “Why are you staying? What point is there in your further participation, when it is clear that you will not join any form of Federation, no matter what structure we adopt? Why are you wasting our time as well as your own? Or are you simply trying to ensure that we remain divided among ourselves, so Rome can pick us off one at a time, and you Remi hope to feast on the scraps? Because let me assure you, lord Carlix; you will find that you Remi are not nearly as strong as you think you are!”

“Retract that insult, or it will mean war between us!” Carlix roared in indignation.

“If the Remi want war, then war they will get,” Porux shrugged dismissively. “We already have in place a treaty with the Republic, and your annihilation will be exactly what is needed to unite the rest of Gaul.”

“If the Republic marches against us, the last hundred miles of their march will be over the ashes of what were once Lingones!”

Porux stood. “Who will stand with the Lingones against this threat of misery for all Gaul?”

Celtillus of the Arverni, Orgetorix of the Helvetii, Casticus of the Sequani, Diviciacus of the Aedui and Baiorix of the Santones all stood immediately.

Pellixus of the Allobroges stood a moment later, saying “We are already part of Roman Gaul, but I expect lord Silo will have no objection to us helping to defend the Lingones, who are Friends and Allies of the Republic.”

“Make no mistake, Carlix,” Porux said menacingly, omitting the honorific 'lord' this time. “There shall be a Federation, and it will include at least these seven tribes you see standing before you now. But we are generous men, and we are offering you the opportunity to have a hand in deciding exactly what the ground rules will be. But if you wish to go your own way, then do so! Later, when you see what your stubbornness has achieved, you will be forced to seek admission on our terms, not on yours.” Porux looked around the hall. “That same courtesy is offered to all of you. Discuss this Federation with us in good faith, and we are prepared to make concessions and changes to this Contract if they are fair and reasonable. But refuse to join with us, and you will be on your own. Perhaps the future will be kind to you, and the Republic will accept you as Friends; or perhaps they will see your refusal to join with us, and think of you as a future threat that should be stopped without delay. Decide wisely, friends!”

Pardico stood. “If the Federation will give us justice and protection against the Remi, we Parisii will join.”

“We seven swear to that here and now,” Porux said, looking to the other six. They all nodded agreement. “And that includes settling the matter of your disputed territories, now occupied by the Remi.” He paused for a moment. “Unless, of course, the Remi also join; in which case your dispute will be settled by a Federation court rather than force of arms.”

Callistus of the Pictones stood. “Will this Federation gain for us an amnesty against the killing of Caesar's garrisons last year?”

“Lord Silo has promised amnesty to all who join the Federation and take their part as Friends and Allies,” Porux answered. “He is aware of the provocations by Caesar, and will hold to account only those who maintain their enmity now that Caesar is gone.”

One by one more delegates stood to signify their assent. At length only Carlix and a few from northern Belgica remained in their seats.

“Then I declare this meeting closed, and invite all tribes intending to join the Federation to re-convene in one hour to discuss and agree on the details of the Contract,” Porux declared. Then, speaking directly to Carlix, “And if I see your face in this hall again, it had better be because you are here in good faith, intending to join. Otherwise I will have you driven out. Only those who are prepared to eat the soup are entitled to choose the ingredients.” Carlix glared at Porux, and stamped out of the hall, everyone else making way for the angry face. Some of the delegates from other Belgian tribes followed him.

When the delegates came together an hour later, Silo and his colleagues presented themselves. “Lord Porux, we Republic delegates will not speak on the formation of the Federation, that being an entirely Celtic matter. But we think that if we are permitted to attend purely as observers, we would be better equipped to understand the Federation's legitimate concerns and be able to make a stronger peace when we negotiate with the new Federation.”

Porux spoke to the hall. “Is there any objection to that?” he asked.

“What is the point of objecting?” Carlix asked sarcastically. “Whatever is said will be reported to them by their hired women anyway; Porux for one will keep no secrets.”

“I take that to mean that you have no objection, Carlix,” Porux replied evenly. “And we will see in good time who the women are, hired or not. Now, let us begin,” Porux turned to the matter of the Contract. “Are there any suggestions for changes to the Contract?” Carlix stood immediately. “Yes, lord Carlix?” Porux asked politely.

“The Remi seek only three amendments, believing the other faults can be corrected in time. The first is that the prohibition on leaving the Federation be removed. We believe that every tribe should have the right to leave the Federation if it believes it is being treated unjustly. “The second is that the requirement for a two-thirds vote to change the Contract. This Contract is a new and untried arrangement; we believe it will require some adjustment as we gain more experience, and that those changes should not be able to be prevented at the mercy of a minority. Once the system has been properly tested and proven, perhaps then we can change back to a two-thirds requirement for the sake of

stability; but let us not be hasty in this regard. And our third suggestion is that the majority required should not automatically count absentees as negative votes.”

“Thank you, lord Carlix, for your constructive suggestions,” Porux responded as Carlix sat.

Orgetorix of the Helvetii stood immediately. “Although I am inclined to prefer the current draft Contract, I can see that the first suggestion has some merit. In practical terms, a tribe that is determined to leave the Federation cannot be prevented from doing so; all it needs to do is stop sending Councillors, stop paying the Federation tax, and generally ignore Federation laws. Enforcement by armed force would effectively be the same as expulsion and war, anyway. I can also see some value in the second suggestion; will all be learning as we go.

“But I cannot accept the third suggestion. It would be too easy for someone to prevent the attendance of some of the Councillors who oppose a particular change, and then move that change without warning so as to have it passed by a Council that has been deliberately manipulated to provide it with an unrepresentative majority.” Orgetorix looked around the hall slowly. “Not that I am levelling this at any one tribe in particular, of course. But to show goodwill, I am prepared to support the first two changes if lord Carlix will assure us that the Remi will join the Federation if only the third is defeated.”

All eyes turned back to Carlix, who turned and whispered to delegates from other Belgic tribes beside and behind him. After a few moments he stood. “The Remi will join if the first two amendments are carried,” he announced at last. “Other matters can be seen to in good time.”

Casticus of the Sequani stood next. “I am pleased to say that the Sequani will also support those two amendments, to avoid the risk of war between our tribes. At this time, we Celts face a strong Republic, and our only options are to co-operate with them, or be subjugated by them. It is only by being united that we will be strong enough to deal with the Republic on fair terms. We welcome the full participation of the Remi, and hopefully the other tribes in the north.”

Callistus of the Pictones stood. “I understand that lord Silo is here as an observer only, and has no right to speak. However, I suggest that we invite him to state a pledge that we have so far only received indirectly. Will the Republic grant an amnesty against the killing of Caesar's garrisons last year? And I also ask for the Republic's reaction to what has been said so far.”

Silo looked to Porux without rising.

“I cannot allow that on the basis of the request of only one tribe,” Porux decided. “However, if a majority of delegates would like to hear lord Silo speak on one or both of those two questions, I will invite him to speak.”

“Yes! Yes!” The calls came from the ranks. “Against?” Porux asked. Only a few voices were heard.

“Lord Silo, you may respond to those two questions if you wish to.”

Silo stood. “Thank you, my lords, for your invitation. First, I can assure you that the Republic will seek a treaty with the Federation as soon as it is formed. In exchange for equitable and just arrangements to ensure continued peace between the Republic and Gaul, we will not only offer amnesties; we will

also offer to redeem all who were seized and sold into slavery by Caesar, and pay some compensation to the next of kin of those who were killed. It will not make up for the loss, I know; but it will be a sign of goodwill, and of some help to those who have been harmed.

“As for my reaction to what I have heard so far,” Silo went on. “I do not understand Gallic very well, and I have understood only the summary that my translator has whispered into my ear. But it is my preference that all Gaul should be united. This will provide a means by which a future Caesar would be discouraged from repeating the mistakes of these last few years. It would also permit any similar hothead among the Celts to be dealt with by his own kind for any raiding or other hostile acts, rather than by us foreigners and provoking a reaction that could lead to war. But as I said a few days ago, what we prefer is not important; what is vital here is what you Celts prefer.”

Any other speakers?” Porux asked as Silo sat.

Baiorix of the Santones stood. “The Santones will also support the two amendments, for the sake of peace.”

“Does anyone oppose the first two amendments?” Porux asked. There was no movement.

“Then I declare them accepted,” Porux concluded. “Now, who will speak to the third amendment? The current draft will count absent Councillors as automatically voting against any changes. The amendment would have them not counted at all.”

Diviciacus of the Aedui stood. “This amendment must be defeated. Otherwise, we can expect Councillors to be murdered or abducted in an attempt to manipulate the vote. The current wording must stand.”

Cominix of the Atrobates stood immediately. “That is absurd! According to this formula, a hundred men meeting and voting unanimously for a change can be defeated by one hundred and one who do not even bother to turn up! Why should the fate of the Federation be determined by who is the laziest?”

“Perhaps the answer to that problem is to ensure your supporters are not among the lazy ones,” Porux replied from the chair. “If something is so important, then it should be important enough for its supporters to attend and vote.” A murmur went around the hall. “Are there any other speakers?” The murmur continued, but with no-one standing. “Then I put the question for the amendment; those in favour of the amendment?” There was a chorus of ‘Yes’. “Those against?” A loud shout of ‘No!’

“I call for a count,” Porux announced. “Those in favour, please stand.” Most delegates stood. “I appoint Orgetorix counter. As he indicates each man, that man will sit.” Orgetorix started counting loudly as he pointed to one man after another.

“There are nineteen tribes in favour of the amendment,” Orgetorix declared at the end of the count.

“Now those against?” Porux called. “I call Cominix as counter.”

Cominix carried out his count, and at the end declared “There are twenty four tribes against the amendment.”

“Then I declare that the amendment is lost; the current wording stands,” Porux concluded. “Are there any other suggestions for amendments?” There were no men rising as he looked around the hall. “Then I leave the Contract as a whole, to either accept or reject, to each tribe for individual decision,” Porux announced. “Those who choose to join should stay behind and subscribe. Others may leave now.”

There was stirring in the seats, but each man remained seated.

Sertorius had deliberately convened the May meeting of his Council here at the first barrage so everyone would be able to see how the dam handled the peak of the flood. He was overawed by what he saw from the viewing platform.

The water impounded behind the wall stretched back like an inland sea, until a bend in the valley limited his vision. The jets of water rushing through the twenty tunnels through the dam wall under the pressure of this impounded water were white boiling torrents in their stone-lined channels, ending in a ferocious standing wave almost hundred paces downstream.

“This is amazing, Arius,” he said to the engineer standing beside him, but without taking his eyes off the spectacle. “To have conceived so great a work, and then to have made it actually happen.... Is that what it feels like to be a god?”

“Not a god, Quintus, but a very happy engineer,” Claudius answered. “This is about the same flow that was the peak of last year's flood, and about two-thirds of the biggest flood we designed for, without the wall being over-topped. You see that we still have plenty of freeboard left?”

“When will you start sliding the steel gates into position, to hold back some water for the dry season?” Sertorius pressed.

“Not until the water level in the lake drops a lot lower than this,” Claudius answered. “We don't want to put too much load on the embankment for the first couple of years; the earth has to consolidate first, to pack down really tight. Otherwise the water seeping through it could do damage. You have to be careful with these earth dams.”

“But didn't you have men packing the earth down hard while you were building it?”

“Yes, but that was only enough to survive the high water for a short peak. After a couple of years, once the pressure of the water itself helps it all pack down, we will be able to hold back more water for longer periods.”

Sertorius looked up the length of the valley again. “That is a lot of water you are holding back, Arius. How much difference will that make to the flood levels down in Babylon?”

“To the peak flood level? No difference at all, really,” Claudius answered. Sertorius was shocked.

“Then why are we building these dams?” he demanded.

Claudius thought for a moment before answering. “Think of it this way, Quintus; you have a large tank, with a stop-cock at the bottom. You open the stop-cock, and water starts flowing out and starts to run down the gutter. That is the typical flood. Are you with me so far?”

“Yes, I see what you are saying,” Sertorius nodded.

“Right. Now put a bucket under the stop-cock. It might take a minute to fill the bucket, and then the bucket starts to overflow. What difference does that make to the flow down the gutter?”

“Well, water doesn't start flowing down the gutter until a minute later, but once the bucket is overflowing, the amount of water flowing in the drain would be the same.”

“That's right,” Claudius agreed. “And that is what is happening here. This one dam is like a bucket; it takes the front edge off the flood, giving a few more days before the flood hits Babylon, but the peak flow will be the same. It will just flood for a shorter time.

“So these dams will do nothing to prevent flood damage after all?” Sertorius was aghast. “But that was one of the reasons why we approved these dams!”

“Not so, Quintus,” Claudius continued his explanation. “Now imagine that instead of just one bucket, you have five buckets. And when the first bucket starts to overflow, that overflow water doesn't go to the gutter, but into the second bucket; and that overflows into the third, and so on. What difference would that make?”

“It would delay the flood by five minutes instead of just one; but the flood would be the same.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Claudius. “But what if the tank only holds enough water to fill the five buckets? Or to put it another way, what if there is only five minutes' worth of water in the tank? That means that the last bucket won't overflow, because there is no more water flowing into the system.”

Understanding dawned on Sertorius' face. “So this dam is just the first bucket in the series of five! By itself, it doesn't stop the flooding; but when all five are built, they will be able to hold back all the flood water!”

“Well, all except what we allow through, to keep the fields watered,” Claudius corrected him.

You are a genius, Arius,” Sertorius said with respect. Then he tore his eyes away from the spectacle. “Well, one dam finished; four more to go.” The other four men, respectfully quiet during this inspection, followed Sertorius and Claudius from the viewing platform and into the construction office for their meeting.

“Let's finish with Arius first,” Sertorius said as he took his seat. “We have all seen the first dam now, and I'm very impressed. What is the programme for the rest of the year, and what other projects do you have on your plate?”

Claudius leant forward on his elbows to speak. “This dam will not be operated in any active way this year. The flood tunnels will be left fully open, but even in this passive mode it will mean that the levels downstream will tend to drop more slowly than usual. But that should not be a major issue; I estimate that inundated land will be available perhaps ten days later than might otherwise have been the case, but river flows for watering will remain higher than usual for about the same length of time, and the start of the next flood will be delayed by about

the same time. It just means that the season as a whole will move to be ten days later.

“I intend to build the second dam next year, but this will depend on conditions. The second dam will be bigger than the first, so I am planning the work so that if I look like I am going to run out of time I will be able to protect a two-thirds completed dam against erosion during the flood, and finish it the following year. For those who are wondering, but too polite to ask, this first dam came in just a little bit over budget. But I expect that now we have experience in these local conditions, and a workforce that knows what it is doing, the costs of the remaining dams will be able to be contained. As for other projects in planning, I propose a high-quality road from Babylon to Antioch, to make trade quicker, easier and cheaper. The old Persians did a similar thing, building a road from Susa to Sardis, but this follows a difficult route and was more aimed at connecting their more powerful cities militarily, rather than the needs of bulk trade. I propose to build this new road up the Euphrates valley instead. A better road that makes trade cheaper will pay for itself by allowing us to charge merchants who use it, either by a direct toll payment, or by increasing their import/export fees, or by taxing the inns and caravansaries along the way.

“And finally I suggest that we think about clearing a safe shipping channel up the Euphrates when the dams are in full operation and the river is better controlled. We won't know until the dams are finished and have had a few years of operation behind them, but I expect that we should be able to make the river safely navigable at least as far as Babylon; this will also improve trade. But that is for later.”

“How much will this new road cost?” Sertorius asked when it was clear that Claudius had finished.

“The road itself, in the order of ten thousand sesterium milia,” Claudius said offhandedly. “But I will need to build quite a few bridges, too. I prefer to build them in stone, rather than timber which will need constant maintenance. That will be another ten to twenty.”

Tollianus frowned. “We are spending a huge amount on building works already, Arius; and as you said, you are over-budget even on your already generous allocation. I would like to see a return on these expenses before I commit more money that way.”

“Specially if we are thinking about building a navy,” Karmides jumped in. “Now that we control sea trade with the Indus, we will need to suppress piracy.”

“Why, Arius; I do believe they are jealous of your big dam!” Sertorius quipped.

“Well, there is no urgency about the road,” Claudius shrugged. “But the more trade we can push through, the more taxes we can collect.”

“Put together a properly-costed proposal, and an analysis of how it would pay for itself, and I'll go through it with Marcus,” Sertorius promised. “Now, who is next? Karmides, you were talking about a navy?”

“Yes, Quintus,” the old Greek answered. “I have the design for a fast patrol ship, which should be capable of running down most pirate vessels. It is

also capable of carrying a century of soldiers. It was prepared by Sibar, probably the best shipwright in Krokola. One of Arius' engineers, the one who has been analysing these eastern hull designs, has looked over it; he agrees that it looks good from an engineer's perspective, too. I propose to have one built and put through sea trials; and if it lives up to expectations I would like to have another five commissioned."

"So you think piracy is going to be that big an issue?" Sertorius asked. "How many ships have been lost so far?"

"Only three so far; but unless we take action, more pirates will be emboldened."

"Cost?"

"Five hundred sestertium milia for the prototype, plus a designer fee of fifty sestertium milia to Sibar if it lives up to his claims. Then we might see if we need to make any adjustments before building more, but I expect each to cost about the same, five hundred sestertium milia or so."

"And how will these ships operate in battle?" Marius asked. "There is no point in catching these pirates if we can't defeat them."

"They will have grapples, with chains rather than ropes on the last twenty feet or so; they can't be cut through. The idea is to use a small onager to throw a few grapples across the enemy, wind them in with a capstan, and when the ships are alongside each other you send men across to board and do hand-battle, just like in the Punic Wars."

Marius thought for a moment. "So we will need marines, and they will need to be able to use cross-bows to clear the enemy deck before going over. I think we can train up a specialist cohort for that style of warfare."

"Right, Karmides; let's get that first ship built. Lucius, establish a Marine Cohort and start training them on boarding exercises," Sertorius decided. "If Septimus is available he might be able to help you there; any soldier who has a chance to be trained by the leader of the legendary Caretus Cohort will bust his guts to make the grade! They might even develop the same esprit de corps if they see themselves as being another Special Unit. Then, if everything works like we hope it will, we can expand from there."

"And now, my pet project. How are the Black Sea colonies going, Marcus?"

"They are going better now than they were last year," Tollianus answered. "Those forty two old farm managers have been spread around the colonies and have spent the winter giving lessons. Also, we have had another thirteen thousand of the Roman Head Count take up allotments and migrate. With snow outside and nothing else to do, almost every new colonist now has probably the best education he could have hoped for, even if it is only farming. Most of them couldn't even read properly when they shipped out! The last report I had from the teachers was that they had concentrated on telling their boys what sort of land is best to clear and how to go about it to ensure the best results. They expected to start work in April, and with luck get a small first crop in by Quinctilis. Perhaps not enough to even be worth the time and effort, and certainly not enough to feed

them for the year without borrowing, but just the experience will set them up well for next year.

“Meanwhile, Arius Parus, the governor of Thracia, has taken some inspiration from you. He has claimed all unworked land in the north along the coast, as far as the Danube mouths. He has proclaimed it as Public Land, and has started setting up his own colonies. With us on the northern and eastern shores and Parus settling Romans on the western shore, the Euxine will be a Roman lake within a generation.”

What are the Greek cities in northern Thracia doing about that?” Sertorius asked in surprise.

“Screaming like wounded pigs, but the Senate has told them to go away,” Tullianus replied. “These north Thracians didn't lift a finger against Mithridates twenty years ago, so they have been told that they have not been considered 'Friends and Allies' since then. Parus claimed only land that was not being put to productive use, so they have been told to shut their mouths. If they don't like that, then perhaps it is time for a proper Treaty to legally define their rights; and that legal definition might be a lot more burdensome than losing land that was going to waste anyway.”

“That is a big call from the Senate,” Sertorius commented drily.

“Apparently Vitellius promised free land to every Roman who wanted it, but he didn't have the funds to buy it from the locals like we are doing. So a word in the ear of an ambitious governor was all it took. And who was going to object? The City Comitia was solidly behind him, the Boni would prefer Rome without the Head Count mobs, and the Italians saw no point in arguing if both Boni and Populares agree. And in the long run, probably even the local Greeks will benefit from it, once they get over the insult; more people means more business for them.”

Sertorius frowned for a moment. So if this land is being given away, I suppose that means that the City Comitia will not be paying for land in our colonies.”

“That's right, Quintus,” Tullianus agreed. “Those already in our colonies are doing as well as we could have hoped; but we have had no orders from Rome for more land since Parus published his plans; the Roman Comitia is referring all applicants to Parus. What happens in the future depends on all sorts of guesses; How much free land is there anyway, or at least how much is fit for farming; will Parus start pushing the definition of 'unused' when he starts to run short of arable iugera; and will he start on a series of confiscations when there is no other source of supply?”

“Well, you are the expert in Administration, Marcus. What can he do within the law?”

“Pretty much as he pleases, it seems,” Tullianus answered. “The key to the whole issue is that Parus is right about these cities. They submitted to Mithridates, losing their status as Friends and Allies, but when the Republic administration moved back in after the war without having to fight for the

territory, everything just went back to business as normal; there was no revision of their legal status. So technically, these cities are still enemies of the Republic.”

“Even though they have been administered by the Republic for almost twenty years, paid their taxes, and never lifted so much as a rolled-up sheet of paper to use as a weapon against the Republic?”

“You’ve got it in one, Quintus!” Tullianus assured him. “Law is a wonderful thing, isn’t it?”

“Then I think we would do well to assume we will be getting no more colonists for a few years yet,” Sertorius concluded unhappily. “In that case, I think we might look at consolidating some of our smaller settlements into a few larger towns.”

“That might be awkward, Quintus. We have already bought the land where the new colonies are now, and we would have to pay again to buy new lands near the larger centres. So let’s just see what Fortuna brings us over the next few years. Besides, the local barbarians have come to like the idea of more, smaller colonies; they hope that it spreads the trade opportunities wider. Strange as it seems, we might even be able to talk them into giving us more land, free of charge, rather than having these colonies closed down.”

All right then, Marcus,” Sertorius decided. “Talk to the local leaders in each case, and explain what is happening and why. I want you to be scrupulously honest and candid with these guys; there are too many Roman hostages on their soil for us to make enemies of them. So whatever they are prepared to do or offer, we will consider it in good faith. Get talking to them and keep me informed.

“And in the meantime I will write to Drusus and Silo on a purely personal level. I think the Senate should consider carefully how it deals with these Thracian Greeks. It would seem strange if they are subjected to land confiscations for merely submitting to overwhelming Pontic power twenty years ago when we were not there to defend them, while Pontus itself has been treated so much more leniently. We don’t want to send a message that might be misinterpreted by all the Greeks everywhere else.”

Tullianus smiled. “Yes, do that, Quintus. The more they can limit Parus, the sooner we will be able to get our own colonial expansion going again.”

Silo rose to report on negotiations with the new Gallic Federation. “Conscript Fathers, I can summarise our negotiations as satisfactory and complete.” He scanned the terraces, a smile of satisfaction on his face. “The first and most critical point is that all of Gaul west of the Rhene has consented to join the Federation. We have only one entity to deal with, and not a myriad of competing interests, nor a handful of recalcitrant stand-outs.

“As previously foreshadowed, we have agreed that all of Gaul, including the territory currently administered by the Republic as Transalpine Gaul, shall form a single Special Province. Within that province, each Gallic tribe shall administer its own laws autonomously. Cities such as Massalia and all other Republic colonies will also be recognised as autonomous, and under their own

laws and courts, but not part of the Federation; it is up to this Senate to determine their exact status within the Republic.

“The Special Province will be administered by an Ethnarch to be elected by the tribes of the Federation. The Ethnarch will report to this Senate, but will hold his office from the Federation. We will have no authority over the Ethnarch.

“The Republic shall have control over all armed forces within Gaul. These will be organised along Republic lines, with Republic officers. However, the Ethnarch shall have a veto over the number and distribution of non-Celts in the army. In this way, the Republic can be confident that any attempt to use these forces against the Republic will be impossible to plan without our knowing, and crippled by lack of leadership if it does occur. And the Federation can be confident that any attempt by the Republic to use them against the Federation will result in mutiny. Each side will be safe from coercion by the other. The Federation will be responsible for all costs in equipping and maintaining these armed forces, and for its own internal public works and other costs; in consideration of which, there shall be no liability for taxes to the Republic.” Silo stopped pacing at this point before resuming his report.

“All of this is simply a confirmation of our initial outline agreement. But there were a few additional points added to the agreement. The first is that the Federation shall be entitled to take two seats here in this Senate, with the speaking rights of Tribal Praetors, except that they shall have no vote. The second is that the Ethnarch's veto power over non-Gaul soldiers shall not extend to forces travelling between Italy and the Spains through territory which is currently Transalpine Gaul; there shall remain an unrestricted right of innocent passage of Republic forces through this territory. However, the courtesy of providing notice to the Ethnarch before entering shall be observed whenever possible. The third is that all persons enslaved by Caesar shall be returned to their homelands with compensation for their wrongful captivity and additional cash for any injuries, and there shall also be compensation paid to the kin of all persons killed by Caesar's forces and for damage to property, up to the total value of Caesar's assets seized by the Republic after his condemnation for Treason. The distribution of this compensation shall be decided by a special court to be set up by the Federation for that purpose.” Silo looked around, with a crooked grin. “Caesar's personal fortune was no-where large enough to cover the damage he did, so this amounts to handing all of his fortune over to the Gauls. At least that means that the Republic is not out of pocket for his misdeeds, so I think we got out of that quite cheaply.

“And finally, the terms of this Treaty shall not be varied without the free agreement of both parties. In other words, if one party breaks one provision without proper consultation and agreement, the other party is entitled to interpret that as the repudiation of the whole agreement.” Silo scanned around the chamber. “Conscript Fathers; when you sent me, Gaius Aurelius and Lucius Porcius to negotiate this Treaty, you gave us authority to bind the Republic. We three have already pledged to this Treaty in accordance with that authority, so the Republic is bound. But I invite you to endorse our actions here and now, to confirm this friendship with all of Gaul.”

Cato stood as Silo sat, and a nod of the head from Vitellius indicated that he had the call. "Conscript Fathers, there are right now, in the public gallery above us, two Celtic nobles who have been sent here to take their places in our Senate. Therefore, I must ask that the first order of business now should be to endorse the Treaty and invite them to come down and join us on this floor. Only after that is done should there be questions."

Vitellius spoke from the chair. "I will not ask for speakers for or against that question. The Republic is already bound to agree to it. But I will ask for a vote on the question, to demonstrate to our Celtic friends how warmly the Republic welcomes them. Those in favour, please stand and applaud." Vitellius was the first to his feet and started clapping, followed almost immediately by the whole chamber. After a minute he ceased and sat.

"Please, Lucius Porcius; if you could show our new members to their seats on the front row?"

Chapter 9 – 687 AUC (67 B.C.)

Sertorius could not have asked for more. Not that he deserved any less, of course; he was nothing if not convinced that he had performed brilliantly. The renewal of his governorship over the Eastern Frontier a year and a half ago was recognition that the extension of Republic control over the remaining Parthian territories at such little cost and huge profit had been superb statecraft, and the Republic was growing prosperous on the trade along the Silk Road.

But would the contribution of Pontius Telesinus as Eastern Proconsul also be recognised? Would his imperium be renewed? Since most of the territorial gains had been by Telesinus' aggressive diplomacy rather than force of arms, Sertorius felt the Samnite had earned another term as much as he did himself. Life would certainly be more difficult if he had to establish a working relationship with a novice as the replacement Eastern Proconsul.

But the letter from Pontius which had arrived late this afternoon had filled him with joy. Another five years as Eastern Proconsul, with three and a half years of his own second term as Governor, would be enough to finish everything they had planned when they first came together.

Not everything had gone perfectly, of course. Marcus Tullianus had been recalled to Rome last year for a new posting; it seemed that the College of Administrators had been unable to find anything strictly improper about his work, but his occasional unorthodoxies warranted him being kept under closer watch. Thank all the gods that the old woman sent in his place was such a stickler for keeping within precedents. He had accepted the existing arrangements in the East as 'normal' for this frontier province, strange as they might have seemed compared to his previous experience in Corsica-Sardinia. But his officious manner grated on Sertorius.

Karmides had also left them, the old sailor taking his final voyage last winter, across the Styx. But to be blunt, that was not a great loss. For all his experience, Karmides had lacked what was most important out here at the edge of the world; he had so little imagination. The fledgling navy was looking good under the command of Charetas, a dynamic and inventive Athenian who had served in Nicomedes' navy as a junior officer before transferring to Asia Province. There, as a mere thirty-year-old, he had been given command of the local fleet to suppress piracy and had performed very effectively. Just the sort of skills needed here in the much larger Indian Ocean, so Sertorius had enticed him more with the challenge than the salary. But most satisfying was that Charetas had found in Charetas a kindred spirit. Between them they had trained a good Marine Cohort that promised to be great in a few more years.

Lucius Marius had also left, bored once the frontier had stabilised on the Indus and there remained nothing more for him to do than suppress banditry. He had gone back to Rome to try his hand at politics, or at least set himself up for a posting in Gaul where the Germans were an ever-present threat to a Special

Province that wanted the security that came with the Republic but was reluctant to accept enough Italians or Romans to fill out the legions to full establishment. The Celts, fine warriors that they might be by tradition, were reluctant to fit into the discipline of the legions; the result was a garrison on the Rhene that was understaffed and under-disciplined. Just the sort of challenge that Marius would rise to!

Yet there was one man who would not leave Mesopotamia even if chained behind a quadriga. Arius Claudius was engrossed in the scheme to control the Euphrates, and was even now monitoring the behaviour of the fourth barrage as the Spring thaw was filling its reservoir. One more dam to go after this one, and then a couple more years to fine-tune the operating procedures to make sure the balance between the five reservoirs was both safe and efficient; Arius would not leave any time soon! And then he had visions of dredging the Lower Euphrates to form a shipping channel. He was already surveying the course and depth of the river each year to see how the annual floods affected the sandbars from one year to the next, and planning ways of keeping a preferred channel clear. He showed all of the pure, simple joy of a ten-year-old playing in a rivulet on his father's farm, Sertorius thought to himself. Truly there is a man blessed by the gods, to so much love his work!

There was a knock on his study door. "Enter!" Sertorius called. The door swung open to reveal Gaius Lucianus.

"Ah, Gaius!" Sertorius beamed. "Good news! Pontius has been given another five years."

"That is excellent, sir," Lucianus started, to be stopped by a hand raised quickly in front of him. "I'm sorry," he corrected himself. "That is excellent, Quintus. I served under him in Numidia, investigating the Bocar Affair. I have nothing but respect for him."

"As he does for you, Gaius," Sertorius replied. "Why do you think I asked you here, to replace Lucius Marius?"

Lucianus felt the pieces falling into a pattern. "So Pontius recommended me? It is not just co-incidence?"

"No co-incidence at all, Gaius," Sertorius confirmed. "Pontius deliberately left you as liaison officer with Bocar when he returned to Rome, because he knew you would not panic if the rogue did something radical. When Bocar stepped over the edge, you and that Administrator were perfect in your handling of it, just as Pontius expected."

"Do you mean that Pontius knew what would happen? That I was being put through some sort of test?"

Sertorius smiled thinly. "Pontius didn't just know what was going to happen; he set it up to make sure it would. Why do you think he sent that particular Administrator to Bocar? The little, weedy man with a chip on his shoulder? He knew Bocar would treat him with contempt, and that the Administrator would respond by being an insolent little bastard!"

"But why, Quintus?" Lucianus asked in wonder. "Why set things up so there would inevitably be a falling-out?"

“Pontius knew that Bocar had conspired against a Friend and Ally of the Republic, and he was determined that nobody should be allowed to do that and get away with it; so Pontius set Bocar up to fail. In fact, Pontius half expected Bocar to kill the little twerp, not just slap him. And you were specially put there to make sure that when Bocar cracked, there was a reliable man on hand to arrest him.”

Lucianus stood stunned. “So Pontius would have been quite happy for Claudius to be killed?”

“Perhaps not happy,” Sertorius shrugged, “But if the little fool is going to continually provoke a man like Bocar, he will eventually get what he deserves. The fact that it was only a slap is evidence that you had instructed your men well enough in how to protect him. You foresaw problems, and took action to keep things under control. Well done!”

“Oh... well, thank you, sir – err, Quintus,” Lucianus responded.

“Now, what brings you here, Gaius?” Sertorius asked at last.

“Oh, yes. I have news that the King of the Jews is likely to face a revolt from his brother,” Lucianus said.

“How does that involve us?”

“It doesn't, at least not yet,” Lucianus answered. “But it would be surprising if they both continue to ignore us. I expect one or both will ask for our support.”

Sertorius thought for a moment. “Yes, I suppose we should expect a call from the one who is in the most trouble. The one who is winning will not want to go into debt. But then, he might offer us some inducement for us to stay out of the squabble.”

“I prefer accepting inducements to stay neutral, rather than empty promises that cost Roman lives,” Lucianus offered.

“Yes, I expect Pontius will take that attitude as well,” Sertorius agreed. “And this is really Pontius' call, not mine. With any luck he should be back in a month or so; we can wait for him.”

“Yes, sir – Quintus,” Lucianus agreed. “I just wanted you to be aware of the situation so you could plan accordingly.” Lucianus turned to leave Sertorius to his own thoughts.

“Just a moment, please, Gaius. Could you please call in on Lucius and Arius. I want a meeting of the Council tomorrow morning. Tell them about the Jews.”

“Yes, sir – Quintus,” Lucianus left.

It was a small Council meeting this time. Typhon was on a delegation to the Tamils, far to the south of the Indus, and Caretus was in Charax with Charetas, supervising the training of the Marine Cohort. With Telesinus also out of the Province, that left only four of them.

“Lucius, please tell me anything that should be dealt with as a matter of urgency,” Sertorius opened the meeting.

The Chief Administrator, prepared to the back teeth as usual, referred to the top sheet on his right-hand pile. "There are several appointments that I have made under delegated authority in accordance with the routine established under the previous Administrator, notice of which I table now in accordance with the provisions of that delegation..."

"Yes, Lucius; you don't need to read them out," Sertorius broke in. "As soon as the back of the sheet of paper hits the table, I will take them as read. I have absolute faith in your competence and judgement in these things."

Callius pressed his lips together, not at all happy that important appointments such as city governors were being accepted without proper scrutiny. This was his fourteenth Council meeting, and he was becoming exasperated at the informality, almost sloppiness, that Sertorius demanded. Only first names, and not titles, to be used! Actions under delegated authority left unexamined! Minutes being written to deliberately excise everything except the text of formal resolutions, while the real substance of the talks was recorded unofficially and distributed instead! No wonder Tullianus had been recalled! Still, it was all within the law, so he had no choice but to adapt to how the governor wanted it. But what Sertorius did not know was that Callius had no intention of being another Tullianus; after the second meeting he had been routinely sending a copy of the more complete, even if informal, minutes back to a friend on the College Committee, with his own explanations and annotations, and also his monthly diary entries. If something went wrong, then it was going to be obvious to all that the fault was in the Governor, not the Administrator!

"Thank you for your confidence in me, Quintus," Callius said drily. "But I am required by law to present certain routine reports to you. I am not permitted to presume upon your approval."

"Then be advised that simply by placing your reports on the table, you have reported to me. I will read them in my own time, and refer back to you anything that requires further clarification." Sertorius fixed him with an impatient stare. "Be assured, Lucius, that everything you do is examined carefully, even if it is not done while you are watching. Remember, I am governor of this Province, and you are subject to my requirements, not the other way around. If you do not like my style, I will happily write a glowing recommendation for you to be appointed onto the Board of College Administrators so you can go back to Rome in glory."

"Thank you for that offer, Quintus; but my only concern is to ensure that all things are done in accordance with the Law, proper administrative practice and the regulations in force. It protects all of us if things are done properly." Callius was not going to be told by this Military Man, however famous, how to conduct the infinitely more demanding art of administration. Military strategy, tactics, training and logistics is child's play in comparison. "But if you find my approach too conservative, then perhaps your glowing recommendation might be best for all concerned."

Sertorius continued his glare. "Do your job however you will, Lucius. But do not waste the time of this Council on your posturings or other trivialities."

Cut to the chase! Those are my Standing Orders for this Council, so adhere to them!”

“Yes, Quintus,” Callius replied curtly. Then he picked up the pile of sheets to his right and dropped them in the centre of the table. “I table my routine Reports as requested.” Then he turned to the left-hand pile, taking the top sheet. “Now for non-routine matters.

“Extraneous matter number one thousand two hundred and twelve; We have only one merchant trading in silk, and he has complained that he will not be able to continue in business unless the duty on silk is cut by at least fifteen per cent. He says he actually needs a twenty percent cut, to allow for the prices in the east being on a rising trend.” Callius looked around the table. “He also showed me his books; whether they are genuine or not, I wouldn’t know; but it seems he is operating on the bare limit of profitability, which would explain why no other merchants are coming into the market. He explained to me that he would be out of it himself, except that he is acting out of duty to his patron in Rome, who requires him to carry on the trade so long as he can break even. It would be a disaster for the Province’s revenues if the silk trade collapsed. I recommend that we cut the tariff by twenty percent, just to ensure that this man does not drop out of the market.”

Callius picked up the next sheet. “Extraneous matter number one thousand two hundred and thirteen; a representative of the Empire to the far east, calling itself ‘The Middle Kingdom’, presented himself to the governor of Margiana and asked for passage to meet with our Emperor. The governor outlined our political and administrative system, and provided him with two cohorts as an honour guard and guide in addition to his own entourage. The representative is expected to arrive in Babylon on the fifth day of Sextilis.” Callius put this sheet to one side and took the next page from the pile.

“Extraneous matter number one thousand two hundred and fourteen; the Ethnarch of Krokola has requested that the amount required for payment of taxes be reduced. Storm damage to the port facilities requires urgent repairs, and he seeks permission to divert part of the amount due towards the cost of these urgent repairs.” This second sheet was put aside and the third page taken.

“Extraneous matter number one thousand and ninety three, continuation; the Tamil representative has left Charax accompanied by Typhon, bound for the Tamil lands, as part of our diplomatic and trade exchange. Typhon reports that prospects look encouraging.” Callius looked up. “What action should be taken in regard to each, Quintus?”

Sertorius frowned. “Can we afford a twenty per cent cut in the silk tariff? That is one of our main sources of income.”

“I have looked at what this merchant has offered. He says that a twenty percent cut in the tariff will allow him to increase his volumes considerably in subsequent years. We can afford it if we slow the building of the navy in this next calendar year, then the lower tariff on an increased volume would be about revenue-neutral.”

Sertorius shrugged. "If that is your recommendation, then I accept it. Twenty per cent it is! Now for the Eastern Kingdom; I would like two more cohorts to be prepared as an honour guard, Gaius," Sertorius said, turning away from Callius. "When we get word that the Middle Kingdom embassy is leaving Ecbatana, I will travel out to meet them and bring them into Babylon myself. I just hope that Pontius is back in time to go with me; foreign negotiations are his responsibility, not mine."

Then, turning back to Callius, "Now, about the Ethnarch of Krokola crying poor; please send one of your men to Krokola, Lucius, with authority to inspect this supposed damage. I delegate authority to him to grant a diversion of taxes if he considers the damage sufficiently severe to justify that action. As for the Tamil delegation; note and file." Sertorius looked at the pile of routine reports dumped in the centre of the table. "In summary, Lucius; how is the budgetary position?"

"In good order, Quintus," Callius replied. "Charettes reports that the prototype ship has performed as promised, and slight modifications to the design have been approved for a second ship, for the same price as the first. Arius has compiled all costs associated with the third dam, and it came out slightly under estimates. Repairs to roads and bridges damaged by floods in the Indus are not being carried out yet, due to continuing flooding. It is expected that more money will need to be set aside, or alternatively a local levy could be imposed. The cut to the silk tariff just authorised could delay those works further, or alternatively you might want to delay other works such as the new ship programme. But for the moment we are slightly ahead."

"Thank you, Lucius," Sertorius accepted the summary in good grace. Then, turning to Arius, "Do you think that a flood mitigation system could be built for the Indus, like you are doing on the Euphrates?"

Arius frowned as he considered this question. "I am not so sure about that, Quintus," he said at last. "The Euphrates was a big project, but in essence it was simple to model. The water starts at the top of the river as snow melt, and flows down the channel in a predictable flow, with no sudden rushes. But the floods in the Indus are mostly due to rainfall, which can happen anywhere in the valley, or everywhere at once, and comes in very large surges. That would make it much harder to control."

Sertorius gave a smile of disappointment. "Well, spend a few sesterces to monitor flows over the next couple of years while you finish the Euphrates scheme; that might give you enough information to study the problem more closely."

Then to Lucianus, "Gaius, you have news from Judaea?"

"Yes, Quintus," Lucianus answered on cue. This little conversation had already been scripted for the benefit of Callius, whom Sertorius not only disliked, but actively distrusted. "The Queen regent is dead, and the older son has been proclaimed king. But it is doubtful that he has the energy or following to match his younger brother if push comes to shove. And my information is that young Aristobulus is getting ready to push."

“Correct me if I am wrong here, but isn't Judaea a Friend and Ally of the Republic?”

“It is, Quintus,” Lucianus confirmed, “but which of the two brothers is the rightful king?”

“I would imagine that would be a matter for the Republic Senate to decide,” Sertorius answered. “Not even Telesinus can over-rule that; his authority is only in the east, and does not include lands west of the Euphrates. What do you say, Lucius?” Sertorius turned to his Administrator.

“You are right, Quintus,” Callius confirmed. “You should not intervene without a clear mandate from the Senate.”

“With respect to both you and Lucius, I was not suggesting any intervention, sir,” Lucianus continued. “However, I suggest that we should station a couple of legions near Damascus, just to be ready to protect the Republic's interests if something unexpected happens.”

Sertorius made a show of considering this. “That seems prudent, Gaius.” He glanced across to Callius, who shrugged. “Yes, do it.”

“I will start a file on this,” Callius said. “This will be 'Extraneous matter number one thousand two hundred and fifteen'.”

“Thank you, Lucius; and please add it to the cross-index under 'Judaea'.”

It hadn't taken as long as Lucianus had expected. As soon as he arrived in Damascus he heard that young Aristobulus had only knocked on the door in Jerusalem and the whole house had fallen down. But for some unknown reason, he had not finished the job. Instead of the obligatory fratricide, he had not only allowed his deposed older brother to live, but had even allowed him to keep the revenue for the High Priesthood, even though he had required the office itself to be relinquished.

These Jews are strange people, Lucianus concluded. To leave your older brother and rightful claimant not only alive, but also free and with a considerable income was perhaps a show of incredible generosity or perhaps of incredible confidence, but it was certainly a show of incredible stupidity.

It did not take long for the deposed Hyrcanus to avoid any risk of a surprise change of policy from his brother. He took himself to Petra as quickly as he could and threw himself into the arms of King Aretas. No doubt the Nabataeans would prefer the weaker and more pliable Hyrcanus on the throne, rather than his more aggressive younger brother. So watch for developments there, he thought to himself, with Sertorius' secret orders still in the back of his mind. Milk these Jews, of either faction, for as much as they could pay for our support; and then, when we have a pretext, move to install Hyrcanus on the basis of Judaea becoming a province with the notional Jewish king as Ethnarch.

A knock on the door snapped him out of his reverie. “May I come in, Gaius?”

“General! It is good to see you again!” Lucianus stood to greet Telesinus and invite him into his office.

"I came straight here from Antioch," Telesinus explained. "I haven't had the chance to report back to Babylon. But if Quintus is up to his usual style, he will have given you unofficial orders. What are they?"

"Basically, to add Judaea to Syria, and hopefully make a bit of cash for the Province out of the process," Lucianus answered the question first, his military discipline coming to the fore. "But I am still getting used to the way he operates. Why is everything done on first-name terms, and why are all but the bare essentials so informal?"

"Because Quintus wants everyone to operate as a team, and he likes to always keep his options open, if I may say it so bluntly," Telesinus answered. "The more you commit to writing, the more you are limiting your freedom to change your plans, and even to change your story if you are called to account." Telesinus dropped into the visitor's chair. "Not that he ever does anything exactly illegal, mind you. But he likes to take full advantage of the grey areas in between.

"That is also why the College of Administrators does not like him. They know that in written records there is power, and the Administrators want power. Quintus gives them as little as possible, and they resent it." Telesinus shifted in the seat slightly. "You know, of course, that Callius is sending his own secret reports back to the College? Partly he is doing this to protect his own arse, just in case something goes wrong; but mainly he is doing it because he had grown accustomed to being the de facto governor in Corsica-Sardinia, and he resents being anything less out here. He and some on the College are working to undermine Quintus, to replace him, and to use his downfall to intimidate the next governor into compliance."

"No, I didn't know that!" Lucianus was shocked. "But if you know, then Quintus must; what is he doing about it?"

Telesinus smiled. "Let us say that Lucius might be the perfect model of an Administrator; but Quintus is a consummate politician. He already has enough material to have Lucius charged with serious misconduct; now it is merely a matter of what to do with it, and when. But from what I have seen of Quintus, he is much more likely to use it for blackmail than to actually have charges laid. It is now no more than a matter of timing."

"Blackmail?" Lucianus was horrified.

"Why do you say it as though it is a dirty word?" Telesinus asked. "It is merely an unofficial way of gaining compliance. If Lucius wants to take a stand on principle, all he has to do to stop it is confess everything to the College Board and take his punishment." Telesinus smiled grimly. "But I somehow don't think that our beloved Administrator, who insists on doing everything by the book, will avail himself of that opportunity. High principles are meant to be applied to everyone else, but not him."

Lucianus shook his head, as if to clear it. "Why does everything have to be so dark and gritty? Why not just get on with the job?"

"Which is exactly what did happen while Marcus Tullianus was here. He did everything legally, and damn efficiently, too! But he worked with Quintus, not against him, and that is what made this Province the richest in the Republic in

five short years. But Lucius seems more interested in making everyone jump through paper hoops than he is in getting on with the business. I would not be surprised if Quintus is keeping him here until this Judaea Question is settled, so that if he starts to get too difficult he can then pull him up short on his rope. Better than getting rid of him now and risking a new face that might not be so easily controlled while we sort things out the way we want them.”

“Is that why you suggested that I should be sent out here?” Lucianus asked. “Because you know that I saw how Bocar was brought to ground, so I would understand the need to do something similar here?”

A broad grin spread across Telesinus' face. “It is good to see that you understand, Gaius. What we are building out here on the edge of the world is going to be the best thing that ever happened to the Republic. We have trade in such volumes and at such profits that the Republic will be richer than it could have dreamt about. We have public works and infrastructure that nobody could have imagined twenty years ago. And we have the Rule of Law, a system of justice that encourages long-term investments that will keep the prosperity flowing for generations to come. And we have peace! Not the peace of oppression, but a peace that every man under our authority will defend with us, and not turn against us! Tell me one nation now under our authority that does not rejoice in their liberation from their former tyrants!

“We are the Miletus Decree extended to every race on earth, just as Sulla said would happen one day. We are the future of the Republic, and therefore the future of the world. Small-minded men like Lucius will either serve it and prosper with it, or retreat back into their out-dated fears and be left behind.”

“And what out-dated fear is Lucius clinging onto, that makes him such a hindrance?”

“His fear is that things will get out of his personal control,” Telesinus answered bluntly. “Although the Rufan System was set up to ensure that governors should be accountable lest they become tyrants, it has developed into a weapon to ensure that Administrators are now the tyrants, each his own petty king with the Governor as his executive officer. Lucius is afraid of losing his privileged position. What an irony that the actions he has taken to protect that privilege will be the grounds for his downfall!” Telesinus took a breath. “As if Quintus is not accountable for his actions! Of course he is! He had to confront the Senate two years ago and give a justification of everything he has done out here, and I had to endure the same interrogation a couple of months back. We are accountable, all right; but we are accountable to the Senate! Lucius and his fellow maggots demand that we be accountable instead to his self-serving and self-perpetuating clique of jumped-up mediocrities. That is not the Republic; it is not the *Mos Majorum*!”

Lucianus was inwardly troubled by this tale of conspiracy and counter-conspiracy, but knew better than to show any reluctance. “What have you got on Lucius, that you will be able to persuade him to be more co-operative?”

“Oh, don't worry about that,” Telesinus answered breezily. “Just carry out the instructions Quintus gave you, and be patient. Tell Lucius as little as possible and let Quintus have a copy of whatever you do tell him.”

“I will certainly fulfil any mission I am sent to carry out, Pontius. Have no doubt about that,” Lucianus promised. “But I am concerned that there is this tension between Lucius and Quintus. I would rather not be drawn into anything that is not entirely proper.”

Telesinus smiled and reached forward, to slap him on the shoulder. “Exactly what I wanted to hear, Gaius! Neither I nor Quintus want you to take sides, which would be counter-productive as you have so rightly said. We just want you to do your job to the best of your ability, and remember at all times that you are under the authority of the Governor, not the Administrator. So keep Quintus informed of any attempt by the Administrator to usurp gubernatorial authority.”

Lucianus smiled back. “I will have no qualms about doing that, Pontius. You can rely on that.”

“Excellent!” Telesinus accepted the assurance. “Now, I think I might head back to Babylon, so if you have anything you want me to take back with me, please get it to my camp by tomorrow evening. I also intend to write back to the Senate advising them of developments in Judaea, and asking for confirmation that I am best placed to protect the Republic's interests until a formal embassy can be sent. Until otherwise informed, I am assuming that role, and I will be supporting Quintus in his plans and his orders to you. Lucius has no authority at all in this matter, remember that! Bye now!”

Telesinus offered his right arm, which Lucianus took and then released after a respectful grip. Soon Gaius was alone in his office again. This looks like it could get ugly, but I already have the patronage of Pontius, and through him Quintus, he mused to himself. I must do nothing to imperil that, or I could go the way that they have already planned for Lucius. I must be careful to please Quintus, while also staying strictly legal, and this could be the making of my career

Well, Pontius as good as told me the secret to navigating this problem; whatever Lucius tells me or asks me, I am to refer it to Quintus, my immediate superior, for instructions on how to respond. Strictly by-the-book, just as Lucius himself demands that everyone should operate, so he can hardly complain! Well, time to start carrying out Quintus' orders with a bit more energy; he told me he expects me to use prudent initiative, and not simply react. But with Pontius here, I really should make sure I have his consent to negotiate with foreigners, and his guidelines on what to say to them when I do speak. I should have done that a few moments ago, while we were chatting. Gaius rose from his table and left for Telesinus' camp to ask for delegated authority.

Lucianus arrived at Jerusalem at the head of a cohort of cavalry just as Aretas and Hyrcanus were establishing a siege of the city. Hyrcanus was eager to

meet and talk with the man he hoped would be his Roman Protector, and rode out to greet him.

“Lord Lucianus!” he exclaimed in Greek as he bubbled with delight, even before the two men were close to each other. “It is wonderful to see that you have come to assist the Friend and Ally of your Republic! Now we will not have to waste time, money and lives to subdue the city; surely you will be able to convince him that to live in Rome a free man would be better than to die in a siege, taking his own city on a path to destruction with him!”

Lucianus smiled at so effusive a greeting, and closed the distance to offer his right arm. “Hyrcanus, my friend! It grieves me, as it grieves Governor Sertorius and the whole Senate of the Republic, that our friends should fight each other. I would be pleased to do whatever is in my power to restore harmony.”

“Then please, speak to my brother words of peace. I do not thirst for his blood, or that of any of his supporters,” Hyrcanus urged. “I will grant him and any who choose to go with him safe passage to the Republic's territories, and I will harm none who might choose to remain here as my faithful subject.”

“I will certainly do that, my friend,” Lucianus agreed emphatically. “But at present I have only this honour guard of but five hundred men. I did not want to bring what might have seemed an invasion army against a Friend and Ally. With your permission, I would like to have at least three legions with me, to demonstrate the strength of our commitment to achieving peace in this land.”

“Please, my friend, lord Lucianus; bring as much strength as you wish, to demonstrate your determination in this matter.”

“Thank you, friend Hyrcanus. I will do that. Now, if I might be given a small patch of land, I will set up my camp and speak to Aristobulus tomorrow.”

“Indeed, lord Lucianus. Take your own choice for your camp site.” Hyrcanus gestured with a generous sweep of his arm. “Wherever you think best, take that place. If any of our men are in your way, we will move them.”

“Thank you, Hyrcanus; but I think I will set up in one of the valleys to the north. Please ensure that none of your forces camp upstream from us, to ensure our water is not fouled.” Lucianus pulled his horse around, and with a final smile and nod he trotted back to his personal staff to give instructions.

Aristobulus spread his hands as he spoke. “Hyrcanus claims to not want to shed any blood; but that is an untested claim,” he pleaded. “But I have proof of my peaceful intentions. When he surrendered to me, did I not leave him unharmed? Did I not leave him free to come and go as he chose? Did I not allow him to retain the revenue from the High Priesthood, even though I fulfil all the duties of that office? Surely that is a conclusive proof that I have been gracious and generous towards him! I have offered him no grounds for moving against me in so treacherous a manner! Yet he repays my gentleness by bringing fifty thousand mercenaries against me, and his own city! This man might appear gentle, lord Lucianus, but he is a double-dealer and a backstabber. You must not put any trust in him at all.”

“What you say does indeed make sense, Aristobulus. Your brother has indeed repaid you evil for good. With your permission, I would like to bring three legions to this place, to ensure the safety of my camp against any treachery while I am here on this mission of peace. And then, when the issue is settled, I will be in a position to assist you in enforcing it.”

The frantic calculations in Aristobulus mind did not show on his face. Which side is this Roman really on? Or is he yet to decide? But I cannot afford to say anything that shows my faith in him is anything but complete. “That is indeed a good idea, lord Lucianus. Please do so.”

“It would be prudent, I think, to await their arrival before we go any further,” Lucianus suggested. “Otherwise, Hyrcanus and Aretas might strike at me while I am still vulnerable, if they sense that I might not support them.”

Aristobulus frowned at this. “I would prefer to establish peace as soon as possible, lord Lucianus. Every day that passes is a day of idleness within the city, a day of lost production. And every day Aretas and Hyrcanus camp outside is another day of abuse on that land. Would it not be better to determine our actions and timetable immediately, and if you grow concerned about the safety of your camp you might withdraw and meet with the other legions on their way?”

Lucianus nodded, and then put on a show of being at least partly swayed. “Yes, what you say has merit; but I must be careful. I will report back to them that you seem daunted, but that you are demanding too high a price for your surrender. Shall we say, ten thousand talents as well as safe passage? We can go through a few cycles of offer and counter-offer while we wait for the legions to arrive.”

“Then let us do that, lord Lucianus,” Aristobulus agreed. “Now, what will be our plan to fall upon them when your legions arrive?”

“That will depend on how they are deployed at the time,” Lucianus responded, “and how far they have progressed with their siegeworks. It will be at least another fifteen days before the legions arrive; we should start our planning in perhaps ten days' time, when we have a better idea of what we are facing.”

“Perhaps we might be able to determine their deployments and their siegeworks earlier, lord Lucianus, if you were to propose these deployments and siegeworks for them,” Aristobulus smiled. “The whole world knows that the armies of the Republic are unequalled in such matters; so why would they not seek your advice, and follow it scrupulously? That would allow us to plan well ahead of events, and train our men specifically for the blow that will scatter our common enemies. And it would also ensure that they would not suspect your intentions in the meantime.”

Lucianus slowly nodded to himself again. “You are a shrewd man, well worthy of the throne, Aristobulus. I see now why all the soldiers under Hyrcanus came across to you, and why all the important men in Jerusalem are eager to be counted among your friends. I will do as you suggest.” Lucianus stood and offered his arm. “Until we meet again.”

Aristobulus stood and took the offered arm in true Roman style. “Until we meet again.”

Aretas was with Hyrcanus when Lucianus found his tent to report on the negotiations.

“Greetings, Aretas,” Lucianus said breezily to the Nabataean king. “And greetings to you too, Hyrcanus,” he said with a genuine warmth.

“Please, come in and take a seat, lord Lucianus,” Hyrcanus stood and beamed a smile as he invited the Roman into his tent. Aretas also stood after a short hesitation, but without the smile. Lucianus noticed the reluctance.

“Please, Aretas; let bygones be bygones!” he urged. “It has been more than fifteen years since Damascus opened its gates to Silo; so either go to war against the Republic to reclaim it, or accept reality and resign yourself to peace. But to resent us without taking effective action against us will give you the worst of both worlds. We will not be going away within your lifetime, I promise you that.” Lucianus offered his right arm. Aretas affected to not notice.

“I will avenge that insult, Aretas,” Lucianus said cheerily, “but in my own good time. Right now I have a friend who needs my help.” Then, turning to Hyrcanus, “I think we will need to be patient here. Your brother is confronted not only by the three of us, but also by a bad conscience. He knows that he should never have moved against you, even if he doesn't believe that the gods take their revenge upon such impiety. But he is hoping to bargain his way out.”

Please, my friends, take your seats,” Hyrcanus urged. “And please, suspend all other considerations; in this fight we are all allies!” This time Aretas had the good sense to wait until Lucianus moved to sit before sitting himself. Hyrcanus was the last to lower himself onto a couch.

“And what terms does he propose?” Hyrcanus asked.

“He asks for his freedom in Rome, safe passage there, and ten thousand talents of gold to relinquish the throne and all other titles and positions he currently holds.”

The disappointment on Hyrcanus' face was obvious. “That is not possible,” he said at last.

“How much did you offer Aretas to support you in this campaign?” Lucianus asked pointedly. “Perhaps you can pay Aretas for his time to date, and divert the remainder to gain peace with your bother.”

Hyrcanus made to answer but Aretas broke in quickly. “Arrangements between Judaea and Nabataea are not the concern of third parties.”

Lucianus ignored Aretas to speak directly to Hyrcanus again. “I gather you have already paid up. Oh, well, I suppose you had no-where safe to stash your cash, so I can understand that. So why is Aretas still here, if he has already been paid? Is it because he considers you more pliable than your brother, and he hopes to become the power behind your throne? In which case he would have come to your aid anyway, fee or not.”

“I have great respect for my friend Hyrcanus!” Aretas protested as he stood. “I am doing this out of my deep sense of justice, and asking only that my friend cover my unavoidable costs in the process.”

Lucianus continued to ignore Aretas. "What are you willing and able to pay, Hyrcanus? Because if you cannot or will not meet his demands, then we need to start working on a real siege, the way Romans do it, instead of the infantile efforts I have seen from Aretas so far."

Hyrcanus looked from one guest to the other. "There is another issue here, Lord Lucianus," he said at last. "When and if Aristobulus leaves as a free man, we can be certain that he will strip Jerusalem of every ounce of silver and gold as he goes. I cannot afford that," Hyrcanus seemed to be summoning up the appearance of being a hard bargainer. "Instead, I propose that he be permitted to leave Jerusalem free and unharmed, but empty-handed. Any damage he does must be paid for out of his own property, and if he cannot cover that cost, then he is to be crucified," Hyrcanus said with an air of finality.

Lucianus nodded to himself. "That will certainly be a bucket of cold water over his pretensions," he commented at last. "But let us not respond with that answer too quickly. Let him stew for a few days, and when he hears it he will know that it is a genuine ultimatum, and not just an ill-considered word in anger."

"If you think that best, lord Lucianus," Hyrcanus agreed listlessly.

"In the meantime, let us look around the city, and I will make plans for a proper siege and assault," Lucianus continued. "That should concentrate his mind on being a little bit more co-operative."

"Yes, that would be good," Hyrcanus agreed. It seemed that the effort of making a counter-demand has sapped his mental strength.

At last Lucianus turned to face Aretas. "Come with me on my inspection tour, Mighty King," he said mockingly. "You will be given a masterclass on how to plan and conduct a siege. Then, when we move against your recalcitrant little realm in ten years' time, you will understand what you are confronting."

Aretas returned with a smile that was more a sneer. "I have better things to do with my time than to listen to a child's boasts. Just report back to us with your plans, and then we will critique them for you."

Lucianus turned back to Hyrcanus. "We will talk again later, Hyrcanus." Then he stood, snapped to attention facing Aretas and snapped off a parade-ground salute before walking out.

"Arrogant prick!" Aretas said as the flap fell back.

"Perhaps; but you provoke him without good reason, my friend. The point is, we need him."

"We do not need him!" Aretas asserted impatiently. "He has only five hundred men here, all cavalry which are useless in a siege. I have a hundred times as many men here, all infantry and engineers. If I were you, I would politely thank him for his words of support, but tell him that his legions will not be required. We have the situation under control."

"You say that because it means nothing to you if Jerusalem is destroyed," Hyrcanus replied with an edge to his voice. "But if there are a few Roman legions camped outside the walls, then Aristobulus would know that there are dozens more elsewhere in the Roman world and all of them will come hunting for

him if he does not toe the line. I need Rome to get me my city intact, even if you don't."

"In other words, you are saying you don't need me," Aretas responded.

Hyrchanus dared to smile. "I suppose I don't, Aretas. But if you abandon me to go back home now, then think about where those Roman legions will go when they finish their business here. I strongly suggest you think again about how you speak to that man you just described as an arrogant prick."

Lucianus rode around the city walls the next day, pointing at various features while a staff officer took notes. The following day there were Republic soldiers taking measurements. The reluctance of the defenders on the walls to harm the Roman soldiers was in stark contrast with the treatment accorded to Aretas' soldiers, who were subjected to archer attacks if they ventured too close without shielding. Aristobulus was playing his part well. On the fourth day, as the earthworks were commencing, there was a call from the walls for Lucianus to resume talks.

"It looks like Aristobulus is starting to worry," Lucianus said to Hyrchanus. "I told you that letting him sit and stew was the best negotiating tactic! Now that he knows we have designed our siegeworks, he is torn. Does he take action against the Republic, and ensure his downfall, or does he make a desperate attempt for his life?"

"And what will you say to him this time?" Hyrchanus asked anxiously.

"Why, that depends on you!" Lucianus replied. "It is your throne I am negotiating, on your behalf! I recall you saying that we should offer him safe passage only, and empty-handed at that; with no looting or damage to the city as a condition. Do you still want to put that as your terms?"

Hyrchanus looked anxious. "I don't know. Will that provoke him into doing some damage, just to win better terms? I look to you for advice."

Lucianus pondered this for a moment. "I think I should tell him that you have stated those as your terms; and depending on how he responds, I might offer to try to talk you down from such a hard line. Let me play it as I see it."

"Yes, do that," Hyrchanus agreed, glad to be rid of the responsibility.

Aristobulus stood and smiled to welcome Lucianus into the room. "How goes it, Gaius?" Aristobulus asked warmly. "You certainly look serious out there, and I hope I have played my part well." He offered his right arm

"You have played it very well indeed, Aristobulus," Lucianus confirmed with a smile as he took the arm. Aristobulus gestured towards the couches.

"I am doing my best to make Aretas look like a complete clown," Lucianus continued as he took a seat, "even to the point of inviting him to go back home because his forces are as much a distraction as a help; but he will not. In fact, he seems to be going out of his way to be friendlier than when we first met. I think he thinks that I am setting him up as an ally who deserts his friends, and using that as a pretext to march on Petra. And the way you have been too timid to

harm our surveyors, but called for another meeting as soon as the earthworks started; that was very good theatre!" Lucianus complimented his host.

"That is good," Aristobulus enthused. "So what is on the agenda for today?"

"Hyrcanus seems to be without any funds. I get the impression that Aretas has milked him for his support on this campaign, and there is nothing more he can put up on the bargaining table. So his reply to your demand for ten thousand talents is to offer you safe passage only, without loot and without payment. He is so short of cash that he needs the gold and silver in Jerusalem himself."

Aristobulus tapped his teeth with a thumb. "That could be right, actually. Aretas is a greedy bastard."

"So we have to decide how you are going to reply to that counter-demand," Lucianus went on. "Preferably in a way that will allow my legions another ten days to get here."

"Let's say that I might be prepared to drop the demand for the ten thousand talents," Aristobulus offered, "but I insist that my personal wealth and that of my followers be guaranteed, and that any treasure in overseas temples becomes mine. My father kept several thousand talents in Greek temples as a reserve, just in case; I don't know if Hyrcanus knows about that."

"But the most important point is that work on your siegeworks must stop, as a sign of good faith while we negotiate."

Lucianus nodded again. "Yes, let's try that. If nothing else, waiting for them to ask around to find out how much Judaeen gold is overseas should take a while."

"Excellent!" Aristobulus agreed. "Now, you mustn't leave too quickly. Let them think it has been a hard negotiation, but one in which I have tried to gain every advantage. So come, enjoy a meal with me, and let them smell fine meat and wine on your breath when you return. Let them see how desperate I am to win you over!"

To Hyrcanus, the best news was that Aristobulus had not been provoked into acts of destruction. Here is a man totally unfitted to be a king, Lucianus thought to himself; he is so lacking in confidence that he considers simply avoiding a disaster to be a major victory. He is just the man we need in Jerusalem once this kerfuffle is over.

"We have made progress, Caius," he enthused. After six days of 'lord Lucianus' vis-a-vis simply 'Hyrcanus' to establish his higher status, Lucianus had invited Hyrcanus to address him by familiar name. Little acts of generosity to create a greater sense of personal loyalty; it works in politics the world over. "We have stared down his demand, so he knows that we do not fear him. From this point on, the rest should be much more easily controlled."

Aretas was not at this meeting, but had made a point of sending an apology. Ever since that exchange of open insults Aretas had avoided Lucianus wherever possible, but put on the appearance of friendship whenever a meeting was unavoidable. Virtually all contact between Lucianus and Aretas now was

being carried out either by Hyrcanus as an intermediary, or in writing. Lucianus was quite happy with that arrangement; it gave Aretas less opportunity to question him.

“Perhaps we have, Hyrcanus,” Lucianus conceded, “but how much gold did your father place overseas? And where? If you don't know where it is, then how do you know how much you're conceding to this pretender? And if things fall through, how do you get your hands on it yourself?”

“I know more than my brother does,” Hyrcanus asserted with confidence. “My father placed considerable reserves in Ephesus, Delphi, Rhodes and Smyrna in the Consulship of Glaucia, once it was obvious that the peace settlement in Asia province was going to endure. But when he died and mother came to the throne, she secretly moved this gold to other cities, to prevent my brother from gaining access. She told me where this treasure was, because I was her favourite and agreed with her policy of restricting the power of the Temple authorities, while my brother actively groomed them for support.”

“So Aristobulus only thinks he knows where the gold is, but you know the real locations?”

“That's right, Gaius,” Hyrcanus beamed. “We can afford to grant him his demands; and once he is out of the way, he will find out too late that he is penniless. So go back to him straight away, and tell him we are agreed.”

Lucianus was appalled. “With respect, Hyrcanus; that would be the worst possible thing we could do!” He shifted in his chair as he considered the best way to explain. “Look; if you agree so quickly, then Aristobulus will suspect that something is amiss. Maybe he will guess that the money has been moved, or maybe he will think that you will agree to anything to get him out of the city because you don't intend to keep our bargain. Whatever, he will think that you consider it a bargain for yourself, and if he pushes harder he can win more. So you have to give the impression that this is more than you are prepared to pay, but you are being beaten into agreement by a Republic that wants peace on its borders and doesn't really care how much it costs you.

“Remember, we only got this far because we didn't even bother to respond to his first demand; we ignored it and carried on preparing for the siege. So we keep playing that tactic, keep putting more pressure on him, and that is how we make him think that whatever we finally agree to is the absolute best he can hope for. Only then will he not be tempted to push for more.”

Hyrcanus gave a look that showed he was not convinced. “If we agree to what he asks for, how could he push harder?”

“Well, for a start, he could accept our agreement, but then argue about the process of implementation. For example, he might require that his personal wealth, which we have agreed to permit him to keep, is a private matter, and not subject to our inspection. And on that pretext, he might melt down all the gold and silver he can lay his hands on, and add it to his own.”

“But part of the basic agreement is that Jerusalem must be left intact!” Hyrcanus objected.

"An agreement is only as good as the means of enforcement," Lucianus asserted drily. "We do not want to give him the impression that we will accept anything less than the strictest methods of enforcement."

"Well, what do we do?"

"We wait a few days, to give him the impression that you do not accept these terms. But at the same time, I cease the siegeworks, to give the impression that I am putting pressure on you to accept."

"If you say so, Gaius," Hyrcanus conceded. "You are obviously a much better negotiator than I."

It was now the fourth day after his last meeting with Aristobulus, and news had arrived the previous evening that the three legions were about four days' march away. It was about time for another trip into the city.

"And how is my brother taking the pressure, Gaius?" Aristobulus asked easily. "By now you will understand why I did not get rid of him; he is certainly no threat to me, and his death would have been very unpopular with the Pharisee party; a division in the kingdom that I did not want to make any deeper."

"That might be true of Hyrcanus himself, but the same cannot be said of Aretas," Lucianus replied. "Whenever I report back to Hyrcanus, he says nothing. He just looks across to Aretas for instructions. I thought at first that Hyrcanus was pleased that you made your second offer, but Aretas immediately demanded to know how much gold was held in overseas temples. Hyrcanus said that didn't matter; what was important was getting you out of the city. But Aretas wouldn't accept that; he predicted that you would use that gold to come back with a mercenary army, and re-take the crown." Lucianus shrugged. "But the good news is that my legions will be here in a handful of days. Give them a couple of days to fortify their camp and to rest, and then this whole charade will be over."

"So how do we spin this out for those few extra days, Gaius?"

"I have suggested to him that you need to agree to a few more conditions. First, you have to agree that all the baggage you take out has to be subject to inspection, to prove that you have not looted the temple, etc. And second, you will be held until Hyrcanus' men have occupied the city, to make sure that there has been no wanton destruction." Gaius smiled. "There should be no problem with you considering those conditions objectionable; by the time we come back with an answer to your objections, my men should be just about ready."

Aristobulus chuckled. "You are right Gaius; I find the idea of surrendering myself and all my possessions to Hyrcanus, which effectively means surrender to Aretas, most unappealing. So that should be a convincing objection. But should I say so right now? Or would you prefer me to wait a couple of days, to give your legions more time?"

"Yes, time is important here," Lucianus agreed. "It would be good to let another day or two to slip by. But to not respond immediately might be seen by Aretas as a sign that you are at least considering it, a sign of weakness that might provoke him to attempt to take the city by storm. Is there an answer you can give straight away that will still leave the door open for further time-wasting?"

Aristobulus thought for a moment. "Rather than an answer, perhaps a request for clarification might be better. Let them explain exactly who is to inspect my baggage, who is to hold me until the city is examined, where these things are going to take place, and what assurances or guarantees will there be in place that I and my legitimate possessions will be released at the end of the process. When they come back with answers to those questions, there should be ample scope to quibble about the details."

"Excellent!" Lucianus exclaimed. "That should do the job quite nicely; you are considering it, but from a position of strength. I'll take that answer back to them now."

"More progress!" Hyrcanus was delighted. "You certainly know how to do this business, Caius!"

"I said that he did not dismiss your conditions out of hand, Hyrcanus, not that he accepted them," Lucianus cautioned the once-and-would-be king. "But before he agrees, he wants certain details to be made clear. First he wants to know who will inspect his baggage train, and where."

"Well, obviously I would; and I would do it as he left the city," Hyrcanus answered as though it was indeed obvious.

"What; you personally?"

"Of course not me personally," Hyrcanus answered impatiently, "My men would do that."

"Your own men, or men supplied to you by Aretas?"

"What is the difference?"

"The difference is that men supplied by Aretas are not your men; they are Aretas' men," Lucianus said as though explaining to a dullard.

"What difference does it make?"

It makes this difference; that whatever they see, they will report to Aretas. And Aretas would then know how much booty he can expect if he attacks them as they leave. This armistice will be between you and your brother, and will not be binding on Aretas."

"Aretas would not do that!" protested Hyrcanus. "But if there is any doubt, bring Aretas into the agreement too."

"Even if that were done, Aretas would still not be bound," Lucianus pointed out. "Aristobulus would no longer be a king, but only a private citizen, with no standing in an international treaty. He would be at Aretas' mercy. In short, there is no way Aristobulus is going to agree to an arrangement like that. And nor would he agree to the inspection being carried out as he left the city; he would be too far from safety." Lucianus pressed his lips as if sizing up a hard task.

"I suggest, Hyrcanus, that you think long, hard, and in detail about how, where and by whom this inspection is going to be carried out. You will need to design it so that your brother has good reason to feel that he is not going to be betrayed in the process. Take a few days to work through it, and put yourself in his position every step of the way." Lucianus turned and left the tent.

It was the evening of the next day that Hyrcanus called on Lucianus with a couple of pages in his hand.

"I have here a detailed, step-by-step procedure that should meet most of my brother's concerns." He held out the sheets.

Lucianus took the sheets and walked out of his tent to read them more clearly in the dusking light. He frowned and pressed his lips as he read through the points one by one. When he had finished he walked back into his tent, beckoning Hyrcanus to follow, and lit two oil lamps.

"Hyrcanus, I will take those sheets to your brother if you really want this city to be destroyed. What you suggest here could so easily be turned into a trap that your brother would have no choice but to see it as one."

Hyrcanus was visibly shocked by this response. "But how? What could go wrong?"

"For a start, there is no way of ensuring that Aretas will allow Aristobulus to march all the way to Joppa without an ambush. That is – what? Fifty miles? Two days march at forced pace, more than three if he intends to march in armour and with weapons ready.

"Second, how can he be confident that Joppa will open its gates to him? He will have no siege engines, so it would be a long investment, with Joppa being able to be re-inforced by sea.

"Third, even if he makes it into Joppa, how can he be confident that there will be transport available?

"Fourth, even if he does find a boat, how can he be confident there is not a squadron of triremes just down the coast, waiting for him to come over the horizon as he makes his way towards Alexandria?" Lucianus shook his head. "This so-called 'plan' is no more than an invitation to put his head into one lion's mouth after another!"

"But Aristobulus knows I am not that devious!"

"And Aristobulus also knows that Aretas *is* that devious!" Lucianus countered. "Please, go away and think about it again. You need to come up with something that is workable, or you are just begging for him to make a last stand. And that could be very messy for all of us."

Hyrcanus walked out into the twilight a much more disappointed man than he had expected to be. As he left, a rider arrived outside the command tent and dismounted. He snapped off a crisp salute. "Message from Septimus Mallius to the General." The rider held out no paper; this must be a spoken message.

"Yes, soldier?"

"The ninth, fourteenth and fifteenth legions are expected to be here in two days' time, sir. Legate Mallius respectfully asks that a camp be prepared for them so they can rest on arrival."

"Thank you, soldier. Is there any more?"

"I have been instructed to return with orders, if you have any, sir."

"Then go to my staff cook in the camp, have a good meal and a good night's rest. Report back to me after breakfast."

Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” The cavalryman saluted again and turned to lead his horse towards the stables.

Two days! About time to press Aretas into supplying a few thousand troops to build the camp and palisade for his three legions! That should be interesting, to see how keen the little Arab is to make life easier for Romans. He set off on foot for the Nabataean camp.

Hyrcanus returned the next day with an improved proposal. Lucianus was not surprised to see it had all the symptoms of having been devised by Aretas as he read through it. Hyrcanus watched on like a young boy hoping that his pedagogue would say something encouraging about his latest elegiac couplets.

“How long did it take you to devise this?” Lucianus asked.

“All day, Gaius. I have thought of nothing else.”

“And to what extent did Aretas assist you in composing your thoughts?”

Hyrcanus looked down for a moment, embarrassed. “To a great extent, Gaius.”

“Yes, and it shows through like the point of a javelin through a wicker shield,” Lucianus said dismissively. “This has all the faults of the first draft; it is a little more deceptive in its presentation of the same ambush opportunities, but Aristobulus will see through it immediately.” Lucianus took a deep breath.

“Aretas might have also told you that I expect my legions to arrive late tomorrow; he has generously sent some of his men to help prepare their camp site. Perhaps I can help you with some of these problems. Let me think about it, and we three can talk together about a more acceptable offer to your brother. Please urge Aretas to attend; he is going to be part of the problem if he is not prepared to be part of the solution.”

“Yes, Gaius,” a suitably chastened Hyrcanus replied. “In my tent, perhaps; two hours before sunset?”

“That would be excellent, Hyrcanus. Thank you.”

The next morning promised yet another sunny day. Lucianus spared a passing thought for his legionaries, having marched all the way from Damascus in this heat. At least they will not have to dig their own camp when they get here. He ordered a contubernium of cavalry to ride with the messenger from a couple of days ago back down the road towards Damascus, to assure the legates that they could march to dusk if they were within range; there would be no need to break the march early to set a camp.

The camp site itself was in good order, and would be ready by early afternoon. He must make a point of thanking Aretas for his men; it would be a good way of showing some respect and a willingness to make a fresh start. Then he got down to writing his own proposal.

Hyrcanus and Aretas were both in Hyrcanus' tent when Lucianus arrived.

“My apologies, my lords; I did not realise I was running late.”

“You are not late, Gaius; I arrived early,” Aretas put him at ease. A good sign, Lucianus thought to himself.

“Then let us get straight to the business,” Lucianus ploughed in. “The biggest problem is that Aristobulus does not trust you, Aretas, and you, Hyrcanus, do not have an independent force. But now my troops are here, I think I might be able to offer Aristobulus an acceptable alternative. With your approval, I intend to suggest the following procedure.

1. *The forces of King Aretas shall withdraw from Jerusalem. Gaius Lucianus, General in command of Republic forces, shall guarantee that all Nabataean forces are returned to Petra or other sites at least 100 miles south of Jerusalem.*
2. *As soon as the Nabataean forces are withdrawn, the Temple treasures shall be brought out and surrendered for safekeeping to Gaius Lucianus and for inspection by Hyrcanus. Hyrcanus shall confirm that all treasures are intact and accounted for. No outside forces shall be permitted into the city to carry out an independent inspection, lest these forces pillage some treasure and blame the loss on Aristobulus.*
3. *Upon confirmation that all Temple treasures are in the safe custody of the Republic, Aristobulus and those with him shall come out of the city and present themselves to Gaius Lucianus. Gaius Lucianus shall guarantee their safe passage to Syria, and their subsequent freedom.*
4. *Hyrcanus may not enter the city until all of the supporters of Aristobulus are under the protection of the Republic. Once all supporters of Aristobulus are declared to be safe, Hyrcanus may enter and take up the crown.*
5. *All treasures belonging to the Kingdom of Judaea held outside Judaea itself shall become the personal property of Aristobulus.*

This different approach, in which the Republic acted as the intermediary, caught both Hyrcanus and Aretas by surprise.

“That is excellent, Gaius!” Hyrcanus enthused. “Do you think he will accept it?”

“I am confident that he would prefer that to facing a siege by King Aretas,” Lucianus said quietly. “And I expect that I will be ordered to assist you in that siege, once the Senate learns how Aristobulus spurns the mediation of the Republic in this matter. I will make sure Aristobulus is aware of that consideration as well.”

“But it involves lifting the siege now, and sending my troops home, before we have his compliance,” Aretas grumbled. “What is to stop him from breaking out as soon as my men leave, and you have only three legions?”

“What is to stop him, you ask? My three legions, that's what!” Lucianus replied forcefully. “Three legions of the Republic, specially in a siege situation, are the equal of your fifty thousand, I assure you. And even if they are not, an unprovoked attack on my force would trigger a reaction from the Republic that would destroy Aristobulus and all Judaea around him. He knows that, and he is not suicidal.”

“I do not want Judaea destroyed, Gaius,” Hyrcanus protested.

“Nor do I, and nor does Aristobulus if it costs him his own life. He will come around, believe me.”

The Arab and the Jew looked at each other. At last Hyrcanus said “I think it is the only option we have, Aretas.”

“If you say so, Hyrcanus; but I provided the forces you requested, so I have earned my pay.”

“You have earned your pay, my friend,” Hyrcanus agreed. “But do not leave just yet. First we have to gain the agreement of Aristobulus.” Turning to Lucianus again, “Could you arrange to meet with him tomorrow morning?”

Aristobulus was warm in his welcome the next morning. “I see that your legions have arrived! That is very good! How long before they are rested well enough to attack the Nabataeans?”

“Not only the legions have arrived, Aristobulus; so also have fresh orders.”

“Oh? Why do I not like the sound of that?”

“Because these orders are that I am to resolve this crisis by ensuring Hyrcanus becomes King,” Lucianus said with obvious displeasure. “Apparently, the Senate considers him suitably weak. They do not want the new King of Judaea to be a man beyond their control.”

“But I am a Friend and Ally!” Aristobulus protested.

“And I will do what I can for you, friend. Right now Hyrcanus and Aretas do not know my orders; and not knowing that they have the Republic behind them, they are still trying to negotiate you out of here. So I have done what I could; I offered myself as an honest mediator to get you out of Jerusalem, but in a way that preserves your life and your treasure. Here is what Hyrcanus has agreed to...” Lucianus read the proposal to him.

“Shit!” Aristobulus exploded. “I have to walk away from the throne, and leave it to a brainless, gutless puppet!”

“Now that the Senate has spoken, it is inevitable that the brainless, gutless puppet will be king,” Lucianus agreed. “So let us make the best of what is left for us. And who knows? It might be that in a few years’ time, when Hyrcanus has shown himself incompetent - and even worse, a puppet to that bastard Aretas! - while you have shown yourself a true Friend and Ally, that the Senate will reconsider. Replacing one king with another is nothing new to the Republic, if the Senate sees it as in the Republic's best interests. If you are patient, you will soon enough be King again.”

Aristobulus thought for a moment. Please, if I may read that paper again?”

Lucianus passed the sheet to him, and he scanned it again.

“I see that only the Temple treasures are required by this; that would mean the sacred objects, jewels, cash and the precious metal on hand. It says nothing about the Royal Treasury or any private wealth in the city,” he observed.

“Why do you think I wrote it that way?” Lucianus smiled. “As ex-High Priest, Hyrcanus would know if any decorations are missing, and have a pretty

good idea of the bullion and funds the Temple held; but he would have no idea about the Royal holdings; he left all that to his underlings! And as for private wealth – well, he wouldn't have a clue! You can walk out of here a rich man, not counting what you can collect from the Greek temples.”

“And all it will take is a bit of patience, a bit of networking among the more influential men in Rome for a few years to show my loyalty and competence, and wait for the incompetence of Hyrcanus to become too obvious to ignore...” Aristobulus made up his mind. “I can do that; and a bit of time in Rome would probably be quite enjoyable as well, meeting all the right people. You have a deal there, Gaius!”

“Excellent!” Lucianus smiled broadly. “How much time do you need to grab as much gold and silver as you can carry?”

“I am no fool, Gaius,” Aristobulus smiled back. “I have already collected as much as I can find, just in case I had to move fast. I can start bringing out the Temple goods as soon as I see Aretas break camp.” He held out his right arm to Lucianus, who took it with enthusiasm.

“Thank you for doing as much as you could, Gaius,” Aristobulus said while he held the Roman's arm. “It is not as good as I had hoped, but it is much better than it might have been. And the crown will come to me in time, I am sure.”

“Just remember me as a friend, Aristobulus. Your influence could win me the difference between a good career and a great one.”

The two men smiled at each other and dropped their grip.

“Well?” Aretas asked as Lucianus stepped into the tent.

“He has agreed, completely and utterly,” Lucianus announced. “Congratulations, Hyrcanus; within a few days you will be rightful King again, and not a drop of blood spilt.” And then, turning to Aretas, “And I must thank you for your co-operation, King Aretas; and I apologise for my rudeness to you on so many occasions.”

Aretas was taken by surprise by this. It was not the typical royal thing to apologise, even when at fault. “Why, do not think any more of it, General,” he replied, attempting magnanimity and using the honorific for effect. “I can entirely understand how these unfortunate matters arose. Let us forget it, and look forward as friends.”

“That is most generous of you, King,” Lucianus replied with a gentle smile. “Now all that remains to get the process started is to lead your men back home. Aristobulus has sworn that the Temple goods will be brought out as soon as your forces are out of sight; he does not even require confirmation of the full hundred miles.”

“Then I shall send out the orders now to break camp in the morning. Good-bye.” Then turning to Hyrcanus, “I rejoice for you, my friend. There shall be peace in our region!” Aretas bowed slightly to both before leaving.

Hyrcanus stood staring at Lucianus. “How did you manage that, Gaius? You are a genius!”

Lucianus made a face. "Not really. Negotiation is all about knowing what the other side wants, and what price it is prepared to pay for it. I knew he wanted a comfortable life and was prepared to give up a throne that he could not have held onto anyway, and he knew that you wanted the throne and would be prepared to let him have that comfortable life, so long as he was in exile. An obvious match! It was just a matter of ensuring that both sides kept their word. My three legions were enough for that, if only I could ensure that Aretas would not be a threat. An easy exercise in negotiating skills, beginner's lesson number one."

"Well, I for one will be very grateful," Hyrcanus finished.

It took all of the next day for half of the Nabataean force to decamp and move out, and the next day for the second half. Lucianus knew that the roads in this part of the world do not allow rapid mass infantry movements, and the two Jews were even more aware of the limitations of what were little more than goat tracks through the desert. On the morning of the third day there was a call from the walls; the Temple treasures would be brought out to the Republic camp as soon as Lucianus could provide protection along the road out of the Damascus Gate to his camp.

Since Hyrcanus had only a couple of thousand of his own men with him, this was not a major problem. Lucianus asked Hyrcanus to move his entire army a few miles to the south, and then lined the Damascus road three deep on each side, the men taking formation a hundred paces off the road to allow space for transfer of reserves from point to point. This took one legion each side of the road, with the third legion holding the camp; an obvious display of overkill against a non-existent threat. By the time these deployments had been made, it was too late in the day for any transfer of goods. The message from the wall was that the goods would start coming out the next morning, provided the same deployments were in place.

"Aristobulus is trying to cheat!" Hyrcanus fumed. "He has brought out all the furnishings and artworks, I will acknowledge that; but the bullion and cash is well short of what was held when I was deposed. There should be five hundred and thirty two talents of gold and eight hundred and eighteen silver talents, as well as coin to the value of more than fifteen thousand thousand shekels!"

"My brother, did you ever actually see all that bullion? Did you ever actually see and count for yourself all those shekels?" Aristobulus asked laboriously. "I can only suggest to you that you should have carried out an audit as soon as you ascended to the throne! Then you would have found that our mother's servants had been milking the Temple for their own profit." Aristobulus shook his head. "I ordered an audit when I took over, and I was shocked. But I have to tell you, since that audit, I have spent a few shekels on repairs, about forty thousand; but otherwise everything that was in the Temple is now here under Roman care."

Did you carry out your own audit or inspection, Hyrcanus?" Lucianus asked.

"Yes," Hyrcanus asserted. "I ordered Jason to do a thorough count, and he reported back to me. That is how I know the amount that is missing."

"So you didn't actually do the count yourself," Lucianus summarised. "You relied on the report of the one man who was in position to cover up his own embezzlements. Where is Jason now?"

"I don't know. He stayed in Jerusalem when I fled," Hyrcanus admitted.

"No he didn't!" Aristobulus countered. "He was no-where to be found when I sent for him. I assumed he had left with you!"

"It would seem to me that Jason has fleeced you!" Lucianus gave a cynical chuckle at his own joke.

"Well, be that as it may," Aristobulus said stubbornly, "I can't be held responsible for money that was stolen under my brother's watch."

"Or more likely our mother's," Hyrcanus tried to excuse himself.

"Perhaps it was stolen under mother's reign; if so, then a proper audit by you at the time, instead of just trusting the word of a thief, would have revealed the crime," Aristobulus returned. "You might not be responsible for the theft, or you might be; but you are certainly responsible for not finding out about it."

"Please, my lords; this is getting us no-where," Lucianus broke in. "But it seems obvious that whenever it went missing, it was not the fault of Aristobulus. So he can hardly be held liable for it. Let us continue the process."

"I suppose you are right there, Gaius," Hyrcanus grudgingly conceded. "But do I have your word that if Jason is ever found, the Republic will return him and his ill-gotten wealth back to the rightful owner, the Kingdom of Judaea?"

"Of course, Hyrcanus; the Republic accepts Judaea as a Friend and Ally, and will not tolerate any crimes against it."

"Then I will accept this as all that remains of the Temple treasury. Aristobulus is now free to go."

"Thank you, brother," Aristobulus responded, with only the faintest hint that he might have had sarcasm in mind. "May the kingdom prosper under your wise and watchful eye."

"Then let us move to the next phase of the process," Lucianus interrupted these tender farewells rather than risk another squabble. "My legions will escort Aristobulus to Damascus and then freedom. We will then return here with the Temple treasures."

But why do you need to take the treasures to Damascus with you, and then return?" Hyrcanus protested. "Just hand them over to me now, and that will save you the extra journey."

"I cannot do that," Lucianus answered. "We need to hold those goods until Aristobulus is clear. Otherwise there is nothing to prevent you from engaging more mercenaries like Aretas, to attack him on the road." Lucianus smiled coldly. "Think of your sacred items as being hostages."

"Of course I would not do that!" Hyrcanus protested. "But even if someone does attack him, what is that to the Republic? What is he to you?"

"He is a man I have negotiated with in good faith," Lucianus answered from the high ground of moral authority. "Would you prefer me to not keep my

promises? Answer candidly, Hyrcanus; I have negotiated you back onto the throne, but the gates of Jerusalem are still at my mercy if I decide to deal unfaithfully with you.”

“I apologise, Gaius; you know I meant no insult.” Hyrcanus was not so dull that he missed the threat in what Lucianus had said.

“Then we will leave tomorrow, with Aristobulus and the Temple goods under our protection,” Lucianus concluded. “Be certain that anyone who attempts to interfere with us will be making himself an enemy of the Republic.”

The march to Damascus started the next morning, slow because of the weight of bullion and coin in the drays. Lucianus sent a century of cavalry ahead, to report back to Telesinus that he was on his way home. Telesinus had promised to wait for him in Damascus, close enough for reports if they were needed, but far enough away that the Jews would not be able to appeal directly to him. The reply from Telesinus arrived five days later. He had done well, and should send another report back when he was three days short of Damascus.

It was a nerve-racking journey, creeping along at little more than half-pace because of the stunning wealth they escorted, and the country too uneven to permit more rapid movement in a proper defensive formation against anyone who might be tempted to take their chances at grabbing that wealth. But his experience in Numidia had taught him how to travel safely across this sort of country, and his cavalry scouting left nothing to chance.

After seven days the scouting patrols reported that a force was following, two days' march behind them. He took a cavalry century himself to assess this threat. It was Aretas! Following him with his fifty thousand light infantry and archers! Lucianus knew his force was only a third the size of the Nabataeans, and much more cumbersome; but he had heavy infantry that could put up an excellent defence, and light cavalry that could concentrate in force at any critical point. He could put up a good defence if he had to; but he would rather not have to.

“Back to the main body, men!” he ordered. Arriving back in the camp after sunset, he ordered a stile to be put across the goat track that was called the Damascus Road. He then went into his command tent and took a sheet of paper and a quill. He wrote a short note. When finished he read it through by lamplight, made a few corrections, and then made out a fairhand copy. He even used dots between the words just like Administrators were taught to do, to ensure Aretas would understand the Greek properly; he spoke it well enough, but Lucianus had no idea how literate he was.

From Gaius Lucianus, acting with the authority of Quintus Sertorius, Governor of the Eastern Frontier and Pontius Telesinus, Eastern Proconsul

To King Aretas III Philhellenos,

Greetings and best wishes!

I must thank you for your kind thoughts and diligent assistance to me during this most difficult and complex mission.

I am now informed that you appear to be sending an escort, to ensure my safety on the journey home.

I assure you that although your care in this matter has not gone unnoticed, such efforts are not required. My force is of veterans from the Eastern Campaigns, and more than able to take care of itself against forces much more numerous. We are able to look after ourselves. Even were we to meet a well-equipped and disciplined force five times as many as our own (but I know of no such force in this region, not even your own, Oh King!) we would have no problem defending ourselves until a relief force from Damascus arrives.

However, I must inform you that I have also been advised of bandits in this area, pretending to be Nabataeans. I have advised my commanders that if any such bandit forces are encountered, they must be utterly destroyed. My preference is that this be done by ambush rather than in a set-piece battle.

The risk of confusing your forces with these outlaws rises as you approach us more closely. Therefore I must ask you to curb your commendable desire to see us safely home, and look more to your own safety by returning to your own lands immediately. It would be a great tragedy if my patrols fall upon you and do your forces great harm by mistake.

Live long and in peace, King!

Yes, that should be adequate, Lucianus thought to himself. That can be nailed to the stile first thing in the morning.

Two contubernia of cavalry were left to watch the stile from a distance, from different and well-concealed locations in the hills ahead of the roadblock. The Nabataean force reached the stile in the mid-afternoon of the second day. The leading ranks of their light infantry halted, and the following troops compressed up against them in a ripple that spread back through the column. Some of the more alert officers sent out detachments to either side, in case of ambush, while they waited for Aretas to ride forward and give orders.

Aretas took his time to read the note, and then scanned the horizon as if expecting to see legionaries all around him. He then passed the note to another man beside him. "Look at this, Hyrcanus! They are running scared!"

"The point is, Aretas, that they know we are here. Remember that we have only light infantry; these Romans have heavy infantry and cavalry," Hyrcanus argued. "We will not be able to break through, and they have mounted men who can counter-attack us whenever they choose to."

Who said we need to break through them?" Aretas dismissed the complaint. "Their cavalry are only light, not cataphracts, so they can be easily resisted by pikes. And these Roman heavies cannot charge us; they are fit only for defensive work. We can surround them, and then burn them out with our archers; or perhaps an even better option will become available, depending on circumstances."

"It is not worth the risk, Aretas!" Hyrcanus insisted.

"Not worth the risk?" Aretas was scandalised. "Do you realise how much treasure they are carrying? Enough to make them march at half-pace, they are so overloaded!"

"That doesn't matter," Hyrcanus insisted. "The kingdom is now mine, and I genuinely believe that the Temple goods will be returned in good time. Rome can afford that much to have a loyal ally."

"Stuff the temple goods, Hyrcanus," Aretas replied angrily. "I don't have any share in them, so I don't care. But think how much Aristobulus has stolen from Jerusalem! That is what I want! And if you have no stomach for a fight, then take your men back home now. I will take all the loot, including the Temple stuff, and you can redeem it from me later!" he sneered.

"Redeem it with what?" Hyrcanus returned sullenly. "You have already taken all my ready cash and bullion, just to get the kingdom back."

"Then it looks like you have no choice but to fight with me," Aretas replied smugly.

"I don't like it," Hyrcanus said stubbornly.

"And I don't like you carrying on like a spoilt princess, Hyrcanus. Make your choice and have the balls to act on it. I'm going forward." Aretas did not wait for a response. He roared at the front ranks, "Get that pile of timber off the road! March!"

Like a drowning man clutching onto the only flotsam available, Hyrcanus followed at Aretas' side for another five miles, until Aretas gave the order to make camp.

Riders from one of the lookouts arrived just as Lucianus gave the order to make camp, and were conducted straight to his tent. Gnaeus Mallius, the second in command, saw the cavalryman arrive. He headed for the command tent, expecting orders to be the result of this visit.

"They are still coming, General," was the first sentence, a pithy summary to save time.

"And how far away are they? Did they camp immediately at the stile?"

"No; they kept marching, but I left immediately they started to press on. They are probably making camp themselves now, perhaps twenty miles away."

"That is only one day's march for light infantry," Lucianus mused. "Do we stay here and fortify, or do we push on for one more day, and let them cut the distance to ten miles or less?" he asked himself. "What other comments or information do you have, soldier?" Lucianus addressed himself to the messenger again.

"That there appeared to be a conversation between the two leaders before the march continued, sir. It seems as if there might have been a difference of opinion before the decision was made."

"That would mean that Hyrcanus is with him," Lucianus guessed. "Excellent! Perfect pretext for keeping the Temple treasures as well!"

"Gnaeus, we have some business to do over the next couple of days," Lucianus said to Mallius. "Time to let the boys loose!"

"Hyrcanus, my men have been counting the Roman camping sites as we have overtaken them," Aretas told him. "Assuming that they stayed at each camp only one day, they are two camps ahead of us. And we are making twice their marching speed, more or less. So I expect to catch up to them in two days' time."

"They might be even closer, if they spent two nights at one of their camps," Hyrcanus commented.

"Yes, but I get the impression that they are pushing as hard as they can to get back to Damascus," Aretas argued. "But now that they know we are close, they might stop and take the time to prepare a fortified camp. So they might just dig in and wait in prepared positions."

So what do you intend to do?" Hyrcanus asked. "I have never cared much for all this military stuff."

Aretas controlled himself to not scowl at this comment. A king who didn't care for 'all this military stuff' was not fit to be a king. And wouldn't be for long, either, unless other kings chose to use him as a puppet.

"The first step in making a plan is to put yourself in the enemy's position. What plans is he most likely to make, and when you have worked that out you are half-way to knowing how to defeat his plan." Aretas stood and started pacing.

"We know he has heavy infantry. They are not mobile, but they are very good at holding a defensive line. And we know he has light cavalry, which can be moved quickly, brought to concentrate suddenly on one point to cut out a small part of their enemy so it can be destroyed a small piece at a time.

"So his tactics will be to prepare an impregnable line; and when we throw ourselves at it, he will sortie out with his cavalry against one part of our forces for a short, sharp battle where he has local superiority. Then he will fall back, recover his strength, and do the same thing when refreshed. In this way he will try to grind down our superior numbers overall."

"Then how do we counter such tactics?" Hyrcanus asked, mainly because he sensed he was expected to.

"By not committing all of our forces to the line of battle, and by not allowing small sections to be cut out," Aretas answered. "We will not engage along his whole front, but in one concentrated section. And we will not commit all our forces, but have several waves; we have the numbers to do that. Each wave will be equipped with pikes as they approach. If he attempts to send out his cavalry, these reserves will rush forward with their pikes, and trap his cavalry between our two rows. If he does not, then they drop their pikes and we have fresh men to continue the assault, the next wave take up the pikes to protect them against cavalry, while the previous wave pulls back for a rest, water and food before taking another turn. Meanwhile, the same Roman heavies will have to fight without pause.

"So if he tries to cut us apart, he will lose his cavalry in the process; and if he does not, our waves of concentrated forces will punch through at a single point,

and roll up his line. He will not be able to move his heavy infantry fast enough to contain us.”

Hyrceanus was genuinely impressed. “That sounds like it should work very well, friend.”

“Yes, it should,” Aretas agreed. “So the less time we give him to prepare fortifications for his line, the better. We quick-march tomorrow; no time for skirmish formation.”

It had taken three hours to get into position; three hours of soft moonlight, ending with moonset just as the Republic cavalry reached their positions. How convenient! “Dismount!” Marcus Atius, the commander, ordered curtly. Caesar's tactics against the advance of Sanatruces had been adopted and developed, despite the shameful end of their inventor. Dragoon warfare was now an accepted part of the Republic's military doctrine.

Ten centuries had been given the task of launching the attack. Another four were left in position to cover the withdrawal, and devastate any pursuers if the Nabataeans managed to find the organisation and the courage to give chase. The Nabataean camp was spread across the valley before them, more than four hundred paces square of tightly-packed tents with their cooking fires now dying down between them. Atius was contemptuous of the ill-discipline and sloppy layout of the camp; the tents were generally in clusters of four or five around a common fireplace, meaning that they effectively shadowed the surrounding approaches. There would be no difficulty in creeping up on the enemy, even if there were notional guards warming themselves around the fires against the chill desert air.

With difficulty, and only because he knew where to look and what to look for, Atius followed the careful advance of his attack details. When all were in position, he struck one sword against another three times in a slow tattoo; a sound that would not seem out of place to any Nabataeans who heard it, but a clear signal to his own men. Five men from each detail slashed tent ropes as they rushed forward into the campfire clearings to cut down the guards before they could pick up their weapons. This business done, they repeated the process with the next line of clumped tents. Behind them the other eleven men from their paired contubernia slaughtered any who had managed to escape from their fallen tents, and stabbed at bodies still struggling to get out. Three in each eleven kept an eye forward, to protect the backs of the five lead soldiers against any who might be in pursuit.

By the time the third row of clustered tents had fallen the element of immediate surprise had been lost. The inner guards, alerted by the sounds from the tents outside then, were raising the alarm and finding their weapons and organisation. Half-naked men were pouring out of their tents, many with a sword in hand. “The trumpet, decanus!” Atius ordered. The blast soon rang out over the valley, and the assault details immediately turned back and started running for the gloom outside the camp.

Some of the half-dressed defenders chased after them, but slowed as they came to the edge of the camp and sensed that they seemed to be acting alone. The assault teams had made good their withdrawal from the tented area.

An authoritative shout went up from the camp, and one man ran forward, waving his sword. Other men started to stream after him in pursuit, a front a hundred men or more strong. Just as the last of the assault teams reached the crest of the ridge another shout came from Atius. The Nabataeans in the chase fell like mown wheat as the cross-bow bolts hammered into them. Some of the fallen started to crawl back towards the fires. Another group among the fallen tents, apparently gathering for a second charge, turned and fled out of cross-bow range. Within a few minutes the dragoons were back in their saddles and walking carefully for home in the darkness.

"Give it a mile before you light the torches, men," Atius commanded. "Don't let them know where we are."

Aretas was not a happy man when he toured the scene by torchlight half an hour later. "Who was responsible for sentry duty?" he snapped.

"The men you see dead around the fireplaces, O King," the Commander of Ten Thousand in command of this section of the camp answered fearfully. It was always preferable to provide a living scapegoat when the king was angry.

"How was this attack carried out?" Aretas demanded.

"I have not been able to question all of the surviving sentries, O King; but the first anyone seemed to notice was what they took to be an argument among some in the outer lines of tents. Then there was another argument, they thought, but closer. When they went to investigate, they saw the Romans coming at them with drawn swords. They raised the alarm then but most were killed before help was roused. But at least the alarm caused the raiders to go no further; they ran as soon as they had been detected."

"And how many are dead?" Aretas asked bitterly.

"I have not had time to count, O King; perhaps a few thousand."

"By how many attackers?"

"I do not know, O King; it was too dark, and nobody tried to count them. They just saw Romans running around and stabbing our men. When our men tried to chase them, they ran into an ambush, so no further chase was attempted."

Aretas glared at the Commander, seriously contemplating cutting him down where he stood; but then decided against it. "I want a full report in the morning." He turned on his heel and left.

Hyrchanus was waiting for him back at his pavilion.

"What has happened, Aretas? I heard shouting, as if a battle were taking place!"

"You heard right, Hyrchanus," Aretas replied curtly as he walked past. Hyrchanus fell into step beside the Nabataean.

"Well, tell me what happened!" Hyrchanus insisted.

Aretas stopped at the door of his tent, and looked around. "Come inside," he commanded.

Once inside, Aretas dropped into a chair and indicated another for his guest. Hyrcanus sat nervously.

"A surprise raid by the Romans," Aretas summarised. "We have perhaps a couple of thousand dead."

"Romans! I thought you said they were still two days away, and marching for their lives. Or at most, digging in for their own protection."

"Probably only a couple of thousand of them, or they would have hit our entire perimeter instead of just one side," Aretas explained. "But the big question is how many more are there." Aretas stood abruptly and started pacing the tent.

"They are at least one day ahead of us; their fires are cold when we come across them. So this raid force could not have been the heavy infantry we are chasing. But the Commander out there says they were not cavalry; no horses, and they used infantry weapons, wore heavy infantry armour." Aretas shook his head again.

"It is possible that the three legions we are chasing are bait. They have other legions hidden by the road, and the three we know about are leading us into a series of ambushes like this one. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if all the treasure has been hidden away in the wilderness, and these bait legions are just marching slowly to give the impression that they are heavy and vulnerable." Aretas shifted on his seat. "Or perhaps they have left one legion behind, to harry us, try to slow us down, while the other two make all haste to stay ahead."

"I have heard stories about how General Sertorius trapped Sanatruces in the mountains with over a hundred thousand men. None of them survived," Hyrcanus said in dread.

"Blast! If only I had cavalry, and could do some proper scouting!" Aretas slammed his palm down on the table. "Well, we will have to wait until morning, and then we will be able to see more clearly what has happened."

The Commander of Ten Thousand was at the king's tent at first light. Aretas kept him waiting for half an hour; he had missed enough sleep the previous night, and was in no hurry to come at the bidding of one of his own subordinates. At last he sent for his officer, to hear his report over breakfast.

"We have lost four thousand six hundred and twenty five men, O King; and we recovered the bodies of seven Romans," he reported with a face as stony as possible, to hide the shame of the statistics. Aretas was not surprised; the estimate of only a couple of thousand last night had always seemed a bit light, considering the area of the camp that had been devastated.

"And have you been able to determine how many made the attack, and how they managed it so successfully?"

The Commander did not like to hear the king say that the enemy had been 'so successful' against him. He felt the dread of the king's revenge flow over him. "I ordered one of my officers to keep our men away from the surrounding area to prevent any clues from being trampled, and then examine it carefully in full light. I expect to have his report soon."

"Then come back to me when you have it," Aretas said dismissively. "And we do not march today. Tell the men to set up a perimeter, and set proper

sentries this time. I do not like to lose men through laziness.” He waved the Commander away. As soon as the Commander turned for the tent opening he saw his subordinate rushing to report.

“O King, the second report has just arrived.”

“Then let us hear it now,” Aretas responded.

The subordinate stepped into the tent and visibly gulped his fear. “We found hoof tracks and men's footprints and scuff marks behind the ridge, O King. But as we followed these tracks to the north, only the horse hooves were visible. It would seem that well over five hundred horse were involved, possibly more than a thousand, and that all the soldiers were mounted, not infantry. But they attacked as though infantry, perhaps to confuse us.”

“I already knew that, soldier!” Aretas growled. “Even last night it was obvious that there were at least five hundred, attacking on foot. And how could they have got there except on horseback? Now tell me something new!”

The subordinate trembled inwardly. “Based on the amount of horse dung along the trail, and their likely speed of withdrawal without any moonlight, we estimate about a thousand horse as our best guess, O King. But it could perhaps have been twice that number, if they were prepared to risk travelling faster in the dark than would normally be safe.”

Aretas glowered at him. “A pretty guess, that's all you can give me! All this talk about estimates and complicating factors is just a way of covering your total ignorance!” Aretas rose from the table and threw his napkin down in disgust.

“If you two can't do better than this from now on, you would be well advised to think about falling on your swords. Four and a half thousand of my troops dead for only seven Romans! And you still have no more than guesses about how it was done! Get out, and think about protecting this camp for the rest of this campaign!” The two soldiers were only too happy to comply. Aretas sat, nursing his anger.

Hyrcanus called by soon after. “Is it true, Aretas?” he asked. “Five thousand men killed? The Romans lost only one man for every thousand they killed?”

“No, it's not true, but it is not far wrong either,” Aretas growled.

“It is not just me, Aretas, who recalls the fate of Sanatruces. That story is being whispered all around the camp.”

“Great!” Aretas exclaimed sarcastically. “We out-number them three-to one, but our men are jumping at shadows!”

“Five thousand men dead overnight is a pretty big shadow,” Hyrcanus countered. “I told you at that roadblock; it is dangerous to make an enemy of the Republic. I say we should turn around now. You said yourself that the treasure might already have been hidden, or perhaps it is being rushed ahead while we are being slowed by these nuisance attacks. Mind you, a tenth of our force wiped out is a rather large nuisance!”

Aretas stared at Hyrcanus in disgust at his timidity, but deep in his chest he knew that this coward was right. This one attack had convinced his men that

they were already defeated; and if they believed it, then they would find a way of making it come true. It would be best to cut his losses now.

“Then we will go back home, Hyrcanus,” Aretas agreed heavily.

Atius and his men entered their camp just as the sun was rising, to be greeted with a hot breakfast cooked specially for them. Lucianus was waiting for a report.

“According to all the boasts, we killed almost ten thousand enemy, sir,” Atius reported with a wry grin. “But if we just go on the area of the camp we devastated, I would guess somewhere between three thousand and six thousand. Seven men lost in the mission, and I have stationed sixteen men as lookouts just north of the enemy, to report on their movements.”

“Excellent work, Marcus!” Lucianus congratulated him. “Now, you and your men should grab some food and then an hour's sleep while everyone else breaks camp. You all have no duties today or tonight, so catch up on your rest as best you can.”

It was late afternoon when the report from the lookouts arrived. Lucianus had just ordered camp to be set when four riders came up from the south. “Greetings, General,” one said as he dismounted. “The enemy were still making no sign of breaking camp at noon. The remaining men will send another report as soon as they see movement.”

“Thank you, soldier,” Lucianus acknowledged. “You have done well. How are the other twelve men?”

“We rested from just after midnight until daylight, sir, with four on guard. Then those four were permitted to sleep through the day. By tomorrow morning everyone will be properly rested.”

“Excellent!” Lucianus smiled. “Now get some hot food and rest.”

The next report arrived late the following day. It was clear that Aretas had broken camp and was marching south, back towards his home. Lucianus ordered camp to be set. They were now only thirty miles from Damascus; three days march at their current sluggish speed. Tomorrow morning he would send a report to Telesinus giving him the latest news, and asking for further instructions concerning Aristobulus. If Telesinus was so inclined, he might even be able to be in camp tomorrow night.

As it happened, Telesinus rode out the following day, meeting Lucianus shortly after noon and still twenty five miles outside Damascus.

“Greetings, Pontius! Do I have a story to tell you!” Lucianus smiled as he extended his right arm.

“Then please, call for camp to be set now, and you can tell me,” Telesinus replied. “I also have a few things I need to tell you.”

An hour later the two men were at ease in Lucianus' command tent, Lucianus telling in detail the narrative of the negotiations in Jerusalem and the settlement he had arranged. Then came the story of the return journey.

"How much does Aristobulus have in those drays his men are dragging?" Telesinus asked.

"I don't know, Pontius," Lucianus answered honestly, "and I did not want to inquire. My story is that he is a free man, and his wealth is his own. But I would be reasonably confident that Jerusalem has been picked bare."

"I would expect so, too," Telesinus agreed. "In fact, he might have kept the Temple furnishings separate, but I wouldn't have put it past him to have stripped the gold leaf off the buildings and the other immovables. Well, we will find out soon enough," Telesinus said happily. "I have authority from the Senate to sort this out, so I will. I intend to charge Aristobulus with treason, in that he took up arms against his older brother, the rightful King of the Jews and a Friend and Ally of the Republic."

"And when he is found guilty, all his assets become forfeit to the Republic," Lucianus continued the thought. "I expected you might do that. But how does the Eastern Frontier get its cut?"

"Oh, that will be easy," Telesinus waved the question away. "We determine that much of the gold Aristobulus is carrying is looted from the Royal Treasury, and properly belongs to the Jewish Kingdom. When Hyrcanus hears that, he will be only too happy to donate a very large part of it to the Eastern Frontier Province. That is, unless he wants to be charged with Treason too, for assisting Aretas in his campaign to attack your three legions, and also if he wants the Temple goods returned within his lifetime."

"Yes, that should do the trick," Lucianus nodded, "but it seems a bit transparent. Are you confident that the Senate won't question it?"

"Well, perhaps we can come up with something even better in the meantime. But for the moment I want you to stay out here, and not go into Damascus. I want this camp fortified as if a permanent base," Telesinus continued. "Then we can set up the evidence we need, at leisure." He smiled. "And Gaius; you have done very well indeed! Every ounce of gold available from either side, with the entire Temple Treasury as well! We could not have dreamed of a better result! Quintus will be very pleased."

"Don't forget about the gold stacked away overseas by the old queen, either. We need to grab as much of that as we can."

"Yes, you're right," Telesinus agreed. "We need to make sure the Senate gets a nice bonus. If we try to get our fingers on that hoard, I am sure that word will leak back to the wrong ears. So perhaps we should see to it that the Republic gets its cut up front. We will find it much easier to clean out Aristobulus' personal wealth, rather than the Kingdom's. We just need to find a way of hiding the source. Anyway," Telesinus settled back in his chair, "let's just turn that lovely set of answers over in our minds for a day or so, and then we can decide if any further improvements can be made."

"And when will we tell Aristobulus about his new status?" Lucianus asked.

"The sooner, the better. I want him in chains and under guard before he starts to think something is odd. Why don't you invite him here now?"

"I'll do that," Lucianus agreed. "And I'll also get a few soldiers in here, in case he wants to resist arrest."

Aristobulus arrived a little more than an hour after the invitation went out. He appeared at the entrance to the command tent, freshly bathed, beard oiled and in resplendent robes.

"Aristobulus, I present to you Pontius Telesinus, the Eastern Proconsul of the Republic. Pontius, I present to you Prince Aristobulus, next in line of succession to the throne of Judaea."

"It is a joy to meet you, lord Telesinus," Aristobulus beamed, advancing with a smile and offering his right arm in the Roman way.

Telesinus accepted the arm without showing any expression. "Greetings, Prince Aristobulus; we have much to discuss. Please take a seat."

Aristobulus picked up on the deliberately formal manner of Telesinus. "Are there any problems, lord Telesinus? As Gaius will tell you, I have co-operated fully with him every step of the way, unlike my brother who participated in the pursuit of his forces."

"Yes, I have been told of your impeccable behaviour, Prince. That will stand you in good favour when the time comes."

"When what time comes, lord Telesinus?"

"The time for you to be tried for High Treason, in that you raised a rebellion against a Friend and Ally of the Republic."

Aristobulus was shocked. "You cannot be serious, lord Telesinus! I am more a Friend and Ally of the Republic than my brother, who is the puppet of King Aretas! Aretas is certainly no Friend of the Republic! The events of the last month have proven that!"

"Which is a point that you will doubtless make strongly in your defence," Telesinus acknowledged with a nod. "I hope things go well with you, Prince; Gaius has spoken very well of you and revealed the incompetence of your brother. But unfortunately it is the Senate that decides who is the Friend and Ally, not we here today."

"Will I be taken to Rome to be tried?"

"If you wish to be tried in Rome, you have that right. But I would prefer it if you would consent to be tried under my authority. I do have proconsular imperium, and if we go east of the Euphrates I also have full delegated authority from the Senate in matters of foreign affairs."

"Please, Aristobulus; choose to be tried in Babylon," Lucianus urged. "The Senate will not care how well you conducted yourself; they will only see the opportunity to plunder you. But if you go to Babylon ... well, it wouldn't be the first time a sympathetic ruler has given a Jew his freedom and the right to return to Jerusalem from that place!"

Aristobulus looked from one to the other.

"Remember, Aristobulus, Pontius is Italian, not Roman," Lucianus continued. "Like all Italians, he has sympathy for those whom the Roman Senate has abused, because his own people have tasted that abuse. It is just that it would be improper for him to say so himself. He must continue to be impartial and

completely proper in all he says, to show that he has not pre-judged the case one way or the other.”

Aristobulus fixed Lucianus with his gaze. “I will not ask lord Telesinus to answer my questions, lest it be interpreted as improper; but I ask you, Gaius, as my friend. If it has already been decided that my brother was the official 'Friend and Ally', then does that not mean that my case is doomed before it starts?”

Lucianus shifted uncomfortable on his chair. “If that is so, then yes, your case is doomed wherever you are tried. But do not confuse a verdict with a sentence. Even if you are found guilty, the judge has scope to either execute you, or merely impose a fine. Consul Silo imposed a fine on Nicomedes some fifteen years ago, and Nicomedes walked free,” Lucianus explained with a plea in his voice. “If you go to Rome, you will be dead meat. But if you go to Babylon, you will still be alive, and on hand for the crown when the incompetence of Hyrcanus and the enmity of Aretas are better recognised.”

Aristobulus turned to look straight at Telesinus, while still addressing Lucianus. “So Consul Silo spared the life of Nicomedes. Do I have grounds for believing lord Telesinus would be similarly inclined?”

“If I may speak to you, Gaius,” Telesinus broke in, turning to Lucianus. “Without wanting to talk about any future cases, I will tell you about one case that involved me in the past.

“Bocar of Numidia rebelled against the King of Numidia, a Friend and Ally of the Republic. He actually slaughtered the king and his family. I was sent by the Senate to investigate and report back. After I reported back, Bocar was tried and found guilty, but kept his head. I do not need to point out that unlike Bocar, Aristobulus did not kill the king he deposed, but allowed him his liberty and an income; I will leave you to guess whether or not I would see that as an argument for mercy in this case.

“Now, without referring to any specific case, it is my general belief that the death penalty should only be invoked if the safety of the Republic demands it. There is no need to kill a man if he might yet be of service to the Republic at some time in the future.” Only after Telesinus had finished speaking, ostensibly to Lucianus, did he then turn to look directly at Aristobulus.

Aristobulus took the hint. “With your permission, lord Telesinus, I will go to Babylon.”

Less than a month later Lucianus was back outside Jerusalem, but with five legions this time. He sent a message to Hyrcanus, asking for a meeting. The king sent back immediately, advising that 'lord Lucianus is free to enter Jerusalem at any time, and would be most warmly welcomed whenever he cared to show the King his favour by calling in'. So far, so good, Lucianus thought to himself. Hyrcanus is still running scared. So I'll take him at his word; 'whenever', Hyrcanus had said, so I'll call in now without an appointment. With two junior cavalry officers behind each shoulder, Lucianus rode into Jerusalem and to the palace.

There was a flurry of activity as he approached the palace. Word had obviously got there ahead of him, and there was a frantic race to put on a state welcome in the short time available. Lucianus dismounted in front of the impressive doors, and his men followed suit. Handing the reins to an attendant, he strode up to the doors which opened just as he reached out to push on them.

Hyrcanus was standing in the lobby just inside. "My most sincere apologies, lord Lucianus, that I was not outside to greet you. You have taken us by surprise."

"Not for the first time, if I recall an event on the Damascus Road," Lucianus quipped wryly. Hyrcanus seemed to pale and wither slightly at the recollection.

"Please, step inside; I have refreshments waiting for you," Hyrcanus recovered his poise and gestured towards a covered garden with a fountain, off to one side of the entrance.

"Thank you, King," Lucianus smiled and strolled in the direction indicated. Hyrcanus fell into step beside him.

"How can I be of service to you and the Republic, lord Lucianus?" Hyrcanus asked politely.

"You might recall that I have possession of the goods taken from your temple, King. I must say that it was a good thing that I took them, because Aretas pursued me and tried to steal them for himself; had they remained here, then surely that rogue would have pillaged Jerusalem instead." Lucianus looked sideways to the king. "But of course, you know that already; you were there on the road with him."

Hyrcanus chose not to reply.

"I said, king, that you were there on the road with Aretas as he prepared to attack us; or am I mistaken?" Lucianus repeated.

"You are not mistaken, Gaius. I spent that entire march urging him to turn back. Your brilliant raid that night convinced him where I could not."

Lucianus noticed the use of the more familiar 'Gaius' instead of the formal 'lord Lucianus'. An attempt at genuine friendship, or merely a pretence? No matter, he had his orders.

"I believe you, Hyrcanus," Lucianus returned with the familiar first name. "My spies tell me that there was an argument when you found my note on the roadblock, and I can't imagine that you were urging onwards while Aretas was urging caution." Lucianus sighed. "But even so, the fact that you did not turn back at the roadblock is being held against you. There are many who see your continuation of the march with Aretas as at least consenting to his actions, and many more who consider you an active partner. Your status as 'Friend and Ally' is being questioned, particularly in comparison with your brother Aristobulus, who surrendered himself and his wealth to the Republic."

Hyrcanus stopped in his tracks. "But Gaius; surely there is no question about my status with the Republic!"

"Surely there is, Hyrcanus," Lucianus chided softly. "Your continued friendship with Aretas is heavily prejudicial; everyone knows that he is no Friend

of the Republic, and that he would have wiped out my forces last month, given a chance. You have as much as said so yourself, today. So I have been sent to specifically ask you to end your friendship with Aretas, to provide him with no support or assistance of any kind, and to assist any action the Republic might decide to take against him.”

“Of course I will give such undertakings,” Hyrcanus answered emphatically.

“That is good, Hyrcanus. Otherwise you would be king only for as long as it would take the Republic to replace you; and I would much rather you on the throne. Your brother is too willing to press his luck.”

“Then all is well with the Republic, in that case?”

“Not quite yet,” Lucianus answered. “Even those who would be willing to accept your assurances are still eager to make an example of you for your perceived complicity with Aretas. They demand that you pay a fine, or compensation, call it what you will, to show your sincerity. Until that is paid, the Temple goods will not be returned to you, and perhaps armed force to collect the fine might be considered.”

“What sort of fine, Gaius?”

“Five thousand talents, Hyrcanus.”

“Of gold?” Hyrcanus was horrified.

“Of course gold! Do you think we would bother for so small an amount of silver?”

“But I cannot raise so great a sum!” Hyrcanus wailed. “When I re-entered Jerusalem, I found that Aristobulus had not only cleaned out the Temple treasury, but also the Royal Treasury and the private houses of any person with any wealth worth taking. I don't have any gold, or cash, and no-one else in the city has any either that I could seize for the purpose.”

“But you have the overseas deposits your mother left with the Greeks.”

“That is less than two thousand talents now; I had to pay Aretas for his mercenary force.” Hyrcanus had an idea. “But what about the gold that my brother stole from the Royal treasury? That belongs to me, as King; return what has been stolen from me, and I will pay you out of that.”

“How do we know what is from the Royal treasury, as opposed to his own personal wealth?”

“Treasury ingots are poured in a special mould, the bars have 'LMLK' indented into them; it means 'property of the king',” Hyrcanus explained.

“You will have to write that down for me,” Lucianus said. “I don't understand Aramaic.”

“It's actually Hebrew, but I'll write it for you anyway.”

“So let's sum up where we are,” Lucianus said. “You will turn over to me all of your overseas reserves, and we will take the balance out of the loot that Aristobulus stole. What if there is not enough?”

“There should be enough; unless Aristobulus melted down the king's gold and re-cast it.”

“Well, we will see how far that gets us, anyway,” Lucianus conceded. “Then we can talk some more. And while you're writing that Hebrew, you can also write down where all of your Greek gold is, and any special passwords needed to have it released. Then you can look forward to getting your Temple properly furnished again.”

“Hyrcanus is the absolutely ideal client king,” Lucianus enthused. “He is like a puppy, eager to please and completely trusting. The world needs more kings like him.”

“Never mind that; did you get the information about the overseas gold?” Telesinus cut straight to his own item of maximum interest.

“Yes. And we also need to look though Aristobulus' booty for bars with these four letters on them. Apparently it means 'property of the king', but I can't see how they can get that much meaning out of four letters.”

Telesinus looked at the paper, “Not that hard, I suppose; what does 'regis' mean in Latin?”

“of a king,” Lucianus answered. “I suppose that could be taken to mean 'property of the king', if you wanted it to.”

“Yes; and I am told these eastern languages don't show the vowels, so they would shorten it to 'RGS'; that's only three letters.” Telesinus mused.

“Yes, I suppose so,” Lucianus conceded. Greek was the only foreign language he ever had any interest in learning, and it was similar enough to Latin for him to not have to think too hard, even though he did stumble over some of its nested formations. But Aramaic! It took a completely different way of thinking!

“So get looking for those royal bars, and keep me informed,” Telesinus went on. “But say nothing to Lucius. Refer him to me if he gets curious. Meanwhile I'll get onto these Greek temples.”

It was not possible to find a gold brick with the royal indent. All of the bars in possession had been re-cast into simple unmarked ingots with no identification. Not only the royal gold had been made anonymous, Lucianus mused, but also all the leaf and private metal pillaged from its original owners. Impossible to trace now.

But either time or attention to detail had been lacking for the silver to be treated with the same thoroughness. Several royal bars of silver were found, and these were used to make up clay casts for the gold to be re-cast yet again.

“Don't be greedy, Gaius,” Telesinus said with a wry smile. “Leave maybe a couple of hundred talents in his own rough bricks; the Senate will not believe that an eastern prince could be penniless, and they will want his full fortune to be forfeit. But see if you can find a few jewellers and goldsmiths to fabricate a few priestly chestplates, and set as many precious stones as possible into them. We can pass them off as Temple goods, return them to Hyrcanus, and then get them back on the quiet.”

Sextus Julius Caesar, Consul in that year, arrived in Babylon in early November. A Popularis, or he would not have gained the office, but one of the

many Populares who were becoming more suspicious of Sertorius as his Frontier Province flourished. How could he be doing this, unless something underhand was going on?

“Welcome, Sextus Julius!” Sertorius beamed as he greeted the Consul at the door to the Praetorium. “It is good of you to take an interest in our efforts out here!”

“It is hard to not take an interest, Quintus,” Caesar replied with a forced bonhomie. “You have done remarkable things over the last few years. I must be honest with you when I ask if perhaps the Republic should be asking for more revenue from this province as its prosperity leaps forward.”

“A question that should be asked by every Governor of every province, Sextus Julius, if the Republic is to prosper,” Sertorius agreed. “But that question must also be put in the context of how to make the province grow, so it becomes capable of providing that revenue without risk of revolt.”

Caesar nodded his agreement. “Quintus Poppaediis proved that, with his work in Asia. So I think we will see eye-to-eye during this inspection, Quintus. Because this is not purely a private visit; I am charged to report back to the Senate when I return. I will, of course, let you know what my report will be before I leave. You can then provide your own comments, or even accompany me back to Rome if you wish.”

Sertorius raised his eyebrows. “I doubt there will be any need for that, Sextus Julius. I report back regularly, Pontius makes his own separate reports, and our Chief Administrator reports to both the Senate and the College Committee. I think there is no shortage of opinions from here. But I agree it is overdue for a fresh set of eyes to look us over.” Sertorius gestured towards the hallway. “But why are we standing in the doorway discussing this? Let me show you to your quarters, and then to the bath. Please join me for the meal this evening.”

“Thank you Quintus. That would be very good. Could you please also ask for Pontius and Lucius Callius to eat with us as well?”

“Indeed. I will send word immediately.”

“Pontius; I recall that the Senate charged you with the duty of sorting out the Judaeian Question. Has that been finalised yet?” Caesar asked as he chose a slice of pomegranate from the tray on the table.

“Yes, Sextus Julius. Quintus provided me with five legions to back up my intervention, and Gaius Lucianus has been an invaluable help in this matter. I have decided to restore the elder brother, the rightful king, and to require him to act as our client. He is a most timid man; he will do precisely as we instruct him. He has already renounced his alliance with Aretas, thus isolating the only other force hostile to us.”

“And what of his brother, the pretender?”

“I intend to keep the brother under our wing. He has been co-operative, despite our judgement against him, and we might yet need a replacement king if Hyrcanus proves that he is not up to the task.” Telesinus smiled. “Young

Aristobulus is well content with that situation; he has no doubt that his brother's incompetence will show soon enough.”

“Is his brother that incompetent?” Caesar asked with some concern.

“Not as incompetent as Aristobulus would have you believe, in his youthful arrogance. But he is a weak personality, and will benefit from our firm guidance. In the meantime, to ensure Hyrcanus knows that he has our confidence, I intend to try Aristobulus for his coup, but impose only a light penalty. That way both brothers will know that they are ours to make or break.”

Caesar nodded approvingly. “That sounds like a well-balanced plan, Pontius. And if I read between the lines correctly, it was done without bloodshed. Is my conclusion true?”

“Largely true, Sextus Julius; we did lose ten men and inflicted about five thousand casualties during a raid-in-force. That was enough to send the Nabataeans home.”

Caesar was impressed. “That sounds like the work of the famed Caretus Cohort. They are becoming legends back in Rome.”

Now it was Telesinus' turn to smile. “Actually, the Caretus Cohort were not involved. That raid was the work of Marcus Atius, under the command of Gaius Lucianus. But the style was that of Caretus.”

Caesar was impressed indeed. “Do you intend to take any further action against Aretas?”

“Strictly speaking, he is not within my authority,” Telesinus replied. “That is why I sought Senate authority for this latest intervention. My Standing Delegation is only effective east of the Euphrates.”

“Yes, that is true,” Caesar conceded. “But I would have been willing to accept that your authority to act in Judaea would remain in force until all the loose ends are tied up.”

Telesinus inclined his head one way and then the other before replying. “That could be argued, certainly; but I am always careful to not exceed my authority. In my mind, the trial of Aristobulus is the last of the immediate loose ends, and I expect to get that out of the way before the end of the year. That would be tidier than imposing my will on new Consuls and a new Senate.”

“Speaking of Aristobulus; I gather you are going through this trial only to impress upon him that he is subject to our authority, but you don't intend to harm him. What do you have in mind?”

“I intend to find him guilty, but in view of the unclear situation at the time I will extend mercy. Because of his complete co-operation once it was clear that we did not recognise his claim, we will only impose a fine.”

“How big a fine?”

“I had in mind a few hundred talents of gold. He is not wealthy, surprisingly enough; he was not in power long enough to amass any treasure. But it needs to be something more than a token, or we will undermine Hyrcanus' hold on the throne.”

“Speaking of Hyrcanus,” Caesar went on. “Have you suggested to him that he might make an appropriate gift to the Republic, to compensate us for our time and trouble to establish his throne?”

“Not as such,” Telesinus smiled. “But I have told him that I am levying a fine of five thousand talents on him, for his association with Aretas rather than appealing to the Republic, his proper Patron.” Telesinus shrugged. “The same thing, really; it tells him not to look elsewhere when he wants help.”

“Five thousand is not much,” Caesar objected.

“Once again, it is about as much as he can afford. He spent most of his reserves to pay Aretas for his mercenaries.”

“All the more reason to go after Aretas,” Caesar rejoined.

“You are the Consul,” Telesinus gestured, his hands palm-up in front of him. “If you give the order, I will ask Quintus to provide the legions to enforce it.”

“Then I am giving you the order, and the authority, to subjugate Aretas,” Caesar said definitively. “Proceed when and how you will.”

“And will we subsume Nabataea into the Frontier Province?” Sertorius broke into the conversation. “I need to know what sort of administrative arrangements need to be put in place, or Lucius here will spank me,” he said, gesturing towards Callius.

“Until the Senate determines otherwise, yes, everything south and east of Asia becomes part of the Frontier Province,” Caesar confirmed. “I must let you know that plans are afoot to cut out Pontus and Armenia as a separate Province, but that will not affect Syria or lands south.”

“I don't want to offer Aretas terms, such as retaining him as an ethnarch,” Telesinus continued. “He already has a chip on his shoulder about being expelled from Damascus when we took over Syria; he will only be safe when he is dead.”

Caesar shrugged. “He deserves no better. Make whatever arrangements you two consider best in the circumstances. You can even unite Nabataea with Judaea and install Hyrcanus as Ethnarch if you want. But I want Aretas out of the way, and preferably a good pile of loot as well.”

Telesinus looked to Sertorius. “You heard the Consul, Quintus. Make your plans for a campaign in the Spring; I will send Aretas an ultimatum once you are ready, and the rest will depend on whether he would prefer death or a comfortable exile.”

Caesar turned to Callius, the Chief Administrator. “Lucius, you have been very quiet this evening.”

“Everything you have discussed is outside my area of authority, Consul. I am only the Administrator,” Callius answered formally.

“But you must have a view,” Caesar insisted.

“With respect, Consul, I must *not* have a view. It is my duty to adopt the views of those in authority over me; the Governor and the College of Administrators.”

Caesar frowned. A large part of his mission here was to check on reports from Callius that irregularities were occurring. He looked to Sertorius. “Is

Lucius always this formal? I would hardly fear a spanking from him, as you mentioned earlier.”

“Lucius is scrupulous in doing things exactly by the book,” Sertorius answered. “At first I found his manner... well, irritating, after the less formal Marcus Tullianus; but Lucius has brought a measure of consistency and professionalism that has been a great benefit to us all. We need him to keep us straight and narrow,” Sertorius smiled.

The meal had finished in good spirits, but Caesar was determined to get Callius by himself sometime soon, and press him on these irregularities he had alleged. There would be time for that later in the week, after he returned from his inspection of the Euphrates Dams with Arius Claudius, starting the next morning.

Sertorius also called for Callius just as Caesar was leaving the praetorium, soon after dawn.

“You asked for me, Governor?” Although Callius had been instructed to use first names in Council meetings, and complied, he felt more comfortable with the formality of titles when speaking directly to Sertorius.

“Yes, thank you for coming, Lucius,” Sertorius replied as he looked up from his desk and reached for a drawer. “Please take a seat; Pontius should... ah! There you are Pontius!” as Telesinus appeared behind the Administrator in the doorway. “Please come in and close the door. Take a seat, each of you.”

“Here, Lucius; you might find this interesting,” Sertorius casually tossed a letter into his lap. Lucius noted the seal had been broken; the seal was that of his banker back in Rome.

*To Lucius Callius, esteemed friend,
from Ariston Kallithes, at your service,*

Greetings!

As requested by your business colleague Lucius Gordo, I confirm that he has deposited three hundred sestertium milia into your account on this date. Please instruct me whether you want this to be left in your account, or put to some other use.

I also take this opportunity to assure you that your family are all in good health, and pray to all the gods for you as do I.

I await your instructions.

Callius glanced up at the date. The twenty third day of October! Almost two months ago!

“Why has my private mail been tampered with?” Callius demanded coldly.

“Because I authorised it,” Sertorius said grimly. “It was part of an investigation into corrupt activity.”

“What corrupt activity?” Callius demanded with more passion. “Such investigations are within my duties, not yours!”

“Not when you are the one being investigated.”

“What do you mean?” Callius was taken by surprise.

“Look at the date on that letter,” Sertorius prompted him.

“Yes, two months ago! Why have you been intercepting my mail?”

“Do you know what happened four months ago, Lucius?” Sertorius was at his grimmest.

“No; what?”

“You recommended that the tariff on silk be dropped by twenty percent. Do you recall the name of the only merchant involved in the silk trade?”

“No, but I expect I would recall if I heard it.”

“Well, read the letter again, and see if anything rings a bell.”

Callius turned back to the letter, and then stopped abruptly. “Lucius Gordo!”

“Now, tell me Lucius; why would Lucius Gordo deposit three hundred sestertium milia into your private bank account?” Sertorius asked. “In fact, how would he even know who your banker was? And why would this happen so soon after you had arranged for the tariff on his trade to be so drastically reduced? Why, there was barely time for that news to get back to Rome!”

Callius felt chilled to the bone. He could see the implications. “I have no idea.” He said weakly.

“Well, I have thought of one possible explanation,” Sertorius offered helpfully. “Do you want me to explain it to you?”

“You bastard!” Telesinus interjected. “The rest of us have dedicated our careers to building up this province, making it the jewel of the Roman world; and you care for nothing except graft!”

“What other cosy deals have you arranged, Lucius?” Sertorius demanded. “A man of your diligence, imagination and legal awareness must see this as a pot of gold sitting in an open field! What other scams do you have going?”

“I swear by all the gods, I know nothing of this!” Callius protested desperately.

Sertorius stared at him with unconcealed contempt. “Give me one good reason why I should not report this to the College of Administrators immediately!”

“Because I am totally innocent of any wrongdoing!” Callius almost sobbed.

Sertorius answered this with a sneer. “Even I can think of a better story than that! I will hold back while I search for more evidence, or evidence of other crooked dealings. But I am warning you, Lucius! You will be watched everywhere you go, listened to in your every conversation, and if you go anywhere near a possible witness to try to intimidate him, the trap will spring shut! Keep your nose out of trouble from this moment on, and I will sit on this letter. For lack of corroborating evidence, if nothing else. But if you give me any trouble at all, you will be on a boat back to Rome before you even realise there are chains around your ankles. In the meantime, I will personally read every

letter to you or from you. Try to dodge my surveillance, and you will be done for! Now go!”

Callius staggered to his feet. “Yes, Quintus. Thank you, Quintus!” He opened the door and wandered into the outer office, dazed. Sertorius crossed to the doorway after him and spoke to his secretary in the outer office. “Titus; please see that Lucius has a bodyguard with him every moment of every day. We have received a credible threat against him, and you can see how terrified he is. And make sure those bodyguards report directly to me before they commence duty.” Sertorius closed the office door as he retreated back to speak with Telesinus.

Telesinus had a grin wider than the sky. “Oh, that was so much fun! The best three hundred sesterium milia we ever spent!”

“Yes,” Sertorius agreed. “That should make him very careful what he writes back to Rome from now on, knowing that we will be reading every word both ways!”

“And he might be more reserved in what he says to Caesar as well,” Telesinus added with a smile.

Callius left Sertorius' office and wandered back to his own, lost in a nightmare. What did Gordo think he was doing, putting cash into his private account? And as Sertorius had asked, how did he even know who his banker is? This was so obvious, so clumsy!

Certainly, Callius had accepted the occasional 'gift' before, but he had made sure that these always arrived by untraceable routes; and if Gordo had shown enough wit to tell him beforehand how grateful he intended to be, then a similar arrangement could have been made for him. But this was so unexpected! The irony! On this issue, he had genuinely intended to do no more than his legitimate job, to protect the revenue of the Province, without the encouragement of a kickback. And this is what he gets caught on, and not any of the other minor schemes he had profited from over the years.

And that was precisely the problem. Now that this big kickback had been spotted, however unintended it was in reality, it would prompt a more thorough search through his records, and more extensive tracing of payments which at first sight seemed innocent enough. What had been designed to survive routine audits, and in fact had survived them in the past, would not stand up to more extensive enquiries.

He must write back to Kallithes and tell him to expunge that entire record, even if it meant sending the money back with a note saying it was an error – he had never wanted that money, anyway, so it was really no loss!

Oh, no! Sertorius said he would be examining all my correspondence! He would seize on that as an attempt to destroy evidence; and the note would never reach Kallithes, anyway! Blast! And then a second realisation hit him like a hammer. Not only would Sertorius be reading all my correspondence in the future; he has probably been reading it in the past! He must be; it would be impossible to believe that the letter from Kallithes was the only one he picked out,

by pure co-incidence! So Sertorius has read everything I have been reporting back to Arius Catullus! And the letter to me from Caesar himself, advising me that part of his mission here would be to discuss these reports to Catullus. He sat at his desk for over an hour, almost catatonic. Then he slowly rose and set out for Sertorius' office again.

"Hello, Lucius! Back so soon? I haven't organised the bodyguards for you yet, I'm sorry," the secretary greeted him.

"Oh, there is no rush for that," Callius answered with a weak smile and wave of the hand. "May I speak to Quintus again?"

Titus looked at him strangely. "Of course! You know that you have access whenever his inner door is open." He gestured towards Sertorius inner office, door wide open.

"Thank you," Callius took a breath and stepped through the doorway.

"May I close the door, Quintus?" he asked Sertorius tentatively.

Sertorius looked up, a frown on his face. "Given what has been discovered recently, I would prefer to speak with you only with a witness. Will I call for Pontius, or would you prefer to involve Titus?"

"Oh, if Pontius is free, please," Callius rushed out. The fewer who knew about this matter, the better.

"Then please ask Titus to send for him, and wait for him in the outer office; or in your own office, if you prefer."

"Yes, Quintus. Thank you, Quintus." Callius realised as he said these words for the second time in little more than an hour that he was completely daunted. His customary demeanour to Sertorius was one of cold formality, even as he used first names as demanded by this eccentric, sloppy governor; but now he was acting like a complete sycophant. He decided as he withdrew from the inner office that he would at least salvage the dignity to go back to his own office, rather than decorate the walls here as he awaited Telesinus' pleasure.

"Titus; could you please call for Pontius to report here as soon as he finds the time? I will be in my office, ready to attend at a moment's notice."

"Yes, Lucius; I will send someone for him now." Titus drew on a chord behind his desk. Lucius knew this was connected to a bell in the main office, where banks of petty clerks compiled their lists and accounts. One would be here soon, to run the errand.

Half an hour later Callius was back in Sertorius' office. Telesinus rose as he entered; a display of courtesy that surprised Callius. Perhaps just force of habit, he brushed it from his mind.

"Thank you for your time, gentlemen," Callius took the initiative to start speaking. "As you both saw, I was shocked by the implications of that letter from my banker. I had no idea that Gordo was intending to do any such thing; and surely the fact that this is so obviously improper is supporting evidence that I knew nothing about it.

"Had I been aware and desirous of this corrupt payment, I would have made arrangements for it to be done more discreetly. The very transparency of the payment is proof that I had no part in arranging it."

Sertorius did not look convinced. “Yes, it was obvious, Lucius; but only after we discovered it. Had we not had other reasons for being alert, it would never have been discovered.”

“Other reasons, Quintus?” Callius gaped. “What other reasons? I am innocent of any wrongdoing in this matter!”

“Do you really expect me to reveal the sources of my information?” Sertorius asked with a sneer. “Although you might think I am too casual, careless and sloppy to be a competent Governor, I am slightly more alert and better-informed than you would believe possible. But I will give you this little dribble of information, just out of the kindness of my generous heart.” Sertorius stood and walked around the table to confront Callius directly.

“You said this payment was too transparent, that had you been genuinely corrupt you would have been more careful to hide it. Now, I ask you; when a new Chief Administrator was appointed to replace the eminently competent Marcus Tollianus, what would you expect that I, as Governor, might have done?”

“You checked on my record, I suppose,” Callius said with more confidence than he felt. “And you will have found that my record is exemplary.”

“Stuff your record, Lucius!” Sertorius said harshly. “Fimbria and ... what was his Administrator's name?... anyway, his official record had no black marks, either! But everyone knows that those two were as crooked as a snake having a fit! So I didn't bother with your *official* record; I spoke to some friends, who in turn had friends who had certain dealings in Sardinia; and these friends of friends, who told me about certain transactions, and named certain intermediaries... Do you see where this is leading?”

Sertorius spoke with an edge of contempt in his voice. Although he had no idea whatsoever about any former corruption, that did not matter; what did matter was that Callius understood that he was under suspicion for more than one corrupt act. And innocent or not, Callius would know that it would be hard to escape charges relating to two completely different postings if people with a grudge against him in both were prepared to manufacture evidence.

But to Sertorius' surprise Callius stood still, the blood draining from his face. Gotcha! I have hit a nerve! There was something in his past! Sertorius made a mental note to have Callius' past examined forensically; if he could uncover a genuine crime, that would be a much better pretext for blackmail than a fabricated one!

Callius gaped a couple of times before finding a voice. “An honest man must expect to make enemies among the dishonest; that is part of life,” he explained feebly.

Sertorius turned away and stalked back to his desk. “Anyway, Lucius; could you please put into a nutshell why you wanted to talk to me and Pontius at this meeting?”

Callius gaped a few times again. “I came to declare my innocence; and to explain how, had I been guilty as you allege, I would not have been so careless as to leave so obvious a trail. I maintain that the appearance of guilt is a fabrication, and obviously so when examined with care. Why do you not question Gordo?”

He will deny that I made any request for payment; this payment is obviously unsolicited, perhaps even from someone else trying to set me up, claiming to be Gordo. I am innocent.”

“Thank you, Lucius. Your assertion is noted. But I have no intention of questioning Gordo; what would be the point? Of course he will deny making corrupt payments, and of course it will not appear in his books! There will be no evidence that will be conclusive in court, so I cannot even charge him. Now, is there anything more?”

“If there is not enough evidence to charge Gordo, then how can there be enough evidence to charge me?”

Sertorius gave a thin smile that was half disappointment, half contempt. “Get out of my office now, Lucius! For the moment you are safe, while I think about what to do about you; but watch your step from now on, or you will be the talk of Rome.” Then turning to Telesinus, “Thank you for your time, Pontius. I am sorry it was wasted.”

“Before I go, Quintus,” Callius interjected, “how long have you been reading my mail?”

Since you first arrived, Lucius. I like to know if my team are loyal and honest, or whether they are ready to betray me and the Republic. I found your correspondence with Catullus particularly interesting, and apparently Sextus Julius did, too.”

“I must apologise, Quintus, that I misunderstood your approach to so many different issues,” Callius stumbled out. “Now that I understand more fully, I can see that you have acted completely within the law. I will make sure Caesar is brought to understand that.”

“See that you do, Lucius,” Sertorius said with a smile tinged with menace. “See that you do. And make sure that everything that is said between the two of you is reported back to me, immediately and in full.”

Telesinus opened the inner door and gestured to Callius to precede him. He then walked out himself.

Caesar came back from the inspection of the dams with a sense of wonder. At this time of the year, early December, the storages were well into their drawdown phase, emptying to provide storage for the next Spring flood as well as watering an additional growing season downstream. But even so, the vastness of the impounded lakes and the roar of the water through the discharge flumes made these works seem like the labours of the gods.

“These four dams now offer complete protection against flooding downstream in a normal year, and provide enough storage for two more crops per year in most of the valley. One extra crop per year in the marginal lands,” Claudius explained.

“Then why are you building the fifth dam that you are taking me to next?”

“That is to provide full flood protection in the wettest of years, and sufficient storage gathered during a short Spring flood to see out the full growing season in a drought year,” Claudius smiled. “Operating this system, knowing

when to open or close the gates when you don't know what is still coming down the river, is a complicated business. This fifth dam gives us the scope to start impounding water earlier in case it is a dry year, while still having enough volume to survive a wet year.”

Most impressively, the fifth and last dam in the series was half-completed. Caesar could see that another mighty wall was rising from the controlled chaos of the construction site. The intricate teamwork demanded for transporting the clay fill, spreading it, packing it down tight, and then repeating the cycle layer after layer, each section of the wall being at a different stage of the cycle to make the most efficient use of the different categories of labour and equipment, and all honed by five years of experience on the earlier dams... this dance of thousands was more intricate and masterful than any military evolution or any theatrical entertainment that he could imagine. To see the completed works was awe-inspiring; but to see the act of creation beggared belief for its complexity. How could any mind conceive this in such detail, and then have it carried out so precisely? Caesar could not look at Atius Claudius after that without seeing a nimbus of light surrounding him.

His time with Callius was less inspiring. It was easy enough to dismiss the nominal bodyguard; the word of a Consul was not to be ignored. But even when out of eavesdropping range, the Chief Administrator would not clarify his written allegations of 'improper conduct'.

“For crying out loud, Lucius!” Caesar said in his frustration, “You wrote as if dark things and wicked conspiracies are everywhere underfoot. But when asked face-to-face to provide evidence for even one suspect dealing, you are one long fart without a turd at the end of it! Take one point that caught my eye before I left Rome; you wrote that the actual loot from the Indus cities was actually much greater than reported. So what happened to the difference between fact and report? Did Sertorius appropriate it to his own wealth? Was it split up among the Council members? What happened?”

“I must admit that I misunderstood the reports from the East on that point,” Callius explained himself. “The Governor commissioned a very comprehensive audit on the wealth of all the cities that were subdued, and this was considerable. I took that report to be a report on total booty. But Sertorius decided that it would not be in the interests of the Republic to strip them bare. Quoting the precedent of Silo in Asia and Pontus, he decreed that there must remain intact sufficient coin, bullion and other valuables to support the local economies, to ensure the cities could continue to pay taxes to their full capacity.

“He feared that if he exacted too much, their economies would collapse, their production would cease, hungry mobs would fill the streets, private looting would destroy what remained, and it would take a generation to re-built what had been destroyed in a month.” Callius faced Caesar to say “So there was no misappropriation. What was removed as booty was divided according to law; the Republic received its full share, and the soldiers their entitlements. The rest of each city's wealth remained in place, to generate taxable production for years to

come. It was all my misunderstanding of his economic policy, and no more sinister than that.”

“Well, what about the silk trade?” Caesar continued. “You wrote that Sertorius was told that his Governor's monopoly was illegal, and that he responded by hiding this behind a sham trader. Is that true, or is it another of your silly mistakes?”

“It was not a Governor's monopoly, Consul; it was a foreign treaty with an independent city that permitted only the Provincial Administration to trade in its territory. When the decision of the Senate arrived, Telesinus had to go back to Margiana, like a schoolboy who had been disciplined, and re-negotiate the treaty. Margiana did not want foreign private citizens having the right to trade in its territory, for security reasons as well as maintaining simplicity in the collection of their trade taxes, so it was not an easy negotiation. In fact it got to the stage that Margiana was on the point of repudiating the treaty rather than amending it.

“Eventually it was solved only by an Ultimatum; Margiana was to accept Republic Sovereignty and enjoy Miletus Decree rights, or be conquered and enjoy no rights.” Callius took a deep breath. “That Senate decision caused us great embarrassment and loss of face; it was seen as a sign that the Republic would not keep to its treaties, and Pontius had a great deal of work in making compensatory agreements whenever he was forced to vary a treaty after that. But he did his work well, and we had no revolts.

“So if I can ask you to take one message back to the Senate, it would be this; they have given Telesinus full authority to make treaties, and he is on the spot, and aware of complications and differences in traditions out here. The Senate is aware of nothing! So Senators should accept that Pontius knows what he is doing, and trust him instead of undermining him!”

“So what wicked conspiracies actually have some substance to them?” Caesar asked impatiently.

“I have to admit it; there are none,” Callius answered. “What I originally took to be improper actions and conspiracies, are in fact simply the way you have to do business out here. It was no more than adapting to local custom. But don't worry; over time these foreigners are becoming more aware of our customs, of our way of doing things, and they are starting to understand that our ways have some merit. Within a generation or two I think Persia will be as Romanised as Asia is today. So long as we do nothing really stupid, that is; and the best way of preventing that is to let Sertorius and Telesinus run this province as they see fit. And if they have to be replaced one day, then let them have a couple of years to train up their replacements; or if one dies unexpectedly, let the survivor have full authority while the replacement for the dead man learns how things are done.

“And one more thing; let them choose their own men from now on; I was imposed upon them by the Colleges Committee, and you have seen how badly I misjudged the situation. But Lucianus was head-hunted by them, and look at how well he handled the Judaeon Problem. I doubt Silo could have done better.”

Caesar looked defeated. “So you now say, let Sertorius and Telesinus run the shop however they like?”

“Yes, I do.”

“What about the Judaeian Question? In fact, what about Syria? They are an untidy arrangement that could become a problem; west of the Euphrates, but still part of this Frontier Province!”

“Syria has always been part of the East. From the time of the Hittites, then the Persians through to the Seleucids; they have always been part of the East. Leave Syria in the Province,” Callius said as if the last line in a mathematical proof. “And as for Judaea; there are more Jews living in Babylon than in Jerusalem; Judaea should be considered a part of Babylon.”

“And the private navy he is building?” Caesar persisted.

“It is not a private navy, Sextus Julius; it is commanded by Republic officers, now that Karmides has gone.”

“One last question, Lucius; what do you make of Claudius?”

“The Engineer? He is a genius,” Callius said flatly. “But his projects are stupendously expensive. It is yet to be seen if they are worth the money that has been spent on them.”

“I have seen them, Lucius,” Caesar said with a far-away look in his gaze. “And they will be worth every denarius. They are worth it as works of art, even if they don't grow a single extra grain of wheat.”

“Good morning, Sextus Julius,” Sertorius greeted his guest cheerfully. “I trust you found the Dams Project impressive?”

“Impressive is not the word, Quintus,” Caesar responded. “Verging on mythical would be more like it. The only thing that comes close would be the pyramids in Egypt, but these dams will actually make money instead of being dead monuments.”

“Well, we hope they will,” Sertorius confessed. “Are you ready for a tour of the Indus now, or would you like a few days to rest and catch up with paperwork?”

“A couple of days break would be nice,” Caesar conceded. “With your permission, I would like to interview the members of your Council one-on-one. Could that be arranged soon?”

Sertorius wrinkled his brow for a moment. “Pontius and Lucius are on hand, so no problems there. Arius is still up on the dam site; have you already spoken to him during the inspection?”

“I confess I took that liberty, Quintus,” Caesar confirmed.

“Good. That saves the inconvenience of another trip north,” Sertorius replied, apparently without any offence being taken. “Typhon is on a trade mission at the moment, in the Tamil lands south of the Indus; he might not be back for months, I'm sorry, but if he crosses paths before you leave us that will be fine. Gaius and Septimus are in Charax at the moment, with Charettes. They are inspecting the training of our new Marine Cohorts, so you can talk to them on the way to the Indus if we go by sea. That would also give you a look at our new ship designs; they are nothing like the ships on Our Sea and I think you will be impressed.” He looked up inquiringly, inviting a response.

"I think that sounds excellent, Quintus. Please make the arrangements as might be most convenient for you."

Telesinus made himself available that afternoon, calling in on Caesar as the Consul was packing his stationery for his approaching tour of the Indus.

"Thank you for being so prompt, Pontius," he offered his arm as Telesinus entered the office.

"Best to face the music as soon as possible, my mother always told me," Telesinus joked. "Were you not in the Senate when I gave my report in Spring?"

"Yes, but I had in mind something less formal, and in context too," Caesar explained as he gestured towards a chair.

"Funny you should say 'in context', Sextus Julius," Telesinus said with a wry smile as he sat. "That is the very point I decided not to make to the Senate. It would have only confused them, and I doubted they would have the patience to listen to the explanations."

"Well, I am here now, so feel free to be blunt. If you could be free to do whatever you wanted, what would that look like, and why?"

Telesinus rocked back in his chair. "Anything, eh? Well, I suppose I would like to know that whenever I make a treaty, the Senate would accept it instead of trying to outguess me. Now, don't get me wrong, Sextus Julius; I am a creature of the Senate, subject to its authority day by day, and duty-bound to serve and obey it. I am scrupulous to not exceed my authority, as you might recall when we discussed the Judaeian Question; but I wish they would realise that much of what they ask for is totally ridiculous by the standards of the local cultures."

"Give me an example, Pontius."

"Well, the Silk Trade Treaty with Margiana is the classic example. Out here, ever since Alexander established his Empire, it is accepted that Rulers are absolute. The rest of the people enjoy only as many rights as the Ruler decides to grant, for as long as he continues to grant them. People *expect* to be subject to iron-fisted idiocy. And Rulers also expect treaties to be honoured, or at least until a convincing pretext can be found for breaking them. I think it goes back to the old idea of Kings being like gods; whatever they speak is to be carved in stone, fixed and unchangeable forever.

"So when Margiana made a treaty with the Republic, they saw it as exactly that; a treaty with the Republic, and not with the citizens of the Republic. They gave the right to trade in silk to the Republic, not to our private citizens. So to go back and insist that any Republic trader must be permitted to enter their territory and trade was seen as a great insult. The right to enter their domain was a privilege extended to a fellow-King in their eyes, and not to be promiscuously granted to the rabble. By making that demand, we were putting the Governor of Margiana on the same level as our private traders; and in the eyes of the locals, anyone not a King is little more than a slave."

Caesar nodded. "I see what you mean, Pontius. For the Governor to accept that revision would be to accept that he was our subject."

"Exactly!" Telesinus exclaimed. "But once I had made that proposal, I could not resile from insisting on it. To settle for anything less would be

weakness; almost like claiming to be his overlord, and then backing away as soon as he resisted. If I had done that with Margiana, all of Persia and Parthia would have laughed us out of town. I had no option but to do what any eastern tyrant would do in those circumstances; gamble the lot with a show of determination. But to do that, I needed a pretext. I could not be seen to be breaking a solemn treaty unless I had good reason. So I issued a proclamation that all Republic citizens were to be considered servants of the Republic for the purposes of the Silk Trade.”

“That wasn't as hard as you make it out to be,” Caesar commented.

“That wasn't the end of the matter,” Telesinus continued. Margiana responded by requiring all such 'servants of the Republic' to carry a licence making that status explicit, and thereby making the Republic responsible for their actions. In effect, I was being asked to indemnify every petty prince against any wrong-doing by every trader and all of his servants and slaves. I refused. Margiana then walked away from the table, declaring that the treaty must stay as it was written. If the Republic would not honour it, then Margiana would repudiate it, declaring us faithless friends. I responded by declaring that a true friend would never walk away from a true friend. By walking away from the table, I claimed that Margiana had already repudiated the treaty without good grounds, and was therefore no longer a true friend. I sent them an ultimatum; now that they had renounced their friendship with the Republic, I was under no obligation to treat them as friends. So I gave them two days to either submit to the Republic under the same terms as set out in the Miletus Decree, or to be ravaged. That was language they understood; they submitted.

“After that, every other treaty that I was forced to re-negotiate was done in the light of this precedent. The other party knew that they would be forced to accept eventually, so they made a show of being co-operative. This put the obligation on me to be generous in return; more generous than was actually worth the effort, because magnanimity towards vassals is considered the essence of overlordship out here.

“I start to see, Pontius,” Caesar said. “That was why so little of the wealth of these cities was plundered when you took them over.”

“That was part of the reason, Sextus Julius. But also because Silo proved that leaving a city's productive capacity undamaged is more profitable in the long term.”

“And what sort of working relationship do you have with the others on the Council?” Caesar changed the subject abruptly.

“I am respectful of the authority Quintus has as Governor, and also of his good judgement. In return, he is totally respectful of my authority as Proconsul; he does nothing that affects foreigners without first clearing it with me, and he is always ready to provide legions to back up my negotiations if I ask for them. Just recently he put Gaius directly under my authority when I had to deal with the Judaeon Question. The other members of the Council?” Telesinus continued. “I don't really have much to do with them; they are under Quintus. But there is mutual respect.”

“What about Lucius?” Caesar pressed.

“Lucius is a bit of an old woman, I suppose,” Telesinus answered with a shrug, “and he was a quite negative at first. But he knows his job well, and has adapted to the circumstances. The Administration is smooth, and whenever anything is decided he puts it into effect very expertly. His documentation is excellent; we are all kept up to speed. And he is very good at reminding us of the legalities we must respect and warning us of unwanted consequences or other constraints. Sometimes he is a bit of a problem-seeker instead of a solution-seeker, but I suppose with men like Arius and Quintus on the Council we need someone to keep our feet on the ground.”

“And Tollianus didn't do that as well?”

“Marcus was a genius!” Telesinus exclaimed. “It was the worst day when he was recalled. He not only saw the possible problems, he could come up with ways of turning them into opportunities. He was the one who came up with the idea of the paper money that we use today. Haven't you noticed that everyone now treats it exactly as if it is actual silver? It is no exaggeration to say that he made silver out of thin air!”

“Yes, but don't get too excited about that,” Caesar said flatly. “There are many who see that as government-issued debt.”

“We have the reserves to cover every one of those papers,” Telesinus objected. “It is just easier for people to carry paper than bullion; and it doesn't have to be weighed out, with disputes about being a particle of silver dust over or under weight on the scales, or about the accuracy of the scales themselves. Or the inevitability of coins being shaved. That paper money has real silver backing; not like Greek coins that have been debased to a tenth of their face value. But at the same time, it allows us to run temporary deficits during a disaster, which would suck all the currency out of the economy and stop production and trade in their tracks if we had to use hard coin.”

“Our Roman coins are debased, too; but you were too polite to say that,” Caesar added wryly. “If we offered the same bullion backing for our coins as you offer for your papers, we would have to melt down the coins themselves to recover the metal first, and even then we would not be able to cover half of it. So I agree with you, Pontius; but as a friend, I am warning you that the rest of the world has reservations.”

“Well, I say Marcus was a genius, and if I had my way he would be back here immediately,” Telesinus returned to his main point, “and I am sure Quintus would agree, too.”

“Now looking to the future, Pontius,” Caesar changed the subject again, “I am told Typhon is touring Tamilia, or whatever you call it; is his purely a trade mission, or have you given him some diplomatic authority?”

“I have told him to let it be known that if any of the Tamil cities were to invite me to visit, I would be pleased to meet with them. Nothing more, until I can size up the situation myself.”

“Very prudent, very cautious, Pontius,” Caesar said approvingly. “Specially so, since the customs there will be even more beyond the wit of

Senators than those in the Indus. I will see if I can get you a freer hand when I return.”

“Thank you, Sextus Julius; that would be a good thing for everyone.”

Charettes greeted Caesar warmly when he arrived at the port of Charax. “It has been an honour to serve Pontius and Quintus, two Consulars; it is an even greater honour to be of service to a Consul!” he effused. “How can I be of service to you, my lord?”

Caesar looked out over the harbour. All the vessels he saw looked just like ships; what was so special about them?

“If you could, Charettes, please explain to this landsman what is so special about the new vessels you have been building and testing,” he replied.

“Oh, these are very significant advances in ship building, my lord,” Charettes enthused. “Please walk along the dock with me and I will show you.” Charettes gestured and Caesar fell in beside him. After about fifty paces Charettes stopped, gazing over a new vessel with all the pride of a father with his first son.

“Look at this, my lord! Have you ever seen a vessel like it before?”

Caesar looked carefully, but it looked like a small galley to him; a bit wider and without oars, but that was all. “You must excuse my ignorance, Charettes; but all I see is a short, wide galley. Would that not make it slower than the normal design?”

“Oh, do not look first at the hull, my lord! Look first at the rigging!”

For the first time in his life Caesar consciously and deliberately looked at a ship above deck level. “Ah! Two masts, not just one! But would not the back sail block all the wind from the front one?”

“Not just two masts, my lord, but three cross-arms on each. And do you not see that the masts are much taller than usual?”

“Now that you point that out, yes, I see. So you fit three sails, I suppose? But how would the front mast be of any use?”

“This ship is not designed to sail directly downwind, but it can do so if it needs to,” Charettes realised at last that Caesar had no idea, not even for what Charettes thought was bleeding obvious. “It is intended to sail at an angle downwind, so the front sails are not in the shadow of the rear sails. Also, it fits three sails on each mast so that in light winds we can put up a very large amount of sail, more than could be handled as a single sail. It also means that in heavier conditions, the lesser wind load on any one smaller sail instead of one huge sail makes it possible to handle safely; we do not have to drop the sail completely. And in heavier conditions again, we are able to put up just one or two sails, enough to control the ship, where a single larger sail would be either ripped to pieces or would drive us under.

“And if conditions are such that we have reason to run directly downwind, we can fit longer beams to the ends of the front cross-beams, and fit two sails side-by-side on the front mast, with ropes from the outside tips of the extended cross-beams back to the rear mast. This shares the load between the two masts.

Otherwise, the load of so much sail would break the cross-beams, or possibly the mast itself.”

Charettes beamed with pride. “So this ship can put up much greater sail area in light winds, as well as carry what would be a dangerous amount of sail for a normal galley in heavier winds. No matter what the conditions, it is faster, safer, and allows finer control.”

Caesar thought that he had grasped the main points. He was impressed. “But why has no-one ever thought of this before?”

“Someone has,” Charettes answered. “But not in the Greek or Roman world. I suspect it is because the winds in the Mediterranean are not as reliable as here in the Southern Ocean, so sails were kept simple. I think that if you put one of these ships in the Aegean, you would need to change the sail angle every hour, perhaps more often, as you changed sailing direction to avoid islands or to catch the wind at a constantly varying angle. That is a lot of labour, and a lot of chances to make a mistake if you try to hurry things. But out here, when you can set your rig and rely on maintaining the same sail angle and same sailing direction for days on end, it becomes much more advantageous.”

“Ah! So these ships are for long voyages across open oceans!” Caesar finally grasped that the difference in purpose drove the difference in design.

“That is right, my lord; and because the winds out there are more reliable even when weak, more sail can be put up. So there is no need to carry oarsmen, and all the food and water they would require. This allows more space for cargo.”

Charettes stepped onto the deck and beckoned Caesar to follow. Here was his chance to groom the Consul. “And as you so shrewdly noticed, my lord; this ship is wider than a galley. That is because the wind tends to push the ship over to the side when it is not blowing from directly behind. The wider body gives it a wider stance in the water, allowing it to resist this force. By staying more upright, it catches the wind and converts it into forward motion more efficiently.”

Charettes rested a hand on the stays to the foremast. “It also allows these ropes to be at a greater angle from the vertical. These are connected to the mast, as you can see, and stop the force of the wind from snapping the mast. The flatter the angle on these stays, the more force we can take from the wind without risking our masts; so a wider body helps us with that as well as stability.”

“I never realised how much thought went into designing a ship!” Caesar replied. “I had always assumed that a shipwright just did what he did because that was the way it was always done.”

Charettes smiled. “There are many shipwrights who are exactly like that, my lord. In my opinion, they are not real shipwrights; they are only skilled labourers. I refuse to employ such dolts.”

“Then you do well, Master Shipwright,” Caesar replied. “Just as I will not have a subordinate officer who does not adapt his tactics to the conditions in front of him.” Caesar looked around the harbour with new eyes. He scanned not the hulls any more, but the masts and rigging.

“There! That ship out there!” he exclaimed. “It has a completely different layout! Please, explain that to me.”

Charettes swelled even more with pride. "You are indeed a most acute observer, my lord. Let us go out to it, so I can show you the differences up close as I explain them."

It took only a few minutes to hail a rowboat to ferry them out to the caravel-rigged ship in question.

"Why does this ship have only the one cross-arm on the mast, if having three is so much more versatile?" Caesar asked. "And why is it at such a strange angle?"

"There are boats rigged like this back in the Aegean, but they are much smaller," Charettes started. "Most of them are fishing vessels, and they need to get back to port at the end of the day, even if the wind is blowing directly against them. This rig allows a ship to sail into the wind."

"But surely that is impossible!" Caesar exclaimed.

"Not impossible, my lord; but it does require some cunning. Imagine that you had a triangular sail, one edge along the cross-beam, and the other two sides coming to a point, and that corner was tied to the side of the hull back here." Charettes indicated a point towards the stern of the craft.

"Yes, I can imagine that," Caesar agreed.

"Now, imagine the wind is coming from that direction," Charettes indicated a direction a third of the way around from directly sideways towards the front. "The wind is coming from in front of the boat, is it not?"

"Yes, it is," Caesar agreed again.

Now turn around. If the wind comes from that direction, which side of the sail will it hit?"

Caesar turned. "It will hit the inside of the sail, but will slide off the rear. The sail won't actually catch any wind."

"These sails are not designed to catch wind, my lord; but to change its direction. As the wind slides off the back, it will push on this side of the sail. And although most of the force is sideways, the keel stops the boat from moving sideways. But the little bit of force that is in the forward direction, that force will push the boat forwards."

"Perhaps," Caesar was not convinced. "But you are still not sailing into the wind; only across it."

"But if we sail across it, with just a slight angle upwind, for a while; and then we turn the boat around to catch the wind on the other side, we will come back not to the point we started from, but a little bit upwind from our start. Do this several times, and you have made good some distance directly into the wind."

Caesar stood for a moment trying to imagine this; but he could not. "I find that hard to believe, Charettes."

Then come with me in a slightly smaller craft of the same design; I will show you." In less than an hour Charettes was sailing out of the harbour with a worried Caesar at his side. They were on a single-masted boat only a half-dozen paces long with a crew of three seamen.

“How will we get back, Charettes?” Caesar fretted as he stood beside the shipwright. “The wind is directly offshore. I hope you have a rowboat on standby.”

“Do not worry, my lord. Enjoy the experience!”

To Caesar's alarm the boat continued out of the harbour for half a mile, running before the wind with its sail in a big lazy balloon. Then Charettes barked out an order, and the boat swung to the right, across the wind, and then slightly up into it. As this was happening the seamen wound a capstan to pull in the rope holding the bottom corner of the sail. Suddenly the wind seemed much stronger, the boat rocked fore and aft as it bit into the oncoming waves.

“The wind seems stronger now, because we are running into it instead of away from it,” Charettes explained. “It is like the difference between wading downstream and wading upstream.”

Caesar was not comforted. All he knew was that they had come out of harbour under a gentle breeze, and as soon as they turned for home the wind strength more than doubled. He looked longingly to the harbour entrance just in front of square to their side. The choppy ride continued, with the occasional burst of spray over the deck as they hit a larger wave at just the wrong part of their rocking motion. Soon the harbour mouth seemed behind the square abeam position, and they were drawing further away.

“Where are you going, Charettes?” Caesar fought down a hint of panic. “The harbour is back that way!”

“Yes, it is, my lord; but the fewer times we have to change direction, the faster we will get there. Trust me!” The rocking continued, the wind seemed to be as strong in his face as ever, and the harbour now seemed at a forty-five degrees point behind them. Caesar did not want to show fear, but he had seen enough to know this was madness. He turned back to Charettes to order him to turn around, but before he could open his mouth Charettes was barking more orders to the seamen. Caesar watched for a moment as they scrambled to their positions.

One clipped the bottom corner of the sail to a second rope which passed through a ring on the opposite, the windward, side of the boat. Then the bow of the boat started to swing up into the wind, and then past directly into the wind. The sail flapped, the lock on the capstan was released, and the other rope started to be hauled in. The boat slowed as it clawed up into the wind and around, driven by its own momentum rather than any external force. Soon the wind was coming from the left-hand side. The sail angled out to the right, and the harbour mouth was now straight ahead of them. Relief flooded through Caesar as he saw safety dead in front of him, and the boat regathered speed.

When the boat was travelling well and the chopping, rocking movement had been fully restored, Charettes angled the bow of the boat a little bit more into the wind, to point at land.

“Why are you going in that direction?” Caesar demanded. “We will run aground!”

"No we will not, my lord," Charettes assured him. "When we are working into the wind like this, there is always a little bit of sideways slipping. We will make the harbour if we stay on this angle, because the wind will continue to push us just that little bit sideways."

Caesar did not want to argue. If they came too close to land, they could always steer away; better to be too close than too far away! As it happened, Charettes made the harbour mouth on that tack, and then tacked again once inside to make his mooring.

"So you see, my lord; the wind has been directly offshore all day, but we sailed from a point half a mile directly downwind to get back to harbour," Charettes summarised. "These craft are not as good as the square-riggers at sailing downwind or even across the wind; but they are excellent at sailing against it."

"It has been an education today, Master Shipwright," Caesar agreed with good grace. "I would not have thought it possible unless I had seen it done myself."

"We have yet another design of boat, something like this, and I think it will be even more efficient into the wind. But it is only experimental at this time. Would you like to see that?" Charettes asked.

"Provided you don't take me out of the harbour in it," Caesar said with a smile. Charettes returned the smile.

Caesar was bemused as the rowboat approached the third ship. This one had no cross-arms at all!

"Where do you hang the sail?" Caesar asked in his confusion.

"Let me show you, my lord. But we will stay in the outer harbour this time, I promise."

The three sailors boarded the new craft with them, leaving the rowboat tied to the mooring. They struggled to drag a long sack onto the deck, and then went below for a second, smaller sack. The larger sack was opened, to reveal a large sail and several lengths of timber. The sail had reinforced holes along one edge, with metal ringlets through them. Caesar only noticed the steel hoops around the mast when the sailors started to connect the ringlets around them. As these were fitted, another rope hanging from a pulley at the top of the mast was tied to the top of the sail. The other end of this rope was connected to the capstan and hauled, and the top corner of the sail rose up the mast. After a short distance another ringlet was fitted, and the sail hauled higher. After the third ringlet was hauled clear, one of the lengths of timber was fitted into a sleeve sewn horizontally into the sail.

As two of the men were doing this, Charettes and the third sailor were fitting a long beam to the foot of the mast. Is that the cross-beam? Caesar wondered. Then what is it doing at the bottom of the mast instead of the top? It did not take long to fit the sail to the mast and haul the top corner to the top of the mast. It flapped in the breeze, and Caesar noted that it was neither square nor triangular. It looked like it might have been triangular if it had been twice as tall; but the top part had been cut in a curve, and the timbers strips held the outer edge of the top curve away from the mast. Then Charettes and his helper tied the

bottom corner of the main sail to the end of the horizontal beam, and pulled it tight so the sail was stretched out flat. This was quite unlike the triangular sail on the caravel.

While this was happening, the other sailors were clipping one edge of the smaller sail around the cable that ran from the bow of the boat to the top of the mast, hauling it up the cable as they went using another pulley mounted on top of the mast. This sail was genuinely triangular, and had no bottom beam; it looked very much like the caravel sail, except it used that front cable from bow to mast instead of a crossbeam.

“Are you ready, my lord?” Charetes asked politely.

“Yes, thank you,” Caesar replied, wondering what he was supposed to be ready for. The sailor at the bow cast off the mooring line, and the boat started to drift backwards under the pressure of the wind. Charetes held the tiller over to one side, and the boat started to present side-on to the wind. A barked order, and the front sail was pulled into a graceful but rounded shape. The backwards drift stopped, and Charetes reversed the tiller. The bow continued to drop off the wind, and some forward movement started. Another barked order, and the end of the big horizontal beam which had just been swinging in the wind until then, was pulled towards the back of the boat. The sail started to bulge as the wind caught the side of it, and the broad top swung in the breeze, tauter now. Forward speed increased noticeably, and as the speed increased the front sail was pulled tighter and the horizontal beam was pulled back further. Charetes brought the bow even closer to the wind, until it seemed impossibly close to front-on.

But the shore was getting very close very fast. The bow dropped away off the wind as Charetes adjusted the tiller angle. He called a few orders to the sailors, and the front sail bellied out to a wider angle, and the beam at the bottom of the main sail swung out wider. The speed picked up and the boat raced across the water, faster than a horse could run, it seemed, but Caesar had never ridden a horse that could run on water. Spray flew as the bows slapped the waves.

“My lord; please come back here!” Charetes shouted to him. “You are in danger where you are standing!”

Caesar stumbled back to stand beside Charetes. “What danger? Danger of being blown away?” he asked in exhilaration. “This is amazing!”

“Watch what happens as we turn around, my lord. Watch that big beam.”

The boat fell off the wind even more; they were cutting across the waves at a diagonal now, even though the wind seemed still to be coming from the side. Another shouted command, more activity among the sailors as the boat turned right around towards their starting point.

WHACK! The beam swung violently across the deck where he had been standing moments ago, as the wind came from the opposite side of the boat.

“That takes some getting used to,” Charetes admitted. “It almost killed a man the first time it happened, and the impact tore a hole in the side of the hull where the rope was anchored. We had to develop techniques to minimise the jolt, but even so it carries a huge force.”

“It does indeed”, Caesar agreed. “But this is the most exciting ride I have ever had!”

By now the boat was downwind of the mooring point. Charettes continued to swing up into the wind, controlling his speed by loosening or tightening the ropes controlling the big beam at the bottom of the main sail and the smaller front sail, and for the last dozen paces turned directly into the wind to kill his speed completely. A sailor with a hooked pole groped for a loop of rope, and dropped it over a metal post at the front of the boat. They were back at their mooring.

“As you can see, my lord; this design is much faster, and can point higher into the wind. But it can be a brute if the wind shifts unexpectedly.” Charettes summarised. “But we are still working on it, for its potential. With its high speed and ability into the wind, it seems well suited for anti-pirate patrols.”

“Charettes, you are a genius!” Caesar enthused.

Caesar was left in a daze after that sailing experience. A ship that can not only sail into the wind, but faster than a horse! Never before had he been on a ship that could do more than a respectable jogging pace without more than eighty men pulling on oars to achieve that speed, and then only for a few minutes at a time. He had come to Babylon because of reports from Callius that improper things were happening. He had come half expecting that these allegations would be justified; after all, Callius had a name for strict compliance with proper protocols. But Callius had now confessed that he had been in error. Caesar could now see how that might happen. Sertorius had collected around himself a team of men who were capable of the most amazing feats. Claudius the engineer was doing things that even the gods would balk at; the Caretus Cohort had achieved victories that seemed impossible; Charettes was building ships that defied the wind; and they were even producing silver out of thin air with this paper money. No wonder Callius, pedestrian and without imagination, was alarmed at first!

Caesar now had no doubt. Sertorius was a statesman without peer, a complete genius in the business of building a province in every way that mattered. Militarily and economically as much as productively, he was a genius. And he had no doubt that Telesinus, brilliant diplomat that he was, took care to ensure that he didn't over-reach his negotiating position because he was aware of the precise extent of the military backing that Lucianus could provide for him, as well as the innate conservatism of the Republic Senate. What a team! To think that Sertorius had masterminded all this while also building up genuine popular support for the Republic among the subjugated peoples throughout his vast Province... No wonder that Sertorius insisted on first name terms within his Council! They were not simply an administrative body; they were brothers in a sacred quest!

Sertorius arrived in Charax the next afternoon.

“Greetings, Sextus Julius!” Sertorius smiled warmly. “I hope you've been able to speak to Septimus and Charettes while being so patient with me.”

“Septimus is out on an exercise; but Charettes has been most enlightening,” Caesar replied.

“It is a pity you missed being with Septimus,” Sertorius rejoined. “That man is a genius in his field. As soon as I can spare him, I would like to send him back to Rome, so he can teach his methods to other Special Units. I would appreciate your recommendation for that.”

“You already have my recommendation for that, Quintus,” Caesar responded. “The Caretus Cohort is famed throughout the world already. But I have been totally amazed by the ships you are developing. Is there any chance of these techniques being taken back to Our Sea?”

“All that we do out here is in the service of the Republic, Sextus Julius, so the skills we develop will be made available to all,” Sertorius replied. “But please, let us develop them first, so we do not waste other people’s time. A few more years to get things right, and we intend to make these designs public; but as Charettes says, he doubts that the sailors of Our Sea will adopt them. They are only useful out here in the vastness of the Southern Ocean.”

“Well, be that as it might be, I need to talk to you privately, Quintus. I need to tell you some things that you might not like.” Caesar led Sertorius to a chair and gestured for him to sit.

“In what way has my custodianship disappointed you, Sextus Julius?” Sertorius asked with a frown as he sat.

“In no way, Quintus,” Caesar reassured him. “In fact, you and your Council have exceeded every conceivable criterion. But even so, there are some back in Rome who believe that you have acted improperly.” Caesar put a hand up to forestall a protest. “This is based on incorrect information, which I intend with all my heart to correct when I return. That incorrect information springs from some reports made by Callius when he first arrived. He was unaccustomed to your genius, and misunderstood your actions. But even so, the less imaginative Senators might not be easily convinced.”

“So what do you intend to do?” Sertorius asked with furrowed brow.

“With your permission, I would like to take Callius with me back to Rome. There he would be able to personally reassure doubters that his earlier reports were not founded on a true appreciation of the circumstances.”

Sertorius stared at Caesar for a few moments. “So you are suggesting that I break up my team? It was hard enough to fit Callius into the gap left by Marcus Tollianus, and now you want me to go through that again? Do you understand how much that disrupts my work?”

“I can only imagine, Quintus, having seen how closely your Council works as a team. How can I minimise the disruption?”

“Where can you find a replacement Administrator who can slip into our program without the same problems we had to guide Callius through? Where will you be able to find one who can hit the ground running?”

“I understand your problem, Quintus. I said I have seen how closely your team works,” Caesar answered. “Whom do you suggest?”

Sertorius shrugged in frustration. “The only Administrators who know this province are Callius and Tollianus. If you are going to take one away from me, then I want the other.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Caesar promised.

“Not good enough,” Sertorius replied. “If you are going to recall Callius, then you need to have a very good reason! It has happened once with Tollianus, and you know yourself how much it disrupted our programmes. If you do it to me again, I will go to Rome myself to fight it.”

Caesar dropped his head in defeat. “Then how about this deal. I will arrange for Tollianus to be transferred back here, and only then will I recall Callius. Will that keep you happy?”

Sertorius softened slightly. “I will still need to bring Marcus up to date. But if you can do that, I will not object too loudly.”

Chapter 10 – 688 AUC (66 B.C.)

“Conscript Fathers,” Caesar started his report to the Senate, “I have had printed a full report on my inspection of the Eastern Frontier Province and I trust each of you has been provided with a copy by my staff. If any Senators have been overlooked in this distribution, then please accept my sincere apologies and let me know so I can make good this oversight.

“But it is both traditional and proper that I provide this body with a spoken summary of my findings. In short, I find as follows...

“First, that there is no hint of improper practice in the government of the Province. Any rumours you might have heard have been totally and vehemently denied by the alleged source of this so-called ‘secret information’, and is also totally contradicted by a painstaking audit and examination of the Minutes of Council meetings, the Government records of income and expenditure, and also the personal banking accounts of both Quintus Sertorius and Pontius Telesinus, the two men against whom these scurrilous rumours seem to be targeted. In this regard I must express my appreciation to both of these fine men for not only enduring the insult implicit in these examinations, but also for their complete and sincere assistance and co-operation. They were emphatic that I must look into every corner, to ensure there was no remaining hint of improper conduct by either of them.

“Second, I find that the alleged ‘personal navy’ being constructed is no such thing. It is completely under the command of recognised Republic officers. It consists of two cadres; a properly organised structure of naval officers and seamen, and a Marine Cohort of infantry specially-trained for seaborne operations. Both of these arms have been trained by the famed Septimus Caretus, and are as fine a body of fighting men as I have ever seen. And not only that; they are also experimenting with various new designs of ships which will allow operations previously unimaginable to be carried out. Their work is the greatest single advance in the Republic’s naval capabilities since we acquired the secrets of Carthaginian ship-building more than one hundred and fifty years ago. But the difference here is that we are not just catching up with an enemy; we are advancing beyond them!

“Third, the alleged ‘waste of resources on grandiose projects’ that some might have heard is a total inversion of the truth. I have seen these projects, and I admit that I was stunned by them. They are indeed stupendous in scale and vision, but not ‘grandiose’. They are rigorously disciplined and financially analysed to ensure they provide an excellent return on investment. But no less important, they are simultaneously monuments to the energy, the power, of this Republic.

“I have seen the Great Lighthouse and the Pyramids in Egypt; I have seen the Statue of Zeus; I have seen the Temple of Artemis; I have seen the Mausoleum. They are all monuments that awe all who would gaze upon them. But they provide not a grain of gold, not a modius of wheat.” Here Caesar paused for a moment, to emphasise what was to follow.

“And I have also seen the Dams on the Euphrates. I tell you all; these dams make all other great works seem like cripples in the presence of an athlete! The Dams Project is a greater work of art, of science and of engineering than all the others combined! But more than that; these Dams will actually make a profit! If only all our provinces were so fortunate as to have such natural bounty waiting to be unlocked, and men with the vision and the skill to unlock them!

“No; all the rumours and allegations that you might have heard are totally without substance,” Caesar continued after a slight pause. “Yet I did find one member of the governing Council who was perhaps not up to the standard of the others. Not that this man is incompetent. Far from it! He has demonstrated his worthiness for high office in his career to date, but in more pedestrian circumstances. He simply does not have the imagination to grasp the vision of his colleagues. This has caused him some anxiety, and plenty of misunderstandings.

“Therefore I urge in the strongest possible terms that he be replaced by one who already enjoys the total confidence and support of the other extraordinary members of the Council of the Eastern Frontier Province, and who can hit the ground running. I urge you to recall Lucius Callius to Rome, pending a suitable vacancy as Chief Administrator in some other Province more suited to his proven skills and diligence, and that he be replaced immediately in the Eastern Frontier Province by Marcus Tollianus. Anything short of this action will be to the extreme detriment of the Eastern Frontier Province, and a lost opportunity to the Republic as a whole.”

Metellus was first to his feet as it became apparent that Caesar had finished and was heading back to his seat.

“A question, please, Sextus Julius,” he rushed out. “Are you implying that Lucius Callius is in any way inadequate, or unreliable in his judgements?”

Caesar stopped in his stride and turned towards Metellus. “I am not implying that he is inadequate as Chief Administrator in any other Province. If you had taken the time to read my full Report, you will know that Quintus Sertorius himself speaks highly of his diligence, his attention to detail, and his awareness of the interaction of one government action upon others. But he does lack the imagination demanded for so unusual a Province. Let us put the best round pegs in the most important round holes, and allow square pegs like Tollianus their due when it comes to filling square holes.”

“But I have it on good authority that Sertorius and Telesinus are conspiring to establish themselves as a separate Kingdom!” Metellus cried.

“Read my Report, Quintus Caecilius,” Caesar answered tiredly, and then sat.

Tollianus did not arrive back in Babylon until the middle of Quinctilis. But he was pleased to present Sertorius with a letter from Rome.

*To Quintus Sertorius, Governor of the Eastern Frontier Province,
From Marcus Licinius Crassus and Titus Lafrenius, Consuls of the
Republic, and with the support of the Senate of the Republic,*

Greetings!

We are pleased to inform you that the Senate warmly endorses your governance of the Province, and to that end has resolved as follows:-

- 1. The Senate explicitly approves of your issuing of paper notes to act as money, provided you have firm grounds for believing that such paper will be redeemable from the Province's funds upon maturity.*
- 2. Should Pontius Telesinus be rendered incapable of performing his duties as Eastern Proconsul, you are authorised to assume that capacity for so long as required, provided you immediately notify the Senate of such circumstances.*
- 3. The Senate requests that you provide a short list of persons whom you believe to be suitable as your successor, should that become necessary; so that the Senate may take your recommendations into consideration when appointing a Deputy Governor in the near future. You will be required to ensure that the Deputy Governor, when appointed, will be ready to take on the responsibilities of Governor as soon as possible, subject to the following considerations.*

We also advise that the following resolutions apply to Pontius Telesinus:-

- 1. The Senate assures Pontius that he has complete and final authority to negotiate treaties in full confidence that the Senate will endorse them without qualification. At most, the Senate might suggest some points for consideration, but will not require re-negotiation if Pontius decides that such re-negotiation is not desirable. However, the Senate requests that he would respond to our points of consideration for our education.*
- 2. Should you be rendered incapable of performing your duties as Governor, Pontius Telesinus is authorised to assume that capacity for so long as required, provided he immediately notifies the Senate of such circumstances.*
- 3. The Senate requests that Pontius provide a short list of persons whom he believes to be suitable as his successor, should that become necessary, so that the Senate may take his recommendations into consideration when appointing a Deputy Eastern Proconsul in the near future. He will be required to ensure that the Deputy Eastern Proconsul, when appointed, will be ready to take on his responsibilities as soon as possible, subject to the above considerations.*

We trust that these arrangements will be to your approval, and the benefit of the Republic as a whole. We also advise of the following administrative arrangements:-

- 1. Commencing on the new year in approximately eighteen months' time, Armenia shall be joined with Pontus to become a separate Province. This shall include Colchis and all colonies and settlements on the northern shores of the Black Sea. Colonies on the western shore shall be assimilated into Thracia. The precise boundaries shall be determined by the Censors or their*

delegates. You are required to put in place such measures as might be convenient ensure that this re-organisation is done without difficulty.

2. *Syria, Judaea and Arabia are declared explicitly to be part of the Eastern Frontier Province, and the resolution of Foreign Questions arising in this area shall be within the authority of Pontius Telesinus.*

“Well, Marcus,” Sertorius commented as he lifted his eyes from the paper, “you know how my heart was set on the Euxine Colonies. But that is a small price to pay for having you back with us!”

“And I am pleased to be back with you, Quintus,” Tollianus replied. “It is not only a vindication of my professionalism, but also a thrill to be back at the cutting edge of what it means to make a province prosper. I am more determined than ever to push the boundaries! But how did you convince Caesar to have me posted back?”

Sertorius smiled the smile of a man with a secret. “I can be very persuasive. Now, let me bring you up to date on what has been happening while you were away.”

Telesinus had finished re-casting all of the precious metal he had apportioned to Hyrcanus, and much of the remainder had been fashioned into reasonable replicas of priestly equipment. After the fines for Treason had been subtracted, Aristobulus had been left with the equivalent of two hundred talents of gold. A princely sum, certainly, but only a small proportion of the total loot he had stripped from Jerusalem. The five legions which had made the march to Jerusalem last year were re-assembled as a guard for the return trip. They arrived at Jerusalem on the third day of Sextilis.

“King Hyrcanus, my friend!” Lucianus beamed as Hyrcanus met him at the Damascus Gate. The two men embraced theatrically for the benefit of the crowd. At length they parted. “And I present to you Pontius Telesinus, the Eastern Proconsul,” Lucianus said as he raised an arm towards Telesinus.

Telesinus advanced, offering his right arm and a polite smile on his face. “Greetings, King Hyrcanus!” he said with dignity. “You have the friendship of the Republic.”

“Greetings, lord Telesinus,” Hyrcanus replied as he took the arm. “I rejoice in that friendship. Please, bring your men into the city! Let us quarter them in comfort, instead of them sleeping in tents!”

“You are most courteous, King Hyrcanus,” Telesinus accepted the offer. “I will leave Gaius and your men to see to my soldiers, while we find somewhere to talk.”

Hyrcanus released the arm and gestured towards his palace. “Please, walk with me, lord Telesinus.” As the two men started towards the Place side by side slaves fell in behind them to hold parasols above their heads.

A few minutes later the two men were seated in a lush courtyard, cooled by a tinkling waterfall and the shade of several trees. Bowls of grapes and sweetmeats were laid on the table between them.

“Just to clarify one point right at the beginning, Hyrcanus,” Telesinus opened the business part of the conversation, “I have been granted full and final authority to speak for the Republic. What I decide will not be contradicted or over-ruled. As far as you are concerned, I *am* the Republic.”

“It is indeed an honour for me, lord Telesinus, that a man of your immense dignitas would consent to be my guest,” Hyrcanus responded obsequiously.

“Please, Hyrcanus,” Telesinus smiled thinly, “I am not some self-important potentate such as you might be accustomed to out here in the East. Although I have that authority, I have it only by delegation and I will be required to account for my actions when I report back. I told you my authority not to impress you, but to re-assure you. You need not be anxious that what we agree today will be overthrown tomorrow. So please deal with me simply man-to-man; and I would prefer you to call me 'Pontius', if you do not mind.”

“Then I thank you for your personal friendship, Pontius,” Hyrcanus conformed himself immediately to what he perceived to be his guest's expectation.

Telesinus smiled in return. “Now, the discussions you had with Gaius last year have been acted upon. The two thousand three hundred and forty eight talents held at Delphi and Rhodes have been appropriated, and a further two thousand six hundred and fifty two talents subtracted from the funds confiscated from your brother to make up the balance of the fine imposed on you for befriending Aretas. Your debt to the Republic has been paid. Therefore we have in our baggage train all of the Temple goods taken last year for safekeeping.”

“That is wonderful!” Hyrcanus enthused. “Politically, this is a great victory for me, if the worship in the Temple can be done in all its majesty instead of with makeshift furnishings!”

“Even more wonderful is a little plan that we have devised to assist you, our friend,” Telesinus continued. “When Aristobulus and his treasure were safely in hand, your brother was tried for Treason; his overthrow of you as the rightful King was illegal. The death penalty was not imposed, but he was fined all his possessions except for two hundred talents he was permitted to retain in recognition of his submission.

“But when we seized the bullion and jewels in his possession, we soon realised that it would be impossible to separate what was properly his own, and what he had stolen from you. All means of identification had been removed; even the bullion had been re-cast into plain moulds.”

“So what did you do, Pontius?” Hyrcanus asked anxiously. “Surely you did not seize all of it, and leave me penniless!”

“Quite the opposite, Hyrcanus,” Telesinus soothed him. “We were meticulous to ensure two things. The first was that we must pay full honour to the God of Heaven whom you worship, lest we suffer for unintended impiety; and the second was that if our division of the remainder was not accurate, then

the benefit of that inaccuracy must fall to you rather than ourselves. The Republic always treats its friends generously.” Telesinus leant forward.

“So we fashioned the jewels into priestly vestments and temple furniture. If any of them are in any way improper, then we leave it to you to not pass them on to the priests, but to either correct any faults or retain them in the Royal Treasury, as you and the priests might determine.

“And as for the bullion; we set aside the two hundred talents of gold as your brother's own possession, but the rest was re-cast into moulds bearing the Royal Imprint that you drew for Caius. We are returning that to you, less the amount needed to pay the fine.” Telesinus turned to look squarely at Hyrcanus. “The Republic has retained only four hundred talents which we deemed to be your brother's personal wealth, forfeit for his treason, and the five thousand talents of your fine. The rest is being returned to you.”

“And how much is that, Pontius?”

“Roughly seven thousand talents of gold, fifty eight thousand talents of silver, and six chests of jewels that were left over from making the priestly equipment.”

Hyrcanus was stunned at this wealth. He had expected to be picked clean, but this sum being returned was more than had been in the Treasury when he had been deposed. He recovered his poise quickly. “The Republic certainly has proven itself more than generous in all its dealings,” he commented with obvious sincerity.

“There are a few other matters that have been resolved, too,” Telesinus went on. “The most important is that the Republic does not want any hint of instability in this part of the world,” Telesinus continued. “In particular, we are worried that if anything happens to our Friend and Ally Hyrcanus, the only legal heir is Aristobulus, a convicted traitor. And even if we can prevent his assumption to the throne, we can be confident that Aretas will seek his own advantage.

“Therefore we have taken steps to ensure no such instability can arise. We invite you to assign your kingdom to the Republic, and we will appoint you Ethnarch.”

For a second time Hyrcanus sat stunned. After a minute, he asked weakly “Abdicate my kingdom?”

‘Not ‘abdicate’, Hyrcanus. You will still be king in every way that matters,” Telesinus explained. “But you will not need to raise or equip your own army; the Republic's legions will be your defence. And you will have a liaison officer assigned to you, to ensure that there arises no misunderstanding between you and the Republic. And lastly, you will need to separate out your personal wealth from that of the Kingdom.”

“How can I do that?” Hyrcanus objected. “The kingdom *is* my possession!”

“Not any more, it's not,” Telesinus corrected him. “But don't worry; I have brought with me the liaison officer I just mentioned. He knows the guidelines, and will help you sort out these issues.”

"I will be impoverished!" Hyrcanus continued to plead.

"No you will not!" Telesinus snapped back at him. "You will eat like a king, be dressed like a king, in fact, you will be able to enjoy a better life than the Consuls of the Republic enjoy. And on top of that, you will be able to delegate all of your duties to the Administrator we will appoint for you, if that is what you want, and your life will be totally secure because there will be no incentive for anyone else to try to usurp your throne. You will have everything you want at your fingertips, no unavoidable burdens or duties, and no personal danger!" Telesinus fixed him with a stare. "But if you would rather be a sovereign in your own right, then I suppose that could be arranged. All you have to do is say to me 'Go away, and I never want to see another Republic soldier again.'" Telesinus gave that a moment to sink in. "Go ahead, Hyrcanus; tell us to go away and stay away, that you no longer wish to be a Friend and Ally, and we will grant your wish," Telesinus confirmed. "We will even relay that message to Aretas for you! See how long you last then! And when Aretas has had his way with you and your children, only then will we come; but as conquerors of Aretas, not friends of Hyrcanus!"

Hyrcanus realised that he had no choice. He could be a puppet of the Republic, or a victim of Aretas. He knew which would provide the more comfortable life, as well as the longer one.

"Thank you, Pontius," he said at last. "I would be pleased to surrender my kingdom to the Republic, and I accept appointment as Ethnarch."

"Excellent!" Telesinus smiled. "Now, let us put out an announcement for a Public Meeting tomorrow. We will celebrate the return of the Temple Treasures, and you will express your gratitude and commitment to the Republic that governs so well and so wisely. What greater gift could you give your people, than to entrust them to such a Republic?"

"Yes, let us do that," Hyrcanus mumbled reluctantly.

"And we will display the bullion and gems to be returned to the City Treasury, to demonstrate that the Republic is trustworthy."

"Yes, we will do that, too."

"And after that presentation is made, Hyrcanus, you will accept just enough of the silver as you might need to mint your currency, and the rest you will entrust to the Provincial Governor for safekeeping, just as your mother entrusted her bullion to Greek temples. That will take away any temptation for either Aretas or Aristobulus to attack your city. It will also simplify your finances; instead of having to transport tax revenues overland to Babylon, we will simply deduct it from your holdings."

"That would seem an excellent idea, Pontius," Hyrcanus agreed weakly.

"Next item of business," Telesinus continued, "is the small matter of King Aretas. I have been instructed to bring him to heel. Your role in this campaign will be to provide logistical support for my legions, if that proves necessary. You will not be required to provide any fighting men for the main operation, but you will need to ensure the safety of our supplies and communications, so some guard duty will be involved. In particular, that will

mean maintaining a good supply of drinking and cooking water. That will all be under the command of Marcus Atius, who will answer to General Lucianus, not to you. Tell your Army commander to report to our camp immediately, and he will be given his instructions.”

“Yes, lord Telesinus,” Hyrcanus answered dutifully,

“Come now, Hyrcanus,” Telesinus smiled warmly, “you can still call me ‘Pontius’, we are all friends, you know!”

“Yes, Pontius,” Hyrcanus responded with his own weak smile.

“Arrogant bastards, these Romans!” Aretas scowled when told that the five legions that had marched to Jerusalem had continued south rather than returning to Damascus. “Five legions! Less than twenty-five thousand men! They know I have more than twice as many men plus the advantage of defending prepared ground. How can they seriously hope to defeat me?”

“As you say, King; they are arrogant,” Khalil agreed.

Very well, Khalil; get the men out, prepare your battlefield. An ambush or two would probably damage their morale as well; just like they did to us last year.”

Aretas raised a hand suddenly and pondered the situation for a moment longer. “Unless Rome wants peace, but this general is looking to provoke a war. In that case, perhaps an ambush might send the wrong message. So content yourself with a prepared defence, and send out an emissary to find out what they want to say.”

Khalil bowed, took the respectful three steps backwards, and left to prepare orders.

“King Aretas sends you greetings, and asks you purpose in entering his kingdom,” Khalil said courteously after he had stopped ten paces short of Telesinus and Lucianus at the head of the legions. “My name is Khalil.”

“I thank King Aretas for his greetings, and ask you to relay to him the respect of Pontius Telesinus, Eastern Proconsul of the Republic,” Telesinus replied. “As for our business; I come to offer the King a treaty with the Republic. It is our intention to incorporate his kingdom into Syria Province, with all the rights and benefits under the Miletus Decree.”

Khalil was taken by surprise by this announcement. “My lord, please clarify what you mean. Do you come in peace, or do you present demands?”

“We come in peace, lord Khalil,” Telesinus assured him. “We extend to King Aretas an invitation to assign his kingdom to the Republic. In this way, he will enjoy the honour of ‘Ethnarch’, and his people will rejoice in the benefits of becoming part of the Republic that governs all its peoples wisely, bringing peace and prosperity to all.”

“Your words are honeyed, lord Telesinus, but they amount to a demand that the King surrender his kingdom to you. That is hardly coming in peace!”

“Accept our offer, and there will be no deaths, no rape, no damage, no plundering,” Telesinus explained. “That is peace! Only if your King follows the path of Mithridates, Tigranes and Sanatruces will there be war.”

Khalil pointedly looked past Telesinus, towards the ranks of legionaries behind. “If you continue marching towards Petra, lord Telesinus, there will be no rape or damage or plunder anyway. But there will be plenty of Roman deaths. We vastly outnumber your forces.”

“Just like you did on the Damascus Road last year?” Telesinus smiled.

“King Aretas is right; you Romans are very arrogant,” Khalil commented. “But I wonder how you will explain your actions to your Senate when to start a war you will not be able to win. Petra is impregnable.”

“We could sit here exchanging compliments all day, lord Khalil; but that will not get your report back to King Aretas any faster. You have our offer, and you know what will happen if our offer is refused. Live long and well, lord Khalil.” Then to Lucianus, “Resume the march, General.”

Contrary to common belief, the Siq was not the only way into Petra. It was only the most suicidal. Lucianus had no intentions of sending any of his men into that defile. The other more open routes along the main wadi were also well prepared and easily defended. Petra was effectively a walled city, but the walls were natural, thick, and impossible to breach.

But it is not necessary to get soldiers into a city to conquer it. Although the lightning campaign style of Silo over the last twenty years had revolutionised warfare, the old methods still had their place; and one of the most effective weapons in the Republic Army was still the humble shovel. While the Nabataean forces were set securely behind their defensive works, Lucianus set his men to constructing fortifications of his own, to prevent sallies by the defenders once they recognised the main axis of attack.

“Khalil, I want your report on how you are handling these Romans,” Aretas demanded after the fifth day of stalemate.

“My King, we are impregnable. We have prepared strong defences along every possible line of attack, we have ample men in each location to resist any force the Romans can bring to concentrate, and all are well-trained and well-drilled for every eventuality. We also have something the Romans lack; we have food for two years, and a perpetual supply of water. If the Romans intend to lay siege to us with five legions, they will need another five simply to maintain their supplies of food and water.”

“Then I take it you do not intend to disrupt them?” Aretas asked sternly.

“That is what they are hoping for, my King,” Khalil replied. “They are trying to entice an attack by us. But they have artillery protecting their men while they are engaged in these earthworks, and all have their weapons close at hand. They are hoping for us to be rash, so they can counter-attack, and breach our defences in the confusion. I prefer to let the desert do our work for us.”

Aretas was not convinced. “Food for two years, you say?”

“Two years at full rations; we can last a third year and well into a fourth if we need to,” Khalil assured him. “By that time the Romans would have despaired. We are just not important enough for them to deploy ten legions against us for that long.”

“I do not want to be passive for years on end, Khalil,” Aretas scowled.

“My King, put yourself in the position of the Roman Consuls. There will be other distractions, other opportunities for a campaign elsewhere to gain a bit of personal glory. So long as we take no aggressive action, we will not be a chance for anyone to make a name for himself. But if we start launching sallies or attacks, it will become a matter of pride for them to maintain their enmity. I urge you to simply play it quietly, and they will get bored.”

It took twelve days for the fortifications against Nabataean sallies to be up to the standard Lucianus demanded. The lines of ditches, walls and towers had been laid out cleverly to provide overlapping fields of view and supporting artillery range to create a set of killing fields no less deadly than those in front of the defenders.

“Now it is time for you to shine, Yacoub,” Lucianus welcomed his secret weapon, a Jew who had lived as a trader in Petra for years and who knew it in detail. “You have already provided excellent maps, for which I thank you. My men have been scouting, to confirm their accuracy. You have also located the main spring in the city, and other minor sources of water. What I want you to do now is guide my men by night to capture and hold a few key positions on the hills above the city.” Lucianus turned to his map and dropped his finger on five small valleys in turn.

“Yes, General,” Yacoub replied respectfully. “That should not be too hard. Are these places defended?”

The targets are not, but there are a couple of strong points nearby that we will need to occupy; here and here,” two more points on ridges between the valleys were indicated in turn.

“There are footpaths to those places, General, used by the soldiers on lookout duty. It will be possible to find them even without moonlight, if your men are careful and patient.”

“Excellent! We move tonight; the new moon will set early, allowing us nine hours of darkness. Get some sleep today, Yacoub; it will be a busy night for you.”

Caretus knew his men were in their positions around the first strongpoint, a walled enclosure barely twenty-five paces square with a stone tower at one corner. He was now completing the deployment of his second attack party around the second little fortress, only slightly larger than the first.

He glanced up at the tower again, discernible in the darkness only as a part of the sky with no stars visible. He had already placed his crossbowmen so that the silhouette against the Milky Way gave better definition of the top of the wall. Two shapes on the wall moved from time to time; watchmen in

among the crenellations, pacing to keep warm in the chill of the desert night. Which reminded Septimus that he should not delay too long; his men, and particularly the men who had already been set around the first tower for more than an hour, would stiffen if kept immobile too long.

“Now, Gaius!” he said to the man beside him. Gaius took unhurried aim at the leftmost outline of the watchman, constantly whispering ‘no, no, no, no,’ to Marcus his colleague beside him who was aiming at the shadow on the right and similarly whispering ‘no, no,.. until he had a clear shot. Gaius now had a clear shot, and started whispering ‘yes, yes, yes,’ but Marcus was now chanting ‘no’. Then Gaius’ man started to move again. ‘No, no, no’ Gaius whispered to Marcus. Marcus’ target moved slightly, enough for a clear shot. “Yes, yes, yes, yes,’ Marcus started to whisper. Patiently Gaius tracked his man until he stopped at the far end of his stroll. ‘Yes, yes,’ Gaius started, and then heard the ‘thwack’ of the bolt being fired by Marcus. Immediately he shot as well, and the shadow on the wall disappeared.

Caretus waited for a reaction from the fort. Had there been shouts of alarm the men around the base of the walls were to lob firebombs over the wall and into the enclosure, and the crossbowmen to take targets of opportunity as they appeared on the walls. But after a minute all was still quiet. This was the time for the scaling parties; four men at the base of the wall cast heavily-padded grapples over the wall and pulled their ropes taut. Then they silently scaled the ten-foot high walls, with others following them just as silently.

Caretus looked out to the west. Just above the horizon was a bright star. The other detachment were under instructions to take their target as soon as that star set, or when they saw flames from Caretus’ target, whichever happened first. So far, no flames; so there was no loss of surprise for them. Caretus was satisfied so far. Then, even as he watched, the star blinked out as it dropped below the ridge opposite. Not bad timing!

The whole of the assault team were on the walkway behind the walls now. After a moment to confirm all were present, they disappeared down the internal ladders into the small square below, looking for the sleeping quarters. There were a couple of shouts, soon stifled, and then silence. A few minutes later a call came from the walls.

“All secured, Septimus; nine enemy accounted for; no casualties.”

Only then did Caretus realise that he had been holding his breath. He glanced over towards the first fort. Still no flames from there. Had they also succeeded by stealth, or were they still waiting? If they are still waiting, then the last thing they need is for us to send any kind of signal. Just lay low, and keep up the appearance of nothing unusual. There was still work to do.

“Yacoub, now it is time for you to lead us to the path up from the city,” Caretus told his Jewish guide. This was not necessary; every detail had been worked out earlier, but Caretus dreaded any risk of confusion. His next task was to prevent anyone coming up to counter-attack, and Yacoub had already told them that the steps were only wide enough for one man at a time, to

make them easier to defend. A few cross-bows in line with the top flight would secure this passage.

It took only twenty minutes of groping in the dark before Yacoub said "We are at the top of the steps now. Feel the walls either side."

Caretus knelt to place on the ground an oil lamp he had brought for the purpose, and lit it. Set on top of the highest step, it would reveal anyone approaching from below, allowing him to be picked off. Five men with crossbows were stationed in line, and told to fire in turns if a large number of men tried to rush through the small gap.

"Right, Yacoub; back to the first fort."

Both staircases and forts were secured by first light. An effective counter-attack would be impossible. Caretus reported back to Lucianus, and waited for regular forces to relieve his men. Patrols were established along the top of the cliffs to ensure the Nabataeans would not be able to scale the faces to take the staircase guards from the rear.

"I am baffled, Khalil; why would the Romans want to waste time and effort to capture those two forts? We were never going to try to attack them by that route anyway, we would not be able to get enough men up there to be effective. And they can't use that route to attack us, either, for the same reason." Aretas was worried. He knew that nothing can ruin a good battle plan quite so much as the enemy doing the unexpected.

"I expect that they did not fear an attack so much as scouting," Khalil answered. "They want to keep something secret from us. But it will do them no good; we can see their camps from our remaining lookouts, and I have now strengthened them and the ground around them so they cannot be taken. In the next few days I will have fortifications built to further protect them. These Romans were foolish to not attempt to capture all of them at one time if they expected to achieve their purpose."

"You are too self-confident, Khalil. When it comes to war, Romans are anything but foolish."

"Foolish or not, we can still see everything they do in their camps; their effort is wasted."

"Greetings, Roman," Osama said cheerfully as he cantered his horse out to the emissary. "My name is Osama, and I look forward to chatting with you."

"And I greet you, Osama. My name is Atius," the Roman replied courteously.

"Well what shall we discuss today, Atius?" Osama smiled.

"Let's discuss what my General has in mind," Atius suggested. "I'm sure he would not mind me telling you his secret strategy."

"I would not want you to get into trouble, friend Atius. Why would your General permit you to tell me secrets?"

"My General is a very generous man," Atius replied. "He does not want to harm or kill anyone, not even his enemies. And it would be even more

disappointing to him if he is forced to make your entire city uninhabitable. Surely it is an offence against the gods to poison an entire nation! But that is what he will be forced to do, if you do not surrender the city promptly.”

“Your General is indeed a most sensitive and honourable man, friend Atius; but you may tell your general that he need not concern himself. We have food for many years, and a permanent source of water. We need nothing to be brought into the city from outside. So he will have no need to poison us, because he will have no opportunity.”

“Ah, but you are wrong, friend Osama,” Atius smiled wistfully. “We have gained access to the source of your water supply. We will allow you until this time tomorrow to report back to your King. Come out tomorrow with your surrender under these terms, or we will start to poison your water the following day.” Atius held out a folded letter for Osama to take.

Osama paused, and then accepted the letter. “I will humour you by taking this letter, friend Atius; but do not expect the King to even open it. He is not one to be terrified by idle threats.”

Atius smiled. “We can only offer generosity; we cannot compel your king to accept it. Good-bye for now, and I hope to speak with you tomorrow.”

“Sleep well, friend Atius,” Osama said in farewell.

“My King; Osama has just returned from a parley with the Romans,” Khalil introduced his contact man with the enemy. “What he says seems an idle boast; but it is only right that it be brought to your attention.”

“Well, Osama,” Aretas prompted him. “What is so alarming?”

The Roman threatened to poison our water supply unless we surrender tomorrow,” Osama summarised.

Aretas flicked a hand. “How can they? Our water is not some aqueduct that the Romans can tamper with! Our water comes from a spring within the city itself, beyond their reach.”

“Are you certain of that, King? Where does it come from, to get into that spring?” Khalil asked.

“Spring water does not come from anywhere, it just comes out of the ground,” Aretas said impatiently.

“I recall, my King, when we were in a camp in Judaea near the Salty Sea, we could not drink from the Sea. So we sank a well to get fresh water. The water in the well was salty, also. I guessed that it was water from the Sea, seeping through the ground and into our well. Perhaps our spring also collects water by seepage.”

“Seepage from where, Khalil?” Aretas asked impatiently. “There is no sea or lake near here!”

“I do not know, my King. Perhaps we should ask the people who maintain the Spring and the Cisterns; they might be able to explain this.”

The Keeper of Water was summoned to appear immediately. “Yes, my King? How may I be of service to you?”

“The water from the spring; where does it come from?” Aretas demanded.

“Out of the rocks, my King.”

“Yes, but how does it get into the rocks, to come out of them?”

“Oh, I understand, my King,” the Keeper replied. “The rocks around the city are not solid, as they seem. They are full of tiny little holes and cracks, too small to see but able to soak up any water that falls on them as rain. There are also some larger cracks, large enough to see, that can collect all the water stored into the rocks, and gather it into one place; that is our spring.”

“So the water from the spring is rainwater that falls on the ground above us, and soaks through the rocks?”

“That is right, my King.” The Keeper thought he had solved the problem, and was waiting to be dismissed.

“If someone wanted to poison this water, how could it be done?” Aretas asked.

“Someone could put poison in the cisterns or in the spring, I suppose; but it would be difficult to carry enough poison into these places to be effective.”

“Is there any way to poison the water from outside the city?” Aretas continued.

“I don't see how, my King,” the Keeper answered, perplexed by this line of questions.

Aretas was satisfied. “You may go now,” he dismissed the Keeper. Then he turned back to Osama. Go out to that Roman again, and tell him I laugh at his little joke.”

“So soon, Osama!” Atius exclaimed as he approached the Nabataean. “You had until tomorrow to surrender.”

“The King has taken expert advice,” Osama replied. “He is assured that it is impossible to harm our water supply. He laughs at your empty threat.”

“Perhaps the expert your King consulted was not aware of our plans,” Atius answered. He had authority to reveal details, now that the stairways were impassable and the plateau was secure against an attack to dislodge them. “Do you know those little valleys in the plateau above the city? The ones with the small dams that only fill up when it rains?”

“I have been up there, but I didn't pay that much attention,” Osama conceded.

“Those dams are where your water comes from. When it rains, those dams hold the water long enough for it to soak into the cracks in the rocks, and these cracks feed your spring. Those dams are where we will put our poison.”

Osama tried not to show his alarm; this sounded too much like what the Keeper of Water had just explained to the King. “But they are dry now. Sprinkle your poison, Roman, but there is no water to wash it down into the rocks. We will worry about it next time it rains! Which might be years from now.”

“Oh, it will wash through much more quickly than that,” Atius assured him. “Because starting tomorrow, we will tell our men to use large bowls for latrines instead of holes in the ground; and we will be emptying these

bowls into your dams. Do you know how much piss can be passed each day by twenty-four thousand men? And do you realise that once the rocks around your spring have been soaked with that poisoned piss, it will be a hundred years before it can be made clean again?" Atius smiled. "Go, find your expert, and tell him what I have told you. He might change his opinion." Atius pulled his horse around and returned to the camp.

The Keeper was worried. Being summoned to the King twice in one day could only mean trouble.

"Keeper, tell me what would happen to our spring if the dams on the plateau were laced with poison, and then those dams were used as a latrine by twenty-four thousand soldiers."

The Keeper was shocked. "It would poison our water supply!" he exclaimed.

"Did you not tell me earlier that it was impossible to poison the water from outside the city?" Aretas was not happy.

"I thought you were talking about 'someone', a single person; not an army!"

"Would we be able to prevent this from entering our spring and cisterns?"

"I don't think we could keep it out of the spring, my King; but we could make sure none flowed into the cisterns we already have full," the Keeper answered. "But once the water in those cisterns is used, we would not be able to re-fill them. The spring itself would be poisoned for years, perhaps for a lifetime or more."

Aretas looked across to Khalil. "Now we know why the Romans seized those two forts. Nothing to do with spying! Is there any way of re-capturing those valleys before sunset tomorrow?"

Khalil thought for a moment. "We cannot attack up the steps; they have been hacked smooth now, and too steep to climb. Even if we could, we would have to attack uphill in single file. That would not work.

"The next option is to attack out the end of the valley, and turn before we get to the Roman line of defence. There is a gap between the cliff and the Roman line there. But they would massacre our men as they tried to squeeze through the gap. Even if they got through in enough numbers to take the valleys, we would not be able to get food or water to them. They would be wiped out in a counter-attack.

"Or we could go all-out at the Roman line, and when that is rolled up then go on to the valleys." Khalil shook his head. "I do not like any of those choices. We always designed our defences to resist a siege, never as a base for a counter-attack."

You have seen the Roman deployments, Khalil," Aretas said angrily, "What are they set up for? What is their weakness?"

"They have no serious weakness, my King. We are both set up for defence, and both impregnable; whoever attacks, loses."

“Then let us not attack,” Aretas decided. “Instead , we sneak through the darkness like they did to us. Get some men around the corner quietly. I want a few thousand men up on that plateau before dawn, and then let the Romans try to attack us!”

“That will be a very dangerous tactic, my King,” Khalil said reluctantly, knowing it could cost him his life to argue. “If we are to ensure that we have enough force up there to resist a full-blooded attack, we will need to move tens of thousands of men up there, not just a few thousand. That would take ten hours, three abreast, even if marching on an open road in daylight. I don't think it can be done across broken ground in total darkness without being detected.”

“Then what *would* you do, Khalil?” Aretas demanded menacingly. “You have already said that we cannot hope to attack them directly!”

“I do not think any tactic is likely to give us victory, but out of all the bad options, the idea of a night attack on their camp offers the most hope. They are little more than a mile away; we can creep up on them slowly over a wide front, and then storm their camp while they are asleep.”

“So you think that is our best plan?” Aretas asked, slightly mollified.

“It is still not a good plan, my King; but an attack in daylight would be suicidal. We have no better choice available.”

“Then do it!”

Lucianus was pleased with the strategy thus far. He was confident that the Nabataeans would respond with an attack immediately, now that they knew about the plan to poison their water. But would they do it under cover of darkness or at first light. And where?

The two Republic blocking forces at either end of the wadi were each two legions strong; just under ten thousand men each, significantly out-numbered by the fifty thousand that Aretas could throw at them if he massed all his force for one blow, but the combination of fortifications and artillery would allow them to hold on. And there was another legion holding the plateau; not as well dug-in, but the only way they could be reached would be if the attacking force dared to cross in front of our onagers.

Best to cover all possibilities. As soon as it was dark enough to conceal the action, he sent out men to set tripwires, in case a night attack was launched. The gap between the fortifications and the foot of the cliff was also wired, just in case the enemy tried to sneak through in the dark; but that would be a very bold move, Lucianus thought to himself. Even so, he ordered fifty of his onagers to be alert to that gap, and position themselves to fire into it.

All onager and ballista batteries were prepared and provided with full ammunition lockers, and the crews told to sleep fully-clothed beside their machines. The infantry and crossbowmen were also told to sleep at their posts in their battle gear and with their weapons close to hand. Extra runners were rostered to stand by a doubled sentry duty.

It was almost midnight when the first bell sounded. One of the tripwires set five hundred paces out had been disturbed. Runners left quickly to waken the troops. Then another bell sounded its gentle tinkle, and soon all eight of them had been tripped. They were coming on a wide front!

Lucianus had not been sleeping. He heard the men around him being roused quietly, and he was satisfied with their discipline. Not enough noise to let the enemy know they have been detected. He walked out to the onagers by the light of the campfires, and confirmed that all the crews were alert and ready.

“Keep calm, Claudius,” he reassured the artillery commander. “Don't wind on any tension until you get word. Remember, the first rounds are to be triple-pots to go to maximum range and full width of the front. Each machine to traverse two degrees between shots. Then adjust as orders come through.” The onagers were set just over fifty paces behind the wall; that would place the fall of those first rounds some three hundred paces in front of the wall.

He returned to the wall defining his defensive line. His men were at the ready, but maintaining silence. His heart swelled with pride and respect for these men, all of them veterans and true professionals; they deserve every iugerum of land and every denarius of loot coming to them when they retire!

One of the second line of bells tinkled softly before falling silent. Then a second. The front ranks of the enemy were now only three hundred paces away! “Quick, run to the onagers; time to tension their machines!” The two runners turned and sprinted towards the rear. “Run along the line; tell the ballistae to wind on tension!” Two more men ran off to each side, to spread the word to the smaller artillery spread along the top of the wall.

Lucianus stared into the darkness, but could make out no movement. He strained his ears, but could hear no sound other than the tinkling of the tripwire bells as they sounded one after another, even though the faint breeze was into his face. These Nabataeans were pretty good soldiers, too, he thought to himself, to advance with almost perfect uniformity in the pitch black of this night, and so silently. It will be a pity to kill such fine men!

The minutes dripped past, one by one. Lucianus was starting to wonder if the enemy had realised the purpose of the threads they had already encountered twice, and had cut the third line of wires. To call down the onagers now? he fretted to himself. No, he decided. If they had worked out our alarm system, then they would be going slower. That is the reason for the delay. They are still well short of us. The time crept by with agonising slowness. Then the first of the wires at one hundred and fifty paces sounded its bell. “To the onagers!” Lucianus ordered a runner. “Commence firing! Then report back to me.”

A second and then a third bell sounded just as the first firepots arched over his head. The first salvo landed and shattered, spreading a line of spot fires that revealed a massive Nabataean force spread out over the plain.

The mass of Nabataean men, realising that there was now no point in further stealth, raised a roar and started jogging towards the wall. If they

could get there before the defenders could be roused from their sleep, dress in their battle gear and be deployed on the wall, they might yet be able to carry it in their first rush.

“Triple pots, half-range!” Lucianus shouted to another runner, just as the first runner to the onagers returned puffing. Another volley at full range flew over the attackers. As they landed and shattered, the row of spot fires were linked to become a ragged barrier. A block of Nabataeans one hundred and fifty paces deep and four hundred paces wide were now locked into a killing ground. Unless, of course, they managed to breach the defensive line, in which case they would be doing the killing, not suffering it. Lucianus estimated the enemy were spaced a couple of paces apart, except for some compression in the front ranks; that would mean about fifteen thousand men in the pocket, but he could not estimate how many more were on the other side of the curtain of fire three hundred paces away. This was a serious assault!

The first volleys at half-range started to fall just over a hundred paces in front of the wall. By the light of these fires he could see the front ranks of the enemy were carrying scaling ladders. They were only seventy paces away now, almost on the line of stakes set into the ground to disrupt any charge.

“Ballistae; choose porcupines, and shoot as they are held up at the stakes!” Lucianus heard the nearest of the ballista crews wind back their shooting table and place a packet of arrows in place.

The first of the attackers were now at the stakes. These had been placed less than a foot apart, with their sharpened ends inclined and chest high to hold up any charge. Lucianus was surprised to see the Nabataeans break into pairs and each pair fit some sort of frame between adjacent stakes. Then they started pressing two long levers towards each other. They were using these levers to force wider gaps in the stakes! Then a volley of porcupine arrows cut them down as they worked. New men rushed forward to replace the fallen, and managed to force a passage before the next packet of porcupines could be fired. The ballista crews were under orders to concentrate their fire on any choke points, and continued to cut down men as they waited to stream through the gaps prised in the line of stakes; those that made it through would have to be picked off by crossbows at short range, or even the infantry behind the wall itself.

But by now three rounds of triple-pots had fallen along the ragged line of half-range, and there was an effective barrier against all but the front ranks of the enemy. Rather than reducing range further, which risked burning a hole in the line of stakes, the onagers would be better used to further isolate the enemy front so it could be taken in detail, without risk of reinforcement.

“Onagers, increase range by fifty paces!” Lucianus barked at a runner. He noted that three ladders had now been laid against the inclined outer face of the wall, and Nabataeans were running up them as if they were cleated gangplanks. The first ranks crumpled and fell as they crested the wall, cut down by cross-bows. The second and third waves carried the wall before the

cross-bows could re-load, but found themselves confronted with a dense line of heavy infantry three deep. This well-drilled wall of shields and gladii with javelins over the top went about its business with grim efficiency, hidden from the view of the Nabataeans still streaming into what they doubtless thought was a viable breach. In fact, it was the throat of a mincer. Lucianus' decision to set his infantry behind the wall rather than on it had worked well; the attackers still thought they had achieved at least some element of surprise, and had no idea that their cause was hopeless.

There were few Nabataeans left now in the space between the wall and the nearer line of fire; it was clear that reinforcement from behind was no longer possible. The time had come to annihilate those between the two lines of fire.

"Onagers, increase range a further fifty paces!"

The ballistae were falling silent from lack of targets. Only those two machines either side of the apparent breach were firing into the press of men waiting to climb the ladders. The light shields of the attackers, designed with little substance except for a rim and frame to parry swinging blows rather than stabbing or penetrating weapons, were of little help. The tight line of heavies behind the wall had gradually crept back more than five paces from their original position, to ensure it had clear footing while the attackers had to stand on the bodies of the fallen. Even as Lucianus watched, the last of the men outside the wall were cut down by porcupines and the heavies behind the wall started to move forward, stabbing down at wounded fallen as they advanced.

"Onagers, cease fire!" Why waste ammunition, Lucianus thought to himself. Now let's see what the morning brings.

"Friend Osama! I am glad you survived the night. What a terrible waste of good men that was!" Atius smiled at the envoy.

"There are many mothers in the city weeping for their sons this morning, friend Atius," Osama said sombrely.

Let us ensure that number does not increase, Osama," Atius sympathised. "Once the water supply is poisoned, I cannot see how the people of the city can be saved. The only possible future for them will be death or slavery. So join with me to prevent such a terrible fate."

"I confess, friend Atius, that last night was a desperation attack, once we realised that it was our only chance to protect our water. What can we do now?"

"What are your instructions from Aretas, Osama? I am sure you did not come out here to admit defeat."

"The king believes that even if the attack was not entirely successful, it must still have done considerable damage to you. I am under instruction to sense your mood, and hopefully determine whether a renewed attack has any chance of success."

"Then why are you telling me this, friend Osama?"

"Because I do not intend to follow those instructions. I intend to surrender myself to you."

Atius thought for a moment. "What is your commander's assessment of the situation? Is he optimistic?"

"General Khalil was almost in despair even before last night's fiasco."

"Then come with me. I will show you our camp, and how little we suffered last night. Tell your King that the arrogant Roman insisted you see, so he could gloat all the more."

"Then, when you have a chance to talk to your General, tell him of this offer. We will grant life and freedom to all the city and all his soldiers, if he brings me Aretas by this evening. Dead or alive, we do not care. And the city is to submit to the Republic, under the same terms as we have granted to Jerusalem. You will be free, and govern yourselves, within the framework of the Republic."

"Do you swear this by all your gods?" Osama asked.

"It is exactly the offer we made to your envoy as we were marching here, except that Aretas has now been cut out of it. It is all the Republic ever imposes on cities that submit. I swear to it."

"Then you will not poison the water today?" Osama asked.

"You may tell the king that it will take us a day to tidy up after the battle last night. The death of so many of his men has bought him one more day."

Atius was ready when the lookout called that two men were approaching from the city. He trotted out to meet them.

"Greetings, friend Osama! And who is this lord with you?"

"Friend Atius, this is Khalil, General of the Army of Petra." Osama walked his horse backwards a few steps, leaving Khalil foremost as a sign of respect.

"Greetings, lord Atius," Khalil said in acknowledgement.

"Greetings, lord Khalil," Atius responded. "What shall I take back to my General?"

"You shall take me back to him, if you would be so kind," Khalil answered. "I have a gift for him."

"I would be pleased to do that, lord Khalil, but please understand that no foreigner approaches the General unless he has been searched for weapons. I will also need to examine your gift."

"A wise policy, lord Atius; for how are you to know that I am who I claim to be?" Khalil smiled.

"Then you will please follow me?" Atius asked politely and turned towards his camp.

Atius dismounted outside a large tent, and gestured for Khalil to do the same. A quick instruction was given to one of the sentries outside; he went away immediately at a jog. "You will now remove your armour, lord Khalil, enough to show you have no weapon. And where is this gift you spoke of, please?"

Khalil gestured towards a leather bag tied to his saddle. "Will I open it, or do you want one of your own men to do so?"

“If you would open it please, my lord.”

Khalil unfastened the buckles and put his hand in the bag. It came out holding a human head by the hair. “This is Aretas, formerly King of Petra.” He placed the head on the ground and then started stripping. To demonstrate his complete surrender he stripped naked, even to removing his sandals. “This is the only weapon I have left,” he joked, indicating his genitals. “I trust I will be allowed to keep it.”

“You may dress again, lord Khalil. I thank you for your co-operation.” Atius replied.

Telesinus arrived just as he was finishing this process. “Is this not lord Khalil, whom I met on the road coming here?” he asked as he recognised the man.

“Indeed, lord Pontus,” Khalil answered.

“The name is Pontius, not ‘Pontus’, lord Khalil,” Telesinus corrected with a smile. “But I am honoured that you remembered so closely.”

“Lord Khalil is the General of the Petra Army, lord Telesinus,” Atius clarified for Telesinus. “He brings a very interesting gift for you and the General,” nodding towards the head on the ground.

“Who is it?” Telesinus asked.

Lucianus arrived at this time, having been inspecting the onagers for wear and tear after the battle. “Good morning, everyone,” he said breezily. Atius saluted formally rather than speaking a more casual greeting, being in the presence of two foreigners. He knew it paid to show respect in such circumstances. Then the head on the ground caught Lucianus' eye. “That is Aretas; I recognise him from when we were outside Jerusalem last year.”

“Indeed, lord General,” Khalil confirmed. “I am now in control of the city, and I come to deliver it into your hands under the terms agreed with your emissary lord Atius.”

“What an excellent idea!” Lucianus commented. “Aren't you the man we met on the road?”

“Yes, lord General. My name is Khalil.”

“Then I thank you, Khalil. I really did not want to be forced to destroy your city.” Lucianus smiled. “I did not want to kill so many good men last night, either; but I had little choice there.”

“Had you not inflicted so heavy a defeat, I might not have had the support of my officers to act in this way today,” Khalil replied.

“Enough banter, gentlemen,” Telesinus broke in. “Let us go into the tent and discuss arrangements.”

Khalil knew he had no choice but to submit to every point the Romans put to him; he could only hope that they would honour their commitments in return. The first point was that all his soldiers must present themselves to the Romans the following morning to be disarmed; they would then be permitted to go free after the city had been inspected. The second point was that there would be a legion of Republic infantry stationed in the city, to serve as both a defence force against raiders and to maintain public order within the city. The

third point, which he had dreaded, was the matter of plunder. To Khalil's surprise this was incredibly light; five thousand talents of gold was little more than Aretas spent each year on his army, an expense the city would not have to support under Republic protection.

And recurrent charges and taxes? "Under the Miletus Decree, we are not permitted to charge you any tax except what is levied on a citizen, and at a rate no greater than applied to citizens," Telesinus explained. "That might vary from year to year, but it will never be more than the law allows." Of course Khalil was profusely grateful, however much he doubted this assurance in his heart.

The treaty was signed in the city's main square on the fourth day after the surrender, full of speeches and promises, right arms and smiles. Khalil was announced as Ethnarch, and all but one legion of Republic troops marched off to the north.

"Quintus is going to be so pleased with this," Telesinus crowed as he and Lucianus rode at the head of the column.

"Well, it rounds out the frontier and gets rid of a possible trouble spot; but it is not that big a prize," Lucianus answered.

"You are forgetting the most important thing, Gaius," Telesinus wagged a finger at him. "At the southern end of the kingdom is a port onto the Red Sea. From there we can control all trade between Egypt and the East. We can choke off any trade through Egypt, and monopolise sea trade the same way we have done with the Silk Road."

The scales fell from Lucianus' eyes. "Oh, in the name of all the gods! Yes!" Then he thought again. "But if we had poisoned the water, all that would have been lost!"

"Do you really think so, Gaius?" Telesinus asked with a frown. "Do you have any idea of how much poison we would need to have any significant effect? Do the arithmetic yourself; there is no way we could have harmed their water supply, it would have been diluted so much that it would have been harmless."

Suddenly the whole campaign was turned upside down in Lucianus' mind. It had all been one huge bluff, to make the Nabataeans throw themselves at prepared defences, and then surrender in the face of a threat with no substance behind it. "I sense the hand of an engineer behind this huge hoax, Pontius. Did Arius Claudius have any part in weaving it?"

Telesinus just smiled. "We are all one team, Gaius."

AUTHOR'S NOTES TO THE SECOND VOLUME

The reader will understand why I was shocked to hear that Caius Julius Caesar was widely considered to be 'The Greatest Roman Ever' by people in this timeline. But in my timeline he was the symbol of complete treachery, a man who would sacrifice the lives of many thousands, both low-born and the most noble, in his lust for personal glory. How could the same man present so differently?

I believe the difference is one of context. And this on two counts.

The first difference is that in your history, Italy and Rome had already been through the Social War and the Marian War. Both of these brutalised politics down to a level that would have been unimaginable only one generation earlier. Naked personal ambition, pursued by force of arms, was the new 'normal'. Roman politics had sunk to the level of competing street gangs.

But in my history these wars had been avoided and the great issue of the time, that of Italian Citizenship, had been resolved peacefully. The Silonian approach to governing non-citizens, as set out in the Miletus Decree, also did much to humanise public administration. In the following years Italians had proven themselves to be just as strong in their support of the Republic and Due Process as the best of Romans, often even more so; while violent politics such as the Sulpician and Strabo Coups had been not only nasty, but also failures. This re-inforced the perception that the politics of violence was not only undesirable, but downright counter-productive.

The second difference was in the quality and number of leading men involved. It is not unfair to say that the wars in your history had not only removed many of the top-quality Romans, but had also effectively locked Italian nobles out of the field. Caesar rose as quickly as he did because the competition against him was so weak. This contrasts dramatically from the circumstances in my timeline, where the number of excellent men more than doubled as Italians established their credentials. This large pool of competent and critical (in the best sense of the word!) participants ensured that the sociopathic as well as the merely stupid were kept out of power.

To me, the lesson is clear. The greater the depth in the political classes and the more respect they have for building consensus policies, even in structurally adversarial arrangements, the more stable the body politic will be and the more prosperous the State. Yet it is always so tempting for politicians, and in particular two-party political systems such as seem to be typical of the Anglophone world, to descend into divisive tactics, each side demonising the other, sometime de-humanising their opponents even to the point of justifying violence as a legitimate response. Even in your own history it should be obvious that this 'politics of rage' leads to the proscriptions of the Marian and Sullan factions, the Religious Wars following the Reformation, the dictatorship under Napoleon, Stalinism in the Soviet Union, and even the Nazi regime in the 'cultured' Germany of the twentieth century. And there seems more than a whiff of that same desperation and paranoia in the current 'Terrorist Question' and associated Islamophobia.

It has been said that one who will not learn from history is doomed to repeat it. I can only hope that having two different histories to learn from will further reduce the number of repetitions.

OUTLINE of significant events, dated by Western Convention (years B.C.)

BOOK 1

90 Consuls Lucius Julius Caesar
 Publius Rutilius Lupus

 Censors Sextus Julius Caesar
 Publius Licinius Crassus

Italians enrolled as citizens of the Republic in their native tribes.

89 Praetors Quintus Poppaedi Silo
 Gaius Papius Mutilus - _
 Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius

 Consuls Lucius Cornelius Sulla / Caius Marius (suffect)
 Lucius Porcius Cato

Mutilus sent to govern Sicily

Sulpicius' Coup

Caius Julius Caesar the Younger made High Priest of Jupiter

Marius goes to fight Mithridates

Sulla's First March on Rome

88 Praetors Marcus Livius Drusus
 Marius Egnatius

 Consuls Caius Marius / Lucius Porcius Cato (suffect)
 Lucius Cornelius Sulla

Marius dies at sea; Sulla in command of the War, delegates actual control to Silo

87 Praetors Quintus Sertorius - to govern Spain
 Two Italians

 Consuls Lucius Porcius Cato
 Marcus Livius Drusus

Quintus Pompeius Rufus to govern Asia

Quintus Sertorius to govern the Spains

86 Praetors Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius
 Pontius Telesinus

 Consuls Lucius Porcius Cato
 Marcus Livius Drusus

Strabo's Coup

Sulla's Second March on Rome

*Pontus defeated, Armenia confronted.
Silo's First Triumph.*

85	Praetors	Caius Vidacilius
	Consuls	Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius Quintus Poppaedi Silo
	Censors	Lucius Cornelius Sulla Lucius Porcius Cato

*Nicomedes of Bithynia deposed
Legislation to separate Republic Senate from Roman Senate*

84	Praetors	Lucius Glaucia Caius Papirius Mutilus – to Africa
	Consuls	Lucius Valerius Flaccus Gnaeus Octavius

*Caius Vidacilius to govern Sicily
Quintus Poppaedi Silo sent as Military Governor for Anatolia Frontier.
Sulla invites contributions for the new Great Houses*

83	Rep. Praetors	Gnaeus Papirius Carbo Herius Asinius Caius Vidacilius Titus Lafrenius
	Consuls	Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus Quintus Pompeius Rufus

*Titus Lafrenius sent to govern Asia in place of Rufus.
Republican and City Separation takes effect.
Silo takes Syria*

82	Rep. Praetor	Gnaeus Priscus Quintus Sertorius Caius Vidacilius
	Consuls	Gnaeus Papirius Carbo Publius Servilius Vatia

*Sertorius returns to the Spains
Silo takes a substantial section of Armenia; Second Triumph.*

81	Consuls	Sextus Julius Caesar Lucius Glaucia
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Boni puppets take control of Picentine and Lucani Tribal Houses
Death of Gnaeus Pompeius

80 Consuls Caius Julius Caesar Strabo Vopiscus
 Herius Asinius

 Censors Lucius Cornelius Sulla
 Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius

Caius Vidacilius proposes Tribal Status for Sicily.
Julia born
Silo swallows all of Armenia, and stabilises the frontier with Parthia

79 Consuls Gaius Papilius Mutilus
 Lucius Julius Caesar

Sulla dies, after thwarting Sertorius' run for Consul.
Caius Marius the Younger elected Republic Quaestor by his rural Tribe.
Gnaeus Papilius Carbo to govern of Africa.
Caius Julius Caesar widowed.

BOOK 2

77 Consuls Titus Labienus.
 Marcus Aemilius Lepidus

Carbo proposes Tribal status for Africa.
Mutilus sent to govern Spain, replacing Sertorius.

76 Consuls Gaius Aurelius Cotta
 Pontius Telesinus

75 Consuls Marcus Livius Drusus
 Lucius Porcius Cato

 Censors Gaius Aurelius Cotta
 Quintus Pompeius Rufus

Bocarus appointed Ethnarch of Numidia
Caius Julius Caesar serves under Silo in Armenia
Italian Gaul granted Tribal Status.

74 Consuls Quintus Sertorius
 Piso Gallienus

Sertorius leaves mid-way through his term to take control of the Eastern Frontier.
Silo conquers Mesopotamia.

73 Consuls Marius Egnatius
 Caius Norbanus

*Caesar elected Republic Praetor by his Tribe, then posted to Narbo
Bocar tried for corruption; Numidia absorbed into Africa.
Telesinus appointed 'Eastern Proconsul'.*

72 *Sertorius extends hegemony over Bactria and controls trade along the Silk Road.
Tollianus prints Government 'debt notes' as legal tender.
Telesinus in Sind to make trade agreement.
Mauritanian civil war; Rome takes over.*

71 Consuls Pontius Pellius
 Lucius Aurelius Cotta

Caesar has Glaucia assassinated and triggers the Gallic War.

70 Consuls Gnaeus Priscus
 Caius Marius the Younger

Censors Marcus Livius Drusus
 Marcus Aurelius Cotta

Caesar tried under Lucius Valerius Flaccus as Head of Senate

69 Consuls Caius Forsa
 Marcus Vitellius

67 Consuls Sextus Julius Caesar
 Titus Herennius

Caesar's inspection of the Eastern Frontier Province.

66 Consuls Marcus Licinius Crassus
 Titus Lafrenius

Judaea annexed, Nabataea subjugated.