

ROME IN THE EAST

Volume Three in the series 'The Other Rome'

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AUTHOR'S DISCLAIMERS AND FOREWORD

Social Assumptions and Attitudes

Readers of the first two volumes in this series will already have noted that the persons I write about held views which are not widely supported today. The society of the Republic during the Transition Age had no doubts that a woman should have no voice in public affairs and should be at all times subject to an adult male; either her husband or father, or sometimes an adult son. If no such father, husband or adult son was available she was expected to fall under the authority of a brother or an uncle or some other kinsman, a point which was made explicit in the case of Aurelia Cottae in Volume Two. The only exception to this almost universal attitude was in a separate colony, which will feature in Volume 4 of this series and which I hope to publish in the second half of 2014.

This sexism has attracted some criticism to me. So let me make it clear that I am only reporting these views, not endorsing them!

Slavery was also a fact of life which no-body questioned; and the idea that a slave could have any 'rights' never entered anyone's mind. Slaves were simply property. Again, I report this attitude without endorsing it.

Racism was also a large factor in their mental furniture; so let me say from the outset that I find repulsive the attitudes towards the Khoisan as recorded in this third volume, and the abusive references to them. It is difficult to see how the injustices they suffered could be justified (or even tolerated). But as it happened, so I write it. Please, Gentle Reader, be prepared when you come to those chapters!

Religious Developments

A proportion of the book is taken up in recounting what is called 'the Yeshua Narrative' in my timeline. I have done this because the subsequent growth of the Yeshua Cult had a profound effect on subsequent history in my timeline, just as it has in your own; but in a different way. Whether this has been for good or for ill is a personal judgement, and not properly the subject for a Historian to pronounce on; but nor is it proper for me to withhold from you any mention of a movement that has influenced subsequent history so profoundly. But to outline the main similarities and differences...

First, the similarities. In my timeline Christism spread rather quickly throughout the whole of the Republic, just as it spread throughout the Empire in your history. It was seen at first as a semi-seditious cult, with its emphasis on the Kingdom which was soon to be established. The Republic hated the concept of 'Kingship' no less than the Emperors in your history were jealous of their own supreme power, and this cult was repressed sporadically for two centuries before it was accepted reluctantly. And it was sufficiently attractive to the lower classes to gain a considerable following despite official disapproval and occasional popular pogroms. These similarities resulted in early Christist writings which were stunningly similar to those in your New Testament; many passages in Paul's First Letter to the Romans in my history are virtually word-for-word with parallel passages in the Epistle to the Romans in your Bibles.

Now the differences. In my timeline, Christism never became the State Religion. It could not, because there was no Emperor to establish it, and the various Tribes of the Republic and later the Federation all had widely divergent religions; this created the practical necessity for religious toleration. Also, there was never the dramatic schism that your history experienced between East and West; in my timeline, the West never fell under the power of barbarians, and close contact between all parts of the civilised world continued. These two factors, the lack of emperors to 'establish' a state religion and continuing close contact throughout the whole world, meant that the various gatherings never formed into 'Denominations'. Each individual ekklesia was organisationally autonomous, but tended towards mutual recognition and co-operation on an ad-hoc basis.

Without the tendency of a central authority to impose uniformity, the range of theological opinions and the practical differences in ritual and practice became substantially wider than is generally accepted in the mainline churches in your world today. Some of them would be called 'Arian' by your own theologians. Yet mutual recognition and intercommunion was almost universal.

But perhaps the most striking difference was in their perception of the central or core concept. In your history the Western Churches tend to emphasise the Crucifixion as the heart of their faith; while in the East, the emphasis tends towards the Resurrection. But in my history the emphasis was on what you would call the 'Beatific Vision'. There are many traces of this even in the New Testament as you have it; Paul says things like 'for now we see through a glass darkly, but then we will see face to face.' and 'We all, beholding the glory of the Lord with uncovered face...', while John's Apocalypse has the evil men of the Last Days begging 'Mountains, fall on us, and hide us from the Face of Him that sits on the Throne.' Even your version of Matthew's Gospel reports Jesus as saying 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.'. As a final example, Readers will see how Yeshua's reply on paying Republic taxes as reported in this volume differs subtly from the record in Matt. 22 but with the same underlying concept in play.

In your timeline this theme of the Divine Face tended to reduce in importance, becoming the preserve of a few mystics; but in my timeline it became a dominant theme. Even today (in my timeline) most Christist meetings finish with Num. 6:25,26; "May the Lord make His Face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; May the Lord lift up His Face to you, and give you peace." I have tried to preserve this central theme in my account of the Yeshua Narrative.

Babylonian Scientific Advances

Some readers might prefer to skip some of the chapters based in Babylon. These passages concentrate heavily on mathematical and scientific matters which are not very exciting to the non-specialist, including (I must admit) this humble Historian. However, I felt compelled to include them because the technological advances springing from this research rapidly changed the world. For me to omit these developments would be similar to one of your own Historians ignoring Galileo, Newton and the Industrial Revolution.

So skip over these chapters if you will, but it would be helpful for your understanding to read them to ensure you grasp the importance of the rapidly-evolving technology during this period.

Format of This Volume

The Foreword to the first two volumes in this series explains how I came by the information I now pass on to you, and why it differs from what you would have read in other histories of this period. I will not tire the reader by repeating it again.

My original intention in this volume was to abandon the 'Continuous Narrative' approach of the first two volumes and move to a more episodic approach that followed the main developments in particular regions. This would allow the key episodes to be covered in reasonable detail, while ignoring periods of less significance. I had done much work on that basis, but it became obvious in the writing that this would not be entirely satisfactory. On one hand, the various Tribes of the Republic could not be treated in isolation, as is sometimes done with individual nation-states. Their interactions and inter-dependencies were too complex and the feedbacks too immediate for such a treatment to allow proper context. But on the other hand, the Republic was now so large and complex that to continue writing a History of the Whole, even adopting the episodic approach, would have meant too many threads running simultaneously in the mind of the Reader and thereby causing confusion. It would also have resulted in a book too large to be viable; between 250,000 and 300,000 words is as much as can be managed without adopting a more technologically-advanced publishing process than chosen for this series.

The next approach considered was to cover a shorter period of time than the two centuries compassed by this volume; but unlike the first two volumes, the narrative of these times provided no clear and definite break points. And even if it had, the multiple strands would still have been overwhelming. The only genuine chronological break point offered by this period between the subjugation of Arabia and the end of the Transition Age is the eventual formation of the Federation itself.

Eventually I settled on a geographical division. The Eastern parts of Republic became more and more driven by the dynamism of Babylon, while the Western Tribes tended to follow the fortunes of African traders. Although there was obviously considerable interaction between Africa and Mesopotamia, the two most dynamic Tribes, this seemed as convenient a line of demarcation as any. Where matters in the West or North had a significant influence on the development of the East, these influences have been handled by way of summary notes at appropriate points in the text to provide context.

Working on this basis, this third volume centres on the key events in the East up to the formation of the Federation in 883 A.U.C..

I hope to have the parallel history of the Western Tribes ready for publication in late 2014. This is the part of the Late Republic where the history of my timeline diverges most dramatically from yours. I can foreshadow now that it will be nothing like what you might imagine!

Babylon – 699 AUC (55 B.C.)

Piso Gallienus the Younger was very pleased with his new job as he sat waiting to convene his first Council Meeting as Governor. The Great Senate had appointed him Governor of the Eastern Province, a territory stretching from the Mediterranean coast of Syria down to the northern tip of the Red Sea and then eastwards to include the Indus Valley.

Gallienus took the time to review in his own mind the history of this province since the conquest of Mesopotamia by the legendary Quintus Poppaadius Silo twenty years ago, an action that stunned the world for its audacity and brilliance. Quintus Sertorius served as the first Governor from that time and expanded its influence eastwards to include the Indus Valley until his tragic and unexpected death in late 688 AUC. But those eight years under his governorship had been dynamic, with the Euphrates Dams project and the extension of Republic hegemony over the Silk Road trade routes making the province unimaginably wealthy. Sertorius had died before hearing that his other great strategic plan had also been successful; Gaius Lucianus and Pontius Telesinus had subjugated both Judaea and Nabataea, giving the Republic a port on the Red Sea. From there the Republic could seize Yemen and dominate sea-borne trade between Egypt and the East, just as it already controlled land trade along the Silk Road.

After a short period during which Pontius Telesinus had exercised power as both Acting Governor and Eastern Proconsul, Titus Lafrenius was appointed to the Governorship. Piso Gallienus the Younger had been appointed his Deputy, and for the next ten years had made a name for himself for his competence and sound judgement.

Lafrenius had retired, clearing the way for the Younger Gallienus to be promoted to be the third Governor. He had every intention of being what old Pontius Telesinus had described as 'prudently bold' in the role. And in Gaius Lucianus, Eastern Proconsul for five years now after serving as Deputy under Pontius for five, he had a partner who would work with him. Not that it had come easily; the law covering the position of Eastern Proconsul had originally required that only consulars could be appointed but this had been dropped under the threat from both Italianists and Populares. If the law was not amended, they warned that Lucianus could be quickly put through the *cursus honorum* in order to qualify. But why take him away from the deputy Eastern Consul role for two years simply to satisfy a formality? The Boni had buckled and allowed the amendment. So Gaius and Piso, having served together on the Council in their various roles for ten years now and developed a deep understanding with each other, were now in charge.

The term of this Governorship was five years, although technically he could be recalled without notice. But that would not happen unless he did something grossly illegal or incompetent. He intended to do neither. And Gaius had just been re-appointed to his second term as Proconsul so he had five more

years to run if all things go according to plan. That should be enough time for what he had in mind.

And what he had in mind was more than just taking some cream off the trade between Egypt and the Tamil lands south of the Indus. He wanted to control the entire profit from this trade, not just a percentage. Now he had the tools to do it. With the new design of trading vessels Charettes had built and the revolutionary new design of warships to protect them, there was nothing standing in the way of monopolising this trade for the benefit of the Republic.

Sextus Pannius entered the room with a pile of papers in his arms. "Oh, hello, Piso!" he greeted his Governor cheerily. "You're here early!"

"I don't like being late," Gallienus replied. "My father always said that being first to the battlefield was half the battle."

"So what battle do you have in mind for today?" Pannius asked with a smile.

"Not a battle, Sextus; but it's good to settle your mind first."

Pannius dropped his pile of papers on the table to the right of his own customary seat. "Yes, I agree," Pannius said. "I like to be early, too." He started to distribute the papers around the table, more than a dozen sheets in front of each chair.

Charettes, the old Admiral, was next to arrive. "Good morning, Piso," he greeted Gallienus.

"Morning, Charettes," Gallienus replied. As he spoke, the Engineer Arius Claudius walked into the room in company with Gaius Lucianus and Marcus Atius.

"Paracles is still in Tamilya so let us get started, gentlemen," Gallienus opened. "First, Arius. This is the fifth major flood in the Indus Valley in seven years. What can be done about it?"

"The short answer is 'learn to live with it', Piso. I've been keeping records ever since Quintus first asked me about the feasibility of building some flood mitigation dams over there, and I don't like the numbers. The peak flows are huge and sudden, totally unpredictable. And they can hit anywhere in the valley or everywhere at once. I've done some concept-level work over the last four years, and to build a system that would have controlled every flood event adequately would cost more than the province is worth. The cheapest and most effective way of dealing with it is to build everything of value on hills high enough to stay above the water and to construct roads with pavements thick enough to tolerate the soaking. As for bridges," Arius gestured with his right hand as though throwing something into the air, "Build them cheap enough to replace, because they won't last very long."

"There must be something you can do, Arius," Gallienus came back. "How did the locals manage before the Persians and Alexander arrived?"

"By building on high ground and not wasting their time and energy on roads and bridges," Claudius answered bluntly. "Some places just can't be civilised, much as I hate to admit it. The Indus will always be a place of villages on hills that farm the lowlands when they can, and the cheapest transport will

always be by boat. But live within that pattern and those river flats are among the most fertile in the world.”

Gallienus stared at his Engineer for a moment. Arius was the designer and builder of the Euphrates Dams, widely acclaimed as the greatest feat of engineering ever conceived. He was not an Engineer too timid to take on a challenge if he thought it could be done. “If you say so, Arius. How are your other projects going?”

“The harbour expansion at Charax is almost complete. Another two months will see that come in on budget, or close enough. The haulway up the Euphrates is going well. The works on the bank are complete and the piling to prevent siltation is just over half-complete. So far we’re slightly under budget. More detail is given in my Report.”

This haulway was a pet project for Arius. Back in the days under Sertorius he had spoken about making the Euphrates navigable but closer examination had proved that this wouldn’t be possible. Too much dredging would be required and sailing upcurrent under wind power was too unreliable. Transferring cargoes to oar-powered barges would be too expensive in terms of manpower. So he had cut his plans back to a channel some hundred feet wide along the right bank. The barges could be towed upriver by the big Persian horses originally bred to be cataphracts, walking along a paved towpath next to a stone-lined bank and downstream barges could pass them further from the bank, powered by the natural current and aided by the same horses driving paddlewheels geared up from a flattened treadmill. This allowed much greater loads to be moved than the same number of horses could manage if they were harnessed to wagons. The only difficulties arose in those areas subject to silt, but these were few and minor. The Dams upstream seemed to have taken much of the silt load out of the river, much to the disappointment of the farmers who appreciated the fresh topsoil each year, and the more evenly regulated flow of the river meant the minimum flow was considerably greater than formerly, resulting in less deposition of silt.

“Excellent, Arius,” Piso acknowledged. “Next, Charettes.”

“Thank you, Piso. Over the last month our navy has raided villages on the southern shores of the Southern Sea which are known to have committed piracy against us. We enslaved over eight thousand men, women and children; this is in addition to the pirates killed instead of captured. Eight other settlements are suspected of piracy but the proof is not conclusive. These were informed of our actions against the known perpetrators and we invited them to expand into the now-vacant villages. They were told that the fishing should be a lot easier now with so little competition, but if they were found to be committing piracy in the future the same fate awaits them. I’m confident that these actions should eliminate piracy this side of the Straits. My campaign next year will be to clean out the haunts outside the Straits in the Great Southern Ocean.

“On a less positive note, I report the loss of one ship in the Great Southern Ocean. A convoy from Krokola was caught in a storm and one ship was damaged beyond repair. Seven lives were lost in evacuating the crew to another vessel.

The vessel lost was one of the older designs; the newer ships survived the storm without significant damage, so our shipwrights and designers are certainly doing better every year.”

Gallienus looked over to Atius. “Marcus?”

“Barbarian tribesmen from the north-east launched two raids against villages east of Margiana. I detached a mixed force of infantry, light horse and cataphracts to the area. I intend to devastate the offenders' lands and enslave as many as I can track down. We can't afford to let these barbarians raid our people with impunity.”

“My information is that these raiders might claim to be subjects of the Middle Kingdom, Marcus. They might even be acting on instructions from their Emperor to test our response,” Gallienus warned. “You should clear that with Gaius before you act.”

“I've discussed this with Gaius earlier this morning, Piso. He agrees with me that we must retaliate. If the Middle Kingdom raises a complaint, then Gaius will tell them there must be some mistake. ‘We know that the Middle Kingdom is a Friend of the Republic, and would never tolerate such behaviour; therefore these raiders must be impostors,’ will be his response to any protest.” He looked for confirmation across to Lucianus, who nodded his agreement.

Gallienus smiled. “I like it!”

“Nothing else of significance to report, Piso,” Atius concluded, looking towards Lucianus to report next.

“Some Arabs along the northern shore of the Red Sea have sent us an ultimatum. They demand that we withdraw from their territory immediately, including our own ports such as Eudaemon. Perhaps they think that as a new Governor you might be unsure of yourself and more easily bluffed. I told them that the Republic isn't daunted by idle threats, but if they wish to meet with me to discuss any grievances I'll meet their delegate at Petra and attempt to provide a generous resolution of any problems. However, should they be so foolish and impatient as to act upon this silly ultimatum they can expect nothing in return from us except overwhelming force.”

“Do you need some more troops to underline that?” Piso asked.

“Marcus already has one legion in Petra and three in Eudaemon. Musa and Cana have only nominal garrisons but are well fortified. These southern Arabs are not very good at breaching prepared defences. Their style is more hit-and-run raiding. We have enough for not only defence but for an expedition to subjugate Saphar if we need to. Uzman seems to be their ringleader.”

“Very well,” Gallienus answered. “If you can talk them around to a genuine peace, one which involves their submission and incorporation under Miletus Decree conditions, then do that. But don't bend too far to please them. They're now part of the Eastern Province whether they like it or not, and have been since you led the Arabian Campaign ten years ago. So remind them of the fall of the impregnable Petra and ask them if they think they are any stronger! I'm fully prepared to annihilate them if they won't see reason and I don't mind if you let them know that.”

“It will be a pleasure, Piso,” Lucianus smiled. Gallienus looked to Pannius for the Administrator's Report.

“The routine reports and delegations, complete with our detailed financial position, are included in my written reports for you to read through at your leisure,” Pannius opened. “In summary, the Silk Road trade continues to grow, both in volume and in terms of profitability. One smuggling operation has been broken and the full penalty of total confiscation has been applied to all concerned. This included the estates of many who had received a benefit from the smugglers in an attempt to park their assets out of sight.

“The seaborne trade is also increasing, despite some annoying cases of piracy. Charettes has already addressed that issue and I expect his plans will be effective. Internal revenues are also increasing as the through-flow of trade goods picks up, the Dam Authority is gaining experience in optimising their water releases and farmers are taking more effective advantage of the additional growing seasons. The Province is prospering, operating on budget internally and providing a steadily-growing revenue stream to the Republic.” Pannius looked around the table as he finished.

“Thank you, Sextus,” Gallienus acknowledged. “Now, are there any questions or points of discussion?” Charettes was the first to raise a hand.

“A question to Gaius. Have you made any progress in gaining trade access to the Tamil cities? And also, any progress towards permission to set up bases there?”

“Not yet,” Lucianus replied. “It seems to me that the Tamil cities are very jealous of their position as controllers of shipping coming from further east. They'll do nothing that might help us break their monopoly at the eastern end of the trade routes. As you know from previous meetings, Paracles is making another attempt to bring them around but the latest information I had from him was that they were being very polite about saying 'No Way!'. So Piso and I have thought about alternatives.”

“Please, not a military option,” Atius pleaded. “I have enough on my plate with the Middle Kingdom and the Arabs. I don't want the risk of a long-distance seaborne invasion.”

“Don't worry, Marcus,” Lucianus assured him with a smile, “we have no intention of attacking them. We'll simply go around them instead.” Lucianus looked across the table to the Admiral. “Charettes, I want ships that can routinely sail five thousand miles across open ocean to pick up a cargo from barbarian lands in the far east, and then sail back. Are you able to provide them?”

Charettes frowned as he answered. “Is that five thousand miles with the wind, or against it? If you're talking about a there-and-back mission then it will have to be a once-a-year event to take advantage of the right monsoons. If you want to sail more frequently then we'll need to consider adverse winds, or perhaps a much longer circuit.”

“You're the sailor, Charettes, so I'll leave the details to you. But information from Paracles is that the spices we import originate in a chain of islands east and slightly south of Tamilia, and about the same distance from

Tamilia as Eudaemon. I'm thinking of cutting out the Tamil middle men by dealing with these islands directly."

Charettes built a picture in his mind's eye. "I don't think that will be a problem if we can ride the right monsoons each year. I'd like to stay well south of Tamilia to reduce the risk of piracy and that might make things a bit more tedious." Then he had another thought. "But Gaius; if we can get to the original lands and bring back some seeds or seedlings, perhaps we can grow these spices ourselves instead of having to trade them."

"Perhaps we can, Charettes," Lucianus agreed. "But perhaps they won't grow in our lands, just as the date palms of Arabia won't grow in Armenia. We can certainly try, but the first question is 'can your ships do this voyage?'"

"Yes, certainly," Charettes answered. "But I'd be inclined towards using the fore-and-aft rig for the first few trips until we know how reliable the winds are. Or perhaps the caravel rig; that's safer in a storm."

Lucianus looked to Gallienus. "It seems we should do it, Piso."

"Yes, let it be done," Gallienus agreed. "How soon can you get under way, Charettes?"

"We should leave in early Quinctilis to catch the best winds. Five thousand miles is at most fifty days of sailing. That will mean we can expect to land in late Sextilis; allow a month or two for finding suppliers and trading and we should be in time to catch the return monsoon in October," Charettes calculated to himself out loud. "That gives me three months before sailing to get two or three ships ready, but I would prefer more. We need backup in case some ships come to grief." Charettes looked up. "Yes, we can do it this year if that's what you want," he confirmed. "But I want to take with me someone who knows the area already. Is there any chance of attracting a guide?"

"Do it," Gallienus ordered. "And if you want a guide, then feel free to get one. There must be plenty in Krokola who have been to these lands. If not, then hire someone from Tamilia.

"Next, I also want a couple of ships to sail south along the coast of Punt. There are legends of a wealthy kingdom down that way in times past, and even now much of the gold entering Egypt comes from the south. I want to find those gold mines. Charettes, can you handle that as well?"

"We have a limited number of caravels, Piso," Charettes answered. "But if we are going to hug the Punt coastline, a few sloop-rigged vessels should be able to manage that."

"Good. And take a couple of centuries of marines with you," Gallienus ordered. He looked around the table. "Anything else we need to discuss?" There was silence. "Then I thank you, gentlemen; let's get back to work!"

Gaius Lucianus was willing to be generous in things that didn't matter very much to his core objective, but he was not going to back away from his key points. Why can't these Arabs be equally pragmatic?

"Please tell me, lord Uzman; why do you want to make our naval bases in the Yemen a make-or-break issue?" he asked with a frown. "They don't interfere with your herding or farming and we don't compete with you for fish; in fact,

your own fishermen are grateful for the use of our harbours and facilities! In what way do we harm the well-being of your people? Tell me and I'll take steps to make good any harm."

Usman breathed a heavy sigh of exasperation. "Simply by asking that question you show your contempt for us Arabs! You harm us simply by being there! It is our land, and you are making yourselves our rulers. We Arabs will not tolerate this treatment! If you know anything about us at all, you will know how each clan values its independence. Even those who live in cities instead of herding or farming will not tolerate being under the thumb of any other city.

"What we demand is simple; complete sovereignty over our lands and complete independence of our peoples! That is how we have always lived; it is the Arab way!"

Lucianus waited a moment, appearing to ponder this demand. There is nothing like a pause to ensure what follows makes a larger impression. "Lord Usman; I can't count how many peoples in history have 'always lived' with sovereignty over their lands and independence of their people. Yet very few of them are with us today and still living that way. The intelligent ones have become our partners and taken their share in our prosperity as full members of the Republic. General Silo is perhaps the most famous example, having been born an Italian with none of the rights of citizenship. So have the Celts of Gaul, an autonomous Federation within the Republic. I'm sure that Arabs are no less intelligent than the Celts or the Marsi! And however you might like to boast about Arabs being their own masters, you must agree that both Celts and Marsi are equally proud of their own customs, identity and heritage.

"All these peoples within the Republic retain their own identity, their own gods and their own traditions. But they do so as partners in a greater context now. The time has come for Arabs to join with all of us, and join the Republic. Because the Republic is not going away any time soon and the Republic will retain its ports along the Red Sea. So the only question we need to consider now is simple; shall the Arabs be our Friends or our enemies? To put it even more bluntly, shall the Arabs live and prosper or shall they bring about their own demise?" Lucianus raised an eyebrow. "If you want the Arabs to avoid extermination, then we two will have to agree on how this can best be done. I await your constructive suggestions."

Uzman stood and glared. "You will not be able to exterminate us!" he shouted. "We will drive you out with a thousand small cuts! We will strike from the desert to take you by surprise and disappear into the sands before you can recover! By a thousand minor battles we will exhaust you!"

"Please sit down, lord Uzman," Lucianus answered, totally unimpressed. "You are talking to the General who captured Petra with the loss of only fifteen of his own men! If you had bothered to speak to any of the people in the city outside this room you will know that almost all Petrans are pleased with our administration; the taxes are lighter than they were under Aretas, the rights of the common folk are being upheld, and the trade has never been better. The only people who resent us are a few youths with no sense of reality or a handful from

the families of some Petran soldiers whom Aretas sacrificed trying to retain his throne. And why they hate us for the brutality of their own king is something I will never understand.

“Do you think the Arabs in the ports will be any different? Do you think they will trust themselves and their children to a band of common warlords who will be forced to retreat and abandon them as soon as the legions approach?” Lucianus shook his head. “Make no mistake, lord Uzman; we will hold the towns and the ports we now have, and hold them easily. The only deaths will be the fools who attack them. And if you hope to adopt hit-and-run tactics, then you should remember that the desert provides precious little food. Your numbers will be small and we will be able to clean you out of one oasis after another. Your dreams of glory will shrink to a small band of desperate men waiting for their turn to be slaughtered.

“So let me remind you of what Governor Gallienus told me. 'If you can talk them into a genuine peace, then do so; but if not then I don't mind if you annihilate them.' So will it be peace or annihilation, lord Uzman?”

Uzman smiled a grimace. “I will enjoy watching you die slowly, Roman!” He turned and walked out of the room, his colleague Abd-Almaqah at his elbow.

Lucianus turned to Atius, who had been at his elbow for the entire meeting. “Marcus, please march on Saphar as soon as convenient. Offer them a choice between Miletus Decree status if they surrender or complete enslavement if they resist.”

Atius stood. “I'll sail for Eudaemon today.”

Charettes made signals for the fleet to anchor in the estuary. The settlement on the shore looked more like a village than a city, but it was the most impressive he had seen yet. He checked that Jaya, his Tamil aide, was carrying his bag. This Tamil had better be worth his pay, Charettes thought to himself. Paracles had enticed him to abandon his career as an officer on a Tamil spice trading ship with promises of wealth for himself and his family. Now we'll see if he has the knowledge he claims. Charettes descended into the rowboat for the transfer to the land with six heavy infantry as his guard.

The landing went as well as he could have hoped. There was no jetty, so landing consisted of grounding the boat, having the men climb out into the shallow water, and then dragging the boat up the shore so he could alight without being soaked. He had to convey an image of mastery, and wading through the mud would not create that impression.

“Jaya, is this fellow someone important?” he asked the aide beside him as an impressively-dressed man carrying a ceremonial club approached.

“Yes, Admiral. The club is a sign of kingship. But remember, his kingdom is probably little more than the handful of villages within walking distance. These people have no roads,” Jaya answered.

“Then if you would please go through the formalities, and introduce me...” Charettes prompted.

The native king stopped a few paces before Charettes, his club held conspicuously across his chest, and gave what Charettes took to be a formal welcome.

“King Kudu welcomes the men of the West, and invites them to enjoy his hospitality,” Jaya translated promptly, to ensure Charettes knew what was happening.

“I thank King Kudu for his kindness, and wish him a long and prosperous life,” Charettes replied, bowing slightly. Jaya translated the response. Kudu smiled broadly.

“He seemed specially pleased with that,” Charettes commented.

“Yes,” Jaya explained. “Most traders are less polite than you. He is accustomed to being treated like a supplier, not a King.”

Kudu politely waited for the two visitors to stop chatting before speaking again. “Kudu has invited us to his hut, where he has fermented juice waiting. His harvest is ready for inspection. It seems we have beaten the other traders here; Tamil ships such as I served on usually arrive later in the season.”

The king's hut was a poor shelter to Charettes' eyes but it was substantially larger and sturdier than the other structures in the village. A mat of woven palm leaves covered the floor and a round polished timber platter in the centre served as a table. Charettes made a point of waiting for the King to sit crossed-legged before he sat himself and allowing Jaya to follow. Again the king beamed his pleasure at the respect being paid to him.

After a sip of a concoction tasting of foul apple juice mixed with poor wine, Charettes commented on how young and strong the king appeared for a man of such great responsibility. “Do you really want me to say that, Admiral?” Jaya asked before translating.

“Why not, Jaya? Is it culturally inappropriate? Will it cause offence?”

“Not at all, Admiral,” Jaya responded. “But you will seem too eager to flatter. You will make him think that you're desperate for his crop and he will demand a higher price than usual.”

“That doesn't worry me, Jaya,” Charettes answered. “We will pay no more than the standard price, and if he won't sell then we'll walk away. The king will have to decide whether he wants to do business with us who show him respect, or others who treat him with less honour.”

“If you say so, Admiral. But I suggest that I should first introduce you as one of the rulers of the Men from the West. Your paler skin colour will already have been noticed.”

“Do that, Jaya; I had intended to explain precisely that difference myself, but in a way that might trigger not only his longing for respect but also his ambition for profit.”

Jaya turned back to their host. “King Kudu; my master Charettes is one of the Council of Kings that rules a vast land and many different peoples even further away than the land of the Tamils. That is why his skin is paler and his face seems less rounded. They are a totally different people. King Charettes knows from his own experience how burdensome it is to rule over thousands of

thousands of people to ensure their safety and prosperity, and how it can drain a man's health and make him appear old before his time. Yet he remarks that you appear very healthy and strong, and the power of your youth is still with you.”

Kudu's smile broadened even further. “Please tell your king that he is obviously a man of great quality. Many others who come here are boorish and rude, with no understanding. Yet he is a man who wears courtesy and honour like a robe.” Jaya translated this for Charettes, who put his hands together in front of his chest and bowed his head over them.

“I have a gift for King Kudu, if he would honour me by accepting it. Please take out the glass from the bag, Jaya, and show him how to use it to make things appear larger.” Jaya spoke briefly to Kudu and then took out the small lens about the size of a circle made with a thumb and forefinger and of rather poor quality. It was convex on one side only, being formed by roller-stamping molten glass into a platter full of shallow depressions acting as moulds, and with no polishing to give precision to the image. The glass factories in Babylon were turning these out by the thousands to assist those with poor eyesight but who couldn't afford proper spectacles. He showed it to Kudu.

“King Kudu, my master offers you this token of his appreciation of your nobility, if you would honour him by accepting it. Allow me to show you what it can do.” Jaya leant across the timber platter to hold the lens slightly above the woven mat, allowing the lens to magnify the weave. He slowly raised and lowered it to demonstrate its power. Kudu could not help but gasp as the detail of the weave grew larger, and the grains of dirt and the fibres leapt into clear sight.

“And that is not all, king. Please come outside into the sunlight and I will show you another of its powers.” Jaya stood and Charettes followed him. They had been through this plan before leaving the ship. Kudu followed.

Jaya gathered together a handful of coconut husk from a nearby fire where it had been placed for use as tinder, and a few sticks. Then, forming the husks into a pile and dropping to one knee, he focussed the sunlight onto the tinder. A wisp of smoke rose, and then a small flame appeared. He piled the twigs around the flame. A gasp of surprise broke out among the men gathering around the group. Jaya stood and held the lens in both hands, outstretched towards Kudu. “Please accept this gift.”

Kudu, his face still a mask of amazement, reached out and took the lens. “I thank King Charettes for his most valuable gift,” he stumbled out. “May he always consider me a loyal friend.”

“King Charettes came here to establish such a friendship. At such times, it is their custom to join hands to show their mutual respect and support. Allow me to show you that custom.” Jaya turned towards Charettes and offered his right arm. Charettes took it in the Roman way as Kudu watched.

Charettes held the grip for a moment longer as Kudu stared, and then dropped it. He then turned to Kudu, offering his arm. Kudu took it tentatively at first, but adjusted as he felt the firm but not heavy pressure from Charettes. Charettes smiled, and Kudu returned the grin.

The negotiations for the crop had gone well. As expected, Kudu started by asking more than twice the usual price but Jaya nipped this in the bud. “King Charettes is your Friend and pays you due honour. He will not disgrace you by demanding a lower price than usual and cause you to look weak in the eyes of your people. In return he asks only that you sell to him for the same price as you sell to those who show you no such respect.

“Do this and all will go well. You need never have to suffer humiliation at the hands of the Tamil traders again, because Charettes will be able to buy from you more spice than you will ever be able to grow. Your people will prosper, thanking you for their good fortune. But if you will not treat my Master with equal honour then not only will he trade with others; even the Tamils will not trade with you because King Charettes will be selling to their people as well as his own.”

Kudu was daunted by this combination of offer and threat. “Please, lord Jaya, understand that I mean no disrespect to King Charettes. If King Charettes promises to buy all my people's crop every year then I will promise to sell it to him every year at this same standard price.”

Jaya smiled. “Then we are agreed, King Kudu. That is exactly what King Charettes offers to you. And if King Charettes could ask one more favour of you; he would ask for one of your living plants, to place in his garden at home. He values your friendship greatly and would like a living plant to remind him of your living friendship with him every time he walks in his garden, even when he is too old and weak to visit you again.”

“Of course, lord Jaya; I would be pleased to be reminded to him each day, just as his amazing gift to me will remind me of him every day.” Kudu was no fool; he knew that this could be an attempt by Charettes to start up his own plantation. But little good that would do him! These plants don't self-fertilise!

Charettes was pleased. The return monsoon was starting to blow more consistently. Give it another few days to establish itself securely and he would launch out into the Southern Ocean for the trip back to Charax. He looked once again along the lines of potted seedlings strapped onto the shelves that took up one wall of his private cabin – if a space barely the size of a generous sarcophagus could be called a 'cabin' – and took more pleasure in knowing that each of the other five ships in his fleet carried the same precious treasures. Each of the thirty-eight petty chiefs he had visited had agreed to give him a single plant, none of them suspecting that the same favour was being asked of each of the others. These had been spread among his own three ships as insurance against the loss of any one vessel. Aktar, his second-in-command, had managed another thirty-two from other villages he had visited with the other three caravels. These seedlings alone would be worth the journey. The holds full of various spices, all bought for a fraction of the cost demanded by the Tamil traders, were a welcome bonus. The profits from this one trip would pay not only its own costs but also for the establishment of their own plantations.

So long as the Punt squadron found a suitable site, Charettes cautioned himself. The four sloops that had been earmarked to find the source of the Nile Gold had also been instructed to look for a land with a warm, humid climate. Jaya had been to the Spice Islands several times before, and had described in great detail what conditions would suit these new plants. So may it please the gods who loved the Republic to grant this favour!

There was a knock on what he considered the sarcophagus lid but which was more formally known as his cabin door. "Come!" he responded. The door swung open to reveal Aktar's face.

"The scribes have finished copying our maps and charts, Admiral," Aktar reported. "Work has now started on making full copies for each vessel, using these two full sets as master copies." Making sure that each ship in the squadron had charts of the travels and notes about all of the trading treaty settlements and their chieftains had been Charettes' first priority.

"Excellent, Aktar. I'd invite you in but there isn't enough room. Let's go up on deck to chat." Aktar turned and led the way to the ladder. There wasn't enough room in the passageway to allow the courtesy of stepping aside so the Admiral could pass. A moment later they were on the rear rail of the poop deck.

"How much longer do you need to be ready to sail?" Charettes asked.

"My three ships are ready now, Admiral," Aktar responded. "But I suggest that we should allow the scribes to work on land while they copy our documents. They're all landsmen, and a rolling ship could cause them to make errors."

"I agree," Charettes replied. "The return monsoon has just started so we have more than enough time."

"Meanwhile, Admiral, do you think it might be wise to take out number two for trials? If those repairs are going to fail, better for that to happen close to land instead of the middle of the Ocean." Aktar, although second in command on this expedition, was one of the best captains in Krokola. He had vast experience and his suggestions were always worth acting on.

"Yes, if you wouldn't mind taking command of that, please," Charettes answered. "And I'd like to come with you purely as an observer."

Aktar smiled his agreement. He knew that Charettes acknowledged Aktar to be the better seaman out in this vastness so unlike the old Greek's native waters, and was appreciative that Charettes accepted this rather than resenting his subordinate's greater mastery. "Then let's do that tomorrow, Admiral."

It was a perfect day for sailing. The wind was brisk but constant in both strength and direction. After two hours they were well out from land, the big ocean rollers starting to be felt under their keel. The back-up ship was two hundred paces astern when Aktar ordered the mainsail to be dropped and a sea-anchor dropped over the bow. A few more barked orders and the large sail was brought up from the locker below decks. A lateen sail was also called for. Charettes was impressed; the wind was blowing at perhaps fifteen miles an hour, and Aktar was putting up canvas suitable for a much gentler breeze. This isn't just a sea-trial we are going to perform, but a full-on test load. If the ship can take

this at full power then we should have no trouble under normal practice. While some hands hauled on the oversized sail, others were busy moving all the ballast as far to the port side as possible.

Hoisting these oversized sails in such a fresh breeze was awkward, particularly with all their ballast deliberately moved over to the port side of the hull to heel the boat over, but was eventually accomplished thanks to the sea-anchor keeping the vessel nose into the wind. Then three corners of the sea anchor were released and the canvass hauled in by the fourth corner. The rudder was pushed over to turn the ship away from the wind, and the sheets allowed to run as the sails flagged. Then the sheet to the mainsail was pulled in. The ship started to swing further away from the wind and the drift rearwards slowed and then stopped. Some forward speed was put on and the sheet to the lateen sail pulled in.

Aktar ran on a square reach for less than a hundred paces with both sails greatly de-powered. "Hull report!" he bellowed. A man over the hatch relayed the order below deck, and waited for a reply.

"All in good order, Captain!" he relayed back from the carpenter on station below.

"More power!" Aktar ordered, and the sails were pulled tighter. The ship seemed to leap forward. The deliberate heel to the port side was now more than corrected by the pressure on the sails. After a minute Aktar bellowed for another hull report.

"All well below, Captain!"

"More power!" Aktar bellowed, and the heel to starboard was now enough to make the hands steady themselves as they went about their work. Spray flew from the bow as the vessel ploughed through the waves. Charettes looked astern to see the companion ship struggling to keep pace and failing visibly. Another report from below indicated the repairs were holding.

"Drop off to starboard! I want the apparent wind just forward of abeam!" Aktar bellowed. The bow of the ship swung away a few points. "Now hold that course!" Aktar shouted as the apparent wind came into the sails at a better angle. For this apparent wind direction the sails were at full power and the hull was heeled over more than thirty degrees despite the eccentric ballast tending to force it the other way.

Charettes could barely resist the urge to order Aktar to de-power the sails; was this deliberate showmanship by his nominal subordinate? But just as his nerve was about to break and he was about to snap the order, Aktar ordered the ship a few points to port and for the sails to be de-powered. Soon the vessel was wallowing, as the forward drive fell away. Aktar ordered the bow into the wind and the sea-anchor was dropped over the bow again as soon as all forward momentum was killed.

Aktar went below to inspect the repairs and talk to his carpenter. He re-appeared after a few minutes. "No sign of distress, Admiral," he reported, "and that was about as much load as we could possibly have put on it. Now to try it on the other tack." Then, turning to the crew he bellowed "Right, men! Let's have that ballast over on the starboard side now!"

The starboard reach was not as fast, being on the caravel's bad tack, but had loaded the mainmast footing no less in the opposite direction. Having proven the ship's sea-worthiness the ballast was re-balanced. Aktar dropped the oversized sail and ordered the medium sail up.

“You are not going back with the large sail?” Charettes asked, half in mischief.

Aktar turned immediately, frowning. “That would be a bit too dangerous for my taste, Admiral.”

“I was joking, Aktar!” Charettes laughed. “An extreme test loading under controlled conditions is fine, and you taught me a thing or two about how ballast deployment can give that little bit extra; but only a fool or a hero would try to pilot a ship into an anchorage under that much sail!” Charettes realised that Aktar wasn't laughing with him. “I apologise, Aktar, I meant no offence. You certainly know how to handle a ship but you are wise to take no unnecessary risks.”

“I take no offence, Admiral; but I don't think that prudent seamanship is a laughing matter,” Aktar dared to rebuke his commander. “Such talk full of bravado could be taken seriously by the lower officers as a dare, and end in disaster.”

“Yes, you're right, Aktar,” Charettes swallowed his pride. Aktar was not a showman, trying to impress; he was simply testing this vessel in a safe environment before risking all to the Great Southern Ocean. “You have taught me much today.”

Arabia – 699 AUC (55 B.C.)

Marcus Atius didn't like to campaign in the desert. He was too fond of his bath, and water was at a premium out here in front of Saphar. And even though the days were hot and dusty the nights were quite chilly. But that all came with being on active service in the Eastern Frontier, he consoled himself. He had asked to serve under old Quintus Sertorius, had acquitted himself well in the Nabataean Campaign, and been rewarded with steady promotion for his abilities ever since. Now he was halfway through a five-year appointment as Commander of the Army on the Frontier, and despite the lack of comforts he knew that he wouldn't change it for the world. Out here was where a real Military Man could make his name and fame. He had already put out feelers for election as a Tribal Praetor in a couple of years' time, and perhaps a run at the Consulship after that.

At least this discomfort should have its rewards eventually; if Uzman had meekly surrendered Saphar where would be the glory in that? So the tedious business of a siege was now under way. He had also asked Gallienus to send out another two legions to Arabia to approach the other restive towns in the Hejaz and Yemen and demand their submission.

The routine of the siege was now established. The circumvallation to prevent sallies from the walled town was complete and the outer ring of fortifications was well under way. These outer defences were not intended to prevent a relief force from breaking through. These Arabs didn't have the military doctrine or experience for that. But they would prevent raids that could do damage, make off with his supplies or generally be a nuisance. His plan after that was to force a breach rather than sit out here in the heat for months. The situation in the rest of Arabia demanded a rapid victory and the longer Uzman held out in Saphar, the greater the risk of the unrest spreading.

Atius looked up as he heard the flap of his tent being pushed aside. It was Miron, his secretary.

"General, lord Faid has arrived in response to your message," Miron announced.

"Then please show lord Faid in here immediately," Atius instructed, suspecting that the head of the local clan of migratory herdsmen would be within earshot or Miron wouldn't have used the honorific 'lord' when he had spoken about a nomadic goat-herder..

Miron remained at the tent entrance, holding the flap to one side. "This way, please, lord Faid."

A tall, gaunt Arab appeared at the entrance, a jewelled dagger in his belt. Atius stood and offered the Arab a couch near one wall of the tent as he came around his table. Faid sat as invited.

"Thank you for your courtesy, lord Faid," Atius said with a smile as he sat in a similar couch facing his guest.

"And I thank you for your assurances that you bear no ill-will towards my people, General," the Arab replied in his thickly accented Greek.

“That is true, lord Faid. As you would know, the Republic has never harmed any Arabs excepting only those who have attempted to harm us. Even in our own ports on the coast were built on land bought and paid for by the Republic and by labourers paid good wages for their efforts. And having built these ports at our own expense, we permit local Arabs to use them without charge. Nor have we subjected any city or clan to our taxes or laws nor taken slaves from them except as permitted by your own leaders.

“Yet Usman has threatened to destroy our ports and slaughter our people! We can’t allow this threat to stand, or other leaders might feel obliged to match his provocative words with their own actions.” Atius paused to allow this to sink in, but Faid broke into the train of his presentation.

“But what is that to us herdsmen, General?”

I don’t want you to suspect that the Republic has the intention to harm you and your people, who have done us no harm. I want to assure you that if you stay out of this argument then we will continue to respect you and your rights. But we would ask that you give no assistance or comfort to Uzman or his allies.”

Faid nodded as if to himself. “But life is more complicated than that, General,” Faid said at last. Atius waited. “Although we don’t support anything that might harm the Republic, yet we also depend on Saphar for a market. Where else are we to sell our produce? Where else are we to buy what we cannot provide for ourselves? Despite Uzman's dispute with you, which we don’t support in any way, we are still dependent upon Saphar for these things.”

“I understand your position, lord Faid,” Atius agreed. “We have no intention of destroying Saphar nor interfering with your trade with it. Not in the long term. But so long as it remains an enemy of the Republic, I must inform you that anyone giving aid to it will make himself our enemy, too. I don’t want that to happen to you.”

Faid shrugged. “Then what are we to do? We must trade or we perish. We can’t wait years while you starve these people into submission. And once that is done the survivors will be too few and too poor to trade.”

“Then trade with the Republic, instead,” Atius answered. “Whatever you usually sell in Saphar, I will buy at the same price. Whatever you want, I will arrange for it to be delivered here for the same price as you usually pay.”

Faid looked more intent. “There are some things which are available only from Saphar.”

“Then we will find substitutes. And if there are no substitutes, then it is a luxury you don’t need,” Atius answered. “At least, you don’t need it enough to go to war for it,” he added. “Give me a list of what you want to buy and sell, in what quantities and at what prices. I’ll check with my staff that the prices are fair and reasonable and then we can do business.”

Faid nodded to himself again. “I will talk to my people about this,” he conceded.

“Then shall we take refreshments?” Atius asked, clapping for watered wine and pastries. To these Arabs eating and drinking together sealed a friendship.

“Yes, let us,” Faïd agreed, “I will be back here with my list in four days.”

Uzman was worried. He had not expected the Romans to come after him this far inland. How would they be able to harm him, Saphar's walls being well-founded and thick? And how would they be able to support a siege with no foraging available in the surrounding harsh landscape? And how would they protect themselves from the raids that he and his allies had promised to each other if attacked?

But here they were and they were doing things that no Arab commander would do. They were fortifying their own perimeter, as if to build a walled city around his own walled city! By the time his allies could organise raids the Romans would be as impregnable within their new walls as Saphar was in its own.

His only hope now was that these Romans would not be able to supply their soldiers so far away from their base in Eudaemon. Any supply caravans would be easily destroyed by his allies on the open road. But this morning he saw a terrible thing. Faïd's herdsmen had arrived with their livestock and were selling to the Romans! He also saw drays piled high with barrels heading towards Faïd's springs thirty miles away. Faïd had allied himself with these Romans and was supplying them with food and water!

Well, when his allies arrived in force they would put an end to that, even if it meant teaching that traitor Faïd a lesson in loyalty. But not too harsh a lesson, he hoped; just take out the current crop of Faïd's Elders. The herdsmen were an important part of Saphar's life and he needed their continuing trade.

Then a strange report came to his ears. The Romans were digging out soil and sand from a place a hundred paces away from the walls. What could be the purpose behind that? Were they trying to dig a well, to reduce their dependence on the spring so far away? But rock was shallow and they wouldn't be able to dig deep enough. Were they trying to tunnel under the walls? But if so, why start so far back? It would make the tunnel so much longer than starting closer to the walls. And why were they taking such care to pile the spoil in one big heap, only fifty paces from his walls and therefore within bowshot? They certainly knew they were within range because they had built a barrier to protect their men while they dumped to soil.

The scene had changed the next morning. The pile of spoil was not a round, conical pile as Uzman had been expecting. As it grew the top of the pile was edging towards Saphar's walls and the pile was taking the form of a ridge, or more accurately a ramp. That was when Uzman realised that the hole was not important; it was simply a place to get the material so they could build a ramp of earth up against the city walls. The Romans would be able to march their heavy infantry right over the walls! Uzman stared in terror, clutching for an idea of how to defend against this menace.

Uzman's senior officers met with him at noon. The process of building the ramp was becoming obvious now and the shield against arrows was apparently supported by beams that held it a pace or two in front of the top of the ramp. This allowed buckets of earth and sand to be tipped over the front edge as the end of

the ramp advanced, then support for this shield was edged forward as well. The shield had side walls attached to protect from the flanks and the Romans were building panels of fixed side walls perhaps two paces long on the ramp itself, to protect their men while they were in the space between the toe of the ramp and the shield. Each panel was set at an angle, the near end of the further panel some two feet inside the outer end of the next panel closer the city wall. They were also placing inclined panels on top of the walls to protect against plunging arrows. This louvered arrangement of both walls and roof panels still permitted light and air to enter what would otherwise be a long tunnel while still interrupting any projectile or even line-of-sight intelligence from the city.

Burning the shield with flaming arrows was not an option. It was obvious in the clear sunlight that it was faced with steel plate. But perhaps the timber walls and roof of the approach tunnel were vulnerable.

It was obvious by the end of the day that the rate of advance of the ramp was slowing. Each new foot of advance meant that the ramp needed to be filled not only higher, but also wider to provide stable side slopes. This meant that the volume of fill required for each new foot of ramp length was increasing rapidly. There would be time to take action the next day.

The whole night had been spent working on arrows, tying cloth around the front of each shaft just behind the bodkin point designed to embed itself in the timber of the wooden tunnel walls. These cloth collars were then tacked into place, to ensure that the force of the launch of the arrow didn't force the flaming collar back to the flights where it could send the arrow awry. By morning Uzman's archers had over a thousand of them on hand.

Each of some sixty archers stood with the arrows and a pot of oil on one side and a burning torch on the other. Each man had been told which segment of the tunnel he would be responsible for. They were ready to destroy the timber tunnel in one overwhelming attack. This would isolate the protective shield at the top of the almost-completed ramp, well within range for archers to pick off individuals at a range of only a dozen paces. This would make any further work on this ramp impossible. If the Romans wanted to build a ramp, they would have to start again from the beginning.

"Ready!" Uzman bellowed. The men took up their bows and notched their first arrows. "Take careful aim! There is no need to rush! Start shooting now!"

Each man dipped his arrow head and cloth collar into the oil pot and out again, and then over his torch to light the collar. The arrows then flew through the air into the wall panels. Most arrows embedded firmly and flames started licking at the timber of the walls. A cheer went up from the men on Saphar's walls. Soon a second volley was on its way, more ragged than the first as different men fired at different rates. The job was well under way now!

Then the unexpected happened. Poles were pushed out through the overlaps in the wall panels and swung downwards onto the embedded arrows, knocking them out of the walls. The still-burning arrows were then flicked away clear of the wood. When any particular wall panel was free of arrows, the pole

was retracted and another poked out, this one with a bundle of wet cloth on the end to pat down any spots where the wood of the wall had caught fire. Within a couple of minutes the Romans inside the tunnel had removed all of the flaming darts and were easily keeping pace as more arrived. During all this activity, the tumble of fill being dumped at the end of the ramp had not been interrupted.

Uzman saw all this with dismay. "Cease shooting!" he bellowed. There was no point in wasting more arrows. He called for his officers to follow him to a meeting, leaving his son-in-law Ali in command of the defence.

Meanwhile Atius could not stop grinning. Sitting still and doing nothing was not good for morale in a besieged city; but even worse was to take action that was not only fruitless but actually demonstrated that the enemy has already anticipated it. It makes the victims wonder what else the attacker has anticipated. Now was the time to twist the blade.

An officer in full armour and riding a cataphract made his way towards the city walls and halted within hailing distance. He addressed the men on the walls in their own Yemeni dialect.

"Men! Why would you die for no purpose? Why would you have your wives and children condemned to slavery? You know that you cannot resist us, that every defence you attempt will be thwarted! Surrender now, and live! We will ask no more of you than the head of Uzman, the man who has placed you in this peril!

"Give us Uzman and become Friends of the Republic, and you will live! But if you reject this offer, all of you and all of your families will either die or be enslaved. You have until dawn tomorrow. If I return to find Uzman's head on the ground and the gates open, all will be well. Otherwise we will take this city that very day and show no mercy!" The officer turned and his horse walked back to the Republic camp.

Neither Uzman nor his senior officers heard this. They were in their meeting at the time, groping for an answer to the Roman ramp.

"Even if they complete the ramp, lord, what will they do next? As soon as they move the shield away to come out, they will be vulnerable! We can mow them down as fast as they arrive," one man said enthusiastically.

"Do you think the Romans have not already considered that?" another asked. "Be assured that have already found a solution to that, and probably rehearsed it out of our sight to make sure it works. Just as they had a solution to burning their timber tunnel."

"What sort of solution is possible?" the first insisted. "Once they are out of the tunnel they are vulnerable! There is no way they can avoid that critical point."

"Just as there was no way they could prevent us from burning their timber tunnel? Just as there was no way they would be able to breach our walls, and now they have a ramp that makes our walls no more than a line of stones to be stepped over? Just as our allies would raid them while they were helpless outside in the open, but they have now built walls of their own? These Romans will always find

a solution and I don't want to find out what that solution is by dying.” He looked to Uzman. “Make peace with them, my lord. It might not be too late, even now.”

Uzman was troubled. The Romans had been camped outside his gates for almost a month, and not one ally had even attempted to come to his aid. He had been left out to dry. So much for his plan to use expulsion of the Romans as a rally-cry to extend the influence of his small but influential Himyarite kingdom!

“Yes, we will make peace,” Uzman agreed finally. “Let’s go up onto the walls and call for talks.” He stood and the others stood with him, ready to follow him out the door.

Uzman made his way onto the walls with his senior men following. He called to Ali. “Ali, I have decided to make peace. I’m no longer confident that we can withstand this siege. Call for a Roman to discuss terms.”

Ali's eyes widened in surprise for a moment but he recovered his poise. Even Uzman sees no way of saving the city! Which means that whether he knows it or not, the old man is dead. He turned to the watch on the wall and chose one man at random. “You! You will be lowered by rope to the ground. Go tell the Romans that we want to talk with them.”

The man looked shocked. “Me, sir?”

“Yes! Drop your weapons now! You,” Ali said to another, “Get a rope and basket so this man can be lowered!”

“Good. Tell me when the Roman approaches; I will be in my rooms,” Uzman commanded and turned away. The officers went to turn with him, but Ali gestured for them to stay. Once Uzman was out of earshot, Ali licked his lips. “While you were downstairs a Roman came to offer terms. He promised us our lives, freedom and property. His only demands were that we become a Friend of the Republic,” and here Ali paused, “and that we give him the head of lord Uzman.”

The officers looked to each other. At length one said, “I don't see how we can get a better offer than that.” He then looked to Ali. “And you would be king?”

“As Uzman's son-in-law, I would be king.” Ali answered more boldly than he felt.

The officer who had spoken looked around. “And what do we five think of that?” he asked them.

Pledge us that you will do none of us harm, and I will support you, lord Ali,” said one.

“And I,” said another. The other three nodded.

“I pledge it,” Ali said solemnly. “You are all witnesses for each other.”

The rope and basket had arrived. Ali called over the reluctant emissary. “Tell the Romans that we wish to speak about something they do not yet know. Nothing more.”

“Yes, my lord.” The man had already made up his mind that this would be a one-way journey. The Romans had already stated what must be their final offer. There was no way he would return to this city if it meant his death or enslavement.

“Now, my lords, let’s report to lord Uzman.” Ali smiled sardonically and turned for the stairs.

The Yemeni officer used by Atius as his herald approached the city in the mid-afternoon. The gates were wide open and a group of five well-dressed officials were waiting in the shadow of the wall. These officials left the shade as he approached and walked towards him. He stopped ten paces short of them. The man foremost and in the centre clapped his hands twice and a slave who had been standing behind him walked forward with a basket and placed it on the ground between the two parties. He then lifted the lid and took out a human head, placing it on the ground beside the basket.

“The head of Uzman, as you requested,” the apparent Arab leader explained. “I am Ali, the new King of Saphar. I sincerely thank you for your warning and your offer this morning. Without it I would not have been able to convince the leading officers to act.”

“Do you submit to the Republic?” the emissary asked directly.

“We submit on the basis of your offer this morning,” Ali replied. “We seek Friend and Ally status and the benefits of the Miletus Decree and your pledge that none will be harmed by the Republic.”

I am authorised to make that pledge,” the emissary replied. “Now, if you would please accompany me to the General, the details of how this is to be done can be agreed.”

Babylon – 700 AUC (54 B.C.)

Charettes returned to Charax to see that the new Outer Harbour was complete. The port was so much busier now than it had been only a handful of years ago when sometimes ships had been stacked up riding at anchor outside, waiting for their turn to load and unload. The new breakwater now gave these vessels protection against storms.

He demanded priority to unload and was directed into the inner harbour but was not allocated wharf space.

“Who does the Harbourmaster think he’s dealing with?” he fumed angrily at the pilot sent out to bring his fleet to their proper places. “I am Admiral Charettes, a member of the Governing Council! Go back and tell him that I insist on being unloaded immediately!”

“My lord Admiral, that is why I have brought you to this anchorage,” the pilot answered fearfully. “Your cargo will be unloaded directly onto the barges for haulage up the River. Only less-important goods are transported overland now!”

“So the haulway is complete?” Charettes responded in delight.

“Yes, my lord. The first barges left up-river eight days ago,” the pilot answered.

“Excellent!” Charettes exclaimed in a much better mood. “When can I expect these barges to arrive?”

“They’re on their way now, lord,” the pilot assured him, pointing to the river mouth. “See them coming!”

Charettes followed the man's arm. He could clearly see some strange barges coming out to meet his ships. They were rectangular, perhaps four paces broad and twenty paces long, flat on top and riding high in the water; obviously they would sink lower when loaded. Along the rear edge were six slaves sitting on a bench and pedalling, and the whole barge was moving by power of paddle-wheels at the two rear corners. A Master was seated at the middle of the rear edge. He was operating a tiller and there was another tiller-operator on a small platform projecting out from the centre of the front edge.

Charettes had not been involved in the design of these barges, the haulway being under the authority of Arius, but it was obvious that considerable thought had gone into them. It would be a simple thing to dock a ship, unload its cargo onto the dock, and then transfer it to the barge later; but if that double-handling were to be avoided as well as by-passing the need for more docking space, then these barges needed to be very manoeuvrable. The extra tiller on the front would allow the barge to be turned very sharply. Arius was either a genius to design these himself or had enough foresight to engage someone who knew how to handle water craft.

The barge was now secured alongside. Low steel-lattice walls, which had been lying flat on the barge deck, were now being folded up and clipped into position to prevent any of the cargo shifting or falling overboard. Another good idea! Charettes turned for the ladder over the side to inspect this barge more

closely. He was surprised to see that the peddle crankshaft was not directly linked to the paddles, but was on a belt-drive. Then a closer look revealed that the driven drum on each independent paddle axle was actually two drums, side by side. There was also a mechanism that could creep the drive belt from one driven drum to the other. Why? Then he realised that the second drum had internal gears, which would drive the paddle backwards even when the peddle crank was being driven forwards. By having one paddle in reverse while the other was left in forward gear, this barge could turn around to head in any direction even when dead in the water! He also noticed that the paddle wheels could be taken off the axle very quickly and easily; probably so they didn't suffer damage or cause more drag when being towed upriver, Charettes thought to himself.

By now the crane boom on the caravel had been slung out and was already lowering a net full of cargo onto the barge deck.

"If you could please order some of your hands down here to help stack the cargo, my lord?" the Master asked. "The peddle-slaves are intended to provide motor power, they are not stevedores."

"Yes, of course," Charettes agreed. He called for twelve more men to come down to the barge as the Master started to direct the four already tending to the net.

"Thank you, my lord," the Master acknowledged. "It's important that the barge be loaded evenly, or it becomes more difficult to handle on the harbour as well as harder to tow up the river." The Master then turned to a feature that Charettes had not noticed before. There was an open pipe at the corner of the barge, its top projecting above the deck and just outside the perimeter fence. The master bent and took a measurement down this pipe.

"What are you doing there, Master?"

"Taking readings, to make sure we load the barge evenly, my lord."

"What do you mean?" Charettes asked.

"These four standpipes, my lord. They are all supposed to project exactly the same level above the bottom of the barge. They are almost full of water and linked together, so the water in all of them is at the same level. By measuring how far below the top of the pipe the water level is, we can measure how out-of-level the barge is. The idea is to always load the barge so all water levels are at the same distance below the top of the pipe. Sometimes we need to shift some of the heavier items to the corner where the water level measures lowest below the top of the pipe to regain an even load."

Charettes was impressed. "Who invented all these new features and techniques, Master?"

"I don't know, my lord. But all of the bargemen have been taught them, starting about five months ago. Only the best of those who could follow them properly were allowed to serve as Masters. Those judged to be not as good were appointed forward men instead and they will be given another chance after six months on the job."

Yes, a lot has happened in the six months you have been away, Charettes said to himself.

“Charettes,” Gallienus said, “I want you to take your seedlings down the coast beyond Punt. The Punt Expedition has found some islands off the coast that seem to have the same climate as Jaya’s description of the Spice Islands. Take a few centuries of marines with you. See if we can set up our own plantations on these islands, so be nice to the locals and ask them politely for a few square miles of land. Tell them you’ll pay them well. If they don’t agree then get rid of them, but I’d rather have some labour close to hand if the plantation works. Then give all the information and charts to Lucius Gordo and tell him the plantation is his own possession. His father spent years trading on the Silk Road for next-to-nothing profit as a favour to Quintus Sertorius, so we owe him. Meanwhile, you should plan to take another trip to the east next year and do some more trading. Take Paracles with you and introduce him as your heir.”

“I don’t look that old, do I?” Charettes asked in jest.

“Say he’s your half-brother,” Gallienus smiled. “But we have to keep up the trade you have started and I don’t want you to be obliged to spend six months every year out of touch. We need to make these barbarians happy to trade with whomever we send, not just you personally.” Atius was next around the table where this informal meeting was being held.

“Marcus, how confident are you that Arabia is under control?”

“Very confident, Piso,” Atius replied. “Uzman was the driving force behind the other towns. They wouldn’t have even thought about a revolt except for his pushing. They didn’t send help when Saphar was surrounded and all pledged submission as soon as Uzman was reported dead. Since then the story of our ramp at Saphar has convinced them that nothing can resist us.”

“Good!” Next was Lucianus. “Have you settled the problem of the raiders near Margiana?” Gallienus asked Lucianus.

“Yes, Piso. Twelve thousand slaves, not counting the dead. The Middle Kingdom complained as expected, but I told them that there must be a mistake. Surely the Middle Kingdom wouldn’t allow its subjects to harm a Friend! They kept protesting and demanding compensation, so I just asked them whether or not they regarded the Republic as a Friend. If they do and if these raiders were indeed their subjects, then they should pay compensation to us! But if they don’t regard us as a Friend then perhaps that issue needs to be resolved first. So let’s just agree that these raiders were wandering barbarians, I said, likely to raid the Middle Kingdom as well as us, and all of us are all better off without them.” Lucianus smiled, and Gallienus returned the grin.

Gallienus turned to Claudius. “Arius, congratulations on the haulway! Per ton-mile, the cheapest form of transport ever invented!”

“Yes, and not just that,” Charettes broke in. “The design of those barges is brilliant and also the techniques for off-loading onto them while still at anchor.”

“Thank you, but I had some help there,” Claudius admitted with a smile. “Thapses the Harbourmaster told me he wouldn’t have enough length of quay to

unload all the shipping we expected, and asked if we could unload directly onto the river barges. The rest flowed from there.”

“Either way, it’s the work of a genius.”

“Anyway, now that we have you feeling appreciated, Arius,” Gallienus broke in, “what ideas do you have for the future?”

“My lords,” Claudius addressed the table as a whole, “I anticipated this moment. I’m driven to admit that these last twenty years have been the best life that any Engineer could have hoped for. The Dams Project, the new Royal Road, and now the haulway, not counting the smaller projects along the way such as the expansion of Charax Harbour and the establishment of Eudaemon with its port, water supply and sewerage. Oh, there have been so many projects, and every one of them a joy!

“But I’m now past my sixtieth year and Lucius Junius has the experience to match the natural ability he was born with. I seek permission, to retire and I suggest that you appoint Lucius in my place.”

There was silence around the table. Gallienus broke it. “Will you go back to Rome, or will you stay on hand?”

“With your permission, I had it in mind to go to Antioch,” Claudius answered. “I can see the time that we’ll need to build a better port at the mouth of the Orontes to handle all the trade coming from the East and that means every bit of infrastructure that is needed by a new city. I would like to just doodle, making plans for these works but unofficially. Perhaps in a few years’ time they might be helpful.”

Gallienus smiled wistfully. “So you’re not retiring at all, you old carpenter! You’re just picking the jobs you like instead of following orders!” The others around the table chuckled.

“Guilty as charged, Piso,” Claudius confessed.

“Then may the gods favour you!” Gallienus said, standing and applauding. The others joined him.

Developments – 699 AUC (55 B.C.) to 719 AUC (35 B.C.)

Throughout this book I will tend to expand in detail the critical periods and events, while passing over periods of relatively stable 'business as usual'. However, even relatively stable times can have cumulative changes and this is particularly so when events outside the main area of attention impinge upon our subject.

To give the reader a better understanding of these slower long-term trends, I need to provide a short explanatory bridge. For the convenience of readers in this timeline, more familiar with B.C. and A.D. than with AUC dating, I will use Western Convention dates in these bridging notes of events happening in the background.

1. Direct trade between Babylon and the Spice Islands started to by-pass the former Tamil monopoly. The economies of the leading Tamil cities collapsed and those cities started to predate upon each other.
2. Plantations for the most common spices were set up in Zanzibar as an alternative supply in case of unforeseen circumstances in Sumatra. This led to further exploration of the East African coast and regular contact was established with Bantu pioneers who had only recently reached the coast after a long folk migration from the west.
3. At the other end of the Republic African traders probed southwards from Mauritania, trying to trace the source of gold dribbling northwards from sub-Saharan Africa. Trading contact was made with Senegalese chieftains, and then inland to Mali.
4. The Western German tribes felt threatened by the Gallic Confederation and its association with the Republic. They formed a German Confederation in response. Initially this comprised only the tribes along the Rhine, but by 35 B.C. it included all Germans west of the Elbe.
5. Many of the Mediterranean provinces were accorded Tribal status after the example of Sicily, Africa and Italian Gaul. This process started in 52 B.C. with Greater Asia. This incorporated Cilicia, Cappadocia, Paphlagonia and all territory westwards. Achaia and Corsica-Sardinia followed in 49 B.C., and Thracia (including Macedonia, Thessalonika and east to the Dardanelles) in 47 B.C.
6. In 46 B.C. Achaia adopted a 'Basic Law' similar to the African model, which guaranteed all adult males equal treatment under the law and (with qualifications as in Africa) the right to vote in Tribal elections.
7. There was also a source of gold somewhere south of Egypt, and the Second Class wanted access to it. Egypt was forced to accept a Republic legate,

free innocent passage for Roman citizens and 'Administrative Assistance' in 42 B.C.

8. The settlements around the Black Sea continued to expand. More settlements were established in the lower Danube and the existing occupants progressively displaced. The resulting resistance and skirmishes led to the establishment in 41 B.C. of the Dacian Frontier Province, to include the Danube basin downstream of the Iron Gates. This act and the associated Treaty in 40 B.C. gave the original peoples security of tenure over lands they actively worked, but declared all other land to be Public Land available for settlement by Republic citizens. Population pressures from Rome and Italy caused these lands to fill rapidly.

9. The increased inflow of gold via Senegal and Egypt tended to create inflation over time. The actual value of the Tribal Stipends, originally specified in terms of gold talents per annum, decreased alarmingly. The Republic faced a major financial crisis, kept at bay only by taxes on the continued expansion of Babylonian trade.

10. Greek had long been the working language throughout much of the Eastern Mediterranean and since Alexander's conquests the language of administration and trade throughout the eastern provinces. It was also a mark of education among higher-class Romans. But now, driven by the prosperity of Greek-speaking Babylon, it was becoming the language of trade throughout most of the Republic. For this reason it was the first and often the only 'civilised' language taught to foreign slaves to make them more marketable. This started to influence even lower-Class citizens to learn Greek, if only to widen their economic opportunities and be able to buy from a larger pool of available slaves.

East Africa – 712 AUC (42 B.C.)

Parethos looked down on his son Marios and made a decision. This was one part of the world that was never meant to be home to civilised men. Most of his staff from Babylon had succumbed to this disease and more than one in ten had died. Those who survived remained weakened and were vulnerable to recurrent episodes. Even the local natives could be laid low by it but apparently not as severely or as frequently. Now his son was showing the symptoms, his skin glistening with sweat even as he lay shivering. His urine had been tinged with blood as well.

“Go to Mobutu immediately,” he ordered his Master of House. “Ask him to report to the works office.” Parethos turned away from his son and made for the bedroom door. The Spice Plantations were simply not worth the marginally profit to be made compared to the other options.

He barely had time to note down the alternatives in an orderly way before Mobutu was lead into his office. “Ah, thank you for being so prompt, Mobutu!” he rose from his chair to greet the tall Bantu Headman as he entered the office.

“I was told it was important, Parethos,” the dark man answered in passable Greek. Parethos gestured towards a chair, and Mobutu sat.

“My son is suffering from that shivering sickness, Mobutu,” Parethos started.

“That is terrible!” Mobutu broke in, his sympathy genuine.

“Thank you for your concern, my friend,” Parethos acknowledged the sympathy. “But my son is only one of many Greeks who have suffered in this way and too many have died. However it is well known that your people seem more resistant. Fewer are brought low and very few to the point of death.”

“The gods are kinder to my people,” Mobutu agreed.

“Indeed,” Parethos went on. “Therefore it would seem to me that it would be only sensible if we responded to the obvious will of the gods. It is clear that they would rather the plantations to be worked by your people, not mine.”

“But my people *do* work the plantation,” Mobutu answered. “Do we not supply most of the labour, and your people perform the more skilled tasks?”

“For which I am thankful, my friend,” Parethos acknowledged. “We have a strong partnership in that regard. But I am convinced that your men would also be capable of performing all the skilled work as well. Your people are intelligent, well able to manage your fields and flocks apart from your work here. I am sure that if they were taught reading, writing and mathematics they would be able to replace my Greeks,” he asserted. “And you would certainly be able to replace me as overall manager.”

Mobutu sat in silence for a moment. When the Greeks had arrived some ten or so years ago they had been willing to trade steel tools for the right to set up their plantations on these islands. The Bantu, who had only arrived in this area two generations ago themselves, had all the land they wanted on the mainland, so it had been a good deal at the time. Then, as time went on and the plantations expanded in area and demanded more labour to maintain, work on a day basis was

offered to the Bantu in exchange for tools, steel and cloth. It was a mutually-beneficial arrangement, now that the pastures for their herds had been cleared and they had time to spare. And those steel tools were very handy, much better quality than their traditional iron-working could provide.

“That's a big change to make,” Mobutu said at length.

“Yes, it is,” Parethos agreed. “But I am convinced that the gods brought your people here and my people to meet you so we could both help each other. Once we teach you these skills they will be of great benefit in everything else you do as well as operating this plantation. You will be able to record agreements, keep track of debts and teach your children in a few short years what your ancestors had to learn by personal experience. Your people will prosper.”

Mobutu sat quietly for a moment. “But why would you want to do this?” he asked. “And why would we want to work the plantation, if your Greeks will not be here to take the produce? We don't need it!”

“Ah! But although we Greeks will not stay here we will return every year to take the produce. And in return, we will continue to trade steel with you and cloth and whatever else you might want,” Parethos answered. “Your people will prosper and my people will no longer come here to die.”

Mobutu again pondered things for a minute or two. “I don't know that we have enough manpower to do all that you say, my friend. There are almost a hundred Greeks here. Even if we have the same knowledge and skills, we don't have that many men available to replace all of them.”

“Perhaps not immediately, Mobutu; but now that your farms are established and your children are many and healthy, it won't be very long before you have enough men to take over,” Parethos urged. “And in the meantime we will send enough Greeks to make up the shortfall. We will send slaves to do the menial or dangerous work, while your men will do the better work.”

Mobutu sniffed his reluctance. “I've seen how you use these men you call 'slaves'. We Bantu don't want to interfere with your customs, but we don't treat men like that. They are not animals.”

“Then treat them however you will. They are slaves because they have done wrong and that is their punishment. We believe it is better for them to work to pay for their crimes rather than be mutilated or killed; but if you believe otherwise then you may do as you choose.”

Mobutu fell silent for a minute. “I will take this suggestion to my elders,” Mobutu said at last. “If they agree in principle, then we will need to agree on many details before this is final.”

“Thank you, Mobutu. Your people are fortunate indeed to have such a wise leader.”

The Bantu Elders felt overwhelmed by this proposal. It was one thing to work on a daily basis; one day's work by one man for a fixed amount of steel or cloth was not too difficult to fix as a fair rate of pay. But how could they estimate how much time and labour would be needed to operate the plantation over a year, with the seasonal variations, repairs, maintenance, and processing? And how would this interfere with the seasonal demands of their farms and herds? And it

was clear that they would not be paid simply on the basis of man-days worked. Parethos had made it clear that they would be paid by the amount of produce supplied. How would they be able to ensure they produced enough crop for their payment to cover their efforts? Mobutu reported these concerns back to Parethos.

“This is a complicated business, my friend Parethos,” Mobutu explained at their next meeting. “Before we can commit to any arrangement, we need more information. We need to know how much labour is required over the full year, and how much we can reasonably expect to generate as a crop. We will also need guidance on how to maintain everything so we don't lose productivity how much it will cost to replace the tools and the equipment and so on.” He held his hands out. “It is not that we distrust you, my friend; but we don't want to enter into any arrangement and then find that we can't satisfy our side of the bargain.”

Parethos had already sent back to Lucius Gordo and the Department of Foreign Trade in Babylon a message outlining his plan to effectively convert the operation of the plantations to a completely contractual arrangement. But it would still be another month or more before he could expect a reply. Even that reply would probably be a request for more information rather than a proper answer.

“As I expected, my friend, you are both honest and wise,” Parethos responded. “Without placing you under any debt at all, let us Greeks take the first steps. Send ten of your brightest young men to me and I will start to train them in the essential arts of administration. I'll teach them how to write and read and how to keep track of very large numbers. Then I'll allow them to have access to all of our books. They will be able to see for themselves how many men work on any one day, and from that they will know how many man-days are required in the season. They will know how much of each product we send back to Babylon each year. They will know what equipment we need to replace and how often and the cost of each piece. They will be able to work out for themselves what a fair price would be for your crops,” Parethos explained. “All this without cost to you, except the time of these young men. And then if you decide to not accept our offer, you will then have ten young men who will be able to teach the rest of your people how to read and write and manage large numbers. Let that be our gift to you before we destroy the plantation and leave forever.”

“You would destroy the plantation if we don't agree?”

“Well, what would be the point of leaving it here?” Parethos answered. “If you don't want to work it and we Greeks don't want to have our men fall sick and die, what other choice do we have?”

Mobutu paused. He had always compared this new proposal to the 'business as usual' option, in which his men would continue to work on a day basis and the supplies of steel and cloth would keep coming. Now he realised that refusal would mean the cessation of these trade goods.

“Yes, I suppose that is true,” Mobutu nodded. “Such a shame to have spent so much effort to grow the trees from seedlings, and then get only three harvests out of them before they are lost.”

“Yes, that would be a pity,” Parethos agreed.

“But back to the plan, my friend,” Mobutu picked up briskly. “I will take back to the elders your offer to teach our young men. I am sure they will be interested in exploring this idea further.”

East Africa – 719 AUC (35 B.C.)

It fell to Metana to put the torch to Mobutu's funeral pyre. All around him the multiharmonics of the funeral song rose and fell around him, like waves in the surf. It was an honour which he really hadn't wanted just yet. He would have preferred to wait for a few more years. Right now he felt that the burden was too great for him. But Mobutu's last words to him had been to re-assure him that every Headman felt like that; at least everyone except a fool. He would grow into the position quickly, Mobutu had promised him between bouts of coughing up blood. Such a calm, wise and compassionate Headman, taken from them before his time! Metana would strive to be a worthy successor.

His people – how strange that phrase felt on his lips! - His people had done well under Mobutu. The farms and fields were now well established and the steel axes supplied by the Greeks allowed new areas to be cleared as required much more easily than using the ancestral iron tools. The plantation was running well, and the yield from the maturing trees was significantly greater than during those first few years which had been the basis of negotiations with the Greeks before they left. There were children everywhere now, so bountiful and reliable was the food supply from the still-expanding farms.

Now it was his task to build on the firm base provided by Mobutu, who had taken great care to advise him on his future role when it was clear that the old Headman's days were numbered. 'Do not allow things to just roll on,' Mobutu had told him. 'You must always look for ways of making things better. Otherwise, as the people grow greater in number and you are driven to use the less favourable land, and the water supply becomes tighter and dirtier, you will find your children slipping backwards. You must keep going forwards or the people will slide backwards.'

The education given to him and his nine fellows had not been wasted. One of them, Mefala, had been appointed immediately as a teacher to ensure there would be a constant supply of educated young men in years to come. A good example of Mobutu following his own advice and looking to the future.

The Song had finished. He touched the torch to the oiled kindling at the base of the pyre. "Father Mobutu, may your spirit watch over your people forever!" Then the Celebration Song started up as people rejoiced that beloved Mobutu would still be there to guide them. He held the torch there long enough to ensure the fire would not fade and then dropped the handle as he stepped back from the growing heat.

Metele, Muhunga and Medinke stepped forward to stand abreast of him as he had asked them to do. The four men linked hands and held them aloft, inclined towards the flames, in honour. The Celebration Song washed over them as they held this attitude of respect. The Song ended and they allowed their arms to drop. Respectfully they stepped backwards away from the mounting flames to merge into the front row of the crowd.

Muhunga and Metana were among the 'ten brightest young men' that had been educated by the Greeks. Shortly afterwards they were adjudged the cream of

the group, and admitted as members of Mobutu's Council of Elders. These older men recognised that the future of their people was inevitably going to be determined by these younger men. Meanwhile Muhunga and Metana recognised that true wisdom was more than just intelligence and knowledge and were respectful of their seniors. As time went by two of the older men in the council died, to be replaced by Metele and Medinke. The two surviving members of Mobutu's original council had been killed by the same plague that took their Headman.

The four men of the council met the next morning to discuss who should be called upon to fill the positions left by the three recent deaths. Muhunga, as the youngest, spoke first. This practice was specifically designed to ensure that junior members spoke their minds freely rather than being intimidated by more senior men speaking before them.

“It is tempting to invite Mefala; he is very clever, and has the respect of everyone for his work as a teacher,” Muhunga opened, “but I think that we have enough cleverness among us already and there are many other men who are respected no less highly. On balance, I think we need another man with the experience and humility we lost when Mobutu and the others died. I suggest an older man and my preference would be Mebile. There will be time soon enough for a younger man to be called up but I hope that is not too soon.”

Metana was next youngest but as the new Headman he was automatically most senior. All eyes turned to Metele.

“I also was thinking of Mefala, assuming that a younger man would be chosen. But Muhunga is right,” Metele said. “You two are already younger than is usual for an elder, and Mebile has much to offer.” He looked over to Medinke for his opinion.

“I was afraid you would choose Mefala,” Medinke said with a smile. “There is no doubt that he is clever but I find him too confident in his cleverness, almost arrogant at times. He seems assured that he will be an elder one day soon, and perhaps Headman. I think he needs to be taught humility first and then he will make a good elder, but not before. I was thinking of Mesinge myself but I agree that perhaps we already have enough youth in this council. Mebile would be a wise choice.” Now all looked to Metana.

“Mebile it is, then,” he said simply. “Let us now go and invite him. Then we will be able to call upon his wisdom as we fill the other two vacancies.”

Metana stood with quiet dignity in front of the other six elders as the Greek Trademaster walked down the boarding plank.

“Lord Mobutu, I believe?” the Trader said with a smile and extended his right arm. “My name is Euphanes.”

“I am pleased to meet you, lord Euphanes,” Metana replied with a smile of his own. “With sadness I inform you that Mobutu is no longer with us. He died three months ago. My name is Metana.”

“My sympathies on your loss, lord Metana. I have been told that lord Mobutu was a very good man,” Euphanes responded. “I take it that you are the new Headman?”

“Yes. And these men with me are my Council of Elders,” Metana explained, and introduced each in turn.

“Please forgive me, my lords, if I do not remember your names at first,” Euphanes excused himself with a smile. “I am not accustomed to Bantu names, and that makes it more difficult for me to remember them. I certainly mean no insult to any of you.”

“We are a very forgiving people, lord Euphanes,” Metana reassured him. “Shall we now move to the office, out of this sun?”

The shade of the office verandah was a welcome relief to Euphanes. He thanked a young girl who offered him a goblet of coconut milk as he sat. “I trust you and your people are doing well, lord Metana,” Euphanes started with the customary niceties.

“Actually, lord Euphanes, this last year has not been a good one,” Metana said with a frankness that surprised Euphanes. “Not only Mobutu and two other elders died of plague, but many of our people also. It was especially hard on our children. Thankfully it came at a time when the work load was light, both on our farms and in the plantation, so we did not lose much production.”

Euphanes made a mental note to himself; stay outdoors with these people! That should minimise the risk of disease transmission. He was suddenly more conscious of the breeze blowing through the verandah, and glad that he was upwind.

“Has the sickness ended yet?”

“Yes, thank you. The last death was almost two months ago and no-one has fallen ill since,” Metana assured him.

“I am glad of that,” Euphanes responded.

“This plague has made us think more carefully about the future of our people though,” Metana went on. “This sickness was unlike anything in our living memory. We believe that it came to us from one of the men on your last ship last year. If our people are going to be exposed to strange new sicknesses because of your visits, we will need to take care. Perhaps we need to adopt your medical knowledge as well.”

“That would be wise, lord Metana,” Euphanes agreed. “Perhaps we should think about our handling processes, to keep your people and ours apart. I suggest that your people should stack the goods on the dock while we stay away, and only after you have finished will our men tie up to the dock and load the ship.”

“That would be a good idea,” Metana agreed. “But I would also suggest further measures. I would like four of our men to be taken back to your lands to study your medicine. Then when they return they will be able to control any outbreaks that still might occur.”

Euphanes thought for a moment. If that happens, these Bantu will know the value of the crops they grow and will demand higher prices. They might even think about inviting other traders to bid against us.

“I don't know if you're aware of all the difficulties that might involve, lord Metana,” he said at last. “First, these men will suddenly be exposed to all the sicknesses of an entire city. That would be much more serious than perhaps a single individual catching a single disease. If they are struck by two or more ailments at one time the symptoms of one illness would be confused with the symptoms of another, preventing a proper diagnosis and treatment. Your men could well die within a year.”

“Our young men are prepared to take that risk,” Metana assured him.

“And there is also a great deal of background training required to even start to understand what is taught at the Museum,” Euphanes went on. “The Museum builds on the earlier education our young men have been receiving since infancy. Your young men would have been trained in your own ways and will not understand ours.”

“Our young men are clever,” Metana assured him. “It might take them an extra year to catch up, but they will manage.”

“And it's very expensive,” Euphanes continued, grasping at another straw.

“How expensive?” Metana asked.

Euphanes didn't know. But if he said a number high enough, then these Bantu will be deterred and never find out the truth. “Tens of sestertium milia each per year, for many years. To train one man would cost as much as the plantation grows in a year; and if he dies because of one of our diseases, it will all be wasted.”

Metana sat still, staring at Euphanes for more than a minute. At length he spoke. “Then we have to choose between several options, lord Euphanes. The first option is to avoid contact with you Greeks. The second is to go ahead with our plans, regardless of the cost, and hope it works out in the end. But I am thinking now of a third option. Perhaps if we send a small delegation back with you to get a clearer idea of the difficulties and how they might be overcome...”

Euphanes felt trapped. None of those options appealed to him. “I am sorry, lord Metana, but I can't take the responsibility you would be placing on me. I don't want to bring about the deaths of your young men. I can't accept them onto my ship.”

“Lord Euphanes,” Metana's voice had a harder edge to it now. “The last Greek ship to visit here is probably responsible for almost a thousand deaths due to the sickness. If you are unwilling to allow us to risk four more lives, does that also mean that you are unwilling to ever return here because that would risk another thousand?”

Euphanes swallowed. This Metana has a quick mind! “Of course not, lord Metana. We will continue to call on you; how else can we supply you with the tools and goods you need? But we will do it in a way that doesn't risk infection.”

“That's not good enough, lord Euphanes,” Metana replied. “If you're unwilling to risk the lives of four volunteers than how can I, as a responsible Headman, risk the lives of hundreds of my people, perhaps thousands, women and children included, by continuing contact with you? If you will not take our men then you need never return.”

That was not what Euphanes wanted. He gave a deep sigh. “I understand your position, lord Metana. But I will need to refer this to my superiors for a decision.”

“Why would that be, lord Euphanes?” Metana asked. “Have your superiors already told you that you mustn't transport our men back to you lands? Why would they already have given such an instruction, unless they foresaw the possibility that we would ask? And if they foresaw that possibility and decided to not permit it, then how will it change their minds now that we have actually asked? Isn't that what they had already foreseen when they made their decision?” Metana leant forward to drive his point home. “So if they have already decided against it, you should not hide your answer, but tell us definitely and now. We do not want more delays until some time in the far future.

“But if your superiors have not already decided against it,” Metana continued, “then you are free to make your own decision. To refuse is just as likely to be the wrong call as to agree.”

“I don't know if they have decided that question or not because I have no knowledge of any such request having been made before,” Euphanes struggled to get out of the trap he had built around himself. “Therefore, it is only sensible for me to find out before we do anything that might not be able to be undone.”

So what is your answer, lord Euphanes?” Metana asked flatly. “Do you take our four men back with your cargo, or do you leave now empty and never come back? Think carefully! If you refuse then that is itself something that cannot be undone.”

Euphanes sat in silence for a moment and thought to himself. 'At worst, we simply abandon this source; at best, these Bantu will change their minds when their steel tools are too rusty or worn to be useful and they realise they need us more than we need them.' He took another deep breath. “I'm sorry, lord Metana, but I can't take your men until I have the approval of my superiors. If that means no more trade, then that is your decision to make.”

Metana was stony-faced. “Then you may start on your return voyage, lord Euphanes. Our men were prepared to accept any risk involved, but you have treated them like children, not competent to make their own decisions. That is a grave insult to them and through them to our entire people. The insult implicit in your decision has made any future trade impossible. If your masters decide that they will, after all, permit some of our men to go to your land, you may tell them that their decision has come too late and the blame rests with you.”

“I meant no insult, lor...”

“Don't tell me what you meant, Euphanes!” Metana spoke over him angrily. “It is already clear what you meant, and it is already straining our courtesy that we don't respond more vigorously! Go while you can!”

Euphanes stood, bowed hurriedly, and turned back to his ship.

“Regrettable, but necessary,” Medinke said quietly in Bantu as the Greek walked away.

“Yes,” Metele agreed. “With so stark a choice before him, he would not have refused unless he was confident that his masters would not approve of our men being taken to be educated. It is clear that they want to keep us isolated and ignorant.”

“I suspect that's because they're afraid of us discovering how much our crop is really worth to them. They didn't want us to seek out other buyers who might be prepared to pay better prices,” Muhunga added.

“Yes, you did well, Metana,” Mebile agreed. “Now for the second part of the plan.”

North Punt – 720 A.U.C. (34 B.C.)

It had taken sixty-one days of sailing north up the coast, touching land for food, water, repairs and sleep most nights. At last they had sighted a large ship, the type the Greeks use. It was well out to sea to the north-east, heading due west.

“Meet that ship!” Muhunga ordered.

“But it's angling away from land! Do you really want to follow it out into the deep?” Mabinga the helmsman clearly didn't like the idea of being out of sight of land, specially if it meant sailing at night.

“If there's one ship going in that direction then no doubt there will be others coming back,” Muhunga asserted confidently. “We have water and durable rations for eight days, packed just in case we needed to avoid hostile land. So if we have to use that, then we will.”

Mabinga leant on the tiller to turn their dhow to slightly north of west, onto a converging course with the Greek merchantman. But he didn't expect to have the speed to intercept. Muhunga called to Megombo in the other boat a hundred paces inshore ordering him to follow.

The big merchantman was actually heading slightly north of west. After three hours of pushing their little dhow as hard as they could, the Greek ship had drawn due north of them when they were still a thousand paces off their beam. It was clear to the Bantus that the Greek ship was going to cross in front of them. Muhunga had no idea about customary practice at sea; he had hoped to be able to draw abeam and simply shout. But now that his chance was slipping away he decided that there was nothing to lose. He started waving and shouting.

The wind was in his face and he doubted that the men on board the merchantman could hear him. But they could see him well enough and after a while they started to call back. Aided by the breeze, their voices carried well enough.

“Are you in difficulty?” they were asking.

“Please, stop!” he shouted back. It was obvious from the response on the Greek deck that he could not be heard.

Eventually there was a response. The trader's bow dropped around more downwind, and the big crossbeams holding the sails slewed slightly, to de-power the ship. Within what seemed only a few minutes the merchantman had taken up station some fifty paces dead ahead of the dhow.

“We are strangers,” Muhunga called. “How far to port? And in which direction?”

“Eight degrees north of west,” the answer came. “Four hundred miles.”

Muhunga was perplexed. What is a 'degree'? At least he had an idea of a mile. If the wind held its present direction and strength – which it had done for several days now – he could cover 150 miles in a full day if they did not take rest. So just under three days. And the direction he could determine by watching what heading the big ship took.

“Thank you,” he called back, and smiled as he waved. The trader swung its yardarms around to provide more power and nosed slightly to the north. It started to pull away from the dhows.

That first night on the water was an anxious time, made even more frightening when the half-moon set soon after midnight. But the wind held its strength and direction and the skies were cloudless, allowing the dhows to sail by the stars. Nerves were frayed by dawn, but no damage had been suffered.

A ship was sighted in the mid-morning, well to the west-south-west and apparently sailing just west of north. Had they got the direction that wrong? They watched through the morning as the big Greek ship crossed their line of advance some eight miles ahead of them, and continued to the north. Then, in the mid-afternoon with the trader at the limit of vision to the north-east, it swung around onto a south-easterly heading.

“A relief!” Muhunga breathed deep. “It’s not making direct for a port! It’s working up into the wind. We can still rely on the direction taken by the first ship which was running with the wind.”

There was a bit more anxiety on the second night. A change came through, with the wind freshening and swinging to be more from the north-west. What had been an easy square reach now became a starboard tack and a slight cross-chop started to affect the sea.

Dawn of the second day revealed another trader, this one to the north-east and coming up behind them. As the day wore on this new ship passed them about six miles to their north, and apparently heading slightly more to the north than the dhows. Muhunga ordered their base course to be swung further north, on a long, slow converging course with the new sighting. This was a tight tack now, and it took until almost dusk before the merchantman disappeared over the horizon to the west-north-west.

The wind eased slightly overnight, and started to come in more from the north-east. A comfortable square reach again, and the sea became slightly smoother. But the real cheer came an hour after sunrise.

“Is that land?” Mabinga asked. “Or am I just getting hopeful?”

Eyes stared forward. Was there really a faint line, a tiny difference of colour on the far horizon?

“I’ll climb the mast to get above this sea-haze,” one of the young men volunteered.

“No you won’t,” Muhunga ordered. “Why take even a small risk of falling? Whether it’s land or not, we’ll still sail in the same direction at the same speed, so there is nothing to be gained.”

Within an hour it was clear that there was land in the distance, and by noon they could make out the features on the coast. “Oh! Look!” Mabinga exclaimed. A large ship had appeared, its sails showing as a splash of white against the shore.

“Where did that come from?” Muhunga asked. I’m sure it wasn’t there half an hour ago!”

“Perhaps it came out of a bay; it might have been hidden by a headland.”

“Yes, perhaps,” Muhunga agreed. “Turn towards it, and let's see if that's the port we are looking for.”

An hour later it was clear that there was a bay recessed in between two large mountainous headlands. The two dhows drove in and started looking for buildings near a beach suitable to land on. Once inside the main bay a secondary bay to the north-east caught their eye. This had a considerable cluster of buildings on its northern shore, with timber piers running out into the water just like that at the plantation. There were a dozen or more big trading vessels tied up to them.

It's tempting to tie up,” Muhunga muttered, “but we don't want to do anything that might be an insult. Just steer clear of the wharves and run her ashore as usual.”

Mabinga had to tack twice to make it into this north-eastern bay, but there was plenty of room for these manoeuvres. Eventually the crisp crunch of sand was heard under the keel, the hands jumped clear and threw their anchor up the beach and the sail was reefed. Megombo drove his boat ashore ten paces to one side.

“Hey, Diogenes! Look at this!” Climines called to his secretary. “A bunch of Nubians have just pulled up in two dhows!”

Diogenes walked out of the building and onto the shaded portico looking out onto the harbour. “Are you sure they are Nubians?” he asked. “Their hair looks different.”

Well, let's find out,” Climines said, rising from his seat. He started walking towards the new arrivals.

“Greetings, friends!” he called as he crunched over the sand.

Greetings, friend!” Muhunga called back. “Could you direct me to the person in authority here?”

“The Mayor's office is a short walk up that road,” Climines answered, waving an arm to his left. “Where are you lords from?”

“We are from the far south. I do not know your word for our land,” Muhunga answered.

“Then what brings you here?”

“We wish to trade with your people. But first I must make sure that I do nothing that might offend against your laws.”

“I'm a trader,” Climines said, suddenly more interested. “What do you buy and sell?”

“Cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, nutmeg and ginger,” Muhunga answered.

“Do you buy it or sell?”

“We sell. We operate a plantation that provides these goods.”

“What prices?” Climines asked.

“My lord, I must apologise that I don't know your name; Im new here. My name is Muhunga.”

“My apologies to you, lord Muhunga,” Climines responded. “My name is Climines. May I offer you and your men a bath, a meal and then show you to the Mayor's office?”

“That's very kind of you, lord Climines,” Muhunga accepted. He didn't know anything about the etiquette in this strange new land and this Climines was obviously interested in doing business. “He has a vested interest in helping us at this stage, so long as we don't become dependent upon him,” Muhunga said to his fellows in Bantu.

“Then please come this way,” Climines invited them. “I will have my men bring your equipment and material inside for safekeeping and secure your boats.” Immediately he ordered Diogenes to get some men to see to the matter.

Muhunga turned to his men and said in Bantu “This man is Climines. He has offered to provide hospitality to us. Come!”

“I have not heard that language before, lord Muhunga,” Climines commented.

“As I said, we come from the far south.”

“But you speak good Greek.”

“Thank you. But only three of us speak Greek. I apologise that the other men will not understand you.”

“Entirely expected,” Climines said expansively. “Now, what prices do you seek for your crops?”

“I don't wish to be rude to so gracious a host,” Muhunga answered, “but I have no idea of your values compared to ours. It will probably be a few days before I can answer that question properly. I promise I will show proper gratitude for your hospitality and help.”

Climines took Muhunga and Megombo to the Mayor's office the next morning, emphasising to the secretary that these men were important and should not be kept waiting. After a quick word with his superior the secretary ushered them directly into the Mayor's inner office. The Mayor rose smiling to greet them, his right arm out. “My name is Silon Paracles, gentlemen. How can I help you?”

“Thank you for your welcome, lord Paracles,” Muhunga replied as he took the Mayor's arm. “My name is Muhunga, and my colleague is Megombo.” He dropped his grip and made way for Megombo.

“Please take a seat, my lords,” Paracles indicated a couch. When his guests were seated he took his place on another couch facing them over a small table. “Lord Climines tells me that you are important men and I have no doubt that his judgement is sound.”

“We represent a nation far to the south,” Muhunga started. “We produce cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, nutmeg and ginger. Our mission here is to determine whether trade in these commodities could be for our mutual benefit.”

“I was not aware that these crops grew in the far south,” Paracles answered. “To the best of my knowledge, these plants grow only in the islands far to the east.” Paracles studied his guests more closely. Are these two really from the east and trying to throw him off with a false story? Perhaps they are

dissatisfied with their present arrangements and seeking to do better. But the dark skin suggests that they might be telling the truth. Although he had never been to the east himself, it was widely reported that the eastern peoples had olive colouration, not black.

“Perhaps we are calling them by the wrong names. Greek is not our own language. But we have samples to show you if that would help.” Muhunga reached into his shoulder bag and brought out five small sacks. He placed these on the table for Paracles to inspect.

Paracles glanced into the bags and sniffed them. “My apologies, my lords; these are the spices by their correct names, as you say. So you tell me you want to trade in these commodities. Why do you come to me? I’m not a trader but a government official.”

“We are not familiar with your laws and customs, lord Paracles,” Muhunga answered. “Before we do anything, we want to make sure that we are not offending against your ways. We would be grateful if you could advise us how to arrange for such trade in a lawful way.”

“Oh I see,” Paracles realised in a flash that what was simple commonsense to experienced men was something totally opaque to a stranger. And these men at least had the wit to know their own ignorance could be dangerous.

“Well, the first point that must be made is that only Republic citizens are permitted to trade into or out of Republic ports. Your ships will not be permitted to trade, so you will need to find a trading partner to bring your produce here. Once you do that your Republic partner should be able to handle all the details at this end. It’s that simple, really.”

“So our ships are not permitted into your ports?” Muhunga repeated, showing disappointment.

“Oh, your ships and your people are permitted to come and go as you please, provided you don’t break any laws. But those ships mustn’t carry tradeable quantities. Small sacks for the purposes of sampling such as you have just shown me are permitted but not large quantities for the purpose of sale.” Paracles smiled. “Perhaps you might consider appointing an agent here to handle your business. An agent would ensure that all your operations are carried out legally and would also be able to take action on your behalf if you are cheated.”

“Thank you, lord Paracles,” Muhunga acknowledged the suggestion. “So we are not permitted to bring our goods here in our own ships. Tell me, are we permitted to buy your goods here, and return home? Or will we need to rely on your traders for that?”

“If you are talking about tradeable quantities, you will need to use Republic traders,” Paracles confirmed. “But that’s not usually a problem. Once you have a trading partner he can take the goods you require on the outward trip and bring your produce back on the return leg. Your agent should be able to manage all that.”

“Where and how would we find such an agent?”

“There are many of them in the town. Perhaps lord Climines might provide you with some advice. He is one of the larger traders operating out of Eudaemon so his experience would be valuable to you.”

“Thank you, lord Paracles,” Muhunga smiled again. “Do you have any other wisdom to share with us?”

Paracles paused for a moment. “I mean no offence, my lords. but you are strangers here and there are some people who might like to trick you. I suggest that you should pay no-one for anything until it is delivered, and that you make no contracts without independent legal advice. Be cautious!”

“Thank you, lord Paracles, for your time and advice. We hope to do business with your people so both sides will prosper.” Muhunga stood and bowed slightly, followed by Megombo.

Climines was still waiting for them as they stepped out of the outer office and into the lobby. “Well, my friends? How did it go?”

“Thank you for your concern, lord Climines,” Muhunga answered. “It seems that we may not carry out our trade ourselves but must make arrangements with one or more of your traders. Lord Paracles suggested we should appoint an agent.”

“Yes, the law is written to give the Republic the advantage in these things,” Climines agreed. “That's how we prosper. But competition between traders will still ensure you get a fair price.”

“How do we find such an agent, please?”

“Rather than an agent who can cheat you if you are not looking over his shoulder the whole time, why not deal direct with the traders themselves? I will take you to some I know,” Climines offered. “But I would ask this favour of you; whatever price you are offered by any other trader, please allow me the prior right to trade at that same price.”

“Of course, lord Climines. We will do at least that much and more to show our gratitude for your kindness to us,” Muhunga promised.

Muhunga and Megombo walked through the market that afternoon, noting the prices being asked for the produce. The prices themselves meant little to them. They had no idea of the real value of the units of currency used but the numbers themselves gave them some sense of scale. Then a stroll through the corner of the market dedicated to metalware tore the scales from their eyes. For the price of ten pounds of cardamom they would be able to buy a complete new plough! Euphanes' rate had been two hundred pounds of cardamom for a plough. Their other produce had been similarly undervalued as well. They started taking written notes of prices from that time on, to ensure they had the facts at their fingertips when negotiating prices.

The next morning Climines took them to the district where most of the spice traders were set up. Unlike his own preference for working from his home, these men tried to affect some degree of relative poverty at work to justify the prices they charged for their goods. “Here you are, my lords,” he said expansively. “Talk to whatever traders you will and take a note of the prices they

will offer you. I ask only that you give me right of first refusal to match the best you are offered.” Climines bowed slightly and turned towards his own office.

The name on the door of the first office was Aristos. The agent stood to greet them into his office.

“Lord Aristos,” Muhunga cut to the business after the introductory pleasantries had been exchanged. “We produce cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, nutmeg and ginger. We would seek a trader who will buy these goods from us at the plantation, and part of the payment will be in the form of knives, cloth, pots, tools, and so on. Are you interested? If so, at what prices?”

“What quantities are we talking about?” Aristos shot back. “It has to be worth sending a ship out and back, to cover the cost of the voyage.”

“We typically produce over 40 thousand pounds of cinnamon, 34 thousand pounds of cardamom, 80 thousand pounds of nutmeg, 50 thousand pounds of cloves and 60 thousand pounds of ginger.

Aristos raised one eyebrow and nodded. “An amount worth shipping, at least,” he commented. Then he took from his second draw a few sheets of paper and started scanning down the lists. “Ginger, you said. I’ll pay fourteen sesterces a pound for that. Ah, cinnamon – twenty sesterces a pound. Nutmeg – nine sesterces. What were the others again?”

“Lord Aristos; are you playing some sort of joke on us?” Muhunga was scandalised. “We have walked through the markets and seen prices ten times greater!”

“The markets will tell you the price we ask here after sailing five thousand miles there and another five thousand back and then paying import taxes. Do you have any idea how much it costs to build, equip, man and maintain a full-sized cargo ship?” Aristos challenged.

“No, lord Aristos, we don’t. How much?” Muhunga replied.

“Every pound of cargo bring back from the Spice Islands costs me just under one hundred sesterces,” Aristos replied emphatically. “And that is only the ships that come back. I need an even greater margin to cover for those ships lost at sea with all their cargo.” (In fact, the actual cost of running a typical square-rigger of 240 thousand pounds cargo capacity was more like two sesterces per pound of cargo per annum; but why let these strangers know that?)

“So the cost of transporting a pound of cargo from five thousand miles away is about a hundred sesterces?” Muhunga sought clarification.

“That’s right!” Aristos asserted.

“Then we suggest that you add fifty sesterces a pound to the prices you are offering, because our plantation is less than half that distance away. We are barely two thousand miles from here.”

Aristos was stopped in his tracks for a moment. “No, that’s not possible. The Spice Islands are about five thousand miles away. Your measurements must be wrong.”

Muhunga looked to Megombo and spoke in Bantu. “This fellow is rather rude. I don’t know that we want to do business with him anyway.”

“I agree,” Megombo replied. “But let us at least get a sensible set of prices out of him first, so we can compare.”

“Lord Aristos, please respect us enough to believe that we know where our homeland is,” Muhunga said in Greek to Aristos. “If your navigators determine that we are wrong then the price can be adjusted accordingly. So for trade in these commodities from our plantation two thousand miles away, what prices will you offer?”

“I will add another sestertius per pound if the round trip is less than five thousand miles,” Aristos said begrudgingly. He suspected these men might be Tamils, and Tamilia was just over two and a half thousand Roman miles. That would barely disqualify them from his bonus.

“Not fifty?” Muhunga asked. “I would have thought that a voyage half as far would save you half of your costs. But only one sestertius saved? From that, I deduce that the true cost of transport from the Spice Islands is about two sesterces per pound, so the cost from our plantation would be about one sestertius per pound for the round trip.”

“I don't want to argue my own internal operating costs with you, my lords,” Aristos knew when he was losing an argument. “Do you accept my prices or not?”

“If you would be kind enough to write them down, lord Aristos, we will take them back to our colleagues to discuss. Please quote on the basis of less than two and a half thousand miles of straight-line distance from here to the plantation.”

“Where is this plantation, anyway?” Aristos asked as he listed his prices. “Half-way to the Spice Islands sounds like it might be in Tamilia, you fellows have dark skin and the Tamils once ran that spice trade. It all fits together.”

Muhunga smiled. “You are a most astute observer, lord Aristos. And for the other half of the trade in which you deliver goods to us from this port as part-payment, what increase in price will you charge us for supply and delivery. We would prefer something simple, such as a fixed percentage over and above the marketplace price. This would be more convenient to us than buying in our local markets if you can offer an attractive margin.”

Aristos finished transcribing his price list before answering. “We would have to pay export tax, which is ten percent. Then there is handling and also the risk of spoiling or loss in transit. Let us say fifty percent for durable goods, and one hundred percent for cloth and other goods that need to be kept dry or are otherwise at risk. And three hundred percent for fragile items such as glassware.”

“Thank you, lord Aristos. If that is your best offer, please note it on the page.”

The two men walked out of the office with their first price list in their hands.

“That man was a scoundrel,” Megombo said casually in Bantu, “but even so, his prices mean that a plough would cost less than fifty pounds of cardamom, taxes and transport included. Almost five times better than the old crowd was offering.”

“Yes,” Muhunga agreed. “And it was interesting to learn a few things on the way through as well. We now have an idea how much transport would cost, and what other suppliers are being paid. But I think we would do well from now on to say that we are from Tamilya, wherever that land is. We are less likely to have disgruntled bidders pester us that way.”

“I think we would also do well to talk to the Mayor again and find out what protection we might be given. It's possible that Euphanes might come back to destroy the plantation, just as Parethos threatened in Mobutu's time. I'm sure the Mayor would not like that happening and disrupting the trade through his port.”

“Do you think that Euphanes will do that?” Muhunga asked. “What would he gain by doing that? I think it more likely that his superiors will go back with an apology, hoping that we will want to resume trade. And if we ask to send our four young men back, I'm sure they will agree to do that too,” Muhunga pressed his lips before continuing, “and then slit their throats and throw them overboard before telling us they died from some Greek sickness.”

Megombo kept walking in silence for a few paces. “Yes, that is most likely. So we mustn't let any of our men go with Euphanes. But I don't want to resume supplying him at the old prices; we could make ten times the profit, even trading with that scoundrel Aristos. And I'm sure we could do even better once we have full information.”

“Indeed,” Muhunga agreed again. “I also suggest that we have one of our men stationed here permanently, to watch prices and other events. I don't want to be ignorant of what is happening, dependent upon a single Greek trader for our information.”

“Yes,” Megombo nodded as he spoke. “Suddenly life has become much more complicated, but at least we will be able to afford to have our own man here acting as an independent source of information once these better prices start flowing through.”

By mid-afternoon they had lists of prices from five different traders, all operating on the assumption that the plantation was in Tamilya. They selected the best of them, and presented it to Climines that evening.

“Lord Climines, we thank you sincerely for your hospitality and help,” Muhunga said formally. “In accordance with your request, we show you the most attractive offer we have received today. If you choose to match these terms, we will gladly give you priority over all others. The name of the trader offering these terms is shown on the top of the page.” He handed the sheet to his host.

Climines scanned the prices and terms. “Hey, this says your plantation is in Tamilya! I thought you told me you were in the far south.”

“We told the other merchants we were from Tamilya because that would involve the same distance to transport the goods. We did not want them to know where we really are in case they might turn to piracy.”

Climines nodded as if to himself. “Good thinking, lord Muhunga. There are some out there who might be tempted.” After a moment he looked up from the sheet. “I would be honoured if you would trade with me on these terms,

provided that you will guarantee at least two hundred thousand pounds of cargo per ship. More would be even better.”

“We would be pleased to accept you as our sole trading partner, but we also have additional conditions we didn't mention to the other traders for fear of disclosing too much information. The first condition is we retain the right to sell to others any produce you don't buy yourself. The second is that you offer free passage for up to five of our people in each of your ships, in either direction. The third is that your first voyage will provide transport for all of us back home.” Muhunga smile broadly. “I don't want to have to go back in those dhows!”

Climines chuckled and offered his right arm. The deal was done!

East Africa – 728 AUC (26 B.C.)

It had been eight years since trade with Climines had commenced. Climines had asked for four of his own men to be permitted to stay on the plantation, a request that was promptly granted. It suited the Bantu to have Greek witnesses if Euphanes ever returned, which he did in the second year. Climines' men met with him and told him to stay clear or be charged with piracy in Eudaemon.

Loading and unloading protocols had been developed to minimise the risk and spread of any contagion. A couple of younger workers had fallen ill but quarantine was quick and effective. The extent of the plantation had been expanded as rapidly as available manpower permitted and quantities were soaring. Climines started by-passing Eudaemon with his cargoes, taking them direct to Berenice at the top of the Red Sea for quicker and cheaper distribution into the Mediterranean world and becoming even richer. Muhunga himself had returned to Eudaemon with the first cargo to act as agent. He had suffered a few episodes of various illnesses such as fevers and gastric disorders, but was quickly attended to by physicians and never in serious danger. He then moved on to set up a second office in Berenice.

But more than that, the easy availability and low cost of books was revolutionising the way the People viewed the world. No longer was it only the cream of the boys who were being taught literacy and numeracy by one teacher; every boy over the age of seven was being taught these skills, and the Museum-pressed textbooks on farming, husbandry, sewerage and water supply, medicine, structures and other specialisations were widely circulated. The People, farmers and herders who had lived in villages from time immemorial, were becoming a literate, town-based culture. Mefala, the first teacher, had adapted the Greek alphabet to make Bantu a written language.

The experience of Muhunga and his fellows, quite apart from the low incidence of disease among the plantation loaders, suggested that most fit and healthy adults could survive in a Greek society if proper medical attention was available. Four young men had been selected for study at the Museum, which had been found to be much cheaper than Euphanes had asserted.

And then Muhunga was recalled to report to the Council of Elders on his suggestions for long-term planning. All of these new influences had to be managed.

“Father Metana, I rejoice to see you again,” Muhunga smiled as he used the formal Headman honorific to greet his old friend. “And I rejoice to meet once again with the Elders of the People.”

“Please, Muhunga, Elder of the People, join with your colleagues and share your wisdom!” Metana invited him to sit in their circle. Muhunga took his place.

“First, we thank you for your diligence in reporting in such detail, in supplying us with so many learned books for our instruction and for protecting

our interests. But your enthusiasm and diligence has had startling effects here which you might not have expected and which have not been in your daily view. So much Greek influence is suddenly changing the People in ways we can't predict and might not be able to control." Metana looked around the circle. "We need to make clear plans for the future of the People and we will need all our wisdom for that task." He gestured to Medinke.

"I confess that I am an old man," Medinke said with a smile. "But I know I speak for many old men when I wonder what will become of us if this process continues. Will we become like Greeks? Many of the young men who will be leaders in their time already speak Greek almost as fluently as their mother tongue, because they need to be that familiar with the language to read these new books!

"So we must ask ourselves, do we want to become like Greeks? From what I have seen, they show little respect for their parents, they selfishly exploit everything and everyone they can and they show no mercy. They show no generosity. They are a hard people. I don't want our People to become like them. The steel and the knowledge they bring are very helpful, but if that costs us our souls then the price is too high. Our fathers managed with iron, wood and bone tools, and we can do so again if we have to. There are still enough of us who remember the old techniques and can teach them to our children but if we wait another twenty years even that old knowledge will be lost. Then there will be no turning back."

All sat in respectful silence, allowing Medinke's words time to sink in and be considered. After a period, Metana spoke again. "As Medinke says, he is not alone in that opinion. It is an opinion heavy with wisdom. But it is not the only wise opinion put before us. We all remember Mobutu, who was willing to embrace change. He thought we had to either grow or die. Perhaps he didn't see the full extent of what would happen and erred. Or perhaps he was right. So tell us, Muhunga, what are your thoughts?"

Muhunga drew a deep breath, and exhaled to relax himself. "I see the wisdom in Medinke's thoughts. It is a wisdom of generosity and humility, as befits the man himself. I agree that if we lose who we are, then nothing else can make up for that loss. But I think the question is much more complex than it appears at first sight. In fact, it is not one question but a weave of questions, each one tied into the others.

"The first question is 'Can we go back, even if we wish to?' Medinke thinks we can, but I'm not sure of that. The Greeks know we are here now and they know that our plantation is more valuable than can be imagined. So long as we continue trading with Climines he will use his influence with the Greek Mayor to prevent his competitors from raiding us, to carry off whatever they want. But if we stop trading we also lose our protection. Other Greeks, or even Climines himself, will come here and seize our crops. Even if we destroy the plantation, they will still enslave our young men, our women and our children us to cover the cost of their expedition. So no, I don't think we can stop trading. If we do, it will be our end.

“But to trade with the Greeks does not mean that we will become like them. While I have been based in Eudaemon and Berenice, I have not restricted myself to simply comparing prices. I have toured and seen many different peoples. It is so difficult to explain how vast is the land they call the Republic! The distance of two thousand miles from here to Eudaemon is huge; but the territory of the Republic is just as wide from north to south, and twice as long from east to west! And it is not just Greek! There are many other peoples within the Republic, each with its own gods, its own customs. And by law these religions and customs are protected.

“I have been to a place called Egypt, where farmers still work the same fields their ancestors did a thousand years ago, and still speak their ancestral language. They use manufactured tools and ploughs, but they are still Egyptians, not Greeks. I have seen other people called Jews, whose men refuse to shave their beards and they insist that there is only one true god. They have their own holy books which they say were written in their sacred language long before the Greeks had invented their own alphabet. They even teach that ancient language to their sons as well as speaking Greek. They live in the midst of Greeks who shave their beards to the skin, and worship many gods. Yet the Jews have remained Jews.” Muhunga looked around the circle.

“It is possible for a people to retain their own core, despite the influence of the Greeks, provided they have the inner strength to do so. Many peoples all over that vast Republic have done so, by co-operating with the Greeks but retaining what makes them distinctive. Other peoples have shown that inner strength and I refuse to believe that our People are any less strong than they. What is not possible is for us to survive by opposing them.”

Muhunga took another deep breath. “And what I would propose to you is that the best way to protect our own future is to tie it to the Republic. That way the Republic will protect our freedom and distinctiveness, as it protects that of the Egyptians and the Jews. I suggest that we approach the Republic and ask for their official Friendship, which will make it unlawful for anyone to harm us. Without that protection we are risking all.”

There was another pause as the elders considered this new approach. Eventually Metana spoke again. “Muhunga, you spoke of 'official Friendship'. Exactly what does that mean?”

“It means several things. The most obvious is that we will not be able to prevent anyone from the Republic from coming here peacefully to live with us, to buy and sell, to marry and raise his family among us if he so wishes,” Muhunga started. “It also means that we will have no power to punish that person if he breaks our laws, but there will be a Republic official we can complain to and he will be able to impose punishment. It is customary to allow the local people to advise the normal punishment under their own law and the official simply endorses it.”

“So we would not be their equals under the law?” Metana sought clarification.

“No, we will not be their equals officially, but unofficially that inequality is not enforced. More important is that if any Greek does us harm, we will have the Republic on our side. Compare that to the situation now, where any Greek sailor can harm us and it is entirely out of our hands if he is punished or not. And if we punish him without the consent of the captain, we are entirely vulnerable to his revenge. The Republic will protect their own in that case, not us.”

After a short time Mefala lifted a hand. He had been invited onto the Council three years earlier.

“Please, Mefala; speak.” Metana invited.

“I understand that the Republic takes ten percent of the value of any goods entering or leaving their lands. It is called a 'tax'. I understand that we are paying that tax on everything we buy from the Republic. Is this true? And if so, will anything change if we become an official Friend? And will we be entitled to charge taxes ourselves?”

“That's a very good question, Mefala,” Muhunga conceded. “Yes, we are paying that tax now. We will continue to pay it if we become a Friend. And no, we will not be allowed to tax anything we sell or buy at our end of the journey. But that would make no difference; if we tax what we sell, then the traders will simply offer lower prices. If we tax what comes in, then they will charge us more to cover the tax,” Muhunga explained.

“But it need not stay that way forever,” he went on. “A people who remain a faithful Friend for more than twenty-five years may then ask to be accepted as a full member of the Republic. That means that we will not be subjected to these taxes. We will then be able to charge that ten percent extra ourselves and still be cheaper than other suppliers, and we will not be paying that ten percent on what we buy. In fact, we would even be entitled to take our spices directly into the Republic itself and cut out the profits made by the Greek traders. We would earn much more than the prices they pay us at present! It also means that we will be able to send two of our own men to their Senate; that's what they call their Council of Elders. I look to the time when our sons will become part of this Republic, the equals of any Greek and utterly safe against any enemy.”

Mebile lifted a hand and was invited to speak. “Muhunga, I confess that I am a man even older than Medinke.” A chuckle ran around the circle. “I came here sharing Medinke's concerns. I still share them. But after hearing you I now have even more concerns. You have made me realise that we can't simply turn our backs on the Greeks. If we do, they will strike us from behind. They have nothing to fear from us except a loss of profit. If we refuse to trade they will resort to raiding instead. Yes, we need some protection, in case they are not always as respectful and peaceful as at present. But is this official Friendship the best way of gaining that protection? I don't know. I suggest that we need to gather more information and more opinions before we commit.

“So I would suggest you take Metana and Medinke back with you. If Medinke is satisfied, I will be too. And Metana as our Headman will have authority to do whatever needs to be done.”

“But I don't know Greek,” Medinke protested.

“None of us old men do,” Mebile said with a self-deprecatory smile. “Which is probably condemnation enough. But you know that Metana and Muhunga can be trusted to conceal nothing from you.”

Metana looked around the circle. There seemed to be broad agreement. No hand was lifted to speak again. “Brothers, I think we have much to think about. Let us meet again in two days’ time and continue this discussion.”

Rome – 730 AUC (24 B.C.)

The People had built up substantial reserves of cash over ten years of trade with Climines. The delegation had a natural aversion to waste, but a certain level of elegant presentation was essential if their petition for Friend and Ally status was to be taken seriously. And so it was that Metana, Medinke and Muhunga presented themselves togate and perfumed on the floor of the Great Senate almost two years later. All three were aware that the new custom of cosmetic colouring, now used universally by Republic politicians to enhance some features and subtly hide blemishes, was not available to them; despite the assistance of several sympathetic Senators who had negotiated with them and sponsored them through the political web of Rome, not one artisan in Rome was comfortable with the radically different face shapes and skin hue of the Bantu. But now the back-room talks were over and the deals had been finalised. Now was the time to put everything into effect. The three men had been invited to sit in the Great Senate and Metana to address it.

“Conscript Fathers,” Metana opened as he had found to be customary after sitting in the public gallery through many previous meetings. “I must first thank you for permitting me to address you in Greek rather than Latin. Your courtesy in this regard is yet one more measure of the generous spirit of the Republic you govern so wisely.

“My name is Metana. My office is 'Headman', which would be literally translated as 'Prince' into Latin. But that is a misleading translation, because I don't hold that office by birth. Although born of humble farming parents, I was chosen twelve years ago to become a member of the Council of Elders for my People. This is a body similar to a Tribal Comitia in your Republic. Two years later the then Headman died and the Council chose me to replace him. So you will understand that I am not of noble birth, nor am I a wealthy man. I hold my office only by the consent of my People and the Council of Elders. We are in many ways similar to your Republic.

“My colleagues are also members of the Council. Medinke is the acknowledged leader of the more conservative members. Muhunga is from the more progressive faction, and has served as our Liaison Officer with the authorities of Mesopotamia Tribe and Egypt Tribe for eight years.” Metana started strolling slowly. He had been coached to move about the floor to appear more at ease. He had been advised that a standing monologue gave the appearance of rigidity.

“We have been trading with one particular Babylonian merchant for twelve years now and throughout that time we have been careful to comply with all of your laws. Muhunga has been stationed in Eudaemon and Berenice, the main ports of entry for our goods, specifically to ensure that all is done correctly. And during that time we have been impressed – no, we have marvelled! - at your Republic. It is governed so wisely, so peacefully! It brings prosperity and joy to all! It is the very model that every people in every land would hunger and thirst for!” He stopped and scanned the terraces.

“I have been told many stories from your history while I have made my way here, and even more as I walked around your marvellous city. I have been told of Sulla the Great, one of the main builders of this Republic. I have been told that during his time, many of his fellows considered Italians to be unfit for citizenship. His response? ‘I would offer the Mos Majorum to all men, and those who accept it are already citizens in their hearts.’” Another few paces.

“Conscript Fathers; even before we Bantu knew about the Republic we lived by a code that was similar to the Mos Majorum. It served our people well. But now that we have seen your Mos Majorum we feel that we have moved from squinting at shadows to gazing upon the reality. We who have had to work by touch can now work by sight! Brother Muhunga, during his time in Eudaemon, was the first of us to see the beauty of the Mos Majorum. He reported back to our Council, urging us to come and see for ourselves. So I as Headman and brother Medinke as the leader of the conservatives came to see what he reported to us.

“Brother Muhunga was right! We all three have been captured by so perfect a Law! All three of us will return to our people and wherever our current system is lacking, we will bring it into line with the principles of your Mos Majorum.

“Yet, we also hope to take back one thing more. We hope to take back to our people the most exciting news imaginable. We hope to be able to tell them that we are Friends and Allies of the Republic! We have been told what obligations this status and recognition will impose upon us. We accept those obligations not only willingly, but eagerly.” He stood still now, arms held out wide as in supplication.

“Please, honour the vision of Sulla the Great. Please, accept the Bantu as your Friends.”

As Metana made his way to his seat the senators loosely bound as the Progressive Faction stood and applauded. Many Italian senators also stood; although tending to be conservative by inclination, they had been told that a substantial increase in the supply of spices would drive down prices and their merchant supporters wanted to have free access to open up their own latifundia in the Bantu lands. They had not heard about the Shivering Sickness yet. But all this was for show. Everyone already knew that the Bantu had the numbers for recognition to be passed. Five months of small-scale discussions had not been wasted.

Egypt – 731 AUC (23 B.C.)

Philip Thontes didn't like the proposal at all. Being Theban by birth himself, he well remembered the days when he was not considered a 'citizen' even in his own city. He was appalled that this woman, not even Egyptian herself but an in-bred Macedonian, could propose terms which would exclude Egyptians from citizenship of Egypt but grant that right to only a thin crust of Alexandrian nobility; all of whom were her in-bred Macedonian relatives! None of them even speak or understand Egyptian – except the Queen herself, of course, and even she was the first in her line to bother with that.

“Consul, I understand the political pressures at work. But stop and think for a moment!” he urged Quintus Poppaedi Silo, grandson of Silo the Great. “This proposal runs counter to everything the Republic stands for! To deny the People any voice at all in the affairs of their own tribe! To declare that in all of Egypt there are less than one hundred citizens, all the rest being no more than slaves, or at best freemen! And to declare all executive power to remain in the hands of a pair of Praetors, a position to be filled by election in which only the close kin of Cleopatra will be permitted to vote!” Thontes shook his head in exasperation. “This proposal is a poison that would work its way through the whole of the Republic if it is permitted in any one Tribe. Don't you remember Pompeius in Picenum?” Thontes finished, referring to the stacking of one Italian Tribal Comitia and its laws that would have enslaved a whole tribe had not Drusus the Great taken action to rescue them.

“You don't need to remind me of how Italians were abused in the past, Philip,” Silo replied. “I remember my grandfather telling me about those times, and how they must serve as a warning that we don't commit those same abuses ourselves. He was the man who wrote the Miletus Decree!” Silo paced the floor uneasily. “So yes, I agree with you,” he conceded at last. “What do you suggest? You've served as Legate here for the last five years so you should know these people as well as anyone.”

“My apologies, Consul,” Thontes dropped the passion from his voice, “I feared that political pressure from the Second Class might have been irresistible. I should have known you better.” He gestured towards a couch and Silo strode over to it and sat. Thontes sat on another, half-facing Silo's in a 'V' shape that included a low serving table.

“There are two possible ways forward, Consul; the first is to raise objections to the most unacceptable provisions and work our way down the list until we can push no further. Then we decide whether to take it or leave it. But I don't like that approach; it will create the expectation among the Second Class that eventually an agreement will be reached, and this will create even more pressure on us.

“So I propose that we take a different approach; that we simply swipe their proposals off the table entirely and present our own draft of what we want. Tell these Macedonians it comes as a package. Specially when it comes to citizenship!

After all, it's now common practice for all native-born free men of a new Tribe to be granted full citizenship, even Galatians in Asia and Berbers in Africa! So why not Egyptians in Egypt?"

Silo nodded. "Yes. We should be stating the conditions, not allowing the initiative to be assumed by this local bunch of mutual cocksuckers. Do you happen to have a draft in mind?" Silo smiled.

Thontes smiled back. "What a co-incidence! I just happen to have here a few idle thoughts!" He stood, crossed to his desk, and took out a sheaf of pages to place on the serving table.

"I'll go through these more carefully later," Silo pledged, "but what are the main points?"

"It's based on the Basic Law of the Tribe Achaia; I'm most familiar with that, being Theban," Thontes answered. "Let us see where it goes from there."

Silo called in on Thontes three days later, after the counter-proposal had been put to Cleopatra. "How did it go, Philip?" Silo asked cheerily as he entered.

"The Queen looked at my draft, read the first line or two, and said that I shouldn't waste her time," Thontes answered.

"Disappointing," Silo summarised.

"Yes," Thontes agreed. "I told her that to press for acceptance of her own proposal would be an even greater waste of her time, that she should revise her proposal to conform to the general pattern I had given her. She just gave a thin smile as if to humour me, and waved me away with the back of her hand."

"Well, she's no fool," Silo commented. "I wonder what she has in mind."

"I don't know that she has anything in mind except to maintain her own privileges," Thontes replied glumly. "Her traders might want access to our markets without having to pay import and export fees and to break down the stranglehold that Mesopotamia Tribe has on her trade routes in the East, but she doesn't really care about that. So long as she has a secure throne it's her merchants and peasants who are paying those costs, not her or her coterie of relatives who make up the Noble class here."

Silo paced for a minute. "I think I might pay her another State visit."

Two days later Silo was shown into the Audience Hall. Cleopatra rose from her throne and walked down the steps to greet him, smiling and offering her right arm in the Roman manner. She seemed gaunt, almost sickly to the eyes of a Roman who considered a full, voluptuous figure the ideal of womanhood. "Thank you for taking the time to visit me, Consul," she said cheerfully. Immediately Silo was struck by the texture of her voice. It was like velvet!

"And thank you for making the time for me, Pharaoh, and for your hospitality," Silo replied with his own gentle smile.

"Please let us sit together," Cleopatra suggested. "That throne is too far away from such an important man as yourself!" Even in her mid-forties, she could sometimes put on the winsome charm of a woman in her twenties. She led him into a smaller private room off to one side, sat on one chair and patted the other chair beside her.

“What can we talk about, Consul?” she asked with a smile. Silo studied her closely. Yes, the nose is a bit too big for her face, but those large, luminous eyes distracted the observer's gaze irresistibly. And the voice! It took an effort to pay attention to her words and not just sit there as if listening to music.

“Could we perhaps talk about your current proposal for admission to the Republic?” Silo suggested.

“Yes, why not?” she accepted. “It will be so good to be part of the Republic! Will you speak in support of my application?”

“I would very much like to do that, Pharaoh, but you must remember that the very word 'Republic' means that the State belongs to all of its citizens. Your current draft proposal still maintains dynastic rule.”

“But even in your Republic, Consul, don't you have some who are citizens, some who are freedmen, and some who are still slaves? And only the citizens have full rights under the law while and freedmen need a citizen to sponsor them? And slaves have no rights at all!”

“That is true, Pharaoh; but to restrict citizenship to only those who are related to the Ruling House, and even the concept of a Ruling House itself, is contrary to the Republican Ideal.”

“Perhaps so, Consul; but our proposal doesn't do what you seem to think it does. We don't require that citizenship of the Republic be so restricted,” Cleopatra countered with another charming smile. “All Egyptians can become citizens of the Republic if that's what the Great Houses in Rome so decide; even I know that under your laws Republic citizenship is decided by Republic laws, and I don't intend to oppose whatever the Great Houses decide! Our proposal only defines citizenship of the proposed Tribe of Egypt!”

“That might be literally true, Pharaoh,” Silo responded. “But Republic Law defines a Republic citizen as anyone who is a citizen of a Tribe, or a freeman who has been granted citizenship some other way.”

“Then the problem is not in my proposal, Consul, but in the application of the Republic's laws,” Cleopatra answered patiently. “Even with the law as it stands, there is nothing to prevent the Great Houses from granting Republic citizenship to all Egyptians ‘by some other way’, as the law puts it. Perhaps this problem can be solved simply by a decree that all Egyptians are Republic citizens, even the peasant on his farm.”

“Indeed that could be done,” Silo agreed. “But that would only make them citizens of the Republic, and not of Egypt Tribe. They would have their rights outside Egypt, but so long as they remain in Egypt they would have no process for making use of these rights.”

Cleopatra nodded to indicate that she understood the point. “Yes?...” she said after a moment, as if asking for a conclusion to be drawn.

“The point is, that citizenship that cannot be exercised in one's own Tribe is effectively not citizenship at all,” Silo concluded.

“If you choose to view it that way, Consul, I won't insult you by arguing,” Cleopatra responded with another smile. “But I see it differently. I see it as a way in which even the humblest of my people might be able to be a citizen of

your Republic, if only the Republic sees fit to grant that status. And it also preserves the distinctively Egyptian social structures and customs that have been with us from time immemorial. We get the best of both worlds; the prosperous new age being brought in with your Republic as well as the ancient and venerable traditions of our ancestors. What could be better?" Again Cleopatra flashed that luminous smile, and Silo had no answer.

At length he managed to speak. "I am sorry, Pharaoh, but I can't see it that way and I doubt that the Great Senate will either."

Silo was wrong. Perhaps the Egyptian Petition would have been refused had it been presented by an ambassador, but Cleopatra had not relied on anything so low-key. She travelled to Rome herself and engineered her entry into the city to look like a Triumph. There were elephants and floats drawn by oxen with gold leaf covering their horns and physically perfect Nubian slaves with oiled bodies glistening in the sun. With very few exceptions, no Roman had ever seen anything so exotic but so staggeringly opulent at the same time.

That in itself swayed many. But the decision on the Petition wouldn't be decided by the Head Count in the streets; that was a matter for the Great Senate and these sophisticated but hard-nosed men would not be so easily impressed.

Then Cleopatra spoke to the assembled Great Senate. Even when speaking in unaccustomed Latin her rich, sweet voice hypnotised all who heard her. When Silo rose to speak against he seemed petty and spiteful and his voice sounded scratchy. Cleopatra didn't even attempt to justify her proposal against his criticisms. She simply smiled gently and spoke in that mesmerising voice about the great antiquity of Egypt, how venerable were its customs and traditions and how they must not be tampered with for fear of impiety towards the most ancient gods in the whole world, and how much the Republic would benefit from the inclusion of so great and ancient a land.

Marcus Gabinius, whose father had restored Cleopatra's father to the Egyptian throne a generation ago, noted that the Egyptian Petition made no mention of a Tribal Stipend. Again Cleopatra smiled luminously.

"That is true," she agreed. "But nor does Gaul pay a Stipend, even though it was promoted from an autonomous province to a full Tribe five years ago. Is Egypt less worthy than Gaul? But to go further, does not Egypt offer a path into Nubia and beyond, where your traders can make fortunes? And will you not tax those fortunes as they are being made?" She smiled again. "Believe me; the Republic will make more revenue from taxes on this new trade than it could imagine! Let that access to Nubia be our Stipend, and you will gain more than any fixed sum you might want to impose."

Then the vote came, and the Egyptian Petition was accepted by a very narrow majority. Much to Silo's chagrin the Republic became the protector of Monarchy within its own borders.

Silo got down to business immediately Cleopatra left Rome for Alexandria. His first stop was the house of Marcus Gabinius.

The second was that of Gaius Octavius, a man of forty years who was the foremost legal mind in the Republic. Born into an Equestrian family of a father who had served as a provincial governor, his anti-Noble sentiments were widely known. However, his chronic asthma had deprived him of a clear loud voice, essential in electoral politics. But Silo recognised the ambition within that weak chest as being as powerful as the acclaimed intellect. He hoped that both ambition and inclination would prompt Octavius to be part of his cause.

The three men met in Silo's town house, a deliberately modest residence which boasted only one significant piece of ornamentation when seen from the street; a life-size statue of his grandfather Silo the Great standing at the peak of the brickwork gable. That was ornamentation enough.

"First, I must thank you for your diligence and determination in this matter, Quintus," Gabinius was first to speak as he and Octavius were seated. "I was appalled at how your very valid objections were not even addressed by that painted whore last month! She totally ignored everything you said, but so few Senators even realised it. That silky voice simply side-stepped you and pulled the rest of the Senators along by their pricks!"

"Indeed so, Quintus," Octavius agreed. "I was watching from the Public Gallery. I couldn't believe that such fundamental legal flaws could be winked at. That vote was a blot on the Great Senate and must be overthrown. Otherwise it will stand as a precedent legalising Kingship in a constituent Tribe, an example that could then lead to the overthrow of the Republic as a whole."

"I'm very grateful for both your wisdom and your support, lords," Silo acknowledged. "So we need to do something about it. Caius, you're the most respected legal mind in Rome; what can be done?"

"Unfortunately, the decision has been made that Egypt is now accepted as a Tribe. That can't be undone without Egypt staging some revolt against the Republic. And that Monarchical Basic Law can't be undone except from within the Tribe. The whole issue of Tribal Autonomy was settled back in 673, in the days of your revered grandfather," Octavius started. "So we need to put forward a set of Republic laws that will allow Egypt itself to overthrow their monarchy legally. Otherwise, if they act without a basis in Republic Law, they will be considered rebellious non-citizens and Cleopatra would be entitled to call in the legions to subdue them."

"And do you have any ideas on how we could structure such laws in a form that we could push through the Great Senate?" Silo knew his limitations. He wanted to give Octavius his head and he was happy to follow.

"I have looked at this, and intend to work backwards," Octavius answered. "To change the Basic Law will require a majority of the Egyptian Comitia to vote for that change. Thankfully, Cleopatra was so confident of her power to control her nobles that she settled for the usual two-to-one majority needed for a change to a Tribal Basic Law. She didn't want to risk appearing too much like an absolute ruler. So we need to bring about conditions that will enable the election of men who oppose this Basic Law and for enough of them to be elected so that they comprise more than two-thirds of the Comitia.

“That will not be easy in the existing circumstances in which only the Royal blood are permitted to vote,” Octavius went on. “So the first step is to broaden the franchise. But we can't do that directly. Citizenship of a Tribe is a matter for each Tribe itself to determine, and we run into the Autonomy barrier again.

“So I suggest that we pass a Republic Law that extends the right of every Republic citizen to vote in his own Tribe. This will over-rule any Tribal laws, including the Egyptian Basic Law.” Octavius stopped speaking.

But what good will that do?” Gabinius asked. “The Egyptian Basic Law already provides that all citizens may vote. The problem is that only the blood-relatives of the Royal House are citizens.”

Octavius smiled. “Then we see to it that all adult free male Egyptians are granted Republic citizenship directly by the Great Senate.”

Gabinius was stunned. It was not uncommon for distinguished foreigners to be granted citizenship in an honorary capacity, a token gesture to show they are held in high esteem. But to grant it to millions of Egyptian peasants who spoke neither Latin nor Greek, the working languages of the Republic? Then, after a moment of incredulity, it sank in. Gabinius started laughing. “Oh, by all the gods! What a lightning strike from a cloudless sky! And what's more, it also prevents Cleopatra from intimidating her opponents as well because they will then have their guaranteed rights as citizens against arbitrary arrest or harm! Up until now she has thought of herself as the wolf in a field full of lambs; but in one stroke of a pen those lambs will become lions!”

But Silo had heard Cleopatra herself suggest this. “I'm not sure that will work, Gaius. Cleopatra is entirely aware of that possibility; she even mentioned it to me herself. So I'm sure she already has a counter-move planned if that happens.

“That will not be the final stroke, Quintus,” Octavius warned him with a forefinger raised. “I agree it would still be possible for Cleopatra to hold onto power legally in spite of these measures.”

“Oh? How?”

“By having the existing Comitia pass a law that postpones elections indefinitely,” Octavius answered.

“But elections have to be held each year,” Gabinius protested.

“That's the usual practice,” Octavius conceded. “But I have here a copy of the Egyptian Basic Law, just in case you don't know it off by rote.” Octavius offered a few pages to his fellow-guest. “Tell me where the Basic Law actually requires that elections should be held every year. And even if it did, what's to stop the existing Egyptian Comitia from changing it? Cleopatra has more than two-thirds support there, you know. She owns all of them!”

“So how do we get around that problem?” Gabinius asked, waving away the offered papers.

“A third Law to be passed by the Great Senate,” Octavius explained. “This one will require that no person may hold authority within the Republic or any of its Tribes unless he is elected to that office himself or appointed by a

person or body elected to a higher office and authorised to appoint him, and that such authority expires at the next election or after no more than thirteen lunar months, whichever comes first. The thirteen lunar months allows for a little bit of variation in election dates, but will prevent a corrupt Comitia from extending its own term by delaying elections.”

Silo and Gabinius turned this over in their minds. “Just a moment,” Silo objected. “If that law were to be passed, what would become of three-time Praetors? At present they hold Senatorial office for life if elected three times. Also consulars, although most of them are already three-time Praetors by the time they're elected Consul.”

“There are two ways of handling that,” Octavius answered. One would be to allow their life membership to lapse. The other would be for the Senate to be authorised to re-appoint them after each election. I prefer the second myself.”

“Then what's to stop Cleopatra from doing the same?” Gabinius asked. “Her Egyptian Comitia could appoint more members to outnumber the new members to be elected.”

“That might well be attempted,” Octavius conceded. But their terms would expire at the new election so what would be gained? Effectively it would be the new Comitia, not the old one, which would make such appointments. So they would obviously not appoint any men who would frustrate the policies of those who appoint them,” Octavius explained.

There was another pause as Silo and Gabinius thought this proposal through. “Well, I can't think of anything you haven't covered, Gaius,” Silo said at last.

“Yes, I think I have the required structure properly thought-out,” Octavius agreed modestly. “The next step is gathering support to pass these laws, and the third step is the order in which they are promoted.”

Silo introduced the Law Concerning Regular Elections at the next Senate meeting. Most Senators were bemused, seeing no need for such a self-evident Law but Silo could point to the various Tribes that made up the Republic who had not such explicit provision. Only the Tribe of Gaul, who had inherited the Basic Law of the old Gallic Federation, had such a provision written into its Basic Law and required an absolute Majority to overturn it, and Greater Asia which had it as an ordinary Law capable of being overturned by a majority of those present and voting. What was needed, Silo said, was a way of guaranteeing that such laws could not be set aside by an unscrupulous or corrupt Comitia, such as had been attempted in Picenum and Lucania back in the days of Glauca's consulship. The Senators still wondered what had brought this on but passed the law anyway to give formal force to what had always been unwritten custom. The ability of any institution to appoint or co-opt non-elected members was explicitly preserved, provided such appointments or co-option was limited to the remaining time before the next election. The automatic right of Consulars and three-time Republic Praetors to become life members of the Great Senate was the only exception.

A few months later Gabinius introduced his Law concerning the Right of Citizens to Vote. Every male citizen over the age of thirty, no matter how poor, must be permitted an equal vote in his Tribe, whether it be his birth tribe or adopted tribe. Again the Senators wondered what had prompted such a law; was not the right to vote an integral part of citizenship? And again Gabinius referred back to the rotten Comitiae of Picenum and Lucania, where laws had actually been passed which would have limited the suffrage to only the well-to-do. Nobody wanted to argue against so self-evident a proposition so again it was passed.

And that was where the matter stayed for the rest of the year. But then came the end of the year, the time when the elections of the various Tribal Comitiae were customarily carried out. Egypt, like other Tribes, went through the process. As expected, the few dozen nominal citizens of Egypt Tribe formally endorsed Cleopatra's advisors to become the Comitiae.

Rome – 732 AUC (22 B.C.)

Marcus Junius Brutus, a respected consular, prowled the floor before speaking, consciously building tension. Best to start slowly, quietly. That's how the great Cicero would have done it, he warned himself. Give yourself room to build.

“I have very little to be proud of, in myself,” he conceded, almost as if confessing shame. “Those honours that have been accorded me are not mine by birthright but are all the gift of this Republic. My Praetorships were not mine by right but by election; my peers saw fit to entrust me with certain duties and in gratitude for their trust and out of love for this Republic, I discharged those duties to the best of my limited ability.” More thoughtful pacing.

“Likewise when I was elected Consul eight years ago, that was not a sign of my excellence but rather a sign of the excellence of this Republic which I have vowed time and again to serve with my whole soul. What other nation in the world has so excellent a Law as our *Mos Majorum*? Which other nation protects itself so well against the arrogant, the vicious and even the merely incompetent as our Republic?”

“Indeed, in myself I have so little to boast about. But if I must boast, then let me boast in this, which is indeed mine by birthright: I will boast that I am a descendent of Lucius Junius Brutus, the man who founded this Republic! The man who swore, and led all of Rome to swear, that never again would Romans suffer a King!” Brutus turned suddenly, almost violently as he paused.

“So let me swear now, before all of you and before all the gods; that for all my faults I will not betray the legacy of my ancestors! And I invite all of you to join with me in that oath.” Brutus rocked on his feet for a moment.

“I will recite my oath to you, here and now. Those of you who share my love of the Republic will then be invited to stand and repeat it with me.

“I swear, by the lives of my descendants and on the spirits of my ancestors, before the face of all the gods both known and unknown, and in the sight and hearing of every man in this world; I swear that I will never accept a King to hold authority in this Republic. I dedicate my mind, my strength, my life, my *dignitas*, to oppose and destroy any trace of Kingship in this Republic, here or wherever, now and forever.” Brutus scanned the terraces. “Who will take this oath with me?”

Silo and Gabinius had already primed as many of their allies as they could to accept this challenge. A quarter of the Senate rose to its feet immediately. Others, seeing this response, rose with them. Oh, it was so much simpler in my grandfather's day, Silo lamented. Back then there was discipline among all the Italian Praetors and their long-time *Popularis* allies were almost as reliable. How much more difficult now, when every Tribe and every Praetor acted independently! More rose to their feet slowly.

“Lucius Porcius!” Brutus challenged loudly. “Your father was Consul when Strabo attempted to make himself King! Your father demands from his

grave that you stand or you shame his memory!” Lucius Porcius Cato the Younger, now a man of seventy, fought the pain in his hip to stand.

Brutus swept his eyes over the chamber again. “So many Italians standing, and so many Romans still sitting! And to think that it was once alleged that citizenship would be debased by extending it to Italians! Rather, it is debased by Romans who refuse to live up to their heritage! Be assured of this, all who remain sitting; I will be listing the names of all who refuse to support the *Mos Majorum*, all who refuse to protect our Republic against the threat of a King. And I will publish those names, complete with the oath you are refusing to take, and I will be asking in public why you refuse to take it!”

Most of those still sitting looked around, and then reluctantly rose. This prompted most of the stragglers to stand.

Brutus recited the vow, a phrase at a time, as the Senators followed. Then he added at the end “And I make this vow freely, without reservation and without any excuse whatsoever for not fulfilling the same.” The Senators echoed this final coda.

“Thank you, Conscript Fathers, for your explicit pledges.” He paced a few moments longer. He wanted his passion for this subject to be palpable.

“Conscript Fathers!” he declaimed eventually. “A terrible thing has happened over this last year, and it has borne fruit this last winter! The spirit of the Republic has been assaulted!” He turned on his heel and prowled again before continuing.

“Last year, this Great Senate brought shame upon itself. Last year, this Great Senate established a King!” He rounded suddenly. “And even more shameful, it established a female king!”

Of course, you didn't use that precise word. You at least had the sensitivity to avoid that! Like those tragic men in the legend of Arachne, you averted your eyes even as you worked an abomination lest you be forced to recognise the true nature of your work! You didn't call the position 'King', but 'Praetor'; and to pretend that the spirit of the *Mos Majorum* was being observed, you also established a second 'Praetor'. How pure, how genuinely Republican, your work was made to appear!” He scanned the terraces with a glower on his face.

“There was only one detail you carefully refused to notice!” he admonished them. “What do you call a Praetor, when only the members of one family are permitted to vote? I would call that family a Dynasty, and that Praetor a King! And so it has been proven in Egypt last December. The newly-admitted Tribe of Egypt held its Tribal Elections. You might be amazed to hear that every single person entitled to vote actually participated! Not like the participation rate here in Rome, where less than half of eligible citizens vote! No;! In Egypt, every single eligible voter attended the polls!” He paused. “All seventy three of them!” He scanned the benches again.

“You heard right, Conscript Fathers! I didn't say seventy three thousand; I didn't even say seventy three hundred! In all of Egypt, only seventy three persons

are entitled to vote. And half of them are women! 'How could this be?' you might wonder.

“The answer is simple. Because last year you approved the Basic Law of Egypt in which you explicitly permitted citizenship to be restricted to those who could demonstrate that they had at least one half Ptolemaic blood! You restricted citizenship to the existing Royal House!

“So it was not difficult for Cleopatra to gather all of her relatives into one room, hold a sword to the belly of each in turn, and ask whom they preferred to be 'Senior Praetor'. And then again, to accept her nomination of her own younger brother as 'Junior Praetor.’” Brutus shook his head as in disbelief. “And young Ptolemy knows that he is Praetor only in name. His older brother was accorded some honour until Cleopatra found him insufficiently submissive and had him killed. So Egypt now has a mockery of an electoral system, subject to open intimidation of every elector by a woman who has married her own brother, then murdered him, and then married yet another brother! Incest, murder, and gross impiety, quite apart from electoral corruption!

“Is this woman not a King in all but name? And is this not so because we, the Great Senate, were seduced by her last year?” Brutus looked around again.

“Yet, there is one thing we can do to atone for our errors, and hopefully avert the wrath of the gods for our gross impiety in promoting this abomination,” he resumed more temperately. “We can grant to all Egyptians a genuine part in our Republic instead of subjecting them to this abuse.

“I propose the Brutian Law concerning Citizenship. It's a simple proposal and does no more than formalise what is common practice, even a common assumption, throughout every other Tribe. I propose that every free male who was born or who will be born in territory which is now part of a recognised Tribe is automatically a citizen of the Republic and therefore entitled to vote in that Tribe upon reached voting age, unless some other Republic law places him or allows him to enrol in a different Tribe; and that he may lose that citizenship only by due process of a Republic law.” He scanned the terraces again. “That is accepted throughout every Tribe of the Republic, Egypt being the only exception. Pass this law and it will automatically grant every free Egyptian what every member of every other tribe takes for granted; the right to vote, which is essential to our Republic. I commend it to your sense of duty to the pledge you have so recently recited. To do otherwise is to perpetuate Kingship in this Republic by permitting it to continue to enslave Egypt. Conscript Fathers, do not bring shame upon your solemn pledges; and do not bring the rightful wrath of the gods down on this Republic!”

The two Tribal Proprietors for Egypt naturally reported these new Republic laws back to Cleopatra's court immediately. To their total surprise, she took the news in good spirit.

“Oh, I saw that coming when the Right to Vote law was passed,” she waved away the problem. “In fact, I had even suggested to Silo that the peasants

could be granted Republican citizenship if that was so important to him, so this was obviously setting up the killer blow to come. But it makes no difference!”

“Your wisdom is beyond my comprehension, Pharaoh,” Epithes the Chief Eunuch prefaced his question smoothly, “but these laws now mean that every peasant in both Egypts now has a right to vote. How can you counter the influence of the priests all up and down the Nile?”

Cleopatra looked at him disdainfully. “The Great Senate might as easily have given these peasants the Right to Fly! Rights mean nothing if there is no means for them to be exercised! Certainly they have the right to vote! But how many of them have the right to enter my private Audience Hall, where the vote is to be taken?”

“Are you sure that won't provoke the Great Senate into further action?” Ptolemy asked.

“Be silent until you're invited to speak!” Cleopatra snapped back at him. “In fact, you've been much too willing to express an opinion lately,” she continued. “This is the third time this year; you even dared to speak at the last Comitia! Go to your apartment and don't leave it except when I invite you.”

Ptolemy XIV, Co-ruler of the Two Lands, thirty-six years old and only nine years younger than his sister, bowed submissively and left the room.

“Now that the child is out of the way we might not be interrupted so much,” Cleopatra muttered to clear her mind. “As I was saying, Epithes; nothing has changed. Whatever the Great Senate does, we can skip around it.” Then, to the two Proprætors, “Keep me informed!” A wave dismissed them.

The problem proved to be not so remote as the villages and temple-cities up the Nile. The Macedonian-descended ruling class considered Alexandria their own city, but there were hundreds of thousands of Jews and Egyptians living and working in this metropolis. These men, who had never been recognised as citizens of their own city of birth, were now Republic citizens and were eager to vote out the tissue-thin crust of in-breds who ruled them.

Jason was a comfortably wealthy Jew whose family had lived in Alexandria for four generations. He was also an honourable and generous man, well known as a major supporter of charitable measures for the city's poor and an honest dealer among the city's Merchant Class. His Master of House reported that three of his trading colleagues had arrived at his door.

“Then show them into the triclinium, Sophe,” he responded as he rose and put aside the ledger he had been writing.

“Baruch! Shalom!” he greeted his fellow Jew. “Timothy! Eugenes! It is good to see you!” to the two Greeks. “Please, sit!”

“Thank you, Jason,” Timothy responded as the three guests sat. There was a good-humoured silence and plenty of smiles as the table was loaded with watered wine and cakes. Serving slaves filled goblets and Jason gestured for the men to help themselves to the finger-food.

“Jason, have you heard about the new laws passed by Rome?” Timothy opened the conversation.

“Of course,” Jason replied. “But what is that to me?”

“It means that even the poorest of the poor are now entitled to vote for the Tribal Comitia. No longer will Cleopatra and her parasite clan be able to bleed us for their own debauchery,” Timothy replied.

“Instead, some other corrupt politicians will do the same,” Jason waved a hand. “It's not elections that will rid us of parasites, but the Rufan System. Unless that's done, we will simply be trading one set of tyrants for another.”

“We propose to support candidates that will bring in that Rufan System,” Timothy answered. “We have all seen how well it helps us do business in the other lands under the Republic, so let's bring it in here.”

Jason had not expected this. He looked at Timothy for a moment before responding. “That would be a good idea,” he conceded.

“As you know, the Egyptian Comitia consists of two Praetors, currently Cleopatra and Ptolemy, and three other ordinary members.”

“Yes; Epithes, Chites and Parmines, her favourite eunuchs,” Jason filled out the roll-call.

“We three intend to present ourselves for election. But we need two highly-respected men, acceptable to Greeks, Jews and Egyptians alike, to stand for the Praetor positions,” Timothy explained. “We would like you and Trophos to be those two men.”

Jason looked at Timothy again, to see if this was some kind of joke. His guest's eyes didn't avert. “Nonsense!” Jason said at last. “I know nothing about government! I'm a merchant, pure and simple! And besides, I'm a Jew; I won't participate in a Comitia meeting that takes auguries or invokes false gods! I can't do as you ask.”

“You might claim to know nothing about government, but you know plenty about justice and your religion has taught you about respect for Law!” Timothy asserted forcefully. “And don't worry about the rituals; you can come to the meetings after all that has been done in your absence.”

“No!” Jason refused emphatically. “But if you find someone else I'll support you,” he conceded more gently.

Four months later and five months before the election, Trophos and Baruch declared their candidacy. Simeon Bar-Jonah joined Timothy and Eugenues as the minor candidates. There was a thrill in the air as these five men spoke in every quarter of the city. They promised to introduce the Rufan system, ensure justice and Due Process, and to end the arbitrary taxes and profligate luxuries of the Ptolemaic dynasty.

Trophos and Baruch were escorted into the Public Audience Hall. Cleopatra was alone on her throne; Ptolemy had not been invited. The two men stood respectfully before her.

“Well, lords; what have you to say for yourselves?” Cleopatra asked evenly.

“In regard to what specific matters, Praetor?” Trophos asked, pointedly using the Tribal title instead of 'Pharaoh'.

Cleopatra paused. “I think I'm going to enjoy this!” she said with a sweet smile. “Let's start with the first charge; attempting to instigate a riot.”

“Are we formally charged with that, Praetor? If so, then as citizens of the Republic we demand to hear the evidence and witnesses against us before we are required to answer.”

Cleopatra smiled more broadly, a smile of complete joy. “Oh, yes! I am certainly going to enjoy this!” Then to two slaves standing ready, “These men look tired to me. Assist them by helping them to stand.” A frame was wheeled into the hall, a rectangle supporting two A-frames and a cross-bar between them eight feet above floor level. Trophos and Baruch were bound at the wrists and the tail of the ropes thrown over the cross-beam. The men were lifted until their wrists were just below the cross-bar and their toes clear of the floor. The ends of the ropes were tied off to the base of the frame.

“Wheel them into a side room. I might want to use this hall in the meantime,” Cleopatra said to the slaves, and rose from her throne. One more sweet smile to her captives as she said “Perhaps I will see how you're going in an hour or two. Or perhaps not.”

Trophos was already in difficulty as the frame was wheeled away out of sight. He was a man in his late fifties and robustly built. Being suspended by wrists tied together above his head, his own body weight was forcing his ribcage to full expansion and he was having trouble exhaling. Baruch, about the same age but much leaner, had less weight to fight.

“Don't fight it, Trophos,” Baruch advised his friend in gasps. “Use your belly to breathe, not your ribs.”

“My belly weighs more than yours!” Trophos gasped back. “I need to do something about this, and fast.”

Trophos looked around desperately. His breathing was already a huge effort; he must act while he still had the strength. He had an idea.

“I must apologise for kicking you, my friend,” he gasped. And then he raised his feet and pushed himself away from Baruch. His body started swinging. On the third swing he heaved his left ankle up to catch on the crossbeam, just above Baruch's hands. Another heave, and he had his left knee locked over the bar. Then, his right foot against Baruch's body to provide a point to push against, he swung his body up and over the beam. He fell onto his feet to the floor on the other side of the beam. Not waiting to worry about his own wrists, he pulled at the tail of Baruch's rope. The knot slipped out and Baruch fell to the floor.

“Quickly!” Trophos hissed. “They might be back at any time! Untie my wrists!” Baruch, his own wrists still bound, picked away with the fingers and thumb of his right hand. Trophos' own body weight had pulled the knot too tight. In desperation Baruch went to work with his teeth. It took a few minutes but eventually the knot was loose enough for his hands to take over, and soon Trophos was free. Quickly Trophos took to Baruch's knot and soon both were free.

“What now?” Baruch asked.

“Do you have any ideas?” Trophos asked back. “I'm just happy to be able to breathe.”

“I expect Cleopatra will want to check on us soon,” Baruch surmised. “Unless she just wanted us to die slowly and out of sight but I doubt that. If she comes in person we can take her hostage, but if she sends someone else we'll surprise him, strip him, and one of us will pretend to escort the other out of here.”

“A simple plan is always the best,” Trophos agreed. He looked around for something that might serve as a weapon. A pair of small bronze statuettes caught his eye. “Here, you can have Osiris. I'll take Isis, she's supposed to be a friend of sinners,” Trophos quipped, alluding to his gentile status compared to Baruch's Jewish faith.

Baruch looked uncertainly at the statuette being held out to him. “I see no statue; just a strangely-shaped club,” he said as he took the item. It felt reassuringly heavy in his hand. The two men took station behind the swing of the timber door and waited.

It seemed like hours and Trophos was in pain from remaining fixed in the one position for so long, but he dared not move. But then there were footsteps immediately outside the door and a creak as it swung open. Two men walked into the store room, too involved in their conversation to even glance at the timber frame. Isis and Osiris made short work of them both and the door was swung closed behind them.

“Did you hear anything outside?” Trophos asked. “Do you think anyone is in the hall?”

“I heard nothing,” Baruch answered. “And I can't imagine Cleopatra waiting for anyone, much less us, so I expect at most that she might have told these men to wheel us out for whenever she decides to attend.”

“Then we have to move quickly, before anyone else arrives. Let's get them stripped and get into their gear.”

“Well, I can't pass as a palace slave; look at my beard!” Baruch argued.

Then I'll bind your hands and escort you,” Trophos countered.

“Just don't bind them so that I can't shake loose if I have to!” Baruch agreed with a smile, and started stripping the larger of the two men. “This one looks closest your size.”

Trophos stripped himself and slipped into the palace slave's robes as they were handed to him. “Now to see what waits for us!” Then, with a deep breath, he opened the door and stepped through. “Come!” he urged Baruch after a glance around.

The first priority once out of the palace was to contact Simeon, Timothy and Eugenesis. All five knew they had no choice now; they had to go into hiding until they could flee Egypt.

“Come, I know a ship leaving for Antioch tomorrow,” Eugenesis offered. We Greeks can make ourselves out to be sailors; you two Jews can get a beard trim to match us.”

“No!” Baruch refused. “In Leviticus it says that we must not cut our beards. I can't do as you say.”

“Actually, Baruch, let us consider that Text together,” Simeon offered. “The exact wording is 'you shall not mar the edges of your beard'. There's no problem with reducing the length, so long as you don't shave it back to the skin.”

Baruch looked doubtful. “Are you sure of that?”

“Absolutely certain,” Simeon assured him. “The practice of not cutting the beard close to the skin is the hedge around the law to guard against slips or mistakes, but it's not the Law itself.”

Baruch knew that Simeon was expert in the Law; he often spoke at the synagogue where he was one of the Elders. “If you're certain then I will submit; but not until the very last moment after we are confident that the ship will leave on time.”

“Then we are agreed,” Simeon assured his friend. “And in the meantime I will ask Judah ben Yohanan to bring the Writings to us, so you will be able to see the very words with your own eyes.”

The five men made their way from Antioch to Babylon down the new Road built forty years earlier by Arius Claudius. The old engineer hadn't been able to resist the urge to choose a route that provided spectacular overviews of his Euphrates Dams but this was lost on the travellers. Having decided while in hiding that Cleopatra would have her agents out to find and intercept them if they tried for Rome, their hope was to reach the Eastern Proconsul and persuade him to intervene. After all, Egypt was 'South of Armenia', as the Senate Appointment stated.

It was mid-October when they were admitted into the Proconsul's office and invited to sit.

“I've read your written submission, lords, so there's no need to go over that ground again,” Heracles Lithicos started. “And I perhaps don't need to remind you that the Senate has made clear its resolve to bring Egypt Tribe into line with the customary practice of all other Tribes. So I intend to work with you without waiting for advice from Rome. We simply don't have enough time to argue to and fro before the election.”

“We are greatly encouraged, lord Lithicos,” Trophos acknowledged. “How do you want us to assist in your intervention?”

“Well, what do you five suggest?” Lithicos came back. “You five have had plenty of time to think about it, so tell me your ideas and I'll see if I can go along with them.”

Trophos took a deep breath. “Cleopatra made it clear that she has no regard for the legalities of the situation. She understands only force and intimidation. So resolutions and words and letters won't sway her. You must send armed force.”

“Cleopatra might have no regard for the law, my lords, but unfortunately I'm not free to act the same way. I need a legal basis for any intervention,” Lithicos explained. “And now that Egypt is technically a Tribe, part of the Republic, there are very tight restrictions on how a Republic Officer may intervene in the affairs of a Tribe.”

“Can you send soldiers to arrest her on a charge of unlawful imprisonment of citizens?” Baruch asked.

Lithicos smiled wistfully. “Praetors enjoy considerable immunity while they hold office. A civil charge such as unlawful imprisonment won't be enough. I need something like Treason or Gross Corruption to act, a genuine offence against the Republic as a whole.”

“But if you don't act, there's no doubt that she will find a way to subvert the elections and retain her position as Praetor, and therefore maintain her immunity,” Timothy pleaded. “There must be some way to break this stranglehold.”

“Well, there's no doubt that she will be able to control the next election; all she has to do with any unwanted candidates is to dispose of them as she was clearly willing to do with you,” Lithicos agreed. “But until she does so, I can't act. It's not a crime until she does it.”

“Then it's about time we put a Republic crime in her way. Isn't it an act of Treason to attack a Republic army?” Baruch asked.

“Yes, but she hasn't done that, has she?”

“Then why not send a legion or two to Alexandria, just to pay your respects,” Baruch asked. “And let us go with them and camp in their midst. She won't not be able to seize us without her boys attacking the legion that's guarding us!”

“She won't have to,” Lithicos answered. “All she has to do is present a warrant for your arrest and demand for your surrender. I'd be obliged to comply.”

“Not if you don't know where we are,” Baruch responded, adjusting his proposal. “You have no reason to demand that we keep you informed of our whereabouts; so you wouldn't have us in hand and therefore you can't comply.”

Lithicos leaned back on the couch. “And she would have no power to compel me to search, either; finding you is her problem. Yes, it might work, but it would be very risky for you five.” Lithicos mused a moment longer. “I'm just thinking through how events might unfold,” he said.

“Let's assume you remain free and contest the election. How can we be assured of a fair count? Who will count the ballots?” Lithicos asked. “In most Tribal elections the Chief Administrator has his own staff to do that, completely independently of the current Praetors. But in Egypt Cleopatra and her personal staff do that.”

“So we need to get word to Rome quickly; get them to pass a law that requires all Tribal elections to be under the authority of the Chief Administrator, and get a Chief Administrator appointed to Egypt immediately. And as a Republic appointee he'll have the right to protection by the Republic's armed forces and any interference with him would be an offence against the Republic!” Baruch was full of passion now.

Lithicos thought for a moment. “Yes, that's the way to go. Passing laws that required Cleopatra to do this and to do that was fine in theory, but it left her in control to twist it as she pleased. Much better to put the whole process into the hands of an independent person. Let's do it!”

It was the Ides of December when Pandoros Histhenes landed in Alexandria on the fastest ship available. It had been considered a matter of utmost urgency that he land and make his proclamation before word from Rome reached Cleopatra by some other route. Histhenes marched straight off the ship and took his stand on the harbour wall, satisfied to see that the legion had arrived from Judaea as had been promised. He unrolled his scroll as the bodyguard of legionaries gathered around him. He read in a loud voice, formality as it might be.

*From the Senate of the Republic,
to Pandoros Histhenes*

Greetings!

You are charged with the office of Chief Administrator of Egypt Tribe, effective as of the date of this Senate Resolution.

You are directed to journey to Egypt as soon as possible to commence the execution of your duties without delay.

You are authorised to call upon any other Republic Officer to provide you with reasonable assistance to commence and carry out the duties of your office, such assistance to be provided by that officer under threat of trial for Obstruction of an Officer of the Republic.

You are authorised to call upon any officer of Egypt Tribe to provide you with reasonable assistance to commence and carry out the duties of your office, such assistance to be provided by that officer under threat of trial for Obstruction of an Officer of the Republic.

Histhenes lifted his head from reading the scroll. "In accordance with the appointment of the Great Senate, I hereby take up office as Chief Administrator of Egypt Tribe. I also advise all persons that any interference with me as I go about my duties will leave that person liable to a charge of Obstruction of an Officer of the Republic."

This legally constituted his public announcement, even if it was heard only by a few startled passers-by. He then ordered his secretary to note the date, time and place of this announcement for the record. He set off for Cleopatra's palace with the bodyguard of fifty heavy infantry clustered around him.

Word was carried ahead of him to the palace by a swift runner. By the time he arrived at the gate Cleopatra had sent instructions to the palace gate and was already making herself ready for an audience.

"I am Pandoros Histhenes, Chief Administrator of Egypt Tribe," he announced loudly to the gate guard. "I seek immediate audience with the Praetor."

"Lord Histhenes, the Pharaoh is not able to meet with you at this time. Could you please allow her one hour?" the captain of the guard responded.

"I know of no Pharaoh," Histhenes replied, "I seek immediate audience with the Praetor."

“Could you please allow her one hour?” the Captain repeated, despite the temptation to say something less neutral.

“Take note, Secretary, that I have been refused access to the Praetor,” Histhenes announced at full bellow to the man standing beside him.

“You have not been refused access, lord Histhenes,” the Captain corrected him, “You have been asked to allow the Praetor an hour's notice.” He was careful to use the Roman term for Cleopatra's office, now that he was aware that notes were being taken.

“Since I have been refused access, I will leave an instruction with the officer in charge of the gate; I require the attendance of the Praetor on board my ship within two hours. This will allow her the requested one hour for her preparations, and a generous margin for her travel time from here to the harbour.”

“With respect, lord Histhenes,” the Captain could not resist establishing the proper hierarchy of authority here, with tens of thousands of the common people listening. His Mistress must not be demeaned by this Greco-Roman functionary. “The Praetor has authority over the Chief Administrator and not the other way around. However, I will relay your request to the Praetor promptly, for her consideration.”

“Then perhaps you are unaware of the Resolution of the Great Senate of the Republic, which I publicly announced less than half an hour ago,” Histhenes returned. “Allow me to read it to you.” He then recited from the scroll again. “Secretary, please note that the declaration of appointment was repeated publicly outside the gate of the Praetorium. Note the date and time.” Histhenes then turned and started back towards the harbour.

Cleopatra had arrived at the gate during this exchange, but was still concealed from those outside. She spoke instructions to the Captain.

“Lord Histhenes; if you care to enter now, the Praetor will be able to meet with you within the hour. Come, while you wait that short time you will be able to take your refreshment and relaxation after so long a journey! Is it not better to do so and speak with the Praetor within the hour, rather than march back to the docks and not be able to speak with her for two hours?”

Histhenes had stopped as soon as he heard his name called. Now he turned. “Thank you, Captain. That is an excellent idea. It has now been established that I shall be granted access to the Praetorium at any time.” He marched as if in triumph towards the gates, which opened before him. But the wall of guards in the gate opening did not move aside.

“Your men are obstructing my entrance, Captain,” Histhenes called.

“No, my lord. You are free to enter but no arms may be carried except by the palace guards.”

“I have two choices, Captain. I can turn now and go back to my ship to await the Praetor, or I can tell my men to cut their way through your pretty boys. That leaves you with two choices, Captain; either tell your boys to step aside immediately, or accept the consequences of whatever decision I make.”

The captain glanced to Cleopatra. “Let them in,” she said.

“You may enter with an honour guard, lord Histhenes.”

“Thank you, Captain. You have served your Praetor well today.” The palace guards parted when they heard this, and Histhenes strolled through the gates.

Cleopatra made of point of whiling away two hours before heading down to the Audience Hall. This upstart Greek needed to be shown that making a demand was one thing but obtaining compliance was another. At least the loud-mouth had the courtesy to stand as she entered, she thought to herself.

“Greetings, Praetor,” he said formally as she walked through the entry and along the carpet runner. She ignored him, pacing slowly to her throne. Once there, she sat and clapped twice. Epithes attended immediately.

“Yes, my Lady?” he asked as he bowed.

“What is the first item of business today, Epithes?” she asked.

“There are some routine appointments to be made, my Lady,” he handed her a paper with some names and promotions listed. Cleopatra ran her eyes down the list to gain an overview, and then returned to the top to consider each appointment individually.

Histhenes, still standing by the door, was not going to tolerate this. “Praetor, I will make my report now. Whether or not you listen will be your decision and at your peril.”

Cleopatra studiously ignored him.

“I have been appointed by the Great Senate as Chief Administrator for the Tribe of Egypt and have formal written confirmation of that appointment.” He passed a folded page to one of his escorts, and motioned for this to be taken to the throne and presented. The soldier strode to the throne and up the three steps, and offered the letter to Cleopatra.

“I do not approve of Sosthenes,” Cleopatra said to Epithes as she handed the page back to her Chief Eunuch, “but otherwise all is well. What is next on the agenda?”

“A request from the Priest of Ra for funds to refurbish the Temple,” Epithes handed over a second page for Cleopatra's consideration.

“Drop it on her lap, soldier, and then return here,” Histhenes called. The soldier, already feeling annoyed by being forced to stand there offering a document but being treated as though he were invisible, complied. The folded sheet landed on Cleopatra's lap, but slid to the floor.

“Don't pick it up!” Histhenes called as the soldier started to stoop. “Let them do their own housekeeping!” The soldier stood straight and turned back towards Histhenes.

“I also require you to call a meeting of the Tribal Comitia and all your current heads of your various administrative departments within two days, that meeting to be at a place readily accessible to me. I am to be given at least one day's notice of time and place. At that meeting I will re-organise the Administration of Egypt Tribe as I consider most appropriate, and that will include the replacement of any personnel whom I consider unsuitable,” Histhenes continued.

“Next, I must read to you the Letter of Specific Instruction presented to me by the Great Senate.” He repeated the short proclamation he had already recited twice that day. “You will understand that the authority to compel officers of Egypt Tribe to render reasonable assistance applies to Praetors as well as lower ranks, and that requiring a Meeting of the Tribal Comitia and its chief functionaries is a reasonable request.” Cleopatra continued to ignore him.

“I further advise that if I am not informed within the next twenty-four hours of the time and place of the Meeting I require, I will consider that a serious non-compliance and I will have you arrested. If you have any further questions, I will be pleased to answer them now,” he finished.

Cleopatra handed the letter from the Priest of Ra back to Epithes. “I approve. What is next?” she asked, her right index finger pointing towards Histhenes but hidden from him by the sheet of paper. Epithes understood her intention.

“The newly-appointed Chief Administrator asks to speak with you, Pharaoh,” Epithes responded.

“Very well; show him in,” Cleopatra smiled. Epithes stepped down to the floor level, stood in front of the throne, and announced “The Chief Administrator may appear.” He then stepped to one side.

Histhenes smiled wryly to himself, but strode out to stand on the carpeted strip.

“You are the Chief Administrator?” Cleopatra asked.

“Yes Praetor; my name is Pandoros Histhenes,” he replied, still smiling.

“And what business do you have here, lord Histhenes?”

“I have already informed you of that, Praetor.”

“Then please refresh my memory,” Cleopatra smiled back. “I must have been distracted when you told me.”

“You would do well to be less easily distracted, Praetor,” Histhenes commented. “Now, do you have any questions for me?”

“You have not yet answered my first question, lord Histhenes; but I will repeat it just in case you were distracted,” Cleopatra smiled again. “What is your business here?”

“I have no more business here, Praetor; it is all done.” Histhenes turned his back on Cleopatra without the customary three steps backwards and strode out the door with his escort behind him.

Cleopatra gestured for the doors to be closed after Histhenes. “Well, Epithes; we have an aggressive little kitten there, haven't we?”

“Yes, my Lady,” Epithes agreed. “And he has more than a legion of troops down in the harbour.”

“That won't matter so long as we play by the rules. The Republic has laws against interference with internal Tribal matters,” Cleopatra waved away that consideration. “But what does matter is that soldiers need food, water and entertainment, and they would not have brought all their supplies with them. They'll be expecting to buy whatever they need.”

“I expect so, my Lady,” Epithes agreed.

“Then advise the Granary officials; no grain is to be sold to any Roman. And no grain sold to an Alexandrian may be on-sold to anyone except an Alexandrian, and only in quantities for individual households,” Cleopatra decreed. “They will not have time to send for their own supplies and for them to be shipped here. That should be enough to force them to sail their men to Judaea before they starve.”

“Yes, my Lady,” Epithes responded with a bow before leaving to carry out that instruction.

“Oh, and call a meeting of the Comitia here in two days' time,” she interrupted Epithes' departure. “And let our kitten know about it this afternoon. We must be scrupulous to comply with the resolution of the Great Senate, you know!” she finished with another smile.

“Yes, my Lady.”

Cleopatra, as Senior Praetor, sat at the head of the octagonal table. Ptolemy, the Junior Praetor, sat at her right hand, with the other three Comitia members seated to her left. Histhenes and his personal secretary were allocated the side directly opposite Cleopatra.

“Gentlemen, this meeting of the Comitia has been convened at the request of Pandoros Histhenes, our new Chief Administrator.” Cleopatra smiled and inclined her head towards Histhenes. “Lord Histhenes, I introduce you to the Junior Praetor, Ptolemy XIV. The other three members of the Egyptian Comitia are Epithes, Chites and Parmines.” Each smiled and nodded in turn as his name was called.

“Epithes, please read the minutes of the last Comitia meeting,” Cleopatra instructed.

Epithes cleared his throat. “The third meeting of the Comitia of the Tribe of Egypt was held in Pharaoh's chambers on the seventeenth day of August. The Senior Praetor took the chair. Others in attendance were Ptolemy, Epithes and Chites. It was moved and unanimously adopted that the Senior Praetor shall have plenary powers until the next meeting, which was fixed for the last day of December unless the Senior Praetor determines otherwise. The meeting closed.”

“Are there any matters arising from the minutes?” Cleopatra asked.

“Are you serious, Praetor?” Histhenes asked in amazement. “Why bother having a meeting if that's all that was resolved?”

“Chief Administrator; surely you know that we are bound by our Basic Law to hold at least one meeting each Quarter!” Cleopatra smiled as she rebuked him.

“And all you do is to delegate all authority to the Senior Praetor?”

Cleopatra raised her eyebrows and tilted her head to one side. “Yes,” she said simply. “Flexibility is important.” Then, looking around the table, “Any other matters arising?” she asked again.

Epithes raised a hand, and a nod from Cleopatra signalled for him to speak. “I move that the Senior Praetor have plenary powers until the next meeting, which shall be on the last day of December unless the Senior Praetor

determines otherwise.” The other three men muttered 'Agreed!' and put their right hands on the table, palm down.

“The motion has been agreed to,” Cleopatra announced. “Please record that in the minutes, Epithes.” Then she looked around the table. “This meeting is now closed.”

“But I have business to bring to this meeting!” Histhenes interjected.

“You are too late, Chief Administrator; the meeting is closed.”

“Then I will write you a Report, in which I will raise my business,” Histhenes declared. “As an official memo from the Chief Administrator to the Comitia, you will be obliged to table it and have it discussed.”

Cleopatra smiled again. “I promise you it will be tabled.”

“And I ask you to call another meeting in not more than two days' time, giving me at least one day's notice; same as last time,” Histhenes added.

Everyone was still at the table, of course. No-one would leave Pharaoh until dismissed. “Everyone, if you could please be here for the next meeting, in two days' time,” Cleopatra announced. “You may go now.”

Histhenes was back at the table two days later. The process and the minute-reading were as summary as the first time. But Cleopatra was as good as her word. After the usual delegation of plenary powers she placed several sheets of paper on the table.

“I have received an Official Memo from the Chief Administrator,” she declared. “I move that the memo be not read.” Immediately hands appeared palm down on the table. “Thank you,” Cleopatra responded. “This meeting is now closed.”

“Did you even read that memo yourself?” Histhenes asked.

“You just heard the Comitia resolve that your memo should not be read,” Cleopatra answered. “You wouldn't want me to act in direct violation of the Comitia's explicit resolution!”

Histhenes sighed. “Then I request that another meeting be called for two days' time,” Histhenes said wearily. “That will make it the twenty-first day of December.”

“Your Letter of Specific Instruction requires me to provide you with reasonable assistance,” Cleopatra smiled back. “I consider three meetings in five days unreasonable. Whatever you have to propose can wait another ten days for the meeting scheduled for the thirty-first.” Cleopatra looked around the table. “You may all go now.”

“Lord Histhenes; my Quartermaster is having some difficulties.” That was Sergius Paulus, the commander of the legion sent from Judaea.

“I'm an administrator, not a logistics officer, Sergius,” Histhenes answered distractedly. “Why do you think I could be of any use to him?”

“Because his difficulty is that the Granary refuses to sell any grain to him. Apparently they are under orders to sell only to Alexandrians. The Granary Manager claims that there is a looming shortage, and this rationing is necessary.”

Histhenes thought for a moment. “Rubbish! Only four days ago they sent five grain ships to Ostia! Let's go to the Granary.”

The clerk at the Granary was very polite, but regretted that no grain could be released to non-Alexandrians. “The Praetor has commanded it,” he explained, as though the order of the Praetor was reason enough.

“And when did this order from the Praetor arrive?” Histhenes pressed.

“The day before yesterday, my lord,” he answered.

“And how much grain do you hold at present?”

“We are just over half-full, my lord. We hold enough for two years under this rationing order, so there is no need for concern,” the clerk smiled.

“If you hold more two years' supply, then there is ample time for two harvests to arrive. How could there be any possible need to ration the supply?” Histhenes demanded.

“I don't pretend to know what the future will bring,” the clerk answered. “I have my orders, my lord.”

“Then here are your new orders,” Histhenes replied with his annoyance audible. “The Chief Administrator is ordering you to fill any requests for supply made by the Quartermaster of the fifteenth Legion. As Chief Administrator, I have authority over the Granary, all the way up to the Manager! If the Praetor wants to contradict me then she must do so in writing to me. Not to you, because that has no legal effect! All official communication between the Comitia and the Granary must be made through the Administration. Do you understand that?” Histhenes glared at the clerk.

“Yes, Chief Administrator,” he answered timidly.

“So in two minutes' time when the Quartermaster asks you for a ton of wheat, what will you do?” Histhenes followed through.

“I will supply a ton of wheat to him, Chief Administrator,” he answered.

“When will you supply it to him?” Histhenes pressed.

“As soon as possible upon presentation of a formal requisition order, my lord.”

“And how long will that take?”

“I will order the labourers to carry the sacks to his wagon within the hour, my lord.” The clerk was clearly intimidated now. Histhenes smiled.

“Good! Because I'll be here watching and if you're not prompt enough I will have you charged with Obstruction of an Officer of the Republic. Now, just to make sure everything is legal, let me give you my Directive in writing.” Histhenes went around the counter to the clerk's desk and took paper and a pen.

YES! It had arrived in time! Histhenes was thrilled. It had always been a gamble, to delay the passage of the new Electoral Law to allow him time to ensure things were properly set up in Egypt before Cleopatra could move. Had it not been delayed and word had reached Egypt before he was secure... well, that might have been dangerous!

But here was the official document in his hands and he could proclaim it in public! He ordered a few dozen copies to be made and the original to be hidden safely. He called for the five refugee Alexandrians.

“The law has been passed by the Great Senate, lords, just as Silo and Brutus promised,” he announced cheerfully as they sat. “Now I can move! I’ll ensure Paulus knows what’s expected of him and his troops, then I’ll make the announcement as soon as he assures me everything is ready. I expect that to be on the twenty fourth day of this month. We did it with seven days to spare!

Two days later there were heralds all over Alexandria, simultaneously announcing the new Electoral Law.

The Great Senate and the Republic Comitia have enacted the Brutan Law concerning Administration of Elections. It is ordained that the following provisions will be observed throughout the Republic:-

1. *Every Tribal Comitia must dissolve itself within twelve lunar months of the declaration of its election. If it does not do so, then the Chief Administrator must declare it dissolved immediately the twelfth month ends.*

2. *The Chief Administrator shall act as Interrex, to conduct the election of the new Tribal Comitia within 30 days of the dissolution of the former Comitia. He shall also have authority to carry out all essential government operations as a caretaker.*

3. *The conduct of the election shall be carried out in such a manner as to provide to as many eligible electors as possible a reasonable opportunity to cast a ballot.*

“That is the end of the Great Senate announcement. On the basis of that decree, the Chief Administrator has acted by releasing this proclamation:-

As required by the above law, Pandoros Histhenes, the Chief Administrator of Egypt Tribe, makes the following announcements:-

1. *That the current Comitia of Egypt Tribe, having been declared elected on the 1st day of January, has exceeded its maximum allowable term of twelve lunar months or three hundred and fifty four days. It is therefore dissolved immediately.*

2. *That Pandoros Histhenes, Chief Administrator, has taken up the position of Interrex for the purposes of conducting the election of the new Comitia and as caretaker until that new Comitia meets.*

3. *That the election of the new Comitia shall take place on the third day of January and the results declared on the eighth day of January, that being the date of the next new moon. For this purpose there shall be six places where voting may take place, the exact locations to be advised on the first day of January.*

4. *All nominations for the new Comitia elections must be in the hands of the Interrex no later than the last day of December.*

There was a visitor before noon to Histhenes' office, still on board the ship which had carried him to Alexandria.

“Lord Histhenes,” an immaculately-presented palace herald addressed him respectfully, “Pharaoh would be pleased if you could meet with her at your earliest convenience.”

“I know of no Pharaoh,” Histhenes responded.

My apologies, lord Histhenes, I should have used the title 'Praetor',” the herald explained.

“Since this morning there is no such thing as a Praetor in this Tribe,” Histhenes continued.

“I speak of Cleopatra the Seventh Philopator,” the herald struggled doggedly.

“Oh, Cleopatra!” Histhenes exclaimed. “Why didn't you say so? Yes, of course I'll speak with her. When does she want to come here?”

The herald knew better than to press on with his Lady's intention that Histhenes should go to her. “This afternoon, if that is possible,” he asked.

“That would be excellent,” Histhenes agreed. “Let's say two hours before sunset?”

“I will inform her, lord Histhenes,” the herald accepted the time. “Now, if I may go...”

“Yes, and tell your Mistress that I look forward to a friendly chat.”

Cleopatra came with a small but resplendent entourage, barely a hundred in number. And she was dressed for business in a pure white silk dress and the pschent, the double crown of the Two Lands. Her make-up was flawless and her smile as beguiling as ever. The scent of her perfume filled all the spaces available to it.

Histhenes had expected this and knew there was no way he could compete in this little game. He wore a simple linen Doric chiton and sandals. “Welcome to my ship, Cleopatra,” he smiled as he invited her aboard his ship, holding out a hand to steady her as she stepped onto the boarding plank. Epithes followed her on board.

“No more, please,” Histhenes held up a hand as Parmines also moved forward. There is only enough room for four in my cabin,” he explained. Histhenes had also made a point of ensuring the deck was cluttered with ropes and barrels and the head to the doorway into his cabin was so low that all would need to duck their heads to pass under it. The tall double-crown of the two Egypts that Cleopatra wore would need to be removed to fit through. She was obliged to dodge the tackle on the deck and stoop under the door head.

Histhenes had the one comfortable padded desk chair in the office, the other being a simple timber chair. His secretary had his own bench in front of his writing desk and Epithes was required to stand.

Histhenes rested his elbows on his desk and leant forward. “What can I do for you, Cleopatra?” he asked informally.

Cleopatra's soft, gentle smile looked achingly genuine. “It's not often that I meet my match, lord Histhenes,” she conceded in a voice like liquid velvet. “In fact, this is the first time I have ever been bested. I admire you for that.”

“Don't stop talking now, Cleopatra. I was enjoying that!” Histhenes replied with a smile.

Cleopatra's smile broadened and a tiny, velvety giggle rose from her. “And with a sense of humour, too! Yes, you are certainly the man!”

“Well, what do you want to discuss, Cleopatra?” Histhenes tried to move to the business end of the visit.

“First I must apologise to you,” Cleopatra confided. “I took your initial presentation as being the bluster of an unimportant man trying to impress his betters. But now I realise that you are much more than that! Your actions to date suddenly make sense in the context of this new Electoral Law, and you were obviously privy to it before the Great Senate even considered it.” Cleopatra looked Histhenes over in a way that conveyed great respect. “You are not some mere functionary or other non-entity. You are trusted in the highest circles of the Republic, and that sort of trust is not given to those who don't deserve it!”

“Apology accepted, Cleopatra, on condition that you also accept mine for my rudeness. But as you might have guessed by now, I was under instructions.”

Cleopatra nodded gently. “Now that I know you to be a worthy and important man, I will show you the respect you deserve, lord Histhenes,” Cleopatra advanced her plan. “I gather that your instructions are to ensure that all Egyptians have the right to cast an effective vote henceforth, rather than this right being an unenforceable fiction.” She waited for a response, appearing to hang off his words like a young lover.

“Correct, Cleopatra,” Histhenes confirmed. “I will only be able to include Alexandrians this year, but I intend to put into place a system that will serve the Two Lands in the future.”

I think that is where you will have problems, lord Histhenes,” Cleopatra suggested. “Alexandria is a Greek city and the merchant classes, both Greek and Jew, will be able to govern the city if they are given the chance. But the Two Lands are a totally different case. They are different in so many ways, with different gods, a different language, and a completely different way of looking at the world.” Cleopatra sighed a deep breath, and continued in that soft, velvety voice, as though remembering a story from long ago, a story to soothe an infant to sleep. She was almost in a reverie rather than talking to Histhenes.

“The Two Lands were ancient beyond imagination even before the fall of Troy! Your modern innovations, like the Republic as you know it, seem fleeting as a shooting star to these people, they are so deep in time. They don't understand the Republic and they don't even want to try to understand it! Why should they bother, when it will pass soon enough? To the people of the Two Lands, all things in the world of men will pass like a spark; only the Nile and the gods will endure.” Cleopatra brought herself back into the present and looked at Histhenes. “Unless you understand the soul of Egypt, you will never be able to govern it. Instead, you will drown in it. My ancestors found that. They left the Two Lands to their own ways and built this city for themselves, a city that faced towards the Sea and Macedonia with its back to what it couldn't fathom.”

“Then what do you suggest I do, Cleopatra?”

“The Egypt of the Two Lands, the real Egypt, has never had a king. And it will never have a Comitia. Instead, it has a Pharaoh. Pharaoh is not a king! Pharaoh is one of the gods come down to this world to protect and nurture his land and his people. Without Pharaoh, there is no Egypt. You need to keep that in mind before you even think about elections outside Alexandria. Peasants don't elect their gods! If you ask them to do so they simply won't understand! They will ask their priests ‘What does all this mean? Why can the gods not take control of these things that are well beyond our limited, mortal comprehension?’ If you force them to elect mere mortals to rule over them instead of the god Pharaoh, they will be devastated!”

Histhenes sat quietly as he absorbed this. He knew that what Cleopatra was telling him was true. Replacing a hereditary mortal by an elected mortal was obviously a reasonable, even a desirable thing. But the Two Lands were not a kingdom to be replaced by a Republic. Egypt was a theocracy. There was no mortal king subject to human frailties; Pharaoh was a god and to spurn Pharaoh for a mortal ruler, however just and wise, would be a gross impiety.

“Yes, I think I understand you, Cleopatra,” Histhenes said at last. “We can't take their god away from them.” He looked at Cleopatra with new eyes. “Which means we can't take you away from them.” Silo and Brutus had it all wrong, Histhenes realised. This was not a matter of Kingship within the Republic; it was a matter of simple piety, adherence to traditional gods more ancient than history. “Let the Great Senate do away with Jupiter, with Castor and Pollux, with Venus, with Quirinus and all our own gods, before they dare to tamper with other gods who were ancient before Rome was founded.”

“Thank you for listening to me, lord Histhenes,” Cleopatra said. “And be assured that I will always listen to you.” She rose to leave, but was stopped by a raised hand from Histhenes.

“By law, I have limited time,” Histhenes said. “Let me think about what I can do and we will talk tomorrow.”

“Until tomorrow,” Cleopatra smiled and rose.

Histhenes sat immobile at his desk. What had seemed a simple if aggressive piece of administrative re-organisation when seen from the chamber of the Great Senate was a much more fraught exercise on the ground. The Republic demands that 'No-one is King!'. Yet Egypt demands for its own sanity that 'Pharaoh must remain!'. He was plunged deep into his own thought-world as he tried to piece together a form of Tribal organisation that might resolve this irreconcilable contradiction. And that rich, sensuous voice of Cleopatra weaved through everything he thought. Egypt must have its Pharaoh, which means that Cleopatra's co-operation was essential. Cleopatra must retain her throne. The sole objective now was to do that in a form that the Great Senate could accept.

Histhenes arrived at the palace two hours after sunrise and was admitted immediately and with great respect. He was shown into a small but richly furnished room looking out over the harbour and provided with pastries and watered wine. It took only a few minutes for Cleopatra to appear.

Histhenes stood as she entered. “Good morning, Cleopatra! And thank you for being so prompt!”

Cleopatra gave him another luminous smile. “No, lord Histhenes, I must thank you for addressing our problems so promptly!”

“Yes, they are indeed our problems,” Histhenes agreed. “As you explained so clearly, the Great Senate doesn't properly understand the complexities of this situation. We need to work together on this or both the Republic and Egypt will lose.”

Cleopatra dropped her chin ever so slightly; was that a nod of agreement? “You know the Republic's laws and processes, lord Histhenes. What do you think can be done about it?”

Histhenes raised a hand. “I find this most uncomfortable, Cleopatra. I am not permitted to address you as Pharaoh, a title that the Great Senate hasn't recognised, nor can I address you as Praetor, because your term has expired. So I am compelled to address you simply by name. Yet you continue to address me as 'lord Histhenes'. Can't you address me as 'Pandoros', to put us on an equal footing?”

Cleopatra smiled broadly, and gave that tiny, velvety giggle. “That is most gracious of you, Pandoros. Yes, we must work as a team and that would make things much more comfortable!”

“Well, the first constraint is that the Great Senate will not tolerate a monarchy. Nor any authority being given to any other hereditary office,” Histhenes picked up the thread of the previous conversation.

“Please tell me, Pandoros; where do you come from? You don't speak Greek like the Cretans that were subject to my father and I have heard many Asian Greeks in this city. Your accent is different.”

“I am from Thessalonika,” Pandoros replied. “Why do you ask?”

I knew that there was a connection somewhere!” Cleopatra exclaimed with delight. “Thessalonika, a city founded by Cassander of Macedon, and named after his wife, the sister of Alexander! You have Macedonian roots, as do I!”

Yes, I suppose I do,” Histhenes agreed. “But let's concentrate on the problem at hand.”

Yes, let's,” Cleopatra visibly restrained herself, but another luminous smile flickered out. “Do you have any ideas, Pandoros?”

“I have, but you might not like it,” he replied. “The Law requires that all offices must be based on election within the last year. That means either directly elected or appointed by a body or officer elected to a position with the authority to make that appointment.” Histhenes drew a breath. “So let's amend the Egyptian Basic Law to make the position of Pharaoh subject to appointment.”

Cleopatra showed no expression. Then she spoke. “Pharaoh is not appointed. Pharaoh is a god, at least in the eyes of the Egyptians.”

“Then let it be phrased as a recognition of Pharaoh rather than an appointment,” Histhenes suggested.

Again Cleopatra was expressionless. Then at last, “Yes. But how can we ensure that the Comitia will recognise the true Pharaoh? What will stop them

from appointing one of their own? Or even one of their Patrons, turn-by-turn, so we have a new Pharaoh every year? That will be even worse than attempting to abolish Pharaoh altogether.”

“That's as far as I have been able to go, Cleopatra. You know Egypt better than I; perhaps you can see a way forward.”

Again Cleopatra was silent and expressionless for a time. “Perhaps this recognition should be based on the recommendation of the various priests of the Two Lands. Perhaps the priests of Set, Osiris, Isis, Horus, and so on should meet in a convocation to recommend that person to the Comitia.”

Histhenes took a breath and blew it out. “That could be tricky. These priests are not elected, so by law their recommendation would not be binding. But the Comitia would know that to reject that name could cause chaos.”

“The chief duty of Pharaoh is to prevent chaos, Pandoros,” Cleopatra smiled. “What if the defined role of Pharaoh had little influence over Alexandria? That would mean that the Alexandrians would not concern themselves so much.”

“Yes,” Histhenes took up the thread. “Rather than being 'Ruler of the Two Lands' and 'King of Alexandria', perhaps the role could be re-defined. Let Pharaoh be hailed as 'Sustainer of the Two Lands by Intercession with All the Gods', and we drop all relevance to Alexandria. That would be acceptable to the Great Senate; it would be seen as no more than a Chief Priest.”

Cleopatra gave a genuine laugh of joy. “Yes, that would be excellent!” she agreed.

“You're not concerned that you would no longer have civil authority?” Histhenes asked in his surprise.

“Not at all concerned, Pandoros! And what a brilliant mind you have, to come up with such an idea! It's exactly what Pharaoh is, in a nutshell. Being King of Alexandria as well has always been an ill fit! Oh, you are so clever!” Raising her arms above her head and swaying sensuously, she gave a little dance like a young girl to show her delight. Even at the age of forty-six, her lithe body and limbs moved with superb grace, her smile lit up the world and her eyes were pools of joy. Suddenly Histhenes ached to embrace her.

Cleopatra stopped her dance. “Oh, Pandoros, you're such a clever man!” Cleopatra enthused again, her smile glowing. “Kingdoms rise and fall and one day even the Republic will fall. Only Egypt is eternal, and this plan of yours will ensure that Pharaoh will be safely out of harm's way until the time arrives for Egypt to return to our care!”

She padded over to Histhenes. Placing her palms on his chest and looking up into his eyes almost worshipfully, she said “That leaves me with only one problem. And I'm sure you can solve that for me, too.”

“What problem is that?” Histhenes asked.

“Ensuring a succession,” she answered. “It's the duty of Pharaoh to be fruitful, or the Nile will not be fruitful. Yet I'm childless and approaching the end of my fertile years.”

“You have a husband, a descendant of Pharaoh,” Histhenes replied as his chest tightened.

“My husband is useless,” Cleopatra frowned. “Do you think it is for want of trying? What I need is some fresh Macedonian blood to enliven the dynasty. Will you do that for me?”

Histhenes was almost overwhelmed. But he sensed a trap. “No. You have a husband. It would be most improper!”

“Then it seems my husband will need to suffer some misfortune,” Cleopatra replied coldly. “The dynasty is much more important than any one member of it.”

“You would kill your husband?”

“Of course I would if I had to! I killed the first one so why not the second? But even before we get to that, let me tell you that such drastic measures won't be required. Do you really think Ptolemy will disgrace himself by admitting to being a cuckold?” Cleopatra shrugged. “For a female Ptolemy marriage is no more than necessary rape. Whether I want him or not, my marriage is unavoidable. The only choice I have is whether to bear his children or those of another. Surely you don't believe that all in the line of the Ptolemies have been legitimate!”

“Either way, we will all rejoice that the next generation has come and pretend everything is right, whoever the father really is! But unfortunately I don't even have that choice. Ptolemy is no man. He has no potency! He has proven that for more than twenty years now and I'm running out of time to make other arrangements. Believe me, if I fall pregnant then Ptolemy will know he is not the father but he will rejoice that his virility has been proven in the eyes of the people, and thankful that his own failure will not become known. I assure you, he will rejoice and claim the child as his own!”

Cleopatra moved closer, her voice soft and mesmerising. “Will you help me, and my husband as well? Or do I have to find another man, a real man, preferably of Macedonian blood? And besides; don't you want your child to become a god? A god in the most ancient line of gods on earth? Think about it!” she smiled.

“You're very convincing, Cleopatra,” Histhenes said tightly. “And the Great Senate did give me the duty of ensuring the Two Lands are administered smoothly...”

Cleopatra stepped forward to place her arms around his neck and draw his head down to her. Rising onto her toes, she pressed her lips against his for a lingering moment. “Thank you, Pandoros.”

Three days later Histhenes received a note from a palace courier. Cleopatra respectfully requested the attendance of the Chief Administrator at her palace at noon. Histhenes obliged. He was shown into a private room, only Cleopatra inside.

“Close the door please, Pandoros,” she said silkily and smiling. “I am coming into my most fertile period, and would appreciate your services daily for the next ten days.” She removed her formal wig and started to loosen the girdle around her waist. Histhenes smiled, and started to untie the cord around his own waist.

Their lovemaking was unhurried and playful, interrupted by light-hearted conversation and laughter. Eventually they were both spent.

“That was even better than the first time,” Cleopatra commented with a smile.

“Duty compels me to do it, and I'm always eager to do my duty,” Histhenes answered. Cleopatra gave that characteristic velvety giggle as she swatted him with a pillow.

“Then try to make my duty more interesting and enjoyable, too,” she retorted. “I expect something new every day!”

Histhenes lunged at her again, his teeth at the curve of her throat and his left hand closing on her right breast.

“Oh, no you don't!” Cleopatra protested. “Once each day is enough, or you won't be able to keep up your strength for the next nine days!”

“That will be part of your duty, to keep me encouraged,” Histhenes answered. She pushed him away with her right hand, and he flopped onto his back and sighed deeply.

“Pandoros, I thought we had agreed to work together,” Cleopatra said smoothly.

“Indeed. I thought we had, too,” Histhenes agreed.

“Then why are you harbouring five criminals in your camp?” Cleopatra asked. “Indeed, why are you providing them with assistance in their efforts to gain election?”

“I know of no criminals under my protection, Cleopatra,” Histhenes said as he raised himself on one elbow to face her.

“Those two Jews and three Greeks who are promoting themselves for election to the Comitia are criminals, Pandoros,” she said no less smoothly, but with a tone that discouraged contradiction. “You will turn them over to me immediately.”

“On what charges, Cleopatra? And why to you? What office do you hold, that criminals are to be held at your pleasure? Your tenure as Praetor has already expired.”

“What have you in mind, Pandoros?”

“I have in mind to accept nominations for election to the Comitia from all who satisfy the qualifications, and to submit their names to the electors. Those who have the approval of the people will become the next Comitia.” He shrugged as much as he could while resting on one elbow. “Let's see who will be elected. I have only their names so far, apart from the five from last year's Comitia.”

“And what will we do if they are elected?”

“I will convince them that they must recognise Pharaoh as the Sustainer of the Two Lands, but with no real authority. Meanwhile, everyone outside Alexandria will know that whether you have civil authority or not, you will have supreme religious authority. They will see in you the heart of Egypt.” He flopped onto his back again. “Isn't that as we agreed? I thought that you were satisfied with that arrangement.”

“I was satisfied with that as the official role of Pharaoh but I assumed that I would have authority in Alexandria by virtue of control of the Comitia.”

“And you will have control of the Comitia, Cleopatra, provided the electors vote for you. But if not then you will have to wait until next year. By then I will be able to arrange for votes to be taken all up and down the Two Lands, and there are many more peasants in Upper and Lower Egypt than there are citizens in Alexandria. At worst, you will be out of power for only one year.”

Cleopatra considered this for a full minute. “I urge you, Pandoros, for the sake of your child to be born; do not become complacent. A year can be a long time.”

Egypt – 733 AUC (21 B.C.)

Trophos and Baruch had secured election as the two Praetors and their three colleagues made up the rest of the Comitia. A total success! The first meeting of the new Comitia was held in Histhenes' office, on board his ship in the harbour.

“First order of business,” Trophos announced, “Cleopatra must be arrested and charged with unlawful imprisonment of citizens. Then we add to that torture of citizens.”

“Are you sure that's wise, lord Trophos?” Histhenes asked.

“It's necessary, Histhenes. We must neutralise her before she has the opportunity to gather her forces.”

“The evidence against her is very thin, my lords,” Histhenes opined to the Comitia as a whole. “We have only the word of two of her bitterest enemies, who might be considered capable of fabricating the story. There is no physical injury or other evidence to support their story.”

“Are you calling us liars, Chief Administrator?” Baruch challenged.

“No, lord Baruch, but you can be certain that others will,” Histhenes cautioned. “And if enough of your enemies see the opportunity they will spring to Cleopatra's defence. You will drive your enemies together. I suggest it would be wiser to wedge them further apart. Use Cleopatra as a tool; that will isolate your enemies and neutralise Cleopatra at the same time.”

Trophos smiled cynically. “I didn't realise that part of your job was to give political advice, Histhenes.”

“The Great Senate made it clear that my over-arching mission was to establish Egypt as a Republican Tribe rather than a monarchy, and to do that in a way that promotes stability,” Histhenes warned. “I don't think that the Great Senate expected me to precipitate a civil war to achieve that.” He looked around the table. “Think carefully before you commit to anything irrevocable, my lords, or the Great Senate just might decide that Egypt is in civil disorder and declare its Tribal status suspended while they appoint a Governor to redeem the situation. Part of that settlement might be to punish those who caused the turmoil.” The five merchants had not considered that possibility. They all looked suitably subdued.

“But we must ensure she doesn't do exactly that, but at a time and place of her own choosing,” Trophos explained. “How can we insure against this threat if not by striking first?”

“Oh, strike first, by all means!” Histhenes agreed. “But make sure your strike is effective without being provocative.”

“What do you suggest?” Baruch asked. “We five know trade and we're committed to governing justly, but we're not experienced in the devious ways of politics.”

“I agree completely, lord Baruch,” Histhenes said with a smile. “You're not devious enough, so let me help you there. We'll make a good team together so long as we respect each others' strengths.”

“So how do we handle Cleopatra?” Baruch continued.

“Whatever we do, we must make sure that we are seen as the ones who are being reasonable, working for peace. We must make sure that any intransigence is shown by Cleopatra, not by us. That way we will retain the support of the Great Senate.

“So I propose that we invite Cleopatra to discuss with us some amendments to the Basic Law that will be acceptable to both sides.” Histhenes spread his hands.

“But Cleopatra will see that as weakness!” Trophos exclaimed.

“Perhaps she will, in which case she will overplay her hand and provoke the Great Senate. Don't forget that you are the lawfully-elected Comitia now, and you have every right to call in the legions to put down a revolt.”

The five Comitia members looked to each other. “Very well, Histhenes,” Trophos said at length. “Let her be invited to meet with us at the next meeting. Now, next item of business; we need a proper place to meet and the Chief Administrator needs offices and an administrative structure, with buildings to manage and accommodate his staff. Please detail your requirements, Histhenes, and an estimate of the costs, to be tabled as soon as you are able. In the meantime I move that the Administrator be allowed a budget of up to five sestertium milia for the month of January to cover his necessary expenses,” Trophos suggested, nominating the amount already agreed with Histhenes before the meeting.

Cleopatra seemed to float into the room. The pschent was on her head, her robes seemed to glow white, and her soft smile filled the room with warmth. The three eunuchs following her into the room were barely noticed.

“Please, Cleopatra, take a seat,” Trophos invited as she entered. None of the Comitia stood as she entered. They had agreed that they didn't want to convey any impression that she was their superior. “And if your friends would also be seated,” Trophos added.

“Thank you, my lords,” Cleopatra unleashed her greatest weapon, her voice, as she sat. “I believe you know Epithes, Parmines and Chites, former members of the Comitia.”

“Indeed we do, Lady,” Trophos acknowledged them with a nod of the head.

“Your invitation mentioned that you have it in mind to enact some changes to the Basic Law,” Cleopatra said smoothly, cutting straight to the business.

“Indeed, Lady,” Trophos agreed, “but it might be better to think of it as a complete re-writing. Laws passed by the Great Senate last year make much of the old Basic Law void now, being overruled by Republic law.”

“Yes, that's true,” Cleopatra agreed. “We had in mind to make amendments ourselves, had we been re-elected.”

“I am glad that we are agreed on the need, Cleopatra,” Trophos acknowledged. “It seems to us that perhaps the best way forward would be to adapt the Basic Law currently in effect in Greater Asia. Like Egypt, Greater Asia

is a Tribe which has several widely-scattered centres. But we must then adjust it to reflect not only recent changes to Republic law, but also the unique features of Egypt.”

“That would seem a reasonable approach, lord Trophos,” Cleopatra agreed. “Do you have a draft of what you propose to be the formal document?”

Trophos pushed a small pile of papers across the table. “We have prepared this as a first step, Lady,” Trophos said with a smile. Cleopatra flashed a smile back.

Cleopatra pulled the pile towards her, and turned it around. She glanced at the top page, and then the three underlying pages. “Do you wish me to read and consider now, or that I come back to you with a response?” Cleopatra asked. “I’m sure your time is valuable, not to be wasted while I study these documents.”

“Whichever you prefer, Lady,” Trophos answered. “If you wish you may go now. Or if you prefer we can provide you with a private room and refreshments so you can study and discuss this draft with your advisers. We will proceed with other business while you do so.”

Cleopatra stood. “Thank you, gentlemen,” she said sweetly. “If I may, I would like to give this document the full attention it deserves and not be too hasty. If I may attend your next meeting to make my comments?”

The five stood as a courtesy to farewell their guest, and Cleopatra left with her three eunuchs.

“Well, that was very calm and peaceful,” Simeon commented.

“We have yet to hear her response,” Eugenēs returned. “That might be less calm and peaceful.”

“Next item of business, gentlemen,” Trophos called for order as he sat.

“I have studied your draft, my lords, and there is much to commend it,” Cleopatra opened the discussion. “If Egypt consisted only of Alexandria, then it would be an excellent document and I would be happy to commend it to you for formal adoption.” Cleopatra again spoke softly but clearly, her rich voice carrying well.

“But this document, however appropriate for a Hellenised city or province, doesn’t understand the Two Lands outside Alexandria. I commend to you this draft which I have prepared,” she tabled five copies of her notes, “which explicitly recognises the heart and soul of Egypt outside the walls of this city. It provides that the ancient gods of the Nile must be recognised and their priests must be also recognised along with the temples and their associated lands and other holdings.”

Cleopatra waited while the Comitā members gathered their copies together. “There are no significant changes to the first three pages of your draft; I have done no more than is required as consequential changes in the light of the more significant changes to your last page, and the additional paragraphs I have added as a fifth page.

“The first significant change is the addition to page three, paragraph three. The original text required that all eligible electors must be permitted entry into the place where votes are to be cast. I have added that such places for the casting of

votes must be provided within three miles of every city or town with more than one hundred eligible electors. Otherwise it would be possible to effectively disenfranchise electors simply by not providing an accessible place to vote.

“The next significant change is that members of the Comitia are to be elected by regions rather than treating Egypt as a unitary whole. Egypt has always been the Two Lands, and with Alexandria it is now effectively Three Lands. So I propose that each of these three divisions elect their own representatives, with the number of Comitia members from each being in proportion to the number of electors in each region. In this way, if Lower Egypt has half as many voters as Alexandria, then they shall have half as many Comitia members as Alexandria.

“I have also allowed that the Chief Administrator may further subdivide these three main regions if he considers it appropriate; Upper Egypt in particular is one very long and thin land, where men at one end are not familiar with men from the other end. It might be that such subdivision will be required to ensure all citizens feel that they are not being ignored. But if these subdivisions are made, the same principle of proportionality is to be maintained.

“Finally, I propose that the ancient gods of Egypt be recognised and that their priests, temples and property be acknowledged. The appointment of priests is to be in accordance with ancient custom. In most cases this is hereditary and might seem a violation of Republic law, but since these positions carry no civic authority they are not subject to those laws. Even in Rome itself the various priests are appointed for life and not merely the lifetime of the Comitia or Senate that appoints them!

“I commend these changes, my lords,” Cleopatra concluded.

The five men scanned the changed sections of the new draft. Eugenēs spoke first.

“These changes, Cleopatra; there's no mention of any civic authority other than the Comitia. Does that mean that you're relinquishing any claim to the throne?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I will freely relinquish the throne to Alexandria, but not relinquish the position of Pharaoh. Pharaoh is a religious office, not a civic office.”

Trophos didn't want any concessions to be made by his colleagues purely on the spur of the moment. “Thank you for your very constructive suggestions, Cleopatra. We will consider these changes with all diligence and get back to you.”

“Thank you, Praetor,” Cleopatra smiled again as she stood. The Comitia members stood to farewell her.

The Comitia sat as she left. The door closed behind her.

“What do you make of that?” Baruch asked. “Do we trust her?”

“Whether we trust her or not is irrelevant,” Trophos waved away the question. “What's important is whether we want her as an enemy or a friend. Let's look at these suggestions she has made and see if there are any traps.” He

motioned to Histhenes, who was sitting taking notes at a separate desk, to join them at the Comitia table. "Histhenes, we would appreciate your comments, too."

The six of them read through the documents, Histhenes looking over Baruch's shoulder. After the last of them had finished, Trophos looked around the table.

"Actually, it all seems reasonable to me," Trophos confessed. "It's what isn't said that troubles me."

"You mean there is no explicit abolition of the positions of Pharaoh and King of Alexandria?" Histhenes clarified.

"Precisely!"

"Perhaps you should compare that to any other Basic Law," Histhenes replied. "I don't recall anything in the Asian Basic Law that abolishes Kingship in Asia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, or any other of those former kingdoms. Nor does the African Basic Law mention abolition of the kingdoms of Numidia or Mauritania."

"But they had no effective King at the time, so it wasn't an issue," Trophos argued.

"With respect, lord Trophos, the African Basic Law was adopted when the kings in both Numidia and Mauritania were very much sovereign. They were still Friends and Allies."

"You know what I mean, Histhenes," Trophos waved away the point. "Why would she want to retain the title of Pharaoh, however she wants to qualify it, except as a refuge so she can launch a bid for a new monarchy at some future time?"

"No doubt you're right there, Praetor," Histhenes agreed. "But if that's her hope, then she will be waiting a long time. The Great Senate will never allow it. If she has that plan then it will be many generations into the future, when the Republic is no more, before that is going to happen. But in the meantime she will be seen to have accepted that she has no authority so long as the Republic abides, and therefore she has abdicated any real power. She has effectively gone into political exile."

"If that's so, Histhenes, then why has she gone to such pains to define how elections are to be held?" Eugenius demanded. "Particularly the provision that every village in Highest Egypt as far as Nubia must be provided with convenient access to vote?"

"I would only be guessing, lord Eugenius," Histhenes confessed. "But I suspect that she wants to maintain her profile as the Protector of the Two Lands and wants all the peasants to know that. She has abdicated the throne to concentrate on being a goddess."

"A goddess?"

"Yes, lord Eugenius," Histhenes confirmed. "How can you live in Alexandria but know so little about Egypt? Outside these walls Pharaoh has never been considered a mere king! Pharaoh is a living god, protecting and nurturing his people; being a king is just a small part of that role. What she has

done here is to step back from the lesser role, so she can concentrate on the greater.”

Eugenes looked to his fellows. “Do we want that?” he asked.

Baruch the Jew was the first to answer. “She's no more a god than I am! And I assure you, I am no god! Let her have her pretensions! They will mean nothing as she ages and enters her dotage. Her disintegration will give the lie to her claims while the Comitia will be the source of prosperity and order in society. Her dreams will fade away with her.”

“I see a different perspective here,” Timothy spoke for the first time that day. “This revised draft pays a lot more attention to the Two Egypts than our proposal did. Cleopatra was right when she implied that our minds extend no further than the walls of Alexandria. If we reject this version but Cleopatra provides it to our enemies and campaigns for them, she will be able to turn all of the Nile against us. But if we enact this ourselves then we will be the ones who are the true friends of the peasants. Let's have the peasants with us and not against us.” He looked around his colleagues. There seemed to be some agreement.

“I'm just thinking out loud here, friends,” Simeon mused. “If we accept this deal, where will Cleopatra live? If she's trying to establish herself as the god of the peasants, she will hardly be able to do that from Alexandria. She will have to move to Gizeh, or Memphis, or somewhere like that. That will put her out of real contact with any of our enemies. And even if she does make contact, she'll be regarded as if she has turned her back on civilisation to go back to the old ways. So I suggest we go along with her plan.”

The five Comitia members again looked to each other.

“Whether you want it or not, my lords, if you reject this plan what will she offer instead, and to whom?” Histhenes asked. “There are many other men out there who have agendas of their own, and she still has influence enough to make a difference. Better to let her have what you don't need in exchange for her acquiescence which you do need.”

Trophos was still not convinced. “Let's chew over it until our next meeting.”

The new Basic Law was passed in February. By the end of March Cleopatra was convinced she had conceived and made plans to move to Heliopolis where the Two Lands met. She endowed the ancient Temples of Atum and Ra and proclaimed herself ‘Daughter of Atum-Ra’.

Three months later she announced that the gods had rewarded this act of piety and granted her a child, due to be born in October. This would be the peak of the Nile flood, and a sure sign of the link between the fertility of Pharaoh and the fertility of the land. She was solemnly hailed by the combined priesthood as ‘Sustainer of the Two Lands’, and ‘Mother of Fertility’.

Meanwhile, Histhenes had commissioned a census of the Two Lands for purposes of both tax and voting eligibility. Although Cleopatra herself would not stand for election (that would be below the dignity of a god!), yet he was

confident that her preferred candidates would be successful. When the numbers came in he was surprised at how many eligible electors there were, particularly in Upper Egypt which he had always thought to be a thinly-populated land because of the cycle of flood and drought. In fact, that was far from the truth!

“My lords, I have completed the census,” Histhenes reported to the first Comitia meeting in September. There are almost three hundred thousand free adult males over the age of twenty in Alexandria. Of these, just over two hundred thousand are over the age of thirty, and therefore entitled to vote. In Lower Egypt, the numbers are nine hundred and eighty three thousand adults, of whom six hundred and seventy four thousand are eligible to vote. Upper Egypt has one million and four thousand adults, with seven hundred and twenty eight thousand of voting age.”

The Comitia was shocked. These men had spent all their lives in Alexandria or overseas. In their minds Alexandria was the only part of Egypt that had any significance. The Two Lands were another world that they never bothered to think about. But now they were being told that for every Alexandrian voter there were seven Egyptians!

Eugenes was first to find his voice. “What will this mean when it comes to the next election?” he asked faintly.

“It means that Alexandria will be able to elect only one member of the Comitia if we keep the number at five. Perhaps we should expand the Comitia to consist of some forty men instead,” Histhenes answered. “That's not unusual; most Tribes elect at least that many and the Roman Comitia has seventy members. It also means that with forty Comitia members there should be room for all of you but you will be a minority. You five should start making yourselves known to the voters in the Two Lands.”

“That bitch!” Trophos said as he realised what had been done. “Cleopatra would have known all along roughly what the numbers were, but she implied otherwise! I recall her saying as part of her example, 'if Lower Egypt has half as many voters'. Now, as the heart and soul of the Two Lands, and having so publicly turned her back on Alexandria, her support will make or break anyone trying to get elected outside the city. She tricked us into this!”

“I think you're right, Praetor,” Histhenes agreed. “Cast your mind back to her suggested amendments to the Basic Law; the first was that we had to provide voting places within three miles of any town with more than one hundred eligible voters. That stops us from simply shutting out Egyptians purely by providing voting facilities only in Alexandria. She has beaten us cold.”

“Don't despair,” Eugenes chirped up. “We are still the Comitia. So long as we all agree, we have more than two-thirds of the votes needed to change the Basic Law and remove that provision.”

There was silence around the table. “We have the numbers to do that,” Simeon agreed after a few minutes. “But I hope we also have the wisdom to not try it. It will be obvious to the whole world that we would have only one purpose in mind. And even if it works, the number to be elected from Upper and Lower

Egypt is determined by how many are entitled to vote, whether they do so or not. There will still be six Egyptians in the new Comitia for every Alexandrian, even if Cleopatra arranges to transport just a handful of voters to a polling place in each of the Two Lands. If we change that principle of proportionality we will trigger a revolt and the Great Senate will know exactly who to blame.”

There was a moment of silence as the Comitia members pondered the possibilities. “Lord Simeon is right,” Histhenes summarised after a pause. “The harder we make it for an Egyptian to vote, the more resentment we will gather for no end benefit. Even if we made them travel a thousand miles, even all the way to Alexandria, Cleopatra will still be able to bring enough supporters to the city to elect her puppets, even if they only gain one vote each. Indeed, she might even mobilise a mass of peasants to travel that far! She could provide free food and lodging for them on their journey; she has tremendous wealth!”

“So all we would achieve is to make her even more popular, help her portray herself as the best friend a peasant could have,” Baruch joined the dots for his fellows. “And when the elections result in her hand-picked candidates cleaning us out, she won't be very eager to co-operate with us any more.” He put his palms on the table. “My lords, we have given Egypt and Alexandria back to Cleopatra; but Cleopatra the god, not the Cleopatra the queen. She has us beaten every way you look at it.”

Gloom settled over the table again. “My lords, perhaps she hasn't beaten you yet,” Histhenes suggested.

“Do you have an idea, Histhenes?” Trophos asked.

“She can't beat you if you're not her enemy,” Histhenes answered. “So far you have agreed with her changes to the Basic Law and done everything following from that. Taking the Census, for example, to let the voting happen properly. Perhaps you can convince her that you are her allies in Alexandria and not her enemies. Don't oppose her; join her.”

“She will still have the whip hand,” Eugenés grumbled.

“True; but at least they won't be your backs that she's whipping,” Histhenes countered. The Comitia members pondered this in silence for a few moments.

“My lords, I think it's about time we paid a visit to Heliopolis,” Trophos announced.

Baruch was surprised to see Cleopatra, now heavily pregnant, rise to her feet as he and Trophos were shown into her private audience hall. With difficulty and resting heavily on the arm of a slave, she stepped down from the podium and walked towards them smiling warmly.

“I must thank you both for coming all this way to see me, my lords,” she effused.

“It is most kind of you to see us at such short notice, my Lady,” Trophos responded.

“My days are not as busy as they once were,” she said self-depreciatingly. “And your circumstances have changed too, since you were last my guests.”

“We appreciate your sensitivity on that point, my Lady,” Trophos picked up what was clearly a veiled apology for their mistreatment the previous year. “But that was a different time and we must all look to the future.”

“You are a wise and generous man, lord Trophos,” Cleopatra accepted his forgiveness. “There can be no doubt that Alexandria will prosper under your care.”

“Please, my lady, don't stand for any longer than you must! Take a seat and care for yourself and your child,” Trophos urged.

“Thank you, lord Trophos,” Cleopatra smiled her gratitude. “But we shall all sit; please come this way.” She led the two men to a pair of couches in front of a large window and sat on one, gesturing to her guests to sit on the other.

“We don't wish to exhaust you, my Lady,” Trophos opened the conversation, “so if we may go straight to the heart of the matters we would like to discuss with you...?”

“Thank you for your consideration,” Cleopatra smiled again.

“Very well,” Trophos leant forward. “Histhenes, the Chief Administrator, has completed the census now and he raised some administrative difficulties. At present the Basic Law as we agreed last February requires polling places to be provided so that no village with more than one hundred electors is more than three miles from a voting place.

“Now that we have a clearer understanding of the number and distribution of voters, this requirement would demand thousands of voting places throughout the Two Lands. Histhenes tells us he can't provide the trained staff for so many places in the time available.” Trophos paused. Cleopatra waited for him to continue. He waited for a response.

“Why are you telling me this, lord Trophos?” Cleopatra asked at length. “I'm not responsible for conducting the elections. But if there's any way I can help, then please ask.”

“We were hoping that you would agree to a modification to the Basic Law; one which would extend the maximum allowable distance to the nearest voting place. This will mean that fewer places need to be established.”

“You have the numbers on the Comitia, lord Trophos; it's in your power to make whatever changes you think proper,” Cleopatra answered smoothly.

“I know we have the legal authority to do that, my Lady; but we are also aware that this could impose some difficulty upon the people who would need to take time to walk any great distance to vote and then return. During this time the peasant will not be able to work his land nor the artisan earn an income. We are reluctant to act with a high hand. We seek your wisdom on how best to approach this problem.”

Cleopatra nodded slowly. “Do you have any thoughts on how this should be approached?”

“Unless you could suggest a better way, we expect that we will have to increase the minimum distance to twenty miles, possibly more. This will mean considerable numbers of voters at any one place so there will be long queues. As

a result a voter will need to allow up to a day for walking to the place, another whole day to vote, and then another day to walk home.”

Cleopatra thought for a moment. “Perhaps if you allow voting over several days, allowing your staff to move from place to place over that time. Then the people could vote when your staff came to a place closest to them.”

Trophos was stunned. The Comitia had been wrestling with this problem for two months, but always on the assumption that there would be a single Voting Day throughout the whole Tribe. Now this woman suggests so radical and so effective a solution in barely a minute! “That’s a brilliant idea, my Lady!” he blurted out. “We’ll take it back to Histhenes and see what can be done along those lines. But in the meantime, we might still have to increase the minimum distance, regardless of this solution. But it will be much less a distance now. We will have to go through the details more thoroughly.”

“I am confident that you will act wisely, my lords,” Cleopatra responded. “Whatever is possible, I trust you to do it. So I will understand if you need to amend the Basic Law.”

“Thank you, my Lady,” Trophos accepted this as agreement. “Now to move to the longer-term. We all know that Alexandria is very different from the Two Lands. It is possible that this could lead to tension within a future Comitia, to the detriment of all. We are hoping that you will use your influence to promote a co-operative approach and we will pledge ourselves to do likewise.”

Cleopatra smiled her joy. “It is good to know that Alexandria is in the care of such wise men! We must indeed work together for our mutual benefit.”

“Thank you, my Lady,” Trophos smiled back. “My apologies if we have tired you; should we go now?”

“If there is no more to discuss, my lords, I should take no more of your valuable time,” Cleopatra smiled again. Trophos and Baruch stood, bowed slightly, and turned for the door.

“But if I might ask a favour of you before you return to Alexandria,” Cleopatra spoke out. “Would it be possible for the Chief Administrator to call on me? I would like to ensure that the special needs of Upper Egypt are properly understood.”

“We will ask him to visit you as soon as possible, my Lady,” Trophos promised.

Histhenes arrived ten days later and was shown directly into Cleopatra’s suite. He was surprised to see Ptolemy XIV on a couch by the window.

“Pandoros, thank you for coming so quickly!” Cleopatra said with genuine joy, her face beaming with delight. She waddled as quickly as her swollen womb would allow to embrace him. Then turning to her husband, “Ptolemy, do you remember Pandoros, the Chief Administrator? He was at the Comitia Meetings last year.”

To Histhenes’ further surprise, Ptolemy rose from his couch. ‘Why would the notional consort of Pharaoh stand for mere me?’ he asked himself. Ptolemy walked over to him, his face smiling and his right hand extended.

“Completely unofficially, lord Histhenes, thank you for your assistance,” Ptolemy said with courtesy, “not that anyone outside this room will ever be permitted to know.”

So Cleopatra was being completely truthful those nine months ago! Histhenes realised. “It was an honour and a pleasure, my lord,” Histhenes replied, wondering how else he was supposed to respond.

“An honour, certainly,” Ptolemy commented. He then glanced at his wife in a way that conveyed just a hint of... indifference? Tiredness? Reluctance? Certainly no hint of anger, jealousy or even desire. “May I go now?” he asked her.

“Yes; please,” Cleopatra agreed. “We have things to discuss.” Ptolemy crossed to the door and left the room without a backward glance.

Cleopatra gave her characteristic velvety giggle, smiling at Histhenes like a schoolgirl with a secret to tell.

“When did you tell him?” Histhenes asked

“Oh, he knew you were bedding me even while we were doing it,” Cleopatra waved the question away with one hand. “He was quite pleased; it meant a month in he wasn't obliged to attempt and fail yet again. He always preferred taking children to his bed, anyway; they gave him some sense of power that he never had with me.” Cleopatra smiled again and snuggled into his right shoulder. “But he's not important. The physicians say that I'm carrying twins! That is why I'm so large, and they expect that will mean that I will come earlier than usual.”

“That's wonderful!” Histhenes agreed. “You do look even bigger than I had expected.”

“I would like you to stay here long enough you see them,” Cleopatra radiated her joy into him.

“Would that be proper?” Histhenes asked.

“It's almost a religious duty!” Cleopatra demanded with mock severity, and then giggled again. “Pandoros, you have made me so happy!”

The physicians were right. Only four more days passed before Cleopatra was delivered of a boy and a girl. But the delivery was hard on her forty-seven-year-old body, which had never before delivered a child. The physicians were of the opinion that a full-term pregnancy, as might have been expected for a single child, might not have been survivable.

But Cleopatra wasn't concerned about the danger. “Pandoros, you are wonderful!” she rejoiced. “Not only twins, but one of each sex! They can mate when they come of age, and the dynasty will go on now, even if my fertile days are ended!”

Histhenes marvelled at this woman as she unselfconsciously breastfed her daughter before him. Had there ever been a person so full of life?

“Why do you nurse them yourself?” Histhenes asked. “Are there no wet nurses available?”

“No-one will deprive me of the joy of feeding my children,” Cleopatra asserted softly. “I might do it for only a few weeks and then cease to hasten the

return of my fertility, but I will not be deprived of any part of this experience! I worked hard for it, and I will enjoy it!” Then came that broad, luminous smile.

“They were born on the day the Nile reached its peak, the officials tell me,” Cleopatra reported. “That’s a wonderful sign from the gods and all the people will be told about it. It’s a powerful omen of divine favour.”

“They were born only two days ago, Cleopatra,” Histhenes objected. “How can you know that the Nile won’t continue to rise?”

“Because the levels are reported to me before they are recorded,” she replied. “Any readings higher than those of their birth day will be reduced accordingly.”

“Yes, that should do the trick,” Histhenes agreed. “Have you chosen names for them yet?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Ptolemy XV and Cleopatra IIX, of course,” she answered. “What else could they be named? They will both also take ‘PhilAtumRa’ as secondary names, in honour of the gods who granted me this pregnancy.”

Histhenes sat in silence for a few more moments, enthralled by a woman of such personal authority and dignity in the outside world and also so tender and caring for her helpless children. Here was a woman who was outstanding in every way and he could only hope that these his children would inherit her capabilities.

Cleopatra finished the feed and bound her daughter. Placing her in the crib beside her brother, Cleopatra started to pat her gently. The infant was asleep in a few moments.

“Please stay for two more days, Pandoros,” Cleopatra asked. “Attend the presentation of the children to Atum-Ra, and then you may return to Alexandria.”

“I will, Cleopatra,” Histhenes promised. “And with your permission, I’ll return for the celebration of their birthday.”

Cleopatra smiled beautifully. “Please do. By that time I’ll have need of you again. Two children are not enough.”

Egypt – 734 AUC (20 B.C.)

The first elections to include the entire Nile valley went smoothly enough. Nobody was surprised when Cleopatra's nominees won every seat in the Two Lands, nor that the team led by Trophos and Baruch retained all five seats in Alexandria. And it was a pleasant fulfilment rather than a surprise when experience showed that the thirty five Egyptians were prepared to leave Alexandria largely to itself. They even agreed to retain Alexandria as the seat of the Comitia, for ease of communication with the rest of the Republic. Cleopatra was keeping to her side of the bargain. However they did make one thing very clear; the restrictions on water transport that ensured only Alexandrian merchants could carry out this business, and hence the outrageous fees charged for any passage of goods between the city and the Two Lands, must be abolished. Trophos, who operated several ships on the Lower Nile, realised he had to take the haircut. He knew that these arrangements were probably illegal under Republic law in any case, should any Egyptian attempt to set up his own transport system, and it was obvious that Ankh-Atum, Cleopatra's favoured priest, had precisely that in mind.

One other act of the new Comitia came as no surprise. Cleopatra was officially hailed by the titles she had assumed last year; 'Daughter of Atum-Ra', 'Sustainer of the Two Lands', and 'Mother of Fertility'. She was also acclaimed 'Supreme Intercessor with All Gods' in case there was any doubt about where the cults other than that of Atum-Ra fitted into the scheme of things.

Otherwise all went smoothly. For example, it was agreed that any subsidies for public works must be distributed in proportion to population, this being achieved by each member of the Comitia being given the same allowance to be apportioned as he saw fit. The Alexandrians tended to bestow much of their allowance on the famous Museum, but could not help but notice how the Egyptians tended to direct their largesse to a handful of the more powerful priesthoods in the Two Lands. The greatest beneficiaries were the establishments which most openly revered Pharaoh, and everyone knew that this was no coincidence.

The entire Comitia resolved to travel to Heliopolis in October to celebrate the first birthday of the twins. Naturally the Chief Administrator went as well. Every Chief Priest of every cult up and down the Nile was also wise enough to attend what would surely be the greatest spectacle in the history of the Two Lands. This would be even more majestic than the burial of the Old Kingdom pharaohs in the pyramids, given that dignitaries would be drawn from further afield than the Old Kingdom even knew existed.

But it was not only for the spectacle that Cleopatra decreed that the celebrations should continue for two months. One must never assume at her age that one menstrual cycle would be enough!

Cleopatra was waiting at the dock in Heliopolis as two large river craft tied up. These carried the Comitia members from Alexandria and the electorates of Sais and Ament. The electorates of Lower Egypt had been formed by

combining the twenty traditional nomes of into six regions with approximately the same number of electors in each.

“Praetor Hotep! I am honoured that you have come!” Cleopatra greeted the first man down the gangway of the first vessel. Of course, there had never been any doubt of his attendance; he was Cleopatra’s nominee as Praetor from Lower Egypt, just as Nefrisis was her chosen from Upper Egypt. The other five men from the Western Delta followed him and were similarly greeted. Once the guests from the Praetor’s vessel had been welcomed the plank from the second vessel was laid out and its dignitaries stepped forward.

“Lord Trophos! It gives me great pleasure to see you so well!” Cleopatra said with warmth as she greeted the Alexandrian contingent at the dock. “And lord Baruch!” She offered her right arm to each Alexandrian in turn as Simeon, Timothy and Eugenés also debarked. “I am so pleased that the citizens of Alexandria continue to appreciate your wisdom!” Her smile and her gaze embraced the five of them.

Cleopatra then turned to walk back down the dock with Praetor Hotep at her side. Only after Cleopatra and the eleven Comitia members had left the dock did Histhenes and his administrative staff step off the Praetor’s vessel.

Although the Comitia was notionally in recess the work of administration continued. Histhenes was still having meetings at the first hour of each morning with Hotep, the Senior Praetor and effective Executive Officer for the Tribe. Just as he was leaving one such meeting he received a message from Ptolemy.

*Ptolemy XIV, consort to Pharaoh,
To Pandoros Histhenes, Chief Administrator of Egypt Tribe,*

Warmest greetings!

I have not forgotten the interesting discussions we had together soon after you arrived in Alexandria. I would be very grateful if you could spare the time to resume that custom while you are in Heliopolis. Although this is a fine city, it lacks the proximity to the rest of the world that I found so enjoyable in Alexandria.

Histhenes smiled to himself. Timid Ptolemy has now been so cowed that he is actually inviting me to bed his wife! How accurate was Cleopatra’s opinion of him! He took out a fresh sheet of paper and cut a new nib.

*Pandoros Histhenes,
To Ptolemy XIV, consort of the Pharaoh,*

I would consider it a great honour to resume those meetings you mention. I will certainly make it a matter of highest priority to attend at mid-day whenever you are able to receive me.

Please let me know if you could grant me an hour of your time about noon each day, to take refreshments and discuss matters of common interest. I will call around starting today, to await your pleasure.

This letter was sent immediately by a runner and handed to the gatekeeper in Cleopatra's palace only four hours into the day.

Histhenes presented himself to the gatekeeper dead on noon, with the letter from Ptolemy as his introduction. He was admitted immediately and conducted to the residential wing.

"Pandoros, my friend!" Ptolemy greeted him with a smile and a right arm. "I didn't expect you would be able to respond so quickly. Not a day wasted!" Ptolemy turned as he released Histhenes right arm, waving away the servants. "Come, let us catch up with each other; this way!" as he led Histhenes into his private chambers. As soon as the heavy door closed behind him the bonhomie dropped from his manner. He waved his left hand generally towards another door on the far side of his personal salon. "She is through there," he said dismissively as he turned to his right and made for another room.

Histhenes approached the door indicated by Ptolemy and knocked on it.

"Yes?" a rich, velvety voice answered from the other side.

"Pandoros Histhenes, reporting for duty," Histhenes replied.

There was that distinctive giggle as Cleopatra opened the door. "Such dedication to your duty!" she said admiringly, smiling warmly as she plucked the chest of his chiton and drew him into the room. She closed the door behind him and looked him up and down appraisingly.

Then she nodded once, as if to herself. "Yes, you look like you're still up to the task," she conceded eventually, affecting a shy half-turn away.

Histhenes smiled broadly. Not exactly 'up' to it yet, but that can be fixed within moments," he agreed.

Cleopatra smiled again, and untied her waist sash. She dropped the shoulder of her gown down over her left shoulder, then her right. The silk fell to the floor. Her breasts were rounder, fuller than two years ago. She might have only fed for a couple of months, but that had been enough to make her more voluptuous. Her belly was no longer flat, almost gaunt; it was now firm, with enough conditioning to look as a healthy woman's should. The curve of her thighs was enticing. Histhenes didn't realise how he had responded until she spoke with that giggle again.

"Yes, you are certainly up to it now!" she commented. He realised suddenly that his erection was pushing out the front of the skirt of his chiton.

He smiled sheepishly and untied his own waist sash. "Consider it the sincerest form of compliment," he answered. She stepped forward to reach for his left shoulder and slipped the chiton down his upper arm. He removed his loincloth and stood before her. She smiled sweetly, lifted her arms around his neck, and gently pulled his lips down onto hers. He wrapped his arms around her ribcage and hugged her to him, his penis pressed up against her belly. Her kiss

became more urgent, until she eventually pulled away breathing deeply and her eyes already slightly glazed.

“Oh, it has been so long and so hard for me!” she exclaimed.

“And if you keep behaving like that,” Histhenes answered with a gasp, “it will get even longer and harder!”

Cleopatra burst into laughter, but the fervour didn't fade. Then wrapping her arms firmly around his neck, she leapt up and wrapped her legs around his waist, and then lowered herself onto him. Histhenes moaned as he slipped smoothly into her. Then, one arm at a time, he released his embrace around her body and cupped her buttocks in his hands. Slowly, smoothly, he thrust in and out several times as her soft moans rose in pitch. Then he stopped.

“No! Don't stop! That is SO GOOD!” Cleopatra protested. She tried a few pelvic thrusts herself, but couldn't generate the length of stroke with her thighs wrapped around his waist.

Still cupping her buttocks, Histhenes walked slowly over to the bed, each step effectively another thrust. Her low moaning resumed.

“Unwrap now, Cleopatra,” Histhenes said softly. “I don't want to risk hurting you by falling onto the bed like this.”

“No,” Cleopatra answered. “It has been a year and a half since I last felt this way! Don't stop! Do me over like this!”

Histhenes kissed her gently on the shoulder. “Whatever you say.” The long slow thrusts resumed. Cleopatra responded with a low moan with each stroke. ‘It must have been a long time for her,’ Histhenes thought to himself; ‘She is so hungry for it!’ He deliberately thought of nothing but the sound of her moaning, ignoring as best he could his own rising arousal. Her moans became cries; yes, even with tears, as her climax approached. Histhenes fought of the weakness in his knees as his own juices started to take over. ‘She deserves this one good welcome-home’ he told himself. And then Cleopatra started to thrash back and forth against him, with almost a shriek of ecstasy as she climaxed. Yes, he could feel the tears on his shoulder, as well as the gentle sobs as her chest heaved.

“Oh, Pandoros, you are wonderful!” she whispered between snuffles. “Just hold me still like this, for a little bit longer.”

Histhenes fought down the urge for just one or two stokes more. He had been that close! He stood still, taking her small weight more and more on his arms as her own hold around his neck loosened.

“You are better than ever, Pandoros!” Cleopatra whispered to him. “But I get the impression you hadn't quite finished.”

“Not quite, Cleopatra,” Histhenes confessed.

Cleopatra took some more of her weight on her arms around his neck, and unwrapped her legs. His erection popped out of her. “Then how do you want to finish?” she asked sweetly.

“Sometimes the simple ways are the best,” he answered, gesturing towards the bed. She smiled, stretched out on the bed, and parted her knees. He mounted her slowly, and after only a few long, gentle strokes he was spent. Cleopatra ran

her fingers through the hair on the back of his head. “Stay in there, Pandoros,” she said softly. “Stay in there. If only you could stay in there forever!” He remained over her while he felt his erection subside within her. Eventually he pulled out of her and rose from the bed.

“That alone was worth another set of twins, Pandoros,” Cleopatra said softly. “But please come back tomorrow and we'll make sure of it. And then the day after that...” she smiled gently. Histhenes smiled back. “And then another month after that, just for the fun of it!”

Egypt – 735 AUC (19 B.C.)

Almost a year had passed since the Birthday Celebration and all seemed to be going well. Cleopatra had acted as an effective monarch outside Alexandria, hand-picking who would be elected to the Comitia to represent the Two Lands. Those who had even hinted at any opposition, even by nominating for election without asking her approval first, were handled skilfully; either by charming them into submission or by arranging for their disappearance. It was only the force of her personality that had ensured Alexandria and the Two Lands had not parted ways already. There were so many in the more populous Nile lands who would have been glad to push every last brick and stone in Alexandria into the sea, not caring that its services as a port were crucial to the economy of the Two Lands!

But now she was gone, dying in the delivery of her third child.

Ptolemy XIV was now 40 years old and had never done anything of note. Timid by nature and further cowed by the example Cleopatra had made of Ptolemy XIII when he objected to being no more than her consort, Ptolemy XIV had no public standing and even less private respect. At that time Ptolemy XV and Cleopatra IIX were less than two years old.

The more radical of the priests were becoming bolder and in the Two Lands popular resentment was growing that the Comitia, although now dominated by Egyptians, had not moved quickly enough to bring in land reform and other measures to put Alexandria in its 'proper place'. The time for confrontation was coming.

It was clear that Ptolemy XIV just didn't have the nerve to act against this set of circumstances. He collected as much private wealth as he could and sent it overseas, and then followed it. Most of the court did the same. Ankh-Atum, the Priest of Atum-Ra and now the custodian of the royal children, stepped up and took control of events. He assured all that the elections in December would go ahead, that there would be no intimidation or corruption and that the results would be honoured. He was believed by virtually all of Egypt. Histhenes and Alexandria had no choice but to work with him.

“Greetings, Ankh-Atum, Priest of Atum-Ra,” Eutropes welcomed his guest. As the garrison commander in Egypt, Eutropes had been anxious that he might need to put down a revolt. He was relieved that the initiative of this priest had restored calm without any bloodletting. “I'm sure you already know this, but I must thank you for bringing peace and good order to the Egypts,” he continued. “Be assured that we Alexandrians will do nothing to cause trouble.”

“Thank you for your welcome and your assurances, General,” Ankh-Atum replied in pleasant Greek. Eutropes was impressed; this man was not some rough Egyptian from Upper Egypt as he had feared. Who would have thought that Greek culture had managed to penetrate that far south! “I understand your words to mean that Alexandria will now take its foot off the throat of Egypt.” Suddenly Eutropes suspended his favourable assessment.

“Excuse me, lord Ankh-Atum; could you elaborate?”

Ankh-Atum crossed to a couch and sat uninvited before speaking. “It is to state the obvious to say that Alexandria has nothing to do with Egypt proper, and Egypt regards Alexandria as a completely foreign imposition; thankfully highly localised, but an imposition none the less. For almost three hundred years now Alexandria has lived in luxury by bleeding the wealth out of the Two Lands but now will come the reckoning!” he continued.

“You are very direct, and very confident,” Eutropes said drily.

“Indeed, because both of us know that posturing will not change the facts as they are outside that door,” Ankh-Atum said, inclining his head towards the street outside.

“The facts outside, lord Ankh-Atum, are that Ptolemy XIV is Pharaoh and the effective Ruler of the Two Lands now that Cleopatra is dead but that he has neither the means nor the personality to impose his will on Alexandria. Nor is it in his interests to do so even if he had the means,” Eutropes stated. “Much of his wealth comes from Alexandria, so why would he act to harm it?”

Ankh-Atum smiled a twisted smile. “Oh! So is that why Ptolemy ran for Cyprus?” The priest settled further into the couch. “That claim to be Ruler of the Two Lands would have been an empty boast at any time since Alexander, excepting for the last couple of years under Cleopatra. Up until then the Ptolemies had been absentee landlords rather than Rulers. Right now we have no Pharaoh. Ptolemy never went through the ceremony while Cleopatra lived; Cleopatra wouldn't allow it! And once she died he didn't want to stay. In effect, I speak for young Ptolemy XV and his sister. You can consider me Pharaoh in all but name. And I assure you that I have every intention to impose my will on Alexandria, and I would have no trouble obtaining the means.

“So let me tell you how things will go, so long as I am custodian of Cleopatra's children. There shall be land taxes set so high that the land will not be worth owning, and no-one will be able to sell because there will be no buyers,” Ankh-Atum explained. “The only way any land holder will be able to escape this trap will be giving his land away. And the only person or body who will be prepared to accept the tax liability it will attract will be the Tribal Comitia itself. What can you do, legally, to oppose me? Every peasant in Egypt, being charged half his produce by a hated Macedonian landlord he never sees, will support me! And don't think that your troops will help. All armed forces are now under the control of the Great Senate, so if your garrison steps one sandal outside the city that will mean civil war. I don't have to remind you which side the Republic will support; just ask yourself what the Brutian Law reveals about that question, as well as the precedent of Pompeius in Picenum.”

Eutropes strolled over and sat in the couch opposite. He was impressed not only by this man's polished Greek, but also by his awareness of Republic history and practice. “We could sit here and swap speculations all day, lord Ankh-Atum. But let us try to work towards something more useful. Although we have a Comitia with a clear majority of Egyptians, they are much less radical than you. I doubt they will all follow your whim. But why put it to the test when we

can negotiate our way through these times by co-operation rather than confrontation. What do you propose?"

"That is a very encouraging comment, lord Eutropes," Ankh-Atum replied, using the honorific 'lord' for the first time and smiling more genuinely. "I propose to do exactly as I have said during the term of the next Tribal Comitia. Not this one. If you are wise you will sell all your land immediately. While you can still find a buyer."

Eutropes was becoming more impressed by the minute. Where did this priest from hundreds of miles up-river gain such political nous? And learn such polished Greek? This man was no barbarian!

"I will consider your suggestion, lord Ankh-Atum," Eutropes answered after a pause. "But why are you giving me this warning? Why not simply act, taking me by surprise the same as everyone else?"

"I expect there might be some resistance against those measures by Alexandrian landlords. Futile resistance, of course, but they might do some damage before they can be brought to their senses. And if that happens I want you, as the garrison commander, to support the Tribal Comitia as it exercises its lawful authority. If and when you are called upon to do so, I would not want your loyalty to the Law to be clouded by any hint of a personal conflict of interests."

Eutropes sat still, staring at this priest for more than a minute. "At least I will remain a man of some wealth if I follow your advice, rather than risk all by trying to fight it. But once all the land in Egypt has been resumed in this way, what do you intend to do with it next?"

Ankh-Atum smiled broadly. "The possibilities are endless, lord Eutropes! But in the short term I expect we will simply lease it out to the tenants already farming each particular field, but at a much lower rent. You can be sure of one thing; we Egyptian priests are perhaps the most socially-conservative men in the world. It is time to go back to how it was before the Macedonians changed everything! What we want more than anything else is a return to the Old Ways, when Pharaoh owned everything and all men were secure under his benevolent care."

Eutropes smiled thinly. "And as you said earlier, you can be considered Pharaoh in all but name."

Ankh-Atum returned the smile. "You are a most perceptive man, lord Eutropes."

Egypt – 737 AUC (17 B.C.)

“I was afraid this would happen,” Archites said regretfully to the Museum Curia after he had finished reading the letter from the Praetor to him as Custodian of the Museum. “The Museum was always a Greek institution and survived only by Royal Patronage. Now that Egypt is controlled by the priests and their peasant followers there's no will to spend the money to support us.”

“Is there nothing that can be done about it?” Paracles pleaded.

“There's nothing that can be done about the decision by the Comitia,” Archites answered. “They will not pay us any longer nor furnish our needs. We either support ourselves or find some other Patron rather than the Tribe of Egypt.”

“Who else could afford to support us?” Pythios retorted bitterly. “Everyone here knows how much it costs the city to keep us operating. What private individual would be willing to pour that much money into us, year after year? If we're not supported by the Comitia we can't continue.”

“Couldn't we earn our own income?” Monogenes asked more in hope than conviction. “We could charge the students for our lectures, for copies of our books and for their lodging.”

“How many students do we have who could pay enough to cover their share of our costs, Monogenes? A couple of thousand, perhaps? We would need tens of thousands!” Archites shook his head slowly. “Each of them would have to pay more than ten sestertium milia per year to meet our costs; very few of them could afford to stay with us. The problem is not our salaries and sustenance; it's the cost of maintaining our buildings and grounds and the costs of constantly copying old texts before they fall apart. That's what's eating the money.”

“Then let's sell any buildings and gardens that we don't need. Retain only what is essential,” Monogenes urged. “And let's turn to pressing books rather than continuing with manuscripts.”

“Yes, we could sell some property, I suppose,” Archites conceded. “That would not only provide us with some cash but also cut our maintenance costs. But pressing a book costs more than scribing one. The Pellius Press only saves money if you intend to produce at least a hundred copies.”

“Then let us produce at least a hundred copies of each of the major works,” Monogenes continued. “Indeed, why not thousands of copies? There'll be no problem finding men of wealth who would want their own copies of them. We can start by requiring our students to buy their own copies as reference books, rather than sharing around our precious master copies.”

Archites looked over to Pythios and Paracles, the other Heads of Departments in the Museum. They shrugged, one after another. “Let's at least try it in the short term, Archites,” Paracles said after a pause. “We can sell the old dormitory building and require the students to find their own lodgings; that will bring in enough to operate this year. In the meantime we can look for one or more Patrons and think about setting up our own Press to provide reference books for next year. If this works we can generate enough volume to make it cheaper to

press them ourselves rather than paying a private firm. What we don't sell to students can be sold to the general public.”

“Just so long as we can produce them cheaply enough,” Pythios agreed reluctantly. “But it's worth trying.”

Philip Timotheos, the Tribal Consul of Mesopotamia, was a man in the pattern of the long line of his predecessors. The old Eastern Frontier Province had been originally set up by Sertorius and Telesinus, dynamic men who had no qualms about short-cuts in procedures and even selective reporting back to the Senate. Although Mesopotamia was now a recognised Tribe and those days of derring-do were past, the same spirit of opportunism and dynamism still informed the Tribal Comitia. Timotheos held the position of Tribal Consul, the Chief Magistrate of Mesopotamia, because he epitomised their world-view.

And this, Timotheos realised, was the opportunity of a lifetime staring him in the face. “Thank you for a most impressive presentation, Philemon,” he said to the delegate from the Alexandria Museum as the young Macedonian sat after his sales pitch. “But please allow me to say back to you in my own words what I think you're asking. That is how I know I have understood properly.

“At heart, you're asking me to authorise the payment of tens of thousands of sestertium milia, year after year, by Mesopotamia Tribe to the Museum; in return for which the Tribe gets no more than a thank-you letter and a warm inner glow.”

“No, not at all, Consul!” the Macedonian exclaimed. “Think of the prestige Mesopotamia would earn by being linked to the Museum in such a way! Think of the indirect benefits you would enjoy through the gratitude of thousands of students who will be the leading men of their generation in a few short years' time!”

“So my assessment is correct,” Timotheos concluded, nodding to himself as if the Alexandrian had simply replied 'Yes'. He sat up from his slight slump, and leant forward on his elbows on his desk.

“In summary, you have told me that you expect your annual income from student fees to be about twelve thousand sestertium milia and from publishing you expect another twenty thousand. Apart from property sales, which would obviously not be a source of long-term income, you need an annual income of fifty thousand to cover your basic costs. So you are asking for twenty thousand to close the gap. Any more than that bare minimum would be spent on research.

“Allow me to put to you and the Museum Curia a slightly different proposal,” Timotheos continued. “I suggest you sell all of your property in Alexandria and re-build here in Babylon. Start from scratch, so you will have buildings specially designed for their purpose. Set up your Press here and continue with your plans to support yourself by publishing and by charging modest fees to your students. Your proposed rate of one sestertium milia from each student per year sounds reasonable. Do that, and in return we will write into our Basic Law a requirement that the Tribe will guarantee to you an income of at least sixty thousand sestertium milia each year forever; and additional grants on top of that for specific projects from time to time, if needed.” Timotheos leant

back and smiled. "And that's in addition to a few extra measures which we can introduce to further boost your income. Make no mistake; out here in Mesopotamia we know how to operate at a profit, and I can already see many business opportunities that it appears you have not even imagined!"

Philemon felt his mouth was dry. "A guaranteed sixty thousand each year?"

"That will be just the start of it," Timotheos waved the question away. "I realistically expect something over eighty thousand once we get everything bedded down. We will appoint a Board to the Museum to run it like a proper business and you can be assured that we'll be able to more than double your press income within a couple of years. In fact, you will probably be making ten times your estimates within ten years! Even now I can see markets for your publications that you haven't even considered yet. And that doesn't take into account completely new forms of publications as well."

"A Board? The Curia won't like that idea, Consul. They will insist on being able to make their own decisions."

"And they will be able to make their own decisions about the academic side of things completely free from any interference. They will be able to determine what is to be taught, how it is taught, who is to be placed on staff to teach it and to whom. They will decide who is accredited as a Doctor and who is rejected," Timotheos assured him. "But the Board will have authority over the commercial operations. Things like what books are to be mass-published in addition to your academic syllabus, how many of each are to be pressed, what other material will be pressed, what prices they will be sold for; the commercial side will be there to enable, support and expand the academic side as efficiently as possible. If you bring the Museum to Babylon you will not be a plaything of the Crown as you were in Alexandria. You will be the unchallenged cutting edge of scholarship, autonomous in your academic and research programmes and supported fully as you progress even further in your studies."

"I don't know how to answer you, Consul," Philemon confessed. "This is so different from what I have been instructed to put before you...."

"Then let me send a delegate back to Alexandria with you. He will be able to negotiate directly with the Museum Curia. I'm sure we can give you more than you ever thought possible."

Rome – 740 AUC (14 B.C.)

Abdnebo paced to the focus on the floor of the Great Senate with a theatrical firmness of stride. He had to show confidence here; every bit of bluff would help.

“Conscript Fathers,” he began; but he spoke in Greek, not Latin. “You are all aware of one very influential fact. Very influential throughout the Republic, but amazingly it seems to have had no effect whatsoever in this chamber.” He paused a moment, arms out and palms up, inviting an interjection. “The very fact that no-one has stood to raise a point of order against me is the clearest demonstration possible of what I am about to argue.”

“That interesting fact is simply this; that Greek is spoken so widely now that not one of you objected that I am not addressing you in Latin. Every one of you is so comfortable with the Greek language that I would dare to say that most of you didn't even notice that I was using that language!”

Abdnebo started strolling the floor as he resumed speaking. “Of course, you are all well-educated and cultured men, so it is not surprising that you are comfortable with Greek. But if you take into account the men of the lower Classes you will find that most of them can also converse in that language; and that is true even if I confine myself to Rome itself! But if you look at the Republic as a whole you might be surprised that five times more of our citizens customarily speak in Greek than speak in Latin. That's right, Conscript Fathers! Outside this chamber, the Republic speaks Greek! Latin is little more than a local dialect!” He turned on his right heel.

“In my city of Babylon, Latin is never heard in the street. Even in our Tribal Comitia, Latin is only used when reading a document written in that tongue; and invariably the only such documents are those sent to us by this Great Senate. All discussion about that document is in Greek, except where quoting. All of our courts use Greek and the same is true in all lands west of the Adriatic; and even in Gaul, the language of common use is Gallic, not Latin, and their second language is Greek. Latin is the third language there!” Abdnebo stopped suddenly, for dramatic effect.

“So why are members of my Tribe being punished for being Greek-speakers?” He scanned the terraces, hands on hips and nodding slightly.

“Five days ago, a case was brought by a Roman trader against a competitor from my Tribe. The Babylonian merchant had a good defence; I know him personally and we spoke about the complaint against him before the court opened. But as soon as his advocate stood to rebut the prosecution opening address, he was silenced. The Counsel for the prosecution raised the point of order that the case must be conducted in Latin!” Abdnebo looked around him incredulously.

“For twenty years now we have had legal cases in which witnesses have been able to testify in Greek. It's not as though jurors don't understand the language; I would wager that there would not be one man on the Jurors' List that would be unable to follow even a complex argument in that language! I know of cases where either party has even used Greek advocates,

speaking Greek, without objection. But this Roman trader knew that his case was weak. He knew that if it was heard fairly he would lose. So he hauled out an old Statute from hundreds of years ago! And he did this not to promote justice but to avoid it!

“The presiding judge, a man of complete integrity, had no choice but to insist that this archaic law be honoured. He ordered the defendant's advocate to speak Latin, a language in which he was not very proficient. This detracted from his presentation to the point that he stumbled in his oratory, being forced to mentally translate his prepared address on the run. The crowd started laughing at his accent and tentative delivery. And because he was less familiar with precise legal terminology in Latin compared to his native Greek, he was continually baited and subjected to entrapment, not for anything of substance but purely on the grounds of nuanced meanings.” Abdnebo scanned the terraces again.

“This Republic prides itself on justice, and rightly so!” he declaimed. “Anything that prevents a man from defending himself freely when subjected to prosecution is unjust. This ancient Statute requiring that only Latin may be used in court dates back to the days when all citizens were Latin-speakers, and it was intended to ensure that evidence was given in a language understood by the jurors. But for it to be used for the sole purpose of denying a man the ability to defend himself is not justice! It is the exact opposite!”

“I therefore urge this Senate to decree that true justice is uppermost in our courts. I urge the declaration that Greek be accorded equal status with Latin in this Republic. And I thank you all for your affirmation of the rights of three-quarters of our citizens.”

East Africa – 744 AUC (10 B.C.)

Eugenus Philippos was bemused. This river had an enormous outflow, so it obviously had a huge catchment behind it. That would mean a great deal of good land and all the opportunities that presented for trade. And surely trade would be focussed here at the mouth of the river. Yet there was no sign of any habitation, not even a village. Perhaps it was time to go for a row up the river.

It didn't take long for him to see a small cluster of low shelters by the river. He ordered the longboat to pull up next to them. Soon the boat was aground. He stepped into the shallow water and walked towards the shelters, little more than strips of bark draped over a ridge pole between two uprights. He called for his Bantu translator to come with him.

“What sort of people are these, Mebende?” he asked impatiently. “Look at these shelters! They would blow away in any sort of wind at all!”

“I have seen nothing like it, Eugenus,” Mebende agreed. Then he called aloud “Let us meet in peace!” in Bantu. There was no response. Philippos grew impatient with waiting. He walked to one of the shelters and looked into one open end. There was a multi-pronged spear on a mat of roughly woven stalks, with a fish still impaled on it. He took it. He turned to the fire, still smouldering, in the cleared area in the middle of the huddle.

“Mebende, have you seen a spear like this one?” he asked. “Is it like anything you have seen among your people?”

Mebende studied the way the prongs had been formed. It seemed that the end of a spear had simply been split multiple times and the slivers driven apart. “No, that is nothing like our way, not even among the older people. It looks like the work of a child! But we don't do all that much fishing, so these people might be different.”

That's a good point, Mebende; I see no sign of farming or animal herds. What sort of people live entirely by hunting?”

“All Bantu have their herds, even if they don't farm,” Mebende assured him. “Perhaps we need to look further.” He placed the fishing spear back inside the shelter.

Philippos looked into the next shelter. Another mat and in one corner a bag made of woven strips torn from a palm leaf. He looked inside and found a few small bananas and other fruit. These people were genuinely hunters and gatherers, with no sign of durable tools, furniture or shelter. They must pack up and move often.

“Let's go further up the river,” Philippos suggested. Half an hour later another small settlement was sighted, this time with children playing in the shallow water and two women weaving more palm-leaf baskets. One of the children noticed the rowboat approaching. He pointed and squealed. The women looked up and saw the boat as well, then called urgently to the children. Most came when called, but there were two young ones who were too fascinated by what they saw. They stood in the shallows, watching.

“Pull hard, lads,” Philippos urged his rowers. “Put me ashore as close to those women and as soon as you can!”

Even as he spoke, one woman started running for the forest, leading the children and calling urgently. The other ran for the two transfixed children. She picked up one under each arm and turned, but by this time the boat was running aground. Philippos jumped from the prow and caught her within a dozen paces, holding her above the elbow. Mebende was on his heels.

The woman immediately dropped the children, shouting commands at them. They ran away after the others.

“Please, Mebende, tell her that we mean no harm. We just want to talk!”

“I didn't understand a word of what she said to the children, Eugenēs. I didn't even recognise it as a language.”

“Then use your own language first; there might be some words in common.”

Mebende smiled at the woman. “Do not fear us. We will do you no harm. We want to talk to your people and trade with them.”

The woman looked confused. She answered with a stream of sounds full of clicks and whistles. Mebende frowned.

“It is not just that I don't understand her; she's not even speaking! It is just babble, with all sorts of sounds that are not words. It's like chimpanzees chattering at each other.” And then Mebende looked her up and down more closely.

“Look at her, Philippos; she's wearing no clothing at all, not even a hide. Her face is all out of proportion, her eyelids are strange, and she is not even as tall as my armpit. And look at the shape of her buttocks!” Mebende was completely at a loss. The woman uttered another stream of unintelligible sounds.

Philippos looked her over more carefully now that she had given up on trying to shake her arm free. The cheekbones were very high, higher even than the Bantu. The eyelids had a second fold over them, like he had seen in some people from the remote east, but the skin colour was very different. The hair was in tight curls, even more so than the Bantu. But she was very short and her buttocks were huge, projecting out at right angles from the line of her spine.

“Is she human, or is she really just another type of ape?” Mebende asked.

“I wouldn't say she's an ape, but she is certainly not a human like us,” Philippos answered. “So is she a different type of human or is she something less?” Philippos released his grip and the woman scampered away as quickly as she could. “They make fishing spears, even if very simple in form, and they can weave. That sounds human.”

“Birds weave nests, and chimpanzees break off branches to make clubs, but they are not human,” Mebende answered him. “You from the Republic know more about strange lands and peoples than I do, but can you recall any nation that doesn't have any clothing at all, or who don't build at least huts? But these, these... whatever they are!... do neither! And they don't even talk properly, just clicks and grunts. Even their bodies are not like real humans.”

Philippos was not quite persuaded. "I've seen many different shapes and sizes of people," he commented. "I must tell you that although Tamils have dark skin like you Bantu, their faces are much more like us Greeks than your faces. Perhaps your opinion is influenced by your language; doesn't 'Bantu' simply mean 'People'? So when you say that these strangers are not 'people', you are really saying no more than that they're not Bantu. But are they human? That's the real question."

"I have already given you that answer, Eugenēs. They have no clothes, they have no buildings, they have no language, they neither farm nor keep herds, and even their weapons are little more than a monkey could make. Decide for yourself!"

Philippos sought out Mebile when the ship returned to the plantation. The elder was one of the oldest of the Bantu and almost totally blind now, but he still had his wits about him.

"Lord Mebile, we saw some strangers in our trip to the south," Philippos started after the formal greetings had been exchanged. "We only saw a female up close. She had high cheekbones and a fold over each eyelid and her buttocks were huge. Do you know of any such people?"

Mebile stiffened. "I know of such creatures from my youth. They are not people, they are animals."

"What do you know of them?" Philippos pressed.

"When the People first came to this place, these animals were everywhere. They killed some of our cattle, as if they were wild animals and not owned by us. They stole our seed for the next planting season. They are overgrown chimpanzees, not people!"

"What happened to them?"

"Those we could, we killed; just like any other pest or predator. The rest of them moved away for their own safety."

"What sort of weapons did they have?" Philippos pushed harder.

"Hardly any; they are monkeys, not people. They used sticks with sharpened points, not real spears. And clubs that were no more than short lengths of branches they whittled at one end to form a grip."

"And their houses?"

"They didn't know how to build a house; they lived between rocks with a few twigs over them to support banana leaves. Or sometimes they would lean twigs and leaves against both sides of a low horizontal branch, and crawl into the tunnel for shelter."

"Thank you, lord Mebile. I will be careful of them if I see them again." Philippos took his leave.

So that's why Mebile is so insistent these strangers are not people, Philippos mused to himself. These Bantu slaughtered them and drove them out of their homeland. A guilty conscience that looks for peace by denying the humanity of the victims! But perhaps they're right, he had to concede to himself. That strange female was so far below even the most primitive barbarian he had

ever seen or heard about. Maybe they really were something short of fully human. We will find out over time.

The enforced idleness came to an end three days later. The harvesting and primary treatment of his cargo had been completed and Philippos was ready to sail. He visited the plantation office for the last time to sign the paperwork and take his formal leave. Metunga rose from his office chair to greet him.

“Thank you for your patience, Eugenese; the crop was very late in ripening this year, but that's in the hands of the gods, not ours.”

“It was not time wasted, Metunga,” Philippos replied cheerfully. “It gave me a chance to explore further south. I managed to fill in a couple of blank spaces in the charts.”

“Oh, really? Would it be possible for me to have a copy of those charts?” Metunga asked.

“I'd have to delay another day to produce a copy and I'm already late,” Philippos answered. “Perhaps if I bring it with me on my next voyage?”

“Thank you, but I don't expect to be here much longer. Mine is one of the clans selected to go south.”

“Why would you move away?” Philippos asked.

“Haven't you noticed how many there are of us now?” Metunga asked by way of reply. “Our numbers have more than doubled over the last twenty-five years, and there's a vast amount of land still to be claimed. For generations beyond counting our ancestors expanded from their homeland in the far west, moving eastwards and taming the empty land as they went. When they reached the coast, some turned north but our ancestors turned south, settling the land as they went. Now that we have made this area productive we will go the next step south. Perhaps my great-grandson will do the same after me.”

“There are strange people to the south, Metunga; be careful,” Philippos warned him.

“Oh, you've heard about the Monkey People, have you?” Metunga asked with a chuckle. “Don't worry, we will move them out one way or another,” he assured Philippos.

“Well, take care, my friend. May the gods be with you,” said Philippos as he signed the shipping manifest. Yes, these people had a vested interest in thinking of those strangers as sub-human. Well, it was not his problem.

East Africa – 747 AUC (7 B.C.)

It's strange how insignificant things can decide greater issues. A late ripening of the crop three years ago had allowed Philippos the time to chart another few hundred miles of the African coast further south. He then left copies of his new charts with the Mapping Authority, as the law required; the Republic Government wanted all exploration knowledge to be publicly available, to stimulate more trade and thereby more income. This was much to the anger of the African merchants who had kept their sources of cheap gold a well-kept secret up to now. Some of them, very foolishly, declared only those charts that they knew were widely-known and they kept to themselves the charts of their secret, more profitable trading points. It didn't take long for the Republic to offer rewards to any sailors who might inform on any masters or traders who were guilty of this deceit, and this resulted in several very wealthy men being utterly broken. Suddenly, more charts that had been 'accidentally misplaced' during the original period of disclosure were re-discovered and disclosed.

Now that the African traders had been forced to make their maps public it had been discovered that they had mapped a substantial portion of the West African coast, down to where it turned to the east almost at the Equator. It now appeared that there was more than a thousand miles of uncharted coastline to close the gap between the coast south of the Senegal region and the Bantu settlements. Would this territory come under the influence of Mesopotamia or Africa? The two most trade-oriented Tribes in the Republic were in a race to stake their claims.

So Philippos had been given a special mandate by the Tribal authorities in Babylon. He was ordered to chart down the east coast, around the expected corner, and then westwards to close the gap. This must be done with all haste on the outward journey to establish priority, and then in more detail on the return journey.

Establishing latitude was not usually that difficult. Sighting the elevations of a few stars near the North Pole then referring to tables that had been prepared ahead of time by the mathematicians in Babylon Museum provided a north-south location to an accuracy of a mile provided the readings were equally accurate. But they already knew that this only worked if the navigator was far enough north to sight those stars at a good elevation. If he was south of the equator the horizon haze and diffraction would make readings of all of the circumpolar stars unreliable.

The star-gazers and mathematicians at the Museum had been told about this problem and had come up with an answer, in so far as they could. Babylon could not accurately sight any stars within 35 degrees of the South Pole, so they couldn't prepare tables for the genuinely circumpolar stars of the south. But doing what they could with the stars that were visible to them, they prepared similar tables and charts. These were so far from the true pole that any errors in readings would be greatly magnified, but they were at least something. Then a series of secondary techniques were developed and described that would give more

accurate results but required longer periods of time, up to an hour, with repeated readings as quickly as they could be made to establish the angle of highest elevation of a star as it crosses the meridian.

So yes, latitude could be determined. But how could a sailor determine his position east or west? For most ocean voyages the technique was to simply get to the correct latitude as soon as conveniently possible and then just track due east or west until you sighted your destination. East-west distances were then calculated on the basis of measured speed and dead reckoning. Dead reckoning worked well enough if you were going fast enough for the influence of currents to be unimportant; but good cartography required low speeds. In these circumstances the influences of current direction and speed became much more important.

Oh, well; he was collecting a good fee for this expedition so he would simply do the best he could and see what happened. He had made a point of stopping at the new settlement sent south from the Plantation just after his earlier mapping expedition, an act of final courtesy. It was interesting that this new settlement was autonomous in the tradition of the Bantu migration for generations now but it was also consciously making a point of staying in regular contact with its parent settlement. The Plantation Bantu were also trekking back to the north and west, re-establishing links with other settlements that had been set up during their dispersion. The Plantation clans were taking very seriously the concept of a unified Bantu Nation. The Council of Elders in the Plantation officially said that this arose from ancestral solidarity and a desire to share with their kin. Philippos suspected that there might be some truth in this, but the main reason was a desire to pull together a significant Body Politic so they could press for full Tribal status within the Republic as soon as possible.

So far all seemed to be going well. He had already passed the previous furthest point south on the old charts and all three of his ships were in good order. The coast had continued to trend almost due south until just below fifteen degrees south, and then curved away to the west. With any luck that would be the start of a long curve to bring them on a course due west and then to the north-west

But that was not to be. The line of the coast remained stubbornly south-west, and even started to dip back to the south again. Patience, Philippos commanded himself. But then he saw something that dismayed him. A vast river delta, with multiple channels. Even half a mile offshore the water was distinctly fresher than the open sea. Such a river must have thousands of square miles behind it to capture so much water! He shouldn't expect any turn to the west very soon.

And this proved to be true; in fact, worse than true. The south-west trend continued for another one hundred and fifty miles, and then kicked back towards the east, to trend south-south-east. It was yet another two hundred miles before the curve to the west resumed.

At twenty-five degrees south the general trend was now slightly more west than south, and confidence of a turn for the better had crept back into his heart. The great river was so far to the north that surely he must be beyond its catchment

now! But then another disappointment; another major river mouth, which meant another major catchment behind it. And true to expectations, The trend continued, until one degree further south the coast turned back at him to run almost due north-south.

Philippos dared not to hope again, even as the coast over the next thousand miles slowly swung further and further towards the west. No major river mouths were seen, either.

After another thousand miles the coast was finally running east-west and hope flickered to life. Even the stretch of a hundred and fifty miles where the general line ran substantially south of true west seemed uncertain of itself, and again was not interrupted by a major river.

Then it happened; the coast turned well to the north of due west. Philippos felt that this time he had turned the corner. Less than a hundred miles further he sailed into a vast bay, twenty miles across. He ordered anchors to be dropped and sent parties ashore. This would be more than a watering stop, he decided. We will make camp and celebrate!

It was now the seventeenth day of Quinctilis; Neptunalia was due to start on the nineteenth. Philippos made a firm decision; they would observe Neptunalia and thus ensure Neptune's blessing for the rest of the journey. Surely arriving at this place on this date was an omen!

"Pithes!" he called to his First Officer. "Put a hunting party ashore! I want them to capture a bull of some sort."

"Capture, sir? Not kill?"

"Kill a few if you like; the meat will be good for a feast. But first priority is to capture something for a sacrifice," he explained.

"Ah! I see," Pithes grasped the idea. "Koleos!" he called for the commander of the small Marine detachment on board, "Get your men ready for a hunt. And bring plenty of ropes and cargo nets. Your slaves can act as porters."

The twenty men of the hunting party pushed into the open woodlands, east of the other men preparing the camp in a clearing near the shoreline. There would be no hunting that close to the noise of human activity. Half a mile into the walk they came across a strange creature. Pithes motioned for a halt.

"What is that?" he asked Koleos at his side. "Is it a bear or a monkey?"

"Look a bit further; there must be a dozen of them," Koleos ignored the question.

The nearest animal had heard them. He turned to look for the source of the strange sound, and fixed his eyes on Koleos. He reared onto his hind legs and called; the other animals responded slowly, menacingly coming to the apparent leader and confronting the party.

"They do seem half-bear and half-monkey, don't they?" Pithes commented. "And both can be aggressive. Let's scare them away; I don't want them behind us as we hunt."

Pithes shouted at the troop of animals and waved his arms, advancing on them. This did not bring the result he was expecting. The lead animal reared up again and made his own show of defiance, his canine teeth long and white.

“Right, Koleos; let's take them out with crossbows, please,” Pithes suggested. Koleos snappily ordered his men to form into a shooting line and load. “Number off from the end closest to you and fire at the corresponding animal on command. Ready? Shoot!”

The whine of flights filled the air, and most of the animals went down. Two grabbed at the projecting shafts of the arrows monkey-fashion, and screamed their pain before turning and attempting to flee. Neither made more than ten paces before falling. The party continued through the scrub.

The noise had attracted some attention. Within minutes they saw a group of small, dark-skinned men coming towards them through the low scrub on a slight ridge. They carried light wooden spears, sharpened at one end but without spearheads. One of them, apparently their leader, held up a hand and smiled. Stopping a few paces away, he made a series of clicks, whistles and other sounds.

“What sort of language was that?” Pithes asked.

“Nothing that I've ever heard,” Koleos answered. “But look at them; not a stitch of clothing. And do you see how their penises don't hang properly; they come out at an angle, as if half-erect.”

“Perhaps these are the monkey-men that Eugenex saw a few years ago. He told me about their females having huge buttocks but he never mentioned their males.”

The stranger made another series of sounds and waited for a reply.

“Perhaps they're asking if we are in any trouble with the animals. He seems friendly enough,” Koleos ventured.

“Perhaps,” Pithes agreed. “Let's take him back to the animals; his people might use them for food. If nothing else it will show him that we're not to be treated lightly, in case they get any silly ideas.” Pithes gestured a 'follow me', and started walking back to the fallen baboons. The strangers followed.

Pithes walked up to one of the dead animals, lifted it, and laid it at the feet of the native leader, smiling as he did so. The leader smiled back. Pithes then gestured around to all the dead animals, and then palms-up towards the party of monkey-men. The leader smiled again, turned to his followers and gave another series of strange sounds. The other monkey-men immediately lifted an animal each over a shoulder and started to walk away.

“I presume they said 'Thank you', but in a language I don't understand,” Koleos commented wryly.

Pithes set off in a different direction this time, looking for more open grassed areas instead of the low scrubby bushes on the low ridges. It took more than an hour before they found a small group of – well, they looked somewhat like horses but they had horns like a goat.

“This is the strangest place I have ever seen,” Koleos muttered. “Everything we see looks half of one animal and half of another!”

“The Captain wants us to capture a bull of some sort; he wants to sacrifice it to Neptunus. But I don't think we'll find any bulls around here. We might have to settle for a stallion or a buck of some sort.”

“My guess is that the one with the larger horns is a buck, and the others are females,” Koleos suggested. “But how do we capture him without killing him?”

That's why we have the nets,” Pithes answered. “I had intended to hang them between trees and drive the animals into them, but there are not enough trees here. Let's just lay them out on the ground; then when we drive the animals over them, they should trip and become entangled.”

Koleos nodded his understanding and started ordering his men to unpack, unwrap and spread the netting over the grass in a wide strip.

“Now men,” he said when that was finished, “half one way and half the other to circle around that little herd, and scare them to run over the nets. Bel, you take your contubernium to the left, I'll lead to the right.”

The animals, which Pithes decided to call 'deer' for want of a better word, were wary as the men circled around them at a distance of some fifty paces, but didn't panic. Pithes formed the opinion that the monkey-men didn't hunt large animals but were more scavengers and gatherers, so these deer didn't consider humans a threat. Eventually the men had formed a ring around the deer some fifty paces in radius and spaced out at about twelve paces between them. By far the largest gap in their ring was the thirty-pace stretch of cargo netting laid over the top of the coarse grass and invisible to the deer.

The men started to move inwards at a slow walk. The deer merely stayed watchful at first but when the distance was down to thirty paces they started to move. After milling around for a moment, they started a slow trot towards the gap between the men, and towards the netting. The men continued their slow advance.

The distance between the men and the deer was down to about fifteen paces now, a semi-circle based on the line of the net. Then the buck bolted for the gap. The two does and two fawns followed immediately. The buck stumbled and fell as he tripped over the ropes of the netting, and the four men at the corners of the net lifted it as high as they could. Those closest to them ran along the edges, lifting the net to ensure the beasts couldn't break free. Then they threw the edges over the animals to bundle them firmly. Their horns were caught in the netting, and they went down on one side. The buck was quickly bound at the hooves and a carrying pole passed between his bindings. Only then was the net cut away to untangle him. The females and young were released.

Three men were ordered to take each end of the carry pole and lift it to their shoulders. The buck thrashed as he was lifted upside down. The men then started walking back to camp, the others forming a lookout and guard against any dangers. Pithes looked again at the beast again. Obviously a male, but was it enough like a bull to satisfy Neptunus?

Philippos was in the camp onshore when they returned. Pithes hailed him as he approached with the strange deer that was half-horse, half goat.

“Do you think this will be close enough to a bull to make Neptunus happy?” he asked anxiously. “The last thing I want to do so far from home is to insult the god.”

Philippos looked at the strange animal, and then chuckled. “Not a problem at all, Pithes! We are Greeks, not Romans, so he has given us a horse instead to honour him as Poseidon! But the horns are there as an acknowledgement of him in his Latin guise. Nothing could be better!”

Pithes was relieved. Of course, what Eugenēs said made perfectly good sense. The sacrifice tomorrow would be perfect.

It seemed that Philippos was right. As soon as they rounded the western headland of the great bay the coast set resolutely northwards. Poseidon had favoured them! But the land off the starboard beam became drier and the vegetation sparser as they continued northwards. Eventually it was a great desert with no sign of life or water. This would be a bad place to be forced ashore.

Eventually, one and a half thousand miles north from the Bay of Poseidon, the land started to look survivable. Anxiety levels among the crews dropped, at least so long as no-body thought about the return trip still ahead of them.

The land continued to grow greener as they progressed northwards until they came to the mouth of another enormous river at six degrees south. Once again, the water was still brackish even a mile offshore, so great was the outflow. The voyage continued.

Philippos had absolutely no confidence of his longitude by now. Dead reckoning for months on end was wildly inaccurate, with unknown currents and only occasional and approximate sightings to determine a true north-south line. Although he had continued making such sightings and measurements as he could, and had continued to treat these as 'fact', this would only serve to restore some sense of proportion to the corrections he knew would come later. All he knew with any degree of accuracy was that he was now three degrees south, and the coast was continuing to trend well to the west. This was starting to worry him.

Because according to his reckoning, he was already well to the west of the end of the coast as shown on the charts provided by the Africans. There must soon be a huge gulf or something to lead him back towards the end of the African charts; or otherwise his plots were even more inaccurate than he had feared.

At last the coast started to bend back to the east, but this did not last long enough to get him back on the expected plot. But then, just past 4 degrees north, what he feared came to pass. The coast now ran slightly south of due west. This continued for two hundred miles, by which time he was only one degree, about eighty Roman miles, south of the end of the African charts; but almost a thousand miles too far west. Or so his dead reckoning told him. He stared at his charts and came close to tearing them up in his exasperation.

The coast started to trend strongly north again, but it would be a most amazing co-incidence if there were an inlet almost a thousand miles long, just a few miles beyond the end of the African charts. That would be too strange to be true. He continued his mapping.

Two days later he reached the latitude of the end of the West African charts, and was still almost a thousand miles to the west. All he could do now was plot the coast as accurately as possible on the small scale until his shapes

started to match the coast on his West African charts. Then he would know where the overlap was and how much of his westerly progress was false. Then he could divide that distance by the number of days travelling and make that correction eastwards on his own plots as it accumulated day by day.

It took only ten days more to realise that his last seven hundred miles of coastline corresponded with the African charts. The mis-close on his charts was nine hundred and eight miles, about four and a half miles westward drift per day. That was a lot but not impossible, given the unknowns of ocean currents and inaccuracies in knowing exact headings. He had something to work with now.

The return trip was slower, due to the need to chart the coasts more accurately. It was the three hundred and fifty-eighth day since they had celebrated Neptunalia when they sailed into the Bay of Poseidon again.

“Guess what I have in mind, Pithes,” he said with a smile.

“I would guess seven days of rest and repairs, followed by a sacrifice and feast,” Pithes answered. “Will I give the order to make camp in the same place?”

“Yes, please. And that feast will need another Poseidon Horse, so start looking for another herd we can hunt when the time comes. We need all the divine favour we can get.”

Thus started the tradition that was to be observed for more than four hundred years. Although only four journeys around the tip of South Africa were made in the following forty years, every one of them offered a sacrifice of a Poseidon Horse, or Red Hartebeest as it is known to you, my readers. Later, when the Limpopo became a boom province and the number of voyages increased dramatically, the custom was continued. Domestication and breeding of Hartebeest to supply this tradition became one of the major industries in the area.

Developments – 719 AUC (35 B.C.) to 753 AUC (1 B.C.)

1. Throughout this period the Black Sea Colonies had continued to expand and trade along the rivers from the north. They grew rapidly. The German lands along the south-eastern coast of the Baltic started to be dependent to some degree on their trade with the Republic.
2. The Dacian Frontier Province was re-named 'Danubia' in 33 B.C.. In 10 B.C. The province was accepted as a Tribe.
3. Simultaneously, minor tribes along the Dalmatian coast allied to the Republic started to press down onto their inland neighbours, looking for good farming lands along the Middle Danube. The Republic paid little attention to these skirmishes at first, but as they built into a general displacement of whole tribes the Senate stepped in. King Burebista had already unified several West Dacian tribes and there was a fear that this could serve as a nucleus to include all of the formerly disparate Celtic, Illyrian and Dacian tribes into a confederacy for self-defence. This could too easily grow into a barbarian counter-attack. In 33 B.C. a treaty was made; in return for intervention to restrain the Dalmatians, recognition of the existing claims of the tribes south of the Danube and defence of their autonomy against Burebista's Dacians north of the Danube, these barbarians south of the Danube agreed to permit peaceful trade and immigration by Republic citizens.
4. This was followed in 31 B.C. by the collapse of the Dacian Kingdom north of the Danube. The Republic rapidly moved into this power vacuum to claim the entire Hungarian Plain as the Province of Pannonia. The formerly allied coastal Dalmatian tribes were incorporated into this new Province.
5. This surge forward in Republic influence, combined with the perceived weakness of the Celtic Boii in Bohemia, prompted the expansion of the German Confederation and their ultimatum that the Boii join the Confederation lest they succumb to the Republic. The Boii capitulated to this in 28 B.C., the Confederation offering significantly greater autonomy than the probable alternative from the Republic, which would have been the status of but one minor tribe within a Province.
6. The German Confederation, alert to the trading influence the Republic was establishing along the Vistula, pressed to extend its own influence into these areas rather than risk being outflanked. By 15 B.C. The German Confederation included, at least nominally, all of Germania Magna and even some Samartans as far as the River Nieman.

Babylon – 753 AUC (1 B.C.)

Jupiter was universally known to be the greatest of the gods. Likewise Venus was acclaimed as the foremost goddess. But in June last year, a truly astounding thing had happened. Their planets came together! Not even the sharpest eye could separate them. And this occurred near Regulus, the bright star at the heart of the Lion!

Surely this is an omen of prodigious proportions. This must indicate the conception of a child somewhere, a child worthy of Jupiter as his father and Venus as his mother, and who will have the heart of a lion! Since this was seen low in the west soon after sunset, many astrologers in Babylon were predicting that this birth would occur in the west, soon after the death of some pre-eminent man symbolised by the sun. But since almost the entire Republic was west of Babylon and significant men were dying every year, this did not give much clearer guidance.

For nine months since that fearful union in the heavens the whole world had held its breath. The birth of that child must be at hand. What will be revealed as this child reaches maturity?

This omen had sparked a great revival of interest in Astronomy. It had also inspired Solon Kalothos with an idea. Everyone knew that a simple glass lens could make an object appear larger and help one see finer detail; but this was of no use in Astronomy because a magnifying glass had to be held immediately over an object to study it. Obviously this could not be done to stars! But Kalothos knew more than most men about lenses and their properties. As the Head Glassworker at the Babylon Glass Works and therefore their chief technician, he understood concepts such as focal length and virtual imaging. In a moment of inspiration he realised that two lenses, of different focal lengths and held in precise alignment, should be able to create a magnified image of something even as distant as the stars! Instead of having to hold a single lens close to the planet, the first larger lens would create a virtual image; then the smaller lens could be held close to this virtual image, to magnify it as if it were a real object!

Immediately he obtained two different-sized lenses, mounting one on the end of a rod and setting the other in a frame attached to the rod. With care and patience he crept the larger lens along the rod, seemingly a hair's width at a time, and looking through the smaller lens at the end of the board. Eventually he found that sweet spot, where a magnified image of a distant tree snapped into focus. It seemed so much closer that he felt that he could reach out and touch it. It was upside down, as he expected, but the principle worked. For the purposes of astronomy, up-side down did not matter. He could simply turn his charts upside-down to suit. He set his lenses in a tube, with a rack-and-pinion holder for the smaller lens for fine control of the focus, and asked for a meeting with the Governor to demonstrate his new device. Being Greek and employed in Greek-speaking Babylon, he called his invention the 'telescope', meaning 'seeing far'.

This had led to his appointment to the Babylon Museum under the Head of

Astronomy, with particular responsibility for making and recording observations; so he was now being paid to do what he had, up to this time, funded out of his own income as a private hobby. He was also provided with an ample house, the roof of which served as the Museum Observatory.

Soon he had even more funding to construct a much larger and more precise instrument. That was last year.

Now the assembly was complete. He now had a steel tube, painted black on the inside to reduce unwanted reflections, and at the front was mounted the most precise lens of that size ever ground in the renowned Babylon Glass Works factory. It was over a handspan in diameter, allowing it to gather more light to detect even faint stars, and its precision allowed magnification to over one hundred times without significant loss of clarity. Provided, of course, that the very much smaller lens at the back end was equally accurately ground. He inserted the small tube in which he had mounted the small lens, looked through it, and worked the pinion until the image snapped into focus. The distant barge being towed up the Euphrates was breathtakingly clear! Even though it must be ten miles away, he could read the lettering on its side! This was going to be the greatest step forward in Astronomy since men started looking at the sky!

The greatly-anticipated ninth month had come and gone without any further portent in the sky. Perhaps somewhere there was an infant destined to change the world, perhaps not; but the month of observations since the telescope had been available had been such a cascade of astounding surprises that Kalothos had not had time to wonder. He had seen that the moon was not smooth but rough, with high points casting shadows and the line of darkness at half-moon was jumbled and uneven rather than a geometrically perfect curve. And he had seen that Venus not only grew brighter as it started to fall back towards the Sun in the evening sky, but also showed phases like the moon and varied in size.

But most surprising was Jupiter. It was accompanied by four smaller stars, which were sometimes on one side of the planet, sometimes on the other, but usually scattered apparently randomly on both sides. Sometimes only three, or even two, were visible; but if he waited long enough, he would see one re-emerge from the body of the planet, as though being disgorged.

Then he saw something surprising. One evening there were three companion stars visible, and he was expecting the fourth to re-appear from the disc of Jupiter. As he was plotting the relative distances to these stars, the fourth appeared; but instead of separating from Jupiter's disc, it appeared at least a diameter away! It was as if a black cloth had been hiding it, and the cloth had then been taken away! Kalothos was stunned. What was happening here?

He finished his observations and turned this over in his mind. These companion stars were always of a steady brightness, unlike some that seem to vary over a period of months or more; they certainly didn't go from being invisible to full brightness in a matter of moments! He will need to not only plot positions henceforth, but spend some extended time to see if this happens often.

Well, that was all the observations he needed to do right now; his next observations will be of Mars and Saturn, just before dawn. He will sleep until

then. He turned for the upper room built on the roof to shelter the staircase from the weather. Down in the atrium of his house there was one torch left alight, as was always the case so he could come and go in safety. The shadows cast by the columns around his peristyle were dark, but this was no problem. He heard his pet cat meow in the darkness, and he stood still and looked around to locate it. Another call, and it seemed to be off to his right. As he watched he saw his cat walk out from a corner where it had been obscured by a column. The cat continued to walk, this time into the shadow of that same column, and it was lost in the relative darkness of the background. Then it re-appeared again as it continued walking out of that shadow.

The realisation hit Kalothos like a mallet. Those companion stars don't join with Jupiter and then separate from it; they must circle around the planet! Sometimes they're in line and their brightness is lost against the disc of Jupiter, and sometimes they are behind it and hidden. But the star that appeared suddenly, some distance away, was coming out from a shadow!

That must mean that neither Jupiter itself nor the companion stars shine of their own power, or they would be visible at all times. Both Jupiter and the companion stars must shine only because there is something else throwing light upon them. And then he recollected that Venus showed phases, just like the moon. It was obvious that the lunar phases were the result of the sun shining on the Moon, so perhaps the phases of Venus were due to the same cause. And that could mean that Jupiter and its companions were also visible only because of the light of the sun! Kalothos felt his mouth go dry. If this is true, then it will change everything! He must check carefully to make sure that this guess is supported by the most careful observations before he says anything.

Over the next few days Kalothos thought carefully about what measurements he should take and how to measure these observations accurately enough. It would not be enough to simply estimate the distances of the companion stars on the basis of eye-balling the gap relative to the diameter of Jupiter. But he could rely on one thing; the stars all seemed to move across the sky at a constant speed; it was one of the more annoying parts of making observations when he magnified an image by one hundred times, that this speed across his field of view was also made one hundred times faster and he had to continually adjust the pointing of the telescope.

But now he could make that difficulty a virtue; he had another eyepiece made, this one with crosshairs mounted at precisely even spaces to allow accurate measurements to be made. Do the same for each companion, and do the same at exactly the same time each night, so the time between measurements is also perfectly evenly spaced. Over a few months he will have enough observations to see if the idea of these companions moving in circles around Jupiter holds up to accurate measurements or not.

This technique wouldn't work for Venus without some additional work. In this case he needed to measure what angle Venus was from the sun. This would allow him to plot a line from Earth, as though looking down on the Ecliptic. Then

he needed an estimate of the phase angle Venus showed to be able to plot a line out from the sun. Where the two lines intersected should be the relative position of Venus. He should also measure the apparent size of the planet from one horn of the crescent to the other to give some idea of relative distance. This should correspond to the distance given by the intersection of the angular plots, more or less.

The first step, measuring the angular diameter, was not a huge problem. He already had an eyepiece with several cross-hairs at precisely even spaces. And to estimate phase angle, he would need to compare apparent diameter on the long axis compared to the other axis, so he will need to turn the eyepiece through a right angle. But that can be done.

Angular distance from the sun was a little more difficult. It would not be enough to simply sight the Sun, take a reading from the longitudinal circle, and then sight the planet and take another reading. First, the sun was so bright that it would blind him to look at it through the telescope; he would need to place a very dark glass over the front of the telescope to see it safely, and then remove it to find the planet. Not difficult, but that would take time. Second, the ecliptic was inclined relative to the celestial poles, so he would also need to take a reading of declination as well, so he could then calculate the real separation using spherical geometry; in itself, not difficult, but it took time. And that was the killer; in the time taken to adjust the optics and find the planet for the second set of readings, the sky would have moved through perhaps a degree or more. Or perhaps it might be better to set his telescopes on an ecliptic-oriented mount? He would need to think through how that could be done while still catering for the rotation of the sky around the celestial poles.

He resolved that the best way forward would be to use two telescopes to take genuinely simultaneous readings. But if the longitudinal circles for the two instruments were mis-aligned, this would create a systemic error. This systemic error would then be eliminated by reversing the roles of the two instruments; the telescope which looked at the sun for the first set of readings would be used for the planet in the second set, and vice-versa. Then average the readings!

That would be accurate enough for his purposes, he concluded. But it would be so much safer and also much easier and more accurate to take transit times, if only he had a more accurate way of measuring periods of time up to hours in length. Water clocks were just not reliable enough. Accurate Astronomy demanded accurate clocks. He must talk to the people at the Museum to see if something could be done about that!

Babylon – 756 AUC (3 A.D.)

Three years ago there had been only a few months of observations available before Jupiter moved behind the sun and was no longer available for observation. But these few months were enough to prove that each of Jupiter's four companion stars moved in circles around Jupiter and at a constant angular speed. When Jupiter re-appeared in the morning skies a few months later further observations confirmed this finding, and the longer period from first observation to last observation allowed the period of orbit for each to be calculated even more precisely. Later in that year, when Jupiter was again roughly at right angles from the sun from Earth, the timing of re-appearance from shadow was an observation which defined a precise point in the orbit of each companion, rather than relying on offsets from Jupiter's disc; these timings allowed the orbital period of each to be calculated to an accuracy of almost one part in a hundred thousand for the outermost star, and almost one part in a million for the innermost. The longer period of observation over the last three years had refined these values even more tightly. And yes, the idea of Jupiter casting a shadow from the sun rather than shining by its own light had been solidly established.

Progress on Venus had been slower, due to the 584 days it took for Venus to go through a full cycle and return to its original position. So less than two full cycles had been observed. But the results were very promising, with all observations being within a reasonable margin of error of falling on a perfect circle and Venus moving at a constant speed around this circle. These also explained why Venus seemed to race so rapidly from its maximum elongation from evening star to morning star, but took much longer for the other half of her cycle; the simple geometry of its path as seen from Earth meant that she was much closer during the evening-to-morning section, so the same actual speed meant a much greater apparent angular speed as seen from Earth.

Kalothos had also been carrying out the same series of observations on Mercury. The Mercury Cycle was only 116 days, so there had been enough time for nine complete cycles, but Mercury was much smaller and much closer to the sun. This meant that the number of observable days was much smaller, creating greater uncertainty in the accuracy of the observations.

Kalothos plotted all the positions of Mercury based on observation and geometry on a single sheet, to try to see at least a circle of best fit. But the differences in calculated position seemed much greater than could be reasonably explained by observational error. Perhaps Mercury doesn't move in a circle, but follows a different path. He took his pen and started to plot a line through each observed position, in order of their dates.

He was half-way through this process when he had another flash of insight. The first cycle was not a circle, but slightly elongated. The second cycle seemed much the same shape and size, but the axis of the elongation, the direction of flattening, was about one-third of the way around the sun. The second was also the same shape, but again rotated about a third of the way around. So was the

third cycle. The fourth cycle, another third of the way around, fell almost but not quite on the first cycle; it was about fifteen to twenty degrees short. The fifth cycle was also about fifteen to twenty degrees short of the second cycle. And as he continued his plots, each cycle fell this same angle short of the cycle three previous to it. Why would this be happening? There was one obvious answer; the same elongated path was being followed precisely, except that the whole page that this path was being plotted on was rotating around the sun precisely once every year. This must mean that the earth itself is orbiting around the sun, rather than the sun and the stars going around the earth!

Kalothos called immediately to his assistant. "Abdashar, I want you to plot all these positions again. But this time, all of your plots are to be based on our observation point doing a full circuit around the sun in exactly 365 days. So set a base location for the first set of observations, and then for subsequent observations you will calculate what proportion of 365 days has elapsed since that first observation, move the point of observation around the circle by that proportion, and then base the plotted position on that new position for the earth."

Abdashar looked dismayed. What a complicated procedure that will be!

"Don't worry, Abdashar, you won't have to calculate everything from the raw observations. Just take the conclusions you have already reached, but rotate them around by whatever angle corresponds to the time elapsed since the base observation." Kalothos saw from the change of expression that the idea had been grasped. "Then do the same for the plots of the position of Venus," he added. It might be that the minor deviations in the Venus plots were not due to observational error, but this same systemic error.

While Abdashar went about the laborious business of calculating the correct angle through which every observation had to be rotated, Kalothos went back to teasing out the behaviour of the companion stars around Jupiter. He already knew the duration of the orbit for each star, and the relative radii of these orbits. But a simple division showed him that these stars didn't all orbit at the same speed. The outer star moved the slowest, and the each star moved faster than the one outside it. Why would this be? Why would they not all go at the same speed? But their speeds were not in inverse proportion, either, but somewhere between proportional and the same. There has to be some sort of relationship behind these numbers.

Kalothos sat at his desk and listed the periods and the orbital radii of the four companion stars in vertical columns. But while multiplying numbers was awkward, multiplying fractions was even worse. He worked in the old Babylonian method of writing numbers, where units were counted in lots of sixties and parts were in sixtieths. 'So let's simplify this,' he said to himself, and divided each period and each radius by the value of the innermost moon. (*For the sake of the modern reader, the following numbers from Kalothos 'Memoirs' have been converted from Babylonian base-sixty into modern decimal format.*) This resulted in the periods of the inner three following the familiar one, two, four sequence, a property he had already noticed before, and the outer star jumped to almost nine and a half, not the expected eight. Why doesn't the same doubling

pattern apply to that outermost star, Kalothos mused yet once again. That was a question for another time; he pushed on. The relative orbital radii ratios came out to one, just over 1.6, 2.5, and 4.5.

Maybe they are in proportion in their squares. He ground through the multiplication to get a second tabulation. The periods squared were 1, 4, 16 and 89. And the squares of the radii were 1, 2.56, 6.25 and 20.25. Still no apparent pattern between the squares of these values. Well, while I'm at it, perhaps their cubes might be in some sort of proportion. Kalothos worked through the numbers again. The ratio of periods cubed came up as one, eight, sixty-four and eight hundred and thirty eight. The radii cubed came out at one, four, sixteen and eighty nine. Still no obvious pattern. He glanced back at the previous tabulations to see if there was something he missed.

There! He saw it! The cubes of the radii were roughly same as the squares of the periods! Within observational error of radii, at least! Not only for the inner three stars, with their periods following the neat ratio of the period of the second simply doubling the first, and the third doubling that again; even the odd-man-out fourth star obeyed this squared-cubed pattern!

He rushed out to the main work room to see the plots for Venus and Mercury. He measured the radius of the orbit for Venus, and then the elongated orbit for Mercury. What should he take as the radius for an orbit that wasn't circular? For want of anything better, he took the average of the longest and the shortest distance from the sun. He divided this average Mercury orbital radius into the Venus radius to get a ratio; it was close to 1.85. Cube this, to get approx. 6.4. Now, the Mercury Cycle was 116 days long, and the Venus Cycle 584 days long, a ratio close 5.0. Now, square that to get... oh; 25. Not the 6.4 he was hoping for. He stared at the plot in disappointment. After a moment he walked over to where Abdashar was working on the new plots for Mercury.

"How's it going, Abed," he asked familiarly.

"Not what I expected, sir," his assistant replied. It seems all the plots are now falling on the same elongated orbit. But the period is only eighty-eight days, not the true 116 days of the Mercury Cycle."

"Oh? How could that be?" Kalothos asked.

"I've noticed that it takes Mercury eighty-eight days to complete a full circuit, and then another twenty-eight days to catch up with the point from which the observations are being made," Abdashar explained. "So the traditional Mercury Cycle is more than the time it takes to go around its course; the extra is the time it takes to catch up the same relative position as when it started."

"Then I suppose we'll find the same if we plot the Venus observations as well," Kalothos surmised.

"I expect so, sir. I even tried to make a prediction, based on what I've seen so far."

"Oh? Then what is your prediction?" Kalothos had a great deal of respect for the mathematical ability of this student.

"I thought that the Venus Cycle takes 584 days to complete. In that time our point of reference moves through an arc that I would call 584 days' worth of

angle. So in 584 days Venus does the same, plus another full circuit; in other words, Venus moves through 584 plus 365 days' worth of angle. So its angular speed compared to the reference point is 949 divided by 584.

"Therefore, to move through 365 days' worth of angular distance at this higher speed, Venus will require only 225 days," Abdashar concluded.

"How much time did it take you to work that out?" Kalothos asked. That was a complicated process in base-sixty.

"About half an hour," Abdashar confessed. "But I did take a short-cut; I multiplied 584 and 365, and then divided by 949. It's the same thing mathematically, but it involves only one division instead of two, so it is quicker."

Kalothos suddenly realised the error he had made in his check calculations to see if Mercury and Venus also obeyed the square-cube principle. He had based his calculations on the classical Cycle lengths, not on the real orbital times. He quickly crossed back to his desk. "What did you say those orbit times are?" he called across the room.

"About 88 days for Mercury, and I expect 225 days for Venus," Abdashar called back.

Kalothos plugged these values into his formula. The ratio of periods of these two planets is actually 2.55, not 5! So the square will be about 6.5. Close enough to the 6.4 cube of the radius ratio to be within my measurement error! Then another thought struck him. He rushed back to the plot table, and measured the nominal distance from the Sun to the observation point, the position of Earth. He compared it to Mercury's nominal radius. The radius ratio was 2.6, so cube this to get 17.6. Now the periods, 365 days compared to 88; that is 4.15; squared that is 17.2! Again, close enough to be explained by a reasonable margin of error in the radius observations and his own approximations! The earth was travelling around the sun in an orbit, just like the other planets! The fixed stars and the sun really were fixed, and their apparent movement was the result of the earth moving and spinning!

"Abed, we have discovered that Pythagoras was right!" Kalothos announced to Abdashar. "The heavens are indeed ruled by ratios!"

Babylon – 757 AUC (4 A.D.)

Abdashar was not a lazy man. Far from it! But he was frustrated with the amount of tedious calculation required as assistant to Kalothos, and even more so when an error at the beginning of a complicated calculation was not noticed until the end of the process, sometimes days later. So much time wasted!

Calculating with the common Roman numerals was, of course, out of the question. The range of the numbers was much too great, and there were no numerals for numbers in the thousands of thousands. Only the Babylonian notation, which ascribed place value in steps of sixty, was up to the task. But even so, each step in base-sixty notation was a major effort and it was cumbersome. There was also the very real risk of the characters in one scale of sixty blurring with the characters in the adjacent value-place. There had to be a better way!

And then it came to him in a flash. There can be no possible blurring of characters if each value-place held only one character! And it was also possible to reduce multiplication to addition; it was just a matter of adding so many times. But what if all addition could be reduced to as simple a process as 'one plus one'? If the simple rule was that 'one plus one equals zero, plus one in the next-highest value place', even a child would be able to carry out the most complex calculations!

The elegance of the insight almost brought him to tears. Let 'one' be precisely that; just one. And let two be the same character, but in the next value-place higher. And 'three' would be one in the 'one' value-place, plus a one in the double-value place. Then four would be shown by a 'one' in the double-double value place, and so on. And multiplication would be almost as simple. To multiply by two, just write the number to be multiplied with every character moved one value-place higher! To multiply by three, write it twice; once at face value, then again but moved one value-place higher, and add the two rows! For larger numbers, the same principle applied; for every character, write the original number again for each character in the multiplier, but moved across as many places as that character, then add.

This meant that an empty value place needed a marker; so an empty circle would indicate that, and a single vertical stroke would indicate an occupied value-place. It was also important to note exactly where the single-value place was. Perhaps every number should finish with another character to show that, so let it be a diagonal cross. Finally, larger numbers written this way would be a long string of characters, so perhaps they might be easier to grasp if they were written in sets of five value-places, with gaps or perhaps dots to separate the groups of five.

Now, what could be done for division? Could that be reduced to subtraction, in the same way multiplication was reduced to addition? He wrote down a string of twelve characters, randomly mixing ones and circles, and then a three-character string of one, one, circle. He stared at the two strings. Then thought he saw a way.

He carefully drew vertical lines down a sheet of paper at even spaces. He transcribed the large number near the top of the sheet, with a horizontal line above it. 'If I push the smaller number to the extreme left, so its first character is directly under the first character of the longer number, I am effectively multiplying it through nine value-places, and it becomes larger than the number to be divided. It obviously won't divide in. But if I relax it back to the right by one space, it becomes smaller.' He wrote the string of three 'ones' under the large number, but with its first character under the second character in the long string. He then added as many circles as he needed to match lengths.

'Now to subtract the lower number from the upper number. Remember that one plus one is a circle with the next value-place adding one; so circle minus one is one, but with the next value-place subtracting one. That 'subtracting one' would be conveniently managed by adding one to the smaller number as I work to the left.

'Well, that worked. So that means that the result has a 'one' corresponding to the number of value-places I moved the smaller number. I'll mark a 'one' above the line in that value place. Now, this remainder...'

Again he copied the divisor below the remainder, placing it as far to the left as he could without exceeding the value of the remainder, filled in the extra value-places with circles, and subtracted again. He continued this process until the remainder was a simple one, one. He stared at this for a moment, wondering what this meant. And then another idea struck him. He added another circle to the large number, to the right of the 'X' that marked the single-value space, and pushed his divisor one space to the right instead of to the left. This eliminated the remainder completely, but left a 'one' to the right of the 'X' that marked the single-value place. He suspected he knew what this meant, and a thrill ran through him. To check, he laboriously calculated what the original twelve-character number would be in traditional notation. Two thousand seven hundred and forty five, he reckoned. The divisor was much simpler; it translated to six. He carried out the division in the traditional way, and then screamed his joy. Yes! His suspicion was right! Just as each value-place to the left was worth double the previous space, so the first value-place to the right of the 'X' signified half. He had accidentally invented a completely new and more convenient way of writing fractions!

Pythios was not only a very practical man. He was also the outstanding mathematician of his generation or he would not have been the Head of Mathematics at the Museum in Alexandria twenty years ago and held that position during the move to Babylon and ever since.

"A brilliant concept, Abdashar! No questioning that at all. This will certainly make arithmetic simpler and therefore less error-prone when dealing with very large numbers. But it will also be very cumbersome for everyday amounts. Just look; you need a string of eleven characters to show a number just over a thousand! Isn't it more obvious to the casual glance if we just write MCC for twelve hundred, instead of a string of ones and circles?"

“Yes, lord Pythios,” Abdashar agreed. “But this notation is not designed for everyday use. I am commending it to you for use in specialised professions that deal in very large numbers; people such as Astronomers like myself but also accountants, engineers, Treasury officials, and so on.”

“I would suggest that even treasury officials would find it easier to deal in tens, hundreds and thousands, rather than eights, sixty-fours and two-hundred-and-fifty-sixes,” Pythios replied. “Specially so, since they will have to convert into and out of your system to start and finish their calculations.”

Abdashar was crestfallen. “I suppose so, lord. Thank you for your time and advice.” He turned towards the door.

“But that problem is easily overcome,” Pythios stopped him in his tracks. Abdashar turned to see a broad smile on the mathematician's face. “Your system is a stroke of pure genius! All you need to do is adopt base-ten instead of base-two! That's what people instinctively work on, so why not match it?”

“But lord; if it's not base-two, then it doesn't reduce multiplication and division to simple addition and subtraction.”

“Oh, that's not a problem,” Pythios waved the problem away. “Anyone who can't reliably multiply two numbers less than ten shouldn't be let out of his mother's sight! So keep the same concepts as you have outlined to me, but adapt them for some minor multiplication. For example, instead of just transposing and copying the number, you might have to multiply it by four and then copy the result. But even multiplying a large number in this way is simple if you do it one character at a time. With your agreement, Abdashar, I'd like to work on this project myself. It will be good to achieve one great advance before I'm too old to keep up and I promise you'll get full acknowledgement.”

“I would be honoured, lord Pythios,” Abdashar bowed slightly. “But if I might take a little bit more of your time, lord, I would like to show you a very interesting consequence of the place-value notation.”

“Certainly, Abdashar. Anything you discover must be fascinating.”

“The old paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, sir. The ratio of one speed to the other is not important for this paradox, so let me assume Achilles is only twice as fast as the tortoise he is racing, and starts only one pace behind. Let us describe the distance he covers using my new notation instead of old fractions.” Abdashar took a sheet of paper and started writing on it. “Achilles travels one pace to catch up to where the tortoise started, but the tortoise has moved half a pace in that time. While Achilles covers that half-pace, the tortoise covers a quarter-pace...”

“I am familiar with the paradox, Abdashar,” Pythios hinted gently.

“Yes, well all these halves and halves of halves can be written as an infinite series of 'one's after the unit cross. So the total distance Achilles covers is...” Abdashar wrote '1X111111111' on the paper, followed by an arrow to the right. “The arrow means that the series goes forever,” he explained.

“Now let that be called 'the distance Achilles has to cover'. Now, twice that distance is shown by moving every character one place-value to the left.” Abdashar wrote '11X111111' and an arrow on the paper. “Now subtract the first

number from the second. The 'ones' off to the infinite right are all matched one-for-one, since they both go on for infinity. Which means that twice the distance minus the actual distance equals..." and he wrote 'IOX' on the sheet. "We have got rid of the infinite aspect, and find that twice the distance minus the actual distance equals exactly two! Therefore, the distance equals two. And since Achilles is running at a finite speed, there is also a finite time taken to catch the tortoise." Abdashar smiled sheepishly. "I know this paradox has been solved before in many ways, but the new notation makes the process of handling infinitely small numbers much more manageable."

Pythios smiled and nodded. "Nice work! I much prefer a simple and elegant solution, and that certainly qualifies."

Rome – 759 AUC (6 A.D.)

“Conscript Fathers, there is something about our Republic which all of you know, but for some reason never think about. But to fresh eyes this situation would seem to be exceedingly strange.” Silon Sopater, one of the Praetors from Asia, turned at one end of his stroll.

“Look around! You will see that we have Praetors from all over the Republic! We have eight from Rome itself, being two from each of the Urban tribes; we have twenty-six from the thirteen former Provinces; there are thirty-four Praetors from the Italian Tribes; and – think about this very carefully – sixty-two Praetors from the Rural Roman tribes.”

Sopater paused as he turned. “Sixty-two Praetors from thirty-one Tribes, whose total combined enrolment is less than half that of the four Urban Tribes! Yet these tiny Tribes have more Praetors in this chamber than the former provinces, plus the Italian Tribes all added together! This is a side-effect of the old Catonian Reforms; by promoting entry by election as a Tribal Praetor at the expense of eliminating entry as *pedarii*, the Rural Tribes have gained representation completely disproportionate to their numbers!” He strolled for a moment, to allow this point to sink in.

“This would never have happened in the old Republic, when all Roman Tribes together elected less than a dozen Praetors; and those were usually the most worthy, regardless of Tribal affiliation. Not that I want to undo the Catonian reforms,” he assured his hearers, “but this disproportionate voice held by our smallest tribes is not the outworking of the *Mos Majorum*. It is an unintended artefact of an electoral system that served us well at one point in our history but is now no longer helpful.

“Consider for a moment! Every single Urban tribe has a greater enrolment than the smallest twenty Rural Tribes added together! The smallest of the other Tribes, the former Provinces, has a greater enrolment than all the Rural Tribes added together!” Sopater turned again.

“So why do these thirty-one Rural Tribes hold close enough to half of the elected Praetorships?” Sopater asked rhetorically. “Is it because they are so much wiser than the others? If that were the reason, then why are they so conspicuously under-represented among the consulars? Perhaps it's because they are such noteworthy protectors of the Republic? Then why are the overwhelming majority of our soldiers, from private legionaries to Generals, of Italian or provincial ancestry?” Sopater paused again as he paced.

“Let us speak the plain truth here, Conscript Fathers. It is because these Rural Tribes are relics of a bygone age. They are leftovers from the times when Rome was small, the Urban Tribes were small, Italians were not citizens and there were no provinces. Their significance is like that of an after-birth; it was vital while the Republic was still gestating, but now that our Republic has matured it's long past the time when the afterbirth should have been discarded. There should now be only a navel, not a huge, grotesque lump that serves no further purpose.” Again Sopater paused.

“And it's not only that the Republic has changed demographically. Our wealth has also changed. In the days of Cincinnatus Rome was dependent upon small, independent farmers for its financial and military strength. But those days were more than four hundred years ago. Now more than nine soldiers out of every ten are either Italians or citizens of the overseas Tribes. And our financial strength can best be assessed by examining the income of the Republic. Almost half of it comes from Mesopotamia Tribe alone and more than half of the rest from Africa, Egypt and Asia.

“It's about time that these realities were recognised and our political structure adjusted to match these new realities. Therefore I intend to move the adoption of a new law which will be titled 'The Sopatan Law Concerning Tribes'. This law will combine all the Roman Rural tribes into one new Tribe to be called 'Rustica', for the purposes of the Great Houses. It will be up to the City Senate and City Comitia whether or not this amalgamation is carried through at that level; I am speaking only of the Great Senate and the Republic Comitia. I propose that members of this Senate might care to discuss this proposal over the next few months and the question should be put to the first meeting in Sextilis.”

The Senate erupted as Sopater sat. Members of the Rural Tribes were not merely standing, they were jumping up and down in their outrage. Titus Manlius, the Consul with the fasces that month, looked along the front bench to determine who had seniority.

“Faustus Cornelius, please speak,” he decided in favour of the ex-Censor and grandson of Sulla the Great.

Sulla walked slowly to the focus of the chamber as he waited for the hubbub to fade. At length he had quiet.

“I never knew my grandfather; he died when my father was still a lad. But I have read the diary he kept and which was published some years ago.” Sulla paused for a breath.

“There can be no doubt that my grandfather loved the *Mos Majorum* and sought to apply it to every race of men in the world. In that aim he has largely succeeded and he would be very pleased with how the Republic has grown. It is also clear that he loved the spirit more than the letter. He was the driving force behind the Catonian Reforms which scandalised those who looked only upon the outward and traditional expressions, but didn't discern the true heart of the Republic. He knew better than any that the outward shape of the Republic, its visible expression, needed to change as circumstances changed. His favourite metaphor was that of a child growing to maturity, changing his clothing as he progressed towards full manhood.

“So I have no doubt that my grandfather would approve of this suggested Reform. Therefore I support it.” Sulla sat quickly as the Senate erupted again. The revered Brutus stood.

“Marcus Junius, you are next,” Manlius called the aging ex-Censor.

“As you all know, Conscript Fathers, I am a member of a Rural Tribe,” Brutus opened his address with a wry smile. “And as you might recall from some

years ago, I have pledged myself to the eradication of any trace of Kingship in the Republic.” He strolled for a moment.

“You might ask, 'What has this to do with Kingship? Are we not talking about the constitution of the Great Senate, that bastion of Republicanism? And that response would be understandable. But the speech by Silon has pricked my conscience. For so small a group of citizens to have, by way of inheritance, such a disproportionate power within the Republic is indeed a relic of the days of the Monarchy. This possession of disproportionate power based on inheritance is not far removed from possession of absolute power based on inheritance. It varies from Kingship only by a margin and a slender margin at that. It should indeed be submitted to the most careful scrutiny.

“Now, to merge all thirty-one Rural Tribes into one Tribe might seem the obvious response; but I am not quite convinced just yet that we should take that way forward. But I certainly support, in principle, that the over-representation of these tribes should be reduced. I would welcome any person who could propose some other way forward so a more rounded debate can be held. Therefore I thank Silon for giving us three months' notice of his proposed laws, so this debate can be held without undue haste. I urge all members to consider very carefully how our Republic would be best governed.”

In hindsight, it had been inevitable. Although the Rural Tribes were thirty-one out of the sixty-five Tribes recognised in the Republic, their entitlement to representation in the chamber was considerably less emphatic. The principal reason for this was that quirk in the Catonian Reforms that accorded life membership to anyone elected Tribal Praetor three times. The small Rural Tribes had tended to re-elect the same men time after time, often until they died, so there were fewer life members from them. The Italians and Provincial Tribes tended to have much higher turnover rates, producing many more life members even if they didn't attend the Senate meetings after being voted out of their Praetorships. But for this vote every one of those life members physically capable of attendance made a point of being there.

Thus Sopater's Law Concerning the Recognition of Tribes was passed, with 313 votes in favour, 126 against and the 27 absent; a total of 153 being deemed votes against. This exceeded the two-thirds of all eligible Senators, whether present or absent, required to amend the Republic's Basic Law. This proposed Law was passed across to the Republic Comitia.

The structure of the Republic Comitia was very different from that of the Great Senate. This House had no provision for life membership and consisted of four men from each Tribe. The vote here was much closer, only 132 in favour and 119 against. But the two-thirds majority was required only in the Great Senate; simple passage in the Comitia was sufficient to demonstrate that the People did not veto the change.

Babylon – 767 AUC (14 A.D.)

It had been a tedious effort but at last the Museum had developed a means of measuring time accurately.

The New Mathematics developed by Pythios and Abdashar had held the key. These powerful new mathematical techniques described physical systems not as if static, unchanging entities, but instead described how they changed over time. Calculus had been developed!

This enabled a proof that the time taken for a pendulum swing was a constant for a given effective length and provided the amplitude was relatively small. The same mathematics described any oscillations where the restoring force was directly proportional to displacement – such as for a spring. Having established that, the major difficulty was in the engineering. How could a small impulse be delivered at exactly the centre of the oscillation to compensate for the decay in amplitude due to friction and other losses. Eventually a workable escapement mechanism had been developed for large pendulum clocks and another finer mechanism for spring-driven clocks was almost as accurate.

Then a secondary difficulty presented itself; clocks which ran in synchrony during summer seemed to diverge during winter. But the dismay was short-lived. It was soon enough determined that this was the effect of temperature differences. On hot days the metal expanded and the effective length of the pendulum increased, causing the clock to run slower. Many different combinations of metals were tried with more stable metals arranged to provide the main pendulum and more expansive metals fitted to push the counterweight back up the shaft of this main pendulum instead of allowing it to drop down. These effects tended to cancel each other out to give an invariant effective length. There still remained some systemic errors that could not be explained. For example, pendulum clocks which kept accurate time closer to the equator seemed to run more quickly when moved to the far north, while spring-driven clocks didn't seem to suffer from this problem. But these effects were still being examined and even in the absence of a well-understood cause the variations were well-enough measured to allow for compensation to be made.

The twelve hours of the day and the twelve hours of the night were already widely adopted to give a twenty-four hour day. At first this was proposed to be further refined to 24 “divisions” in the hour and a further 24 “small” divisions but the new decimalisation fashion over-ruled this approach. Time was to remain divided into 24 hours in the day-night cycle by weight of tradition, but with ten divisions in the hour, and ten “small” divisions, and then ten “smaller” divisions. These divisions, down to one-thousandth of an hour, were considered adequate for everyday use. Below this some activities requiring greater precision used ten “smallest” divisions, which was about as fast as could be usefully applied to matters timed by human reaction speed. It was also the practical limit to watch-making skills.

The first significant result from the use of these highly accurate clocks was unexpected. In a series of measurements that scandalised Astronomy, the time between the meridional transits of the sun was found to vary over the year. How could this be? Was the earth spinning more slowly in one half of the year than in the other half? No, because the same observations also timed the transits of the fixed stars and these transit times varied by only a fraction of the variations in the sun transit times. While the fixed star time variations were within expected measurement error and therefore not significant, the variations in the sun's transit times was more than could be explained by errors in the equipment.

Then these results were compared to accurate plots of the sun against the fixed stars. The sun didn't move at a constant speed compared to this background! The sets of data were compared and the reason became clear; the earth was spinning at a constant speed relative to the fixed stars, but at a varying speed relative to the sun. This explained the 'Mid-Day Wobble' of the sun throughout the year. But why did the speed of the sun vary?

Then the plots taken of Mercury were also analysed more closely. The speed of Mercury around the sun varied significantly, depending on where it was in its orbit. Mercury's orbit was significantly eccentric and it was noted that it moved slower when it was furthest from the Sun and fastest when it was closest. Perhaps the orbit of Earth around the Sun was also slightly eccentric with a similar variation in speed?

The features of Mercury's orbit suggested that angular speed was inversely proportional to distance from the Sun. Using data showing the angular speed of the sun's path around the Zodiac, this information was used to infer the corresponding differences in distance from the Sun to the Earth. On this basis an eccentric orbit for the earth was plotted. Then the observations of Venus and Mercury were re-plotted on the basis of Earth following this non-circular orbit. These re-plotted results eliminated many of the hitherto unexplained inconsistencies in the orbits of those two planets.

A further examination of the times of occultations and eclipses of Jupiter's companion stars showed further irregularities. When Jupiter was in the morning sky, apparently rising further away from the sun each day, the periods between these events was just a tiny bit shorter than when Jupiter was in the evening sky and dropping back towards the sun. The actual period of each individual orbit varied by so little that it couldn't be accurately measured in itself but over a period of a few months the differences accumulated. Compared to the 'average' timing for each event over the whole year, these observations were up to eight minutes early when Jupiter was directly opposite the sun as seen from Earth, and up to eight minutes late when Jupiter was closest to the sun. The cause for this variation was not known, but the mathematicians in the Museum got to work again. Adjusted tables showing the movements in the companion stars around Jupiter were produced which took into account these variations throughout the year and giving accurate Babylon Time for each event for a year in advance. Other tables were also produced allowing mariners to determine accurate latitude and local time based on these observations in conjunction with the elevations of

the circumpolar stars. Then a third set of tables were published, by which the difference between local time and Babylon Time was used to determine local longitude. So long as a sailor could see the sky at night he could determine his exact position on the face of the Earth, north and south, east and west! Thus genuine open-sea navigation was made possible.

Using these revised tables The Museum also carried out work to determine the accuracy or otherwise of the Republic's maps. The one-thousand-mile mis-closure in Philippos' circumnavigation of Greater Africa was an on-going embarrassment and Philippos had been refused payment of his full fee because this was put down to his 'sloppy navigation'.

To test these charts the Museum commissioned sightings of occultations and eclipses of the moons of Jupiter from different points all over the known world, from Senegal to the Spice Islands and from Poseidon Bay to Belgium, all to be combined with measurements of the local time at these points.

The results were embarrassing. The earlier maps were shown to have been full of random but significant errors. In particular, the east-west distance between Senegal on the west coast of Greater Africa and Zanzibar on the east coast was found to be over seven hundred miles greater than earlier believed. Philippos' actual error had been less than two hundred miles, slightly less than a mile a day of drift on his outbound journey. But he was still refused the remainder of his payment.

In astronomy, observation and measurement of the moons of Jupiter had long-ago revealed the relationship of orbital radius and period. This had also been found to hold true within Saturn's system. The variation in the extreme elongation of Mercury (due to its rather elliptical orbit) complicated matters, but this same relationship of radius to orbital period was also found to apply to Mercury, Venus and Earth in their orbits around the Sun. This Law was then extended to the outer planets, inferring from their orbital periods to calculate their orbital radii and thus gaining an indicative relative scale of the Solar System as a whole. This consequentially allowed calculation of the relative size of the Jovian and Saturnian systems, based on their apparent angular diameter and calculated distance. What was needed now was a single measurement as a yardstick to determine the magnitude of that relative scale.

The square-cube relationship of orbital radius and orbital period was also analysed using the new technique of calculus. It was an elementary exercise to demonstrate that this implied an acceleration towards the central body that was inversely proportional to the square of orbital radius. Studies of the Saturnian system and the Jovian system had confirmed this inverse-square law, but with a different multiplying constant. Finally, the Solar System was also analysed, again following the inverse-square law but with a much higher constant multiplier.

What is it that makes all these systems follow the same general mathematical relationship but with very different constants? The first possibility was size. It was soon calculated that the strength of the "Tension Force" was not proportional to the diameter of the central body.

When this 'Tension Force' was correlated to the volume of the body, it was found that Jupiter and the Sun were a close match, at least within the margin of observational uncertainty, but the force for Saturn was only about half of what it should be. However, this volume-to-force ratio was the closest correlation available from observational evidence, and the hunt was on for whatever other minor factor might be involved.

One of the men working on the problem was in a temple one day when he noticed a young acolyte following a priest. The lad needed to exert considerable strength to hold a solid-gold ornament steady in front of him as he walked. 'Why don't they just use wooden ornaments plated with gold?' he mused. And then it struck him. For the same volume wood was much lighter than gold. This was just the sort of 'additional factor' that might explain the difference between Saturn on one hand and compared to Jupiter and the Sun on the other. The 'additional factor' was widely accepted to be density. The question about what caused these differences in density was left untouched; there seems no way to test any such hypothesis but it seemed to work.

Tamilia – 773 AUC (20 A.D.)

Chimines Antipater, Eastern Proconsul based in Babylon, was not happy with the condition of the Tamil cities. Ever since the Sumatra Treaties had cut them out of the spice trade these petty princedoms had been thrust into poverty. Not that they deserved any better, he would argue, for their arrogance in the times when they held the spice monopoly and their complacency in allowing it to be stolen from them. But Chimines' concern was not in the least bit humanitarian. He was an intensely practical man.

Now it seemed that civil order was breaking down among them. Anarchy and uncertainty were always bad for business. It might be that one will outlast the others and form a substantial state big enough to build a navy that could interfere with our trade. Or perhaps the whole area could collapse into anarchy with a patchwork of pirate kingdoms and local warlords. Either way, it had to be controlled. The Republic needed to protect its traders. Markos, the Tribal Consul, had agreed with him.

He gave a short tug on the cord by the window behind him. That cord was connected to a small bell in Mordecai's office. Mordecai was his Principal Secretary. Within a minute Mordecai was in his office with quill, paper and ink ready.

“Yes, Proconsul?” Mordecai asked.

“I think the time has come to take a closer interest in the Tamil cities,” Chimines announced. “Please write the following letter and send a copy to each of the princes in the region.”

Mordecai sat at the second table in the room, specifically placed there for his use on such occasions.

*Chimines Antipater, Eastern Proconsul of the Republic,
To (insert name and title),*

Salutations and best wishes!

It has come to our notice that you and your people no longer appear to enjoy the prosperity and security of times gone by. It grieves me that this has come to pass and I am eager to assist you in these hard times.

Unfortunately it is difficult for me to provide you with substantial assistance immediately. I am not a Prince but only an appointed administrator. I must account for whatever I spend and whatever I do, demonstrating that all I have done has been for the well-being of the Republic that has entrusted me with this stewardship.

However there is one way forward. Were you to seek formal recognition as Friend and Ally of the Republic I would argue strongly that your petition should be accepted. Once accepted as a Friend and Ally, the Republic would be honour-bound to support and protect you against any enemies. We would also

assist in more mundane matters as well, such as regaining your prosperity and civil peace.

I invite your petition to become a Friend and Ally of the Republic.

“Copy that letter with the appropriate names on each, one for each of the major Tamil cities. Then bring back the fair-hand copies for me to sign. I hope to have them out before anything serious happens over there.”

Chimines didn't expect a response from any of the princelings in the short term. Nobody gave up a throne unless it was a last resort. But three months later there was a response. Someone had felt he had no other choice. It was the Prince of Ezhimala, who had been presented with a demand for tribute that he had no hope of satisfying.

*Asoka, Lord of Ezhimala,
to lord Chimines Antipater, Eastern Proconsul of the Republic,*

Sincere greetings and blessings!

I have long admired the vigour of the Republic and the prosperity it brings to its citizens. Therefore I was honoured that your Excellency would invite my poor city to join with you and enjoy the benefits of your ways.

I request that Ezhimala might be acknowledged as a Friend and Ally of the Republic on the understanding that Ezhimala would enjoy the same rights and assume the same obligations as other Friends and Allies. In particular we would welcome the establishment of a Republic naval base here so you would be better positioned to protect your merchant fleet from the various dangers they must endure from some of the tyrants in this area and beyond.

To this end I would appreciate a visit from your delegate as soon as possible to ensure there is complete understanding of how these arrangements would be put into effect in our daily lives.

I must advise that such a visit should be accompanied by a substantial military force. I would recommend no less than 50,000 men equipped for a broad range of military demands. There are some among my neighbours who, in their ignorance, would resent rather than welcome your beneficial influence in this region.

I eagerly await your favour.

“So he needs 50,000 men, does he?” Chimines murmured to himself after Mordecai finished reading the letter. “Send in the legate that delivered this letter.”

A Tamil of impressive bearing was ushered into the office. He dipped his head in respect.

“My name is Asoka, following that of my father. I am the first-born to the lord of Ezhimala,” he introduced himself.

Chimines rose from his chair and approached the Tamil, his right hand offered in friendship. Asoka took it in the Roman way. This man has been well-schooled, Chimines thought to himself. He knows to use the word 'lord', a polite term for a respected man, rather than the despised 'king'. And he is also aware of our understated manner in courtesies.

"I am honoured to meet you, Asoka," he assured his guest, smiling warmly. "Please, join me on the couches." Chimines led Asoka to a well-lit corner of his office where three couches were arranged around a low table. "Mordecai, please arrange for refreshments."

When they had settled into polite small talk and tea had been poured, Chimines opened the real conversation. "It would seem that some petty tyrant is causing your father some concern," he opened, sipping his tea to invite a response.

"This is true," Asoka conceded. "Ezhimala is no small city; but we are a cultured people, preferring trade and artistic pursuits rather than warfare. Thus we are the envy of other more base cities who live by plundering rather than building."

"And I might guess that at least one such base city has threatened you?"

"Indeed that is the case, lord Chimines," Asoka nodded in agreement. "Which has convinced my father that we have more in common with the Republic than we have with the barbarous states closer by." There was a pause as the two men looked at each other and sipped tea, each with his own thoughts.

"How has your father responded to this threat?" Chimines asked at length.

"My father is a generous and humane man. He understands that this despot has been driven to belligerence by his need to distract his people from their hunger, for they are on the point of starvation," Asoka explained. "So my father has offered to provide a monthly contribution to his neighbour to help him buy wheat for his people."

"Then the problem has been solved," Chimines concluded. "So why have you come here?"

"The problem has been solved only in the short term, lord Chimines," Asoka corrected. "The fundamental difficulty remains. This contribution, however generous, is naturally limited. We in Ezhimala cannot continue it indefinitely. But so long as it does continue, the despot is lulled into thinking that he need do nothing to repair his own ruinous state or to produce more food for his people. Instead, he foolishly builds up his army rather than his croplands, thinking to provide food by threats rather than by agriculture."

"Yes, that is a very foolish approach and only compounds his needs," Chimines agreed.

"What is best for all concerned," Asoka saw the time was right to press his point, "is a demonstration that this is indeed a ruinous path and that he must turn from it. Only in this way will he realise that his city's problems must be solved at home, not abroad. And only thus will Ezhimala be able to continue its civilised way of life without impoverishment. This will also provide the Republic with a naval base closest to the point where it is most needed to resist piracy." Asoka

placed his teacup on the table and looked Chimines steadily in the face. Chimines responded in like manner, with a gentle smile on his lips before responding.

“Your father is a very wise man, Asoka. Had you asked for an army to destroy this despot I would have thought that he is governed by revenge, a most corrosive emotion. But instead you have shown him to be a genuine man of peace and eager for the prosperity of his neighbours.

“Yes, I shall promote your father's petition to be recognised as a Friend and Ally; but this process can take a considerable length of time. While we await that outcome let us act in anticipation. I will raise a force as your father suggests and dispatch it as soon as possible.” Chimines stood and again offered his right arm. Asoka stood to accept it.

“Should I return to my father now or should I remain on hand?”

“I would prefer you to return, but with an ambassador to your father so he will be able to prepare the way for us,” Chimines replied. “Would you be ready to leave the day after tomorrow?”

“That would be excellent, lord Chimines. If I return in my own ship by myself it will mean little. But to be accompanied by your ambassador and a Republic ship will send a very strong message.”

“Then let it be so!” Chimines concluded. “My staff will show you to your guest quarters and also care for your men.” Chimines gestured towards the door, a clear but polite invitation to leave. Chimines returned to his work desk and waited for the office door to close behind Asoka.

“So he wants ten legions?” Chimines murmured to Mordecai, who had been unobtrusively taking notes. “I'll send four; that's as strong as 50,000 of these Tamils! But make sure they have full ballista and onager complements.” Mordecai bowed and withdrew.

The welcome into Ezhimala harbour was a full-scale celebration. Alexander Pedites, the commander of this expeditionary force, saw the draped colours on the docks while the fleet was still well out from sea and had time to prepare himself and his senior officers for a State Welcome in full dress uniform.

The men were told to dress up and make sure the equipment was in parade condition. This didn't take long; the artillery had already been brought up to full readiness except for tensioning the tendons, just in case they were confronted with the need to land on a hostile coast. The ambassador came out to meet him before landing and outlined the arrangements that had been put into place. With him came some Tamil soldiers who would guide the parade to their allocated quarters within the city.

Pedites and his staff stepped off their boat and onto the quay. Pedites indicated to his major to bark an order and the twelve ships on the quay started to disgorge their contents onto the quay. The men rapidly forming into marching order with horses quickly harnessed to the heavy equipment. As soon as the first twelve ships were empty they pushed out from the quay to make room for the next twelve ships. Within less than ten minutes some 2,000 men, 120 horses and their artillery and equipment were in their proper divisions and ready to march.

Pedites motioned again to the major. They turned and started marching, dress helmets cradled in left elbows. After perhaps a hundred paces Pedites was in front of the platform erected for the occasion at the end of the riverside quay. He and his staff stopped in unison, turned simultaneously at right angles, saluted the King on the platform and marched towards it. The Lord of Ezhimala had never seen such precision and applauded the three men as they climbed the steps to join him.

Once on the platform they saluted again in unison. Then they turned in perfect timing to watch the parade pass before them. From this close range the King could hear the quiet spoken commands of co-ordination but to the crowd it was a marvel, almost a military dance.

The parade passed without a break. The ships were unloading men, horses and equipment at a prodigious rate and the men organising their units just as quickly, so that the army was being landed almost faster than it was marching off the quay. This was an exercise in lightning-fast military logistics that no-one outside the Republic had ever seen before. Pedites, solemn-faced on the platform, was inwardly delighted. So much can go wrong at times like these! But the large quay, the wind favourable both for berthing the ships and then pulling away again when empty, and the scope for so many ships to unload simultaneously had all conspired to make this an unmistakable display of superb military efficiency. In less than two hours the entire army had debarked and passed the reviewing stand. As the last wagon trundled past, the King turned to Pedites.

“I am not seeing before so much speed in military move!” Asoka senior marvelled in poor Greek.

“Thank you, lord Asoka,” Pedites replied. “The armies of the Republic strike like a cobra.”

Asoka was still standing amazed. Then he took control of himself. “Thank you, General Alexander. I say first Alexander is not coming here so far. You are Greater Alexander!” He smiled at his own little joke. “Now we go to basilica to talk.”

Asoka couldn't hide his disappointment when he was told that the force consisted of only 20,000 men, not the 50,000 he has asked for. “Why you are doing?” he asked anxiously. “50,000 are needing to stop the Chera coming forces! My army has only untrained men for standing on walls!”

“Please, lord Asoka, relax!” Pedites soothed him. “You saw my men today. These twenty thousand will be able to defeat a hundred thousand if they meet in the open field, and twice that again if I am able to make it a siege situation.”

Asoka rose from his couch and started pacing.

Pedites deliberately swung his feet up onto the couch, sandalled as they were. He needed to convey complete confidence or this little Tamil princeling might fall apart under him.

“I'll make a deal with you, Asoka; if I can't take over this city within twenty-four hours, and slaughter you and your family in the process, then I'll agree that my force is too small.”

Asoka turned on him, terrified. “I welcome you for friend! Would Republic general do betrayal of friend?”

“Of course not!” Pedites said in exasperation. “But make up your mind one way or the other. If this force isn't strong enough to defend your city, then how can it be strong enough to capture it? Which way will you decide?”

Some of the fear dropped from Asoka's face. “What are you saying?” he asked.

“That's better! Now we can make some progress!” Pedites returned his feet to the floor and adopted a more correct sitting position. “First, I'll have my officers assess your soldiers, their equipment, their training. I'll personally inspect your defensive works and the approaches the Chera forces will need to take to attack you.

“Next we'll take over your forces and train them properly and we'll enhance your defences. Then, when we're ready, we will demand repayment of the tribute that has been extorted out of you. Your part in this will be to provide the manpower, the food and resources we need to do this work. We won't demand tribute from you; only that you feed and equip the soldiers and provide labour for any works needed.” Pedites stood and walked over to Asoka. “That is what 'Friend and Ally' means. The Republic demands no more than co-operation from its friends. If you would rather not co-operate, we will leave tomorrow. “

Asoka knew he had no choice. “I agree,” he promised.

Pedites skimmed through the reports his officers had prepared concerning the number and competence of the Ezhimala soldiery. A total of just over 30,000 enlisted but of a deplorable standard. There were perhaps five thousand 'veterans' by Ezhimala standards, which meant that they had been in a battle before and survived it – probably by running. Most were pressed-ganged youths who had been given a weapon, a beating, orders whose significance and purpose they barely understood and no hint of how these orders were to be carried out.

Right now Pedites' drill decani were treating them as complete novice recruits, training up from scratch for specific and low-skill duties. Pedites knew there wouldn't be time for a full general training before the Chera struck.

And strike they will, he was certain. He had no doubt that there had been informers in the crowd, and however impressed the spies might have been by the quality of his troops, the Chera commanders had not seen that. They would see only the report that to land, form up and march out had taken only two hours. By their reckoning, not knowing the Republic's brilliance in logistics, they would read that to mean a force of perhaps a couple of thousand at the most. The Chera would certainly come to discipline this lapsed tributary as a matter of urgency before others also tried to withhold their tribute and before more Republic troops might arrive.

Meanwhile the survey of the defensive works was progressing. The city walls were thick and reasonably high, but had been laid out clumsily. They had not taken full advantage of the landform and provided little by way of flanking fire on the sections most easily scaled or breached. There was no time to remedy these defects so they would have to be compensated for by way of suitable defensive tactics and training.

The approaches to the city offered more scope. There was one particular bridge some eight miles out of town that could be destroyed at the last minute, forcing an army on the march to compress itself against the river before the "halt!" order found its way to the rear ranks. This created an excellent killing ground for artillery or even simple archers. His engineers were mapping this area closely to optimise the location and number of the artillery pieces and how best to bring the bridge down at precisely the right moment.

Word reached him on the sixth day after their arrival; the advance pickets had seen an army approaching! It was estimated at over 75,000 strong, with over a hundred siege towers and just as many catapults being drawn by oxen. Asoka took the news badly. He demanded that he, his family and his treasure be taken onto the ships and then back to Babylon.

"75,000 men! A hundred catapults! And siege towers too; they are not coming at us with only ladders! We are lost!" he begged, weeping shamelessly. "Come, I give you hundred talents of gold! Is that not the good price for boat to safety?" Then, to Pedites' total disgust, Asoka fell to his knees. "Two hundred talents!" he pleaded.

Pedites looked at him, face impassive. "Stand up, Asoka," he urged. Asoka unsteadily regained his feet. Then Pedites put his right hand to his left breast, as though to salute; but instead he lunged forward as he straightened his arm, catching Asoka across the right cheek with his backhand. Asoka fell to the floor from the force of the blow.

"If I were your commander I would have you crucified for that display!" Pedites spat his contempt. "In fact, I'm tempted to do it anyway!" He turned on his heel and ordered two men from the guard of honour, "You two; take this turd into the deepest, darkest, wettest, smelliest, foulest dungeon you have. Give him no light, no food, no water, no visitors, not even conversation with a guard, until I say otherwise." Then to a third, he ordered, "Get me Asoka the son. Immediately!"

It took only five minutes for young Asoka to walk into the room. "You asked to see me, General?"

"Yes I did, thank you." Pedites let his anger and disgust show on his face. "Your father attempted to desert his army. For a common soldier to do that the penalty is death. But for a commander to do that is infinitely worse!" He saw Asoka's face drop. "Your father is not fit to be a Friend and Ally. But are you?"

"Are you asking me to depose my own father?" he asked incredulously.

“Not at all!” Pedites spat. “I’ve deposed him already and I’ll have him executed as soon as I’m confident that it won’t damage morale. What I am asking is, will you act the man or do I need to find another?”

Asoka squared his shoulders. “I am a Friend and Ally. Ask of me what you will!”

“Thank you, Asoka,” Pedites acknowledged. “As far as anyone is to know, your father is unfortunately unable to continue in command and you will be taking his place until further notice.”

Asoka nodded his acceptance. “Yes. And my duties?”

“Your duties will consist of walking around, encouraging your men, smiling, and being seen to be confident. My officers will handle the rest until we send the Chera running for their lives; or at least those who are still alive at the time, which I hope to be as few as possible. After that the administration of the city will be handed over to you.”

The formation of the Chera advance had been observed and the information passed back to Lucius Mello, the chief artilleryman, as well as General Pedites. It was all too predictable. The main body was advancing in one long string of men, beasts and equipment stretching back more than fifteen miles, with the heavy equipment towards the rear. There was little in the way of cavalry, only a few dozen riders acting as an advance screen. But rather than spreading out and holding formation in a fan they would converge at obstructions to take the easy path.

“How pathetic!” Mello spat. He knew that this advance screen would all use the bridge for the sake of their own convenience. He set up his cross-bow men in suitable ambush sites. This was one advance screen that would totally fail in its duty, due entirely to laziness and lack of discipline.

He did one last round of the onager dispositions. He had measured the battleground as accurately as a surveyor and every unit knew exactly what was required of it for each of the different orders he might signal from his vantage point on an inconspicuous hill. All was ready, with supplies of ammunition stacked beside each unit and ample men to transfer ammunition to other units if one or more broke under the strain of rapid fire. Then he trotted his horse up to his vantage point, screened from the bridge and the far side of the river by a stand of trees which he could see through but made him almost invisible to the enemy.

Within ten minutes he saw the horses of the Chera advance screen on the far side of the river converging on the bridge. They clattered across it with not so much as a glance beneath. ‘What a pity!’ Mello thought to himself. ‘I could have put the demolition crew there anyway and they would not have been seen!’ Again he was disgusted with the unprofessional performance of the screen, who apparently thought nothing of having the task of being the eyes and ears of their army. How little regard they had for the lives of their fellows! He waited for the screen to start to spread out again and pass out of sight of the bridge. Then he ordered the green flag to be run out; barely discernible unless you knew what to look for.

The main beams of the bridge had already been provided with alternative support at the abutments and then sawn through between the temporary and permanent supports. Only two steel splice plates at each end stopped the whole structure from toppling sideways. Now the demolition crew came out of concealment and removed the bolts from the splice plates. Even the tiniest sideways load would send the whole bridge deck toppling off the temporary supports. Just the tramp of the first infantrymen should be enough, but Mello had the bridge targeted by a few onagers just in case it needed some help. He saw the demolition crew run off the bridge and into concealment again. They would join up with the cross-bow men who served to protect the onager emplacement against any infantry that might manage to get across the river.

The front ranks of the main body of the army now appeared on the road. He ordered the green flag to be taken down and saw an answering wave from the onagers. They knew they were on stand-by, and brought their machines up to full tension. At last the first rank of infantry stepped onto the bridge. Mello signalled down to the flag post. He showed them the blue square. A blue flag was run up the pole.

Immediately, three of the onagers sprang to life, throwing heavy rocks aimed at the bridge. The first one missed but the second hit and knocked the decking sideways. It seemed to hang there for a moment, and then as the third round also missed the bridge deck lazily rolled over and dropped into the river below, taking more than a hundred men with it. They would have no chance of surviving, being loaded down with body armour and kit. He flashed the white square next. The blue flag was hastily ripped down and a white flag run up.

The entire onager placement erupted. One battery had been set up to rain fire-bombs down to the left of the road, a second was aimed at the right of the road, and the third battery lobbed lighter firepots well beyond to land on the road some three hundred paces back from the river. He had calculated that some four thousand men would be enclosed by this ring of death and many more just outside it would be pushed into it by the press of the army behind them which would not be able to be stopped quickly.

He observed the fall of the shot. Perfect! The clay bombs exploded on impact, spreading burning oil everywhere and setting fire to the grass on either side. Some of the men had been splattered by the oil and were screaming. Their cries drifted to his ears. He held up the red square now; rapid fire, no more volleys!

Another cloud of firepots rose in their arcs, and smacked into the ground. The fall of shot was consistent, as would be expected; only the slight differences in weight and windage provided minor variations.

Perfect! Now he held up two squares; red and yellow. The two coloured flags were run up the pole. Still rapid fire, but alternating two slightly different trajectories. The first two batteries would alternate between the road itself and their own flank, achieving a greater spread of terror; and the third would alternate between two different weights of firepot, to vary their range. In this way the entire area within the ring of fire would be covered.

What a pity that the siege towers are at the rear! Mello thought. But even so, he expected some five or six thousand casualties here with no losses of his own. That might cause a few desertions in that huge army! He looked out over his handiwork. Only a dozen or so pots had been thrown from each onager thus far but the entire ring of death was a sea of flames. He flashed the black square down to the signal pole to signal 'cease fire – prepare to withdraw', and trotted down to the onager placement. The men were hitching the horses to their pieces and loading unused shells into the trays.

“Excellent work, men!” He praised them. “Any casualties down here?”

“One man cut by a broken tendon, sir; otherwise all is well,” the battery commander reported. “Also, the crossbows took out three of the riders. The others never came within sight.” The first onagers were limbered and ready to move so he waved them down the road towards the city. The others fell in behind in close order. The crossbowmen walked in lines either side, weapons at the ready. All-in-all, a good day's work.

Reconnaissance the next morning reported that the approaching force had split into two components. One section, estimated at 30,000 strong, was marching cross-country downstream, apparently looking for a place to ford the river. Due to the nature of the terrain this force was on foot. Pedites sent three of his four legions down the road immediately, with some locals to show them the quickest way to the first ford in that direction.

The other component was attempting to repair the bridge. This force had deployed in an arc to produce a defensible line and held the siege towers and other wheeled equipment. They had established a small bridgehead on the near abutment, probably by use of grapples, but this force was purely light infantry. They were dug in behind a ditch and palisade to protect their engineers from attack as they worked on the bridge.

“Excellent!” Pedites enthused. He called his favourite artillery man over to study the map with him. “Lucius, more work for your onager batteries!”

“The Chera have set up a small, lightly-armed bridgehead here,” Pedites said, tracing an arc with his finger. “They're well dug in defensively, but not equipped to attack out of their bridgehead.”

“In other words, they've made their own killing zone,” Mello smiled.

“Exactly!” Pedites agreed. “They can't escape and they can't attack! Or at least, not effectively. How would you go about reducing them?”

Mello stared at the map for a moment. “Ideally, I would like to burn them out from a range of perhaps four hundred paces. If they hunker down, they're dead; it will just take a bit longer. And if they try to counter-attack in desperation, that gives us plenty of room to cut them down with porcupines.” By 'porcupines', Mello was referring to ballistae that had been modified to fire a spray of light arrows instead of single heavy armour-piercing bolts. “If anyone is well-enough armoured to survive the porcupines, he will be exhausted by the time he charges that distance under the weight of his gear,” Mello added.

“We won't have direct sight of the target from that distance,” he continued. “We'll need a lookout to give us advice on our range and direction. “But if we set up just here,” he dropped a finger on a bend in the road, “Then we'll know a rough range to start with and we can get a good alignment by aiming for this hill in the distance.” He tapped a hill beyond the river.

He stared at the map a bit longer. “That will give us about two hundred paces behind the ridge, a clear field of fire if they do charge us. Enough for the porcupines to be effective. I'd like perhaps a couple of centuries of heavy infantry as a final line. They can advance through the ballistae if any attackers get that close.” He looked up from the map to Pedites' face.

“That sounds good so far,” Pedites agreed. “But what comes next?”

“The next step is to roll the onagers up onto the ridge, where each piece will have direct view of the target. From there we can take down the corresponding camp on the far bank.”

Pedites smiled broadly. “I have good news, Lucius.”

Mello looked puzzled. “I thought this was the good news.”

“Reconnaissance says their entire main body is in a single camp on the far side.”

Mello looked stunned. “What? Are they total idiots? They know we have that spot already painted!”

“I can only assume they *are* idiots, Lucius; but just in case, I want you to take out a whole legion as a covering force, just in case they have a concealed force on this side of the river.”

“I'd better get organised quickly. This could be a full day's work!” Mello saluted and strode quickly from the room.

It was after dark when Mello reported back. His grin was unmistakable. “It was just as you said, General! About a thousand light infantry in the pocket that didn't even try to charge us. As soon as our ranging shots started landing they were trying to get back across the river. I expect most of them drowned. By the time we set up on the ridge the main camp on the other side was scattering.” Mello had obviously relished the action.

“They had huddled all their siege towers and catapults into the middle of the main camp. We pushed far enough forward to bring them into range and burnt them all. I think we also destroyed the bulk of their supplies. They seemed to have set up their main kitchens by the river for easier access to water.” Mello paused for just a moment. “They broke at the first warning so I don't think we caused as many casualties today as yesterday. But we destroyed so much material that they're no longer a fighting force even if they could be re-grouped.”

“Good work, Lucius,” Pedites approved. “Now let me bring you up to date on the other body, the one that was marching towards the ford. I'm told that they reached the ford here,” tapping his finger on a spot about six miles from Ezhimala, “but it was so late in the day that they decided not to cross. They set up camp on the far side.” Pedites looked up from the map. “Our legions are

deployed ready to oppose the crossing; but how would your boys like to go for a moonlight stroll and then burn their camp sometime after midnight?"

"How wide is the river at that point, sir?"

"Some three hundred paces, I'm told. It's quite wide, but shallow."

"And how far back from the bank is their camp?"

"I don't know that, I'm sorry," Pedites replied. "But when you get there, the commander on the spot will be able to tell you."

"It is just that the onagers have a maximum range of four hundred paces, even using the lighter shells," Mello reminded Pedites. "I might need to set up in the shallows to get the range, and that makes fire canisters difficult to handle and that would be made even more awkward in the dark."

"I take your point, Lucius," Pedites agreed. "But that's something I can afford to go wrong if the worst happens. Right now I have an enemy that's probably scared shitless of our fire-pots after what happened to them yesterday. Even if you drop short they'll probably panic and scatter, just like the bridge repair crowd today. So do your best. That sure beats exposing my soldiers to a battle. We're too far from re-inforcements to play a war of attrition." Pedites fixed him with a stare. "You know your job; now go do it!"

Mello snapped to attention and saluted.

It had been a hard march over a rough road at night after a long day. But Republic soldiers are good at marching. The problem was with the horses. They didn't like walking along that rutted road at night. It was well past midnight by the time they found the legions on the river bank. Mello was told that the river was slightly less than three hundred paces wide, and the enemy camp had been pitched virtually beside the flow. There was a row of fires and sentries along the far bank, just as the legions had set up for themselves on this side.

Mello set up his battery on the water's edge, aligning his onagers to the camp fires burning within the far camp. When all was set to his satisfaction he ordered rapid fire.

Pandemonium erupted on the far bank. As one bomb followed another, the shouting contained more and more screams as more and more men were splashed with the burning oil or trapped in the flames.

The fire on the far bank spread rapidly. It became easier to see men running around the enemy camp, some aflame, but Mello couldn't gauge accurately how severe the damage was nor the number of casualties. He kept up the rapid fire until his ammunition was exhausted.

As the last firepot arched across the river, he gave the order to limber up and pull back from the bank. Then, as the first glimmer of dawn could be seen in the east, he and his men stumbled back onto the road. They were exhausted, but the road would be much easier to travel in daylight than it had been during the night. "Come on, men!" Mello roared. "Only six miles, and you'll be able to eat your fill and fall into your own bunks!" He turned and started trudging along the road to Ezhimala.

Mello re-entered Ezhimala at about the third hour. He reported immediately to Pedites.

“Well done, Lucius,” the General greeted him. “Riders beat you back here. Their reports are that most of the enemy camp went up in flames and their army is scattered. The threat is over. So please thank your men, have them fed, and grant them two days' leave.”

“Thank you sir,” Mello responded, grateful that he would be able to hit his cot soon. He turned and left the room just as Asoka entered.

“Your message said we have won a great victory, General,” Asoka said, with some confusion in his voice.

“Yes, Asoka,” Pedites confirmed. “We estimate some fifteen to twenty thousand enemy killed and all their equipment destroyed. The survivors have fled in every direction. They are no longer a fighting force.”

“This is very good, General,” Asoka beamed. Then a second thought crossed his mind, and his face fell. “And how many have you lost, General? Ezhimala owes a great debt to your men.”

“We have about eighteen men injured; things like cuts from broken equipment, broken toes from cart wheels and dropped gear, twisted ankles; that sort of thing.”

Asoka was confused again. “And how many dead?”

“Oh, no deaths,” Pedites waved his hand dismissively.

Asoka was stunned. It took him a moment to find a voice. “Not one death, General? How can that be?”

It was now Pedites' turn to look confused. “Why are you so surprised, Asoka? Republic armies always try to minimise their casualties. Our soldiers are too expensive to train for us to waste them!”

Asoka was still unable to comprehend what he was hearing. “But you were out-numbered almost four to one!”

“All the more reason to avoid losing our men,” Pedites' replied.

“I must tell my father!” Asoka started out of his daze.

“No, you must not!” demanded Pedites. “He's in solitary confinement and will remain that way until he's executed for desertion.”

“But General,” Asoka pleaded, “You cannot! He is a sovereign!”

“He asked for acceptance as a Friend and Ally of the Republic,” Pedites said heavily. “We sent our army to help him stand against his enemies. We risked our own lives to defend his! And then he repays us by trying to sneak away from the war that he dragged us into!” Pedites spat the words. “That is not what a Friend and Ally does! It's desertion, it's betrayal! He is worse than an enemy!”

Asoka lowered his head. “When will you kill him?” he asked.

Pedites mellowed at Asoka's submission. He stood and walked over to Asoka.

“I expect some time in the next couple of days would be best. The soldiers need to know that desertion means death and the sooner after the battle they are reminded, the better,” Pedites said. “But there are more important

questions in front of us now. We have repulsed the attack so what do you want to do now?"

Asoka blinked. "I hadn't thought beyond survival. What are the choices?"

"We could launch a counter-attack if you wish; or threaten to if they refuse to return the tribute that have extorted from you. But if you want us to do that, we'll need substantial support from you. You'll need to equip and feed an army of your own, and also feed our men if you want us to remain here and train them properly and lead them into battle. And we will also want a share of the plunder or tribute." Pedites shrugged. "Or we could leave well enough alone and simply train up enough for your on-going defence before we go home.

"Or we could keep a permanent Republic garrison here to defend you. You will have to pay our expenses for that, of course; but that would probably be cheaper than an army of your own that would need to be ten times the size for the same level of protection." Pedites raised an eyebrow. "Take a couple of days to think about it, Asoka." Pedites put his right hand on Asoka's shoulder. "And gather some trustworthy advisers around you. Governing a city is no light task."

Old Asoka was formally tried the next morning. The charges were cowardice, desertion, attempting to bribe an Officer of the Republic and attempting to incite mutiny. All charges except bribery carried the death sentence; he was found guilty of all charges by noon.

He was crucified that same afternoon in the city's main square immediately in front of his former palace, with a dozen guards to prevent anyone killing him too quickly. He was dead before the following evening and his body given to his son for the funerary rites.

Three days after the death of his father Asoka paid a visit to Pedites. "I would like to discuss with you the possibility of a raid on Muziris," he opened bluntly.

"Tell me about it," Pedites prompted him.

"The armies that marched against us were from the cities of Vanchi and Muziris, the two major cities of the Chera," Asoka explained. "They are in a close alliance and always work together, even though they have separate kings.

"Muziris is on the coast, and Vanchi is well inland. It occurred to me that the speed with which you unloaded your legions and their equipment would allow you to take a coastal city completely by surprise, much better than marching overland. Would you be able to do that on an open beach, or maybe a smaller town a short march away from the city?"

Pedites nodded. "It wouldn't be as quick if we had to unload through the surf, but it could be done," he agreed. "A town with a wharf or pier would be better."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Asoka. "Then I suggest that you launch an attack on Muziris! By now the survivors of their army would have arrived back there and the city would be in total dread of you. You need only land and demand tribute and they will yield."

“Wait a minute!” Pedites raised his hand. “I need more information than that! Do you have maps? Do you have information about where we can land and what routes are available from our landing place to the city? Whether we can move our artillery by road or whether we will have to wrestle it through swamps? The Republic doesn't just blunder into wars! We plan them carefully beforehand, every bowl of meal and every step of the march. Before I attack any city, I need to look at it first.”

Asoka was plainly unhappy with this answer. “They have taken a thousand talents of gold from us every month for almost a year now until you arrived. I would like that back. But even if you take all the plunder for your reward, I will be happy because they will know that any tribute they demand from us will be demanded in turn by you. So that will take away any incentive to renew their demands. So please, General,” Asoka continued, “Teach these Chera that they must not harm a Friend and Ally of the Republic!”

Pedites thought for a few moments. “Speaking of gold talents; each legion used in your service is costing you ten talents each month for their food until you start providing that to us free of charge, plus another twenty five talents in administration, pay, equipment and expenses. It's been over a month since we left Mesopotamia, so you now owe us from a second month.

“That will be two hundred and eighty talents due now, plus another one hundred and forty due in ten days' time as payment in advance for next month. Just be glad we didn't send the ten legions your father originally asked for!”

“I will have that delivered to you tomorrow,” Asoka promised. “But what about Muziris?”

Pedites stood abruptly. “I'll send a single ship with my legate. He will notionally be on a peace mission to inform the Chera that you are now under our protection, but he will also spy out a suitable landing place and an attack route while he's there.”

Asoka knew not to push too hard. “That is an excellent plan, General. I will provide your ship with a pilot familiar with the river mouth at Muziris.”

Seven days later Pedites' legate was standing on the riverside wharves in Muziris, welcomed by the servant of a nervous king. Nicanor glanced up to the Royal Platform. He was impressed by the richness of the royal clothing and the beauty of his wives, on show to emphasise his power, virility and control. For his own part Nicanor was also aware that he and his guard of honour were just as impressive in a completely different way; they had been ordered to be expressionless at all times, and oozed menace.

“It is a great joy and honour to greet an ambassador of the Republic, my lord,” the flunkie in front of him said in good Greek and smiled obsequiously. “King Palyane invites you to join him and asks by what name or title you are to be addressed.”

Nicanor retained his hard face as he replied. “I thank King Palyane for his welcome. My name is Nicanor.”

The flunkie smiled yet even more broadly again. “Then please climb the steps when I announce your welcome.” He bowed deeply before turning and mounting the platform. Standing on the front edge of the platform, he bellowed in a surprisingly powerful voice. Nicanor could not understand the announcement in Tamil, but he heard his name in the flow. When the flunkie looked down to him, he started towards the steps in a military stride, his escort in step behind him. Let these guys see military precision, he thought to himself with fervour.

He climbed the steps at an even pace, his men crisply forming a single file to follow him and then evolving into the standard two lines at the top of the steps before resuming their march behind him. He stopped crisply, four paces short of where the king was seated under a shade cloth supported on four poles held by four men. After a slight pause to allow the king to speak first if he chose to, Nicanor decided that the local etiquette probably required him to speak.

“I bring greetings from Chimines Antipater, Eastern Proconsul of the Republic, and from General Alexander Pedites, the Commander of the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force,” Nicanor proclaimed.

The flunkie translated Nicanor's Greek into Tamil for the benefit of the king, who responded with a smile and held out a hand, a little over waist-high and palm-down, fingers gently curved.

'If this guy thinks I am going to kneel and kiss his hand, he is mistaken!' Nicanor thought to himself. 'It's obviously time to actively deny our inferiority.' Nicanor strode forward, and presented his own right arm in the Roman manner, to be taken as two men of equal rank might greet each other. Palyane looked at it with a subtle blend of disdain and confusion. He half-turned to the flunkie and asked a question. The flunkie replied, obviously embarrassed, and Palyane spat a response. Before the flunkie could speak, Nicanor dropped his offered arm and spoke menacingly.

“I have offered King Palyane the right hand of friendship. He has refused it. This is very offensive to both Proconsul Chimines and General Pedites.” Nicanor paused slightly to allow his next sentence to have greater impact. “He will either apologise for his ignorance of our customs, in which case we will freely forgive him; or he has made an enemy of the Republic today!”

“Please allow me to apologise, lord Nicanor,” the flunkie rushed out. “I should have informed you that our customs require a visitor to show respect for the king by going onto one knee to kiss the back of his hand.” The broad, smarmy smile re-appeared. “If you would please complete that formality, then King Palyane will be pleased to take your hand of friendship.”

“I must apologise to you, un-named servant,” Nicanor returned. “I should have informed you that I am the personal representative of the Eastern Proconsul. Therefore I can do no such a thing. The Proconsul is a very generous man and prepared to treat King Palyane as if he were an equal; but he certainly will not bend the knee to him for any reason whatever.”

The flunkie looked horrified and paused before turning back to the king. He started speaking to Palyane in little more than a whisper, lest other attendants overhear such disrespect, with much licking of lips and hesitation. He was clearly

afraid of a 'shoot the messenger' reaction, and Nicanor wondered how accurately he was translating his words. Whether brutally true or honeyed, his words were not making Palyane very happy. He rattled off a terse command to the flunkie.

"Please, lord Nicanor, this is a customary courtesy which all kings do when they visit each other," the flunkie pleaded.

"King Palyane will either greet me as a friend, or I will leave here as an enemy," Nicanor demanded. "And he will do it now. I refuse to stand around awaiting his pleasure any longer. I cannot permit the Proconsul's personal representative to be treated like a common slave."

The flunkie's eyes widened in terror. Nicanor was unsure whether it was terror that this might start a war or terror that he had to be the one to tell his master so shocking a demand. He turned back to Palyane, and whispered to him urgently. When the whispering ceased, Nicanor again offered his right arm. "Do not insult me a second time! Either take my hand or lose your head!"

The flunkie whispered urgently to the king, who slowly rose from his chair and touched his right palm to Nicanor's.

"That was not the customary manner but I will accept his intent," Nicanor conceded and smiled momentarily at Palyane. "Perhaps now we can find a cool room somewhere and talk privately?"

The flunkie translated these words to Palyane, who grimaced rather than smiled and gave another curt command.

"Let us now retire to the palace," the flunkie translated. "If you would walk behind the king, please..."

"No, I will walk beside him," Nicanor responded. Nicanor then turned his back on Palyane, walked between his men and went down the steps. His men turned inwards to follow him and again re-formed in two lines behind him as he watched for Palyane to follow down the steps. But Palyane didn't follow. He sat again, and servants fitted two bars to the sides of his chair. Then they lifted him as though in a litter and carried him down the stairs, the front man lifting the bars above his head as needed to keep the chair level. They started walking across the square and Nicanor fell in beside the litter, his own men following him.

They arrived at the palace. Palyane's chair was set on a pedestal inside the shaded courtyard in the palace and another chair, of inferior standard and set half a body height lower, was set in front of it. Nicanor was shown to the inferior chair, from which he would be looking up at Palyane. Nicanor looked at it disdainfully, and beckoned the Greek-speaking lackey over to him.

"What is your name, please?" he asked politely.

"Please refer to me as Ranjit, lord," he responded.

"Thank you Ranjit," Nicanor continued. "The Eastern Proconsul of the Republic, whom I represent in my person, is a man vastly more important than the petty king of a medium-sized city. However, we are a generous people and will operate on the basis that even the pettiest of kings is deserving of our courtesy. So please tell your master that he should be treating me as a man of much higher rank than he is, but I will generously permit him to treat me as a mere equal. Go, translate that much, and I will then tell you more." Ranjit leant to whisper these

words to Palyane lest these insults be heard by others. Nicanor wondered again how accurately his insults were being translated. At length Ranjit returned, and Nicanor continued.

“However, if he continues to offer us insults in return for our courtesy, Palyane will soon find that the Proconsul is not merely vastly more important than he; the Proconsul also commands legions vastly more powerful than the feeble forces that pass for an army in this part of the world. In short, the next insult he offers me will be understood to be a declaration of enmity. Remind him that if it comes to war he will be treated as this chair. Now, go and tell him!”

When Ranjit had finished speaking to Palyane, Nicanor turned to his men.

“One of you; lift that chair above your head and smash it to the floor as hard as you can. I want it destroyed.” The crash of the chair coming apart startled Ranjit and Palyane. They both looked at the broken chair, and then to Nicanor.

Nicanor prompted Ranjit. “Now arrange for some more appropriate seating.”

Ranjit hastily chattered to Palyane for a few more sentences. Palyane nodded thoughtfully and gave some orders to other servants standing by him. They hurried away in response. Then he stood and stepped down from the pedestal to the common floor level and spoke to Ranjit.

“Come, let us walk in the garden while proper arrangements are made,” Ranjit translated, and took up station by his master's side as he strolled towards the open door to the courtyard.

Nicanor walked beside Ranjit. “My mission here is to inform King Palyane of certain arrangements the Republic has concluded with Asoka, lord of Ezhimala.”

“We are aware that you have allied yourself with Asoka, but he is not lord of Ezhimala,” Ranjit relayed the king's response. “We are the overlord of Ezhimala, and Asoka is our appointee who has rebelled.”

“You might have been the overlord of Ezhimala a month ago,” replied Nicanor, “but that is no longer the case. And we have accepted Asoka as our Friend and Ally. Therefore we are bound by our honour to protect him and to set right any harm done to him.”

“We have done no harm to Asoka, but Asoka has done harm to us,” Palyane claimed. “You are allowing yourself to be manipulated by a schemer, a man with no honour. He does wrong and is hiding behind you to shield himself from justice.”

“The Republic will not allow its trust and friendship to be abused,” Nicanor assured him. “Tell us what injustice Asoka has done to you. We will judge your complaint fairly and we will require Asoka to make proper compensation for any wrong-doing.”

“That is an easy case to make,” Palyane replied. “Ezhimala had been a tributary to the Chola for generations until we liberated them from that loathsome yoke. When Asoka was granted by us to remain on the throne, part of the ritual was an acknowledgement that he holds the city only as our agent and at our

pleasure. He pledged to remain loyal to us as his overlord and we permitted him to ascend only on that basis. But he rebelled against us. He stopped paying his dues and resisted our deputation to depose him. He is faithless.” Palyane stopped, and turned to face Nicanor. “You have promised that you will make good any harm done to us. Asoka has done us harm by his revolt. You are bound by your pledge to set that straight and to depose him in favour of our nominee.”

“The Republic does not recognise the right of one city to impose tribute on another,” Nicanor responded. “Therefore, you have no legitimate claim.”

“Would you try to tell me that your Republic is not imposing a tribute? Are your armies here at your own expense? Let us not speak deceitfully to each other, having greeted each other as friends.”

“In fact, we are not imposing tribute,” Nicanor stated. “Asoka has offered us use of Ezhimala as a base to eliminate the pirates that trouble our merchants, and he is covering our legitimate expenses in protecting his city. He has accepted exactly the same offer that we extended to you by letter some months ago. But you did not have the courtesy to even reply.”

“If your forces were there only to suppress piracy, then you would need ships, not an army. But instead you have stationed a huge land army! What is the army for, if not to maintain your rule?”

“What huge land army?” Nicanor asked. “We have only twenty thousand men in Ezhimala, and they were sent only because Asoka asked for them to defend against attacks by his enemies.”

“With respect, Nicanor, we know that is not entirely accurate,” Palyane corrected him. “Our officers report that the army of Vanchi, a force of over 40,000 men, was totally routed by one attack, and on the same day our own army was virtually destroyed by another attack some fifteen miles away. That could not be done with so small a force.”

“I think perhaps your officers are exaggerating our strength to cover for their own incompetence,” Nicanor answered. “The force that destroyed the Vanchi consisted of less than one thousand men, accompanied by another five thousand infantry who took no part in the battle. Your army was destroyed at the ford by the same thousand men, although I will admit that they had another 14,000 on hand if they were needed to hold the ford. But those extra 14,000 took no part in the battle. So both armies were destroyed by the same thousand men; they destroyed the Vanchi by day, then force-marched to destroy your army that night.”

Palyane looked at him with disbelief all over his face. “Why are you telling me this?” he asked. “You are pretending to give away knowledge of your strength, but no clever general does that. And you are understating that strength, not exaggerating it. Why would you do that unless you were inviting us to attack?”

Palyane continued to search Nicanor's face. “That is it, isn't it? You have deliberately and repeatedly tried to humiliate me today, and now you are understating your strength. You are deliberately enticing me to take revenge for that humiliation by hiding your true strength! You are trying to draw me into a

battle at Ezhimala, either to destroy what is left of my army or to entice it away from some other point you intend to attack by surprise!”

“Believe what you will, Palyane,” Nicanor shrugged. “We care nothing about what you think, only about what you do. Just be aware that any harm done to a Friend and Ally will be punished.”

“Be assured, Nicanor,” Palyane replied, “We will do no harm to your friend. You may report that your mission has been successful.”

“Not entirely successful just yet,” Nicanor corrected him. “There remains the matter of the tribute you have extorted from Ezhimala over the last year. I am told that it totalled ten thousand talents of gold.”

Palyane stiffened. “That was legitimate tribute; for generations Ezhimala has paid tribute to the Chola. We not only lifted that burden from them but pledged to defend them against the Chola into the future. That tribute was payment for our protection.”

“Yes,” Nicanor agreed. “In much the same way a highway bandit puts a sword to your belly, and then demands 'protection' lest he run you through on the spot! If you think that is a legitimate claim, then perhaps we should send our army against Muziris and offer to 'protect' you in the same way.”

“But Nicanor; you have just told me you have only 20,000 men!” Palyane pointed out with a smile, as though he had just trapped an opponent in a contradiction. “Now would you tell me you have enough to threaten this city?” Palyane shook his head, smiling. “Which is the truth?” he asked. “I know that your forces are much greater than 20,000, but I don't think they would number over 100,000; and even that many would still be unable to take this city. But it is good to see that you admit now to having a much larger force than you originally stated.”

“Oh, Palyane,” Nicanor shook his head. “I have told you nothing but the truth. Less than one thousand men destroyed your two armies, and I have twenty times that number on hand! But I don't intent to impose a tribute on you nor sack your city for plunder. We in the Republic want no more than what is just and fair and you hold ten thousand talents of gold that rightfully belongs to our Friend and Ally. Will you return it freely, or do we need to take it? Because if we have to take it we will also take enough to cover our time and expenses to do so.” Nicanor smiled and opened his hands.

Palyane looked at Nicanor for some time before replying. “I will not be scared into giving up that much treasure just for fear of the unknown. But nor do I intend to provoke you into a foolish attack. So let us just part on the understanding that I will not harm the Republic nor its friends, and I advise you to not interfere any more in the affairs of this land. Let us not do harm to each other.”

The next words Palyane said to Ranjit were obviously a command, rather than intended for translation. Ranjit simply bowed to his master, and then said to Nicanor, “That is the end of the audience. If you would please walk this way, I will lead you to your ship.”

Nicanor nodded to Palyane, and called for his men.

As they were walking down to the wharves, Ranjit asked, “You said only one thousand men destroyed our armies! They must be amazing soldiers, if that is true! How many casualties did they suffer?”

“I am not sure of the exact numbers,” Nicanor answered. “I think they suffered something like three broken toes, five crushed fingers, and about ten other minor cuts and bruises.”

“But how many dead?” Ranjit continued.

“Oh, no deaths,” Nicanor answered. “Soldiers of the Republic are too valuable to allow us any deaths.”

Nicanor knew Ranjit would report that back to Palyane. They would be convinced it was a lie. Well, let them!

They had arrived at the wharves now. Nicanor turned to Ranjit and offered him his right hand. Ranjit was shocked that this Ambassador would treat him as an equal but after a moment of surprise he took the Greek's hand.

“Thank you for your assistance today, Ranjit,” Nicanor said. “Please tell your master that the tribute must be returned, whether he likes it or not; we will accept it over time at the same rate as it was taken; one thousand talents per month, the first payment due within thirty days from today.

“If it doesn't arrive at Ezhimala by then, we will take action. If Palyane wants to talk further, he should send a single boat offshore from Ezhimala. It must have blue sails and be completely unarmed. If he does this we will not attack the boat but will talk to his emissary and allow him to return unmolested.”

“I will tell him that, lord Nicanor. Thank you.”

Nicanor released his hand and boarded the boat with his men.

Palyane was convinced that the Republic's demand was all bluff and bluster. They were a new kid on the block, swaggering and self-assertive to cover their fear of the unknown. But still, they were an unknown to him as well so there was no sense in antagonising them needlessly. He would send a message to his brother-in-law Tagadur in Vanchi, reporting events here today and suggesting that Ezhimala might best be left alone for the moment. At least until they had a better understanding of how the Republic waged war and developed a new fighting doctrine to overcome them.

There was already a general idea of Republic tactics. Both massacres had similarities; the Republic had chosen a place where troops were concentrated, preferably against an obstacle, and then they used long-range attacks to slaughter soldiers while remaining untouchable themselves. To counter this approach his generals would need to invent a revolutionary operational doctrine and then completely re-organise and re-train his army accordingly. That will take time.

The soft spot in this Republic tactic was that it would not be well-suited to carrying out an attack; theirs was primarily a defensive doctrine, relying on their enemies to enter prepared ground. As soon as the Republic had to advance into their enemies' territory they were themselves vulnerable. So there was no fear of an attack from these cockerels, Palyane thought to himself. It's all bluster.

Tagadur arrived nine days later, accompanied by his Army Commander and his first wife, Palyane's sister. It was good to see his sister again; they were much closer than many royal siblings. His own first wife was also fond of Tagadur, her brother. That evening meal with the four of them together was very pleasant and intimate.

But the next morning it was all business. Tagadur agreed broadly with Palyane's assessment of the Republic's methods and the inherent advantages they held when defending. He felt the proper counter-tactic would be cavalry, preferably light cavalry which could attack swiftly either in a direct charge or a flanking attack. Whatever machinery the Republic used to fling those firepots could not be easily mobile, so they could be destroyed by advance cavalry before the main body of an approaching army could be harmed.

Their respective commanders were subdued. They had both been routed, and preferred as little talk about the battles as possible. But that was not to be permitted.

"Commander Srinath, I understand that in the first battle your entire front division of some five thousand men had been cut out and burned by these firepots?" Palyane asked his opposite's general.

"Yes, my lord," he confessed in embarrassment.

"Yet you immediately set up camp on the blackened soil of that disaster. Did it not occur to you that the same could happen again?"

"That was a consideration, my lord," Srinath agreed. "But there were other considerations as well which suggested on balance that such a decision involved less risk than any other option."

"What were these other considerations?"

Srinath took a deep breath. "These do not seem very powerful in hindsight, my lord; but at the time we were not fully aware of their fighting doctrine. The first was that we had a bridge-head, even if a light one. The fact that they had destroyed the bridge suggested that they would be unwilling to fight if there was a chance of close contact and therefore we believed that we would not be menaced if we had already established a position with men across the river. The second was that if we remained strung out along the road we could be more easily ambushed or caught in a concentrated attack on one section of our line and unable to assist the men at the point of contact. I preferred to concentrate in a more readily defensible deployment, with particular care to protect the siege towers and catapults.

"The third was that we needed water, both for cooking and for drinking. A location by the river seemed best for this, not only for efficiency but also to protect the water-parties."

Palyane stared at him for a minute longer; then dismissively flicked his gaze across to his own general. "And you, Kumar! You had seen what happened to a force pressed hard up against a river; but the very next night you repeat the error! What is your excuse?"

“My lord, the river was very wide at that point. We believed we were beyond the range of their catapults.” Palyane stared at this man for another minute as well, then back to Tagadur's man.

“You both deserve to die,” he announced. “But that will do nothing to restore our armies and would mean that we would have to replace you with less experienced men.” He snorted in contempt. “Not that your 'experience' was much in evidence that day! But I hope this has taught you both to be more professional in your handling of the armies.”

The men bowed their heads and remained silent. Tagadur broke the stillness. “My esteemed brother-in-law is right. You will not be punished for this dismal effort but you will be expected to perform much better in the future. Now go and discuss how best to organise and handle your forces in the future, now that you have a better understanding of the enemy. It is imperative that you both have the same understanding so you can work together effectively.”

The men retired gratefully.

The commanders reported back late that afternoon on progress to date.

“My lords, we have analysed the errors in the recent engagements and have formulated a new doctrine more appropriate to this new enemy. First, our advance screen was too weak and slovenly. They expected to see nothing, and took no care in case of the unexpected. Also, they rode singly. This left them open to ambush.

“We now know that the enemy forces rely heavily on catapults with a screen of concealed cross-bow men to prevent their discovery. We therefore propose that our advance reconnaissance should consist of squads of perhaps a dozen riders each, so that at least some will be able to survive an ambush and report back the positions of the enemy. We will also require them to remain in contact with each other. This will require us to substantially increase the size of our cavalry units and the total number of cavalry in the armies as a whole.

“When the enemy dispositions are known we will then have the information needed to plan the specifics of the attack. We will have the advantage here that heavy catapults cannot be re-deployed rapidly but light cavalry is the most mobile of all land forces. With variations to suit the specifics of the site, we intend to use massed light cavalry to attack the catapults. Some of the cavalry will be equipped to cut down the defensive screen and the catapult operators, others will be equipped to torch the catapults and their ammunition. When the catapults have been eliminated our infantry and siege engines will be able to pass unmolested. We believe this is the most effective doctrine for this enemy and commend the outline to you.”

“Why light cavalry?” Tagadur asked. “You know they have cross-bows as a defensive screen.”

“Three reasons, King Tagadur,” Srinath answered. “First, the cavalry will need to cover a lot of ground quickly if they are to be used in a reconnaissance role, and the condition of the horses by the end of the day is a major consideration. Second, cross-bow bolts can penetrate armour at close range and

these men will need to pass through the screen at close quarters, not just across its face at maximum range. In these conditions wearing armour will only slow the horse, allowing more bolts to be shot at him while in range, and more accurately because he will be travelling slowly, but without providing any increase in effective protection at close range. Third, we can produce about twice as many light cavalry as heavy cavalry for the same expense. The advantage is in the numbers.”

Palyane and Tagadur looked to each other, and nodded their agreement.

“Very well. Recruit the light horse you propose and start training according to your doctrine. We want a force capable of taking Ezhimala within a year.”

Pedites was quite satisfied with Nicanor's report. He was also well pleased with the drawings made from the ship. These covered the walls of the city and observations of the possible landing sites nearby. It was a pity that he was not able to land scouts to assess the locations and quality of the landing site he preferred. That would have aroused too much suspicion. And in any case, he had many sources for that information from Ezhimala citizens who had travelled and traded with Muziris over the years and their reports were in general agreement.

But back to Nicanor. He had created exactly the right impression on Palyane. It was never going to be possible to convince Palyane that the Republic was a serious threat to him, no matter what Nicanor had said and done. But after this first action against Muziris Palyane will recall Nicanor's absolute confidence. It will be regarded as ominous. The Republic will be dreaded in a way that a mere boast, however arrogant, could never have achieved. Meanwhile construction of the long-range onagers was coming along nicely. He expected thirty to be ready for the raid.

It was a warm and clear morning as Nicanor stepped from the ship's plank onto the wharf in Muziris. He knew that Palyane would not greet him. The king will not want to be seen in public treating anyone as his equal. Nicanor's men formed up behind him as he looked around the waterfront.

All the locals were keeping a respectful distance and curious children were being pulled back into proper place. 'Oh, well! Here we go!' Nicanor thought to himself and set off at a march towards the palace. He had made only a couple of dozen paces before Ranjit appeared, running to meet him.

“Lord Nicanor!” Ranjit greeted him, stopping a few paces in front of Nicanor and bowing respectfully, “It is good to see you again! Please, come to the palace, where King Palyane awaits you!”

Nicanor took the steps forward to close the gap, smiling and extending his right hand. Ranjit took it in greeting. “Ranjit, my friend!” Nicanor responded. “It is good to see you again, too; but my mission is not a happy one.”

“Then please come to the palace and we will see what can be done,” Ranjit replied.

“I do not need to trouble Palyane to solve my problem. If you would be so kind, please relay to your master that the first thousand talents repayment was due six days ago and has not yet been delivered. I will wait here for two hours to accept delivery, but if it does not appear by then I will be forced to assume the worst.” Nicanor looked around the waterfront sadly. “It would be such a pity if that were to happen.”

“Please, lord Nicanor, come to the palace with me and this can be resolved.” It was obvious what Ranjit's orders were; get this troublesome Greek to the palace and out of public gaze. Every eye that sees him will remember how he had humiliated King Palyane! Ironically that was precisely what Nicanor would have done, had not this opportunity for some street theatre been presented to him.

“No, Ranjit. I have a better idea,” Nicanor responded. “Please inform Palyane of his omission – inadvertent, I hope! - and I will wait here for the repayment. Then please return to me here. If the repayment does not arrive in time we can take you with us to Ezhimala as my personal friend. I don't wish for you to be caught up in the destruction of this place.”

Nicanor looked around again, broodingly. “We won't utterly devastate this city; that would be too cruel. But we will do so much damage that Palyane will be given ample reason to comply. If he doesn't we will come back again and again. Each time we return we will increase the punishment until his own people rise up against him and force him to accept our terms. Be sure to tell him that, Ranjit. If he refuses payment we will not hit this place only once; we will hit it repeatedly until every last talent is paid; and we will also require a further five hundred talents for every attack we need to launch to convince him to pay. So the sooner he pays, the less he pays and the less damage this city will suffer.”

“Please, lord Nicanor, my master will find those words more convincing if you were to deliver them in person,” Ranjit pleaded.

“Then he should have been here himself in person to hear them. But that dereliction of proper courtesy, insult though it is, will be forgiven if he comes to his senses. Now go please, time is wasting.”

Ranjit studied Nicanor's face for a moment, and knew that he would not come to the palace. He turned and ran.

It was perhaps half an hour later when Ranjit returned. “My master invites you to take refreshments with him and discuss this matter,” he panted.

“I am sorry to hear that,” Nicanor replied. “I understand that to mean that the repayment will not be here within the remaining hour. Such a pity!” He fixed Ranjit with his eyes. “Do you wish to remain here or will you come with me as a free man, an honoured member of my staff?”

Ranjit sensed that Nicanor was genuine in this offer. “It is true that I am only a slave here, but I am a favoured one. I have a wife and two children and if I leave Palyane he will treat them brutally.”

“But you would wish to come, except for the danger to them?”

Ranjit thought carefully about this, then nodded. “Yes.”

“Then that can be arranged. My men will seize you as a hostage. Cry out for help and struggle against them. They won't not hurt you, but all will see that you were taken by force. Are you prepared to do that?”

Ranjit hesitated. “It is very tempting, lord Nicanor; but I cannot leave my family. Perhaps next time, if you will take them with me?”

“Whatever you wish, my friend Ranjit.” Nicanor assured him. “Now I must go. Tell Palyane that the sooner he complies, the less damage he will suffer. Now, please forgive the rudeness I am about to commit, but it is for your well-being when word reaches the ears of Palyane.” Nicanor then slapped Ranjit across the face, turned on his heel and boarded the ship, his men following behind him.

Ranjit stood on the wharf as the ship pulled away. Then turned and ran back to the palace.

Palyane exploded when Ranjit relayed his report. “To strike another man's slave is an insult to the owner! But to strike a trusted servant of the king as he goes about his duty...!” Palyane started pacing the floor in a fury. “Get General Kumar! I want to march on Ezhimala as soon as he can get himself organised!”

“But my lord,” Ranjit cautioned him. “You know well that this man has tried to provoke you into war since the first moment he set eyes on you. Do not be goaded into a war of his choosing! Better for you to choose the time and circumstances rather than act in haste.”

Palyane stopped his pacing. “You are right, Ranjit.” Then he started pacing again. “But get the General, anyway. I want as large a force as possible as soon as possible. And as well trained as possible. I must urge him to greater efforts.”

Nicanor raced up the coast to meet the raid fleet as soon as possible. Mello, who had now been given the unflattering cognomen ‘Onager’, was in command.

“All is set to go,” Nicanor advised him. “I can confirm that the landing area is indeed low-lying with no buildings. But it looks like sheep are grazing on it so it should be firm enough for your artillery and there's a wide creek running inland just as mapped. No alterations to plan required.”

Mello nodded with a grim satisfaction. This was by far the most complex operation he had ever commanded. His men had rehearsed it back in Ezhimala several times, right down to the order in which the craft are to land and be unloaded. If he can pull it off it will become a text-book example. But the worst part of it would be between now and sunset. He had to stay out of sight of Muziris until dark.

The timing for everything was determined by the optimum combination of moonlight and tides. He gave the order to progress to the jump-off point, just out of daylight sight from Muziris. The flags rattled up the halyards, and he felt the ship turn southwards under him. So long as the wind stayed fair, all would go well.

The jump-off point was reached in mid-afternoon; better early than late! The ships took off all sail except for enough to provide bare steerage and wallowed as they reached back and forth around their stations until sunset. All ships were in their correct places, essential if the logistics of the landing and unloading were to go smoothly. Then, as the sun touched the horizon in the west, the flags went up again. All ships pulled on full sail for the sprint southwards into the deepening night.

The first ships, laden with infantrymen, dropped sail at the last moment before turning towards the beach to run themselves aground at a 45-degree angle to the beach. One longboat was lowered and quickly rowed into position for the boarding planks to land on it; then another length of planking folded over that again towards the shore, landing on another longboat. Then a third length of planking reached water shallow enough to allow a man in body-armor and pack to wade ashore safely. No fancy work here, transferring by longboat!

As soon as the ships were aground the sailors were onto the pumps, transferring sea water into holding tanks in the bilge. This assault had been timed to be just after full high tide, and it was important that the grounded ships not be floated off as they were unloaded. Once the pumps and the pipes had been primed the sea water siphoned into the tanks of its own accord. When the water in the bilges reached the pre-set level this flow was stopped by opening an aircock on the high point of each siphon.

The first men down the planks were heavy infantry in full armour, but equipped with spades instead of their usual marching backpacks. These men ran forward to their assigned positions, alert to anyone who might oppose them or raise an alarm. As expected there was no opposition, only a few startled shepherds who were silenced. Having reached the line of their advance, they started digging a defensive trench. The excavated soil was thrown back towards the ships.

Behind them were men unpacking the partly-dismantled onagers from the holds and carrying these sections onto land. Re-assembly didn't start immediately they reached the beach but the men continued carrying them across the paddock to their correct deployment point. There would be no risk the full weight of the machine causing it to become bogged axle-deep in mud. But the ground was firm and the men made good time. Once they were in their correct position re-assembly commenced. They had done this dozens of times in rehearsal, even in total darkness; the crescent moonlight made it seem trivial in comparison. Each man knew who was carrying which bolts and steel plates and fittings, and exactly what he was required to do at every step in the process. Then as the assembly was completed the crews jogged back to the ships to carry pallets full of their ammunition; small incendiary bombs, designed and tested specifically to be light enough for these new, long-arm onagers to achieve the range and elevation to lob over the city walls.

Next out of the ships were the ballistae. These had been shipped entire, so it took six men to conveniently man-handle each ashore. Each ballista required a crew of two for efficient operation, so the ballistae batteries had been arranged in

groups of three to allow crews to assist each other in unloading and carrying their weapons. These were set up behind the earth mound being thrown up by the trench-diggers and the ammunition was fetched from the ships. This was a mix of projectiles; normal steel-headed ballista bolts if they were required to fire on armoured targets and porcupines for use against unarmoured infantry or cavalry. Once in position the ballista crews bent their backs to help the excavators and some of the armoured men moved into a watchful defensive perimeter in case they had been seen and the city garrison roused.

Finally the defensive trench stretched in an arc from the beach to the mangroves in the inlet, some eight feet wide and four feet deep with a rampart some ten feet wide and four feet high behind it.

Then the palisades were brought out to the trench. These were timber stakes a couple of inches in diameter and perhaps eight feet long, sharpened on both ends. They were driven as far as possible into the soft earth of the mound, leaning outwards at about 45 degrees from vertical. Any horse that tried to jump the defensive ditch and mound would need to clear a leap of twenty feet, with palisades projecting eight feet into the air at the far end. In other words, a frontal cavalry charge would be suicide. The position was substantially complete within six hours of the first beaching. There was still no sign that they had been detected. Torches were lit and distributed to the onager crews, three for each machine, just as dawn started to lighten the sky.

Mello did the rounds of the placements, careful to inspect each onager. The last thing he needed in this operation was one poorly-assembled unit to collapse, spreading its incendiary charge into his own battery. All was well.

The first light of dawn was creeping across the sky. He looked out to sea and could make out the shape of the covering fleet anchored just off-shore, past the beached hulls of the transport ships now stranded as the tide retreated. He could see the men on board some of the beached ships pumping out the bilge tanks now that the high tide was past its peak; indeed, the tide was at its low point.

He nodded to his adjutant. "Give the signal," he commanded quietly. The bugle rose to the man's lips, and brayed one long loud note. The thirty onagers were wound back, and within a minute the first salvo of pots was in the air. Mello was pleased to see the charges lob comfortably over the wall; he had known that the estimated height of the wall was accurate and that his deployment of the units was precise, but there's no substitute for seeing it work!

He strode back to the onager batteries. He hadn't commanded 'rapid fire', because he didn't want men making mistakes in their haste; 'fire at will' allowed the men to adopt an easier pace, one that would last the two hours and more that it would take to lob the full number of 150 charges into the city from each onager. Four and a half thousand bombs! What a mess that would make!

Palyane was woken by a house servant gently rolling his master's shoulder to and fro, fearful that his master would object furiously that his Royal Person

could be handled with anything less than total respect but also afraid of being punished for every moment of delay. "My lord! My lord!" he pleaded.

Palyane rose through the levels of sleep like a diver rising from a pearl bed. At last he surfaced. "Eh? What is it!" he snapped.

"We are under attack, lord!"

"Have you told General Kumar?" Palyane demanded.

"He is also being woken, lord."

Palyane rolled from his bed and pulled a rich silk coat around his body.

"Tell me everything you know as we make our way to the roof," he commanded.

"We are being attacked from the sea, lord," the servant started to explain. Palyane made for the stairs that lead to his rooftop terrace. From there he should be able to see the overall state of the city. "Fire bombs are being thrown over the walls and many areas are now burning," the servant continued.

"Why was I not woken earlier?" Palyane demanded.

"I don't know, my lord," the servant answered as he scurried after the king. "I woke you immediately I was commanded to."

A courier from the barracks arrived just as Palyane reached the foot of the steps. "My lord!" the courier called. "General Kumar advises you that there are catapults in the field outside the walls. He is organising an assault on the position."

"How did catapults get there?" Palyane asked incredulously.

"I don't know that, my lord."

"Well, anyway, the sooner he takes them out the less damage they will be able to do. Tell him to hurry!" Palyane stamped up the stairway to the next level, and continued to the roof. The sun was just peeking over the hills to the east. He hurried over to the parapet, and was shocked at what he saw. Fifteen or more ships were just off the coast, and another thirty were stranded on the beach. Oh, and there were another dozen or so lurking in the inlet just beyond!

On the field below he saw a battery of onagers, throwing burning bombs into his city. From this height he could also see trails that had been trodden into the grass of the field. The onagers had been carried there from the boats, they had not come overland. That's how they managed such complete surprise! But how could they carry catapults with such a long range in such small ships?

As the light grew better he made out the scar of the trench cutting off the corner of the field. He could also make out what looked like a skirmish line of infantry behind it. 'Our cavalry will cut them to pieces!' he gloated with delight. Even as he watched, he could see his light cavalry mustering some four hundred paces away from the trench, just outside the walls. "Come on, Kumar!" he growled impatiently. "What's keeping you?"

At last he saw some forward movement. More than a thousand horse wheeled and broke into a trot towards the trench. Although Palyane knew a gallop over uneven ground from that range could be dangerous he impatiently urged more speed. Every bomb that lands before the catapults are put out of action is more damage being done!

Palyane looked down to the city; there were dozens of little pinprick fires. Where a bomb had found a particularly combustible target, or perhaps two or three bombs had landed in the same place, the fires were looking more serious. He looked back to the cavalry just in time to see a swathe of them go down. What had happened? The charge had lost momentum as the remaining horses reared. At last the men regained control and charged again, this time at a full gallop. Again a swathe of horses was taken down. Only half the original numbers remained.

At last they reached almost to the trench. But just as they seemed ready to wash over the defenders they pulled up and veered away. They were now running in full retreat. Again, horses collapsed en masse as barely a third of the original charge made it back to the apparent safety of the walls.

Palyane clenched his teeth and fists in frustration. Light cavalry was supposed to be the key to cracking the Republic army! Why had it failed so dismally? He stormed off his rooftop lookout, calling for his retinue to prepare themselves. Taking only a few minutes to dress more regally, he walked past his sedan chair and into the street. There was no time to waste on formalities.

He stormed onto the edge of the field, demanding that General Kumar report to him. A middle-ranking officer appeared.

“Where is Kumar?” Palyane demanded.

“He is out on the field, my lord. We have no way of knowing if he is dead or only injured.”

“Then who is in active command?”

“I am, my lord. My name is Dilip.”

Very well, Dilip; report the situation, and explain why your cavalry couldn't break through.”

Dilip took a deep breath. “The enemy have a strongly-fortified position. It can't be taken by direct assault. Behind their defensive trench they have machines that look like large cross-bows but can shoot many arrows at once; I would estimate thirty in a single shot. They have perhaps fifty of these machines. Half our force was lost in the approach. Then as we drew closer we saw that the far side of the trench had been filled with spikes. Any horse attempting to jump the trench would be impaled. We had to turn back, losing more as we retreated.”

“Then what do you intend to do?” Palyane asked. “We can't just let them sit there and burn the city!”

“We can't carry an assault, my lord. We have lost most of our cavalry already and what we have left will not be able to jump the spikes. We have infantry, but by the time we could cross the field of fire those cross-bow machines would annihilate them.

“I suggest that we have only two effective ways to handle the situation. We counter-siege, cutting off their supplies while using our own catapults to destroy theirs. I have already ordered the catapults to be set up behind the walls so they can't be seen and use indirect fire to target their catapults. As for cutting off supplies, well... I don't think we have the ability to do that very quickly. The best we can hope for is to reduce their rate of fire over time.”

“I don't believe this!” Palyane shouted. “There would be fewer than a thousand of them out there, and you're telling me that you cannot stop them from destroying the city!”

“I'm sorry, my lord; but I have neither the equipment nor the military doctrine to overcome them.”

“How many infantry do you have?” Palyane demanded.

“About 2,000 under arms at the moment. We lost a lot of men in the Ezhimala campaign and many of the survivors have been dismissed rather than continuing the expense of feeding them.”

“Then get them together and send them out in one single charge!”

“But my lord; in the time it would take them to cross the distance, those cross-bows could fire six or eight volleys. We could lose perhaps five hundred, perhaps a thousand men for every volley those cross-bows fire. The two thousand we have on hand would not even make it to the trench.

“I want that position over-run!” Palyane demanded. “If it's not completely crushed these Republic bastards will think they cannot be stopped, so we need to give them one smack in the face they will never forget. I don't care about the cost! So long as we convince them that attacking us is suicide, I'll consider it a victory.”

“Yes, my lord,” Dilip responded. “I estimate that we will need at least 10,000 men to carry the assault. I'll gather and equip the required number of infantry immediately.”

“How long will that take?”

“I need to locate the men, open the armoury and distribute the weapons. Then we need to form them into proper units to maintain control and discipline. To equip 10,000 men will probably take until sunset. I suggest we attack in silence, under cover of darkness to minimise casualties.”

“Then do it!” Palyane stormed back through the postern gate and into the city. He called for his breakfast to be taken on the roof so he could watch the battle.

The fires were much worse now. Many of the smaller fires had merged and they were now beyond any hope of control. Palyane looked to the south-west; not a sign of cloud or rain! How could a force of only a thousand men do this to him? Then he recalled the interview with that smug Republic officer who had boasted that the forces attacking Ezhimala had numbered only a thousand. He swore a curse that shocked even himself for its imagination.

There was some action among the boats! Longboats could be seen rowing out to sea from the stranded ships. As Palyane watched he saw each of them throw something heavy over the side and then row back. Ramps of sand were also being built up against the ships on the landward sides. In some cases the original plank ramps were being placed on top of the sand.

It registered in his mind that the barrage seemed to have eased. Not so many bombs were coming over as earlier. Palyane looked back to the field and noticed that some of the catapults were being dismantled. As he watched more

catapults stopped firing and their crews started to dismantle them. Some were being carried back to the ships.

“Get Dilip up here immediately!” he ordered one of his attendants.

“Who is Dilip, my lord?” the attendant asked.

“General Kumar is dead. Go down to the barracks, and tell everyone that I want the acting commander up here immediately!”

By the time Dilip arrived it was obvious that the Republic was withdrawing its equipment.

“Think, Dilip! They won't be able to resist your attack once they start withdrawing the crossbow machines from their defensive position.” Palyane said. “That is the time to attack them. Kick their tails as they run!”

“Indeed so, my lord!” Dilip agreed. “But that will not be a job for infantry. I still won't have enough men. But the remaining cavalry will be able to run them down if we can breach the spikes quickly enough. That shouldn't be too difficult once the defenders abandon them.

“Then do it,” Palyane ordered. Dilip bowed and left in haste.

Within an hour Palyane could see that all the catapults were back on board the ships. He also noted that the tide was coming in again; the beached ships were now within reach of the waves. A trickle of machines was also starting to dribble back from the defensive trench. The defences were not all folding back at the same time, but progressively. That made the attack call a bit harder to judge. Too early and the remaining cross-bow machines would annihilate the few remaining cavalry, but leave it too long and most of them will have escaped. Palyane told himself to trust the professionals; at least if it went wrong he would have some-one to blame and not be blamed himself!

Palyane watched as men carried the cross-bow machines back to the ships and then returned for more. At least half of them must be back by now, he said to himself impatiently. Yes, there must be less than half of them left there by now, he thought. Then, to his surprise, all of the remaining machines were lifted and started to be carried back to the ships. “Now!” he shouted in vain towards the distant cavalry. They couldn't hear him at this distance. The horsemen were still milling around, unsure of what was happening. They didn't have the overview Palyane had from the roof.

At last, they seemed convinced that this was the general withdrawal, the vulnerable point in time, and started towards that terrible trench. And then the trap was sprung. The ships at anchor in the inlet and off the beach started flinging more of those fire-bombs. But they were not targeting the city. They were carpeting the area in front of the stakes, with some falling into the trench itself. The horses were confronted with a wall of fire, and sheared away in terror. Under this covering barrage the last of the cross-bows were carried aboard their ships.

But what good would that do? Palyane asked himself. The fools had boarded the ships that were stranded on the beach! When they had been empty, they would have been carried up the beach to the full extent of the tide; now they were laden they would be stuck fast.

He could see the men on board struggling with the capstan as they tried to pull themselves off the beach. He could see the anchor cable stretched taut out to sea. Ah! That's what the longboats had been doing; taking out an anchor! There was also some sail up, the cross-arms slanted over to catch the southerly breeze backwards to help push the ships out to sea.

He could also see men working several pumps. Oh no! They must have deliberately part-flooded their ships, to prevent them being washed further up the beach; now they were pumping them dry to gain buoyancy! And those ramps of sand had not only made re-loading the ships easier; they were holding the ships so the waves could not drive them further up the beach.

Even as he watched, he saw one ship start to slide backwards out to sea. The anchored ships were continuing the screen of fire to hold back the cavalry as one ship after another slid off the beach. Finally, all of them were under sail as they wound in the last of their anchor cables. The covering ships anchored offshore and in the inlet put on sail, pulled up anchor and started reaching out to sea. Palyane was in a rage.

Mello, on the other hand, could not have felt more elated. It had worked! The return back up the coast to Ezhimala was spent in an ecstasy of delight. Certainly there would be injuries; twisted ankles while carrying heavy equipment cross-country in the dark were inevitable. There would also be the usual artilleryman's wounds; cuts, bruises, crushed fingers, and so on. But as far as he could tell without accurate reports he had seen no sign of a battle death.

By the time the last of the casualty reports had landed on his desk he knew he had commanded an outrageous success. Apparently the only death had been a sailor reported lost overboard in the grounding. His ship-mates have seen him topple over the bow of the ship as it hit a small bar. It seems the ship had ridden over him and crushed him against the sand. More importantly, Asoka's General had been on board the command vessel with Mello and had seen the whole battle personally. His report to Asoka would make sure that Asoka understood that the Republic legions had no equal; at least, not below the snow-line of Mount Olympus. There was now no risk that Asoka would be anything except a pliant client.

Pedites was also happy. "I don't need to tell a man of your experience that you were absolutely dumb lucky that everything worked so smoothly for you," he told Mello. "But a lucky general is a good general, so suck it up! So long as you don't make the mistake of thinking you have everything under control but keep that dread in the pit of your stomach that makes you triple-check everything and allow for every mishap, you will continue to do well.

"Some of your soldiers tell me that you made sure the evacuation went so smoothly and efficiently that they forgot to pull up enough grass to make you a crown." Pedites went on. Then he burst into a huge grin. "But some others didn't make that mistake!" He offered Mello his right arm. "I want you in the main square at noon tomorrow so it can be presented!"

Mello was stunned. Corona graminea! “But I didn't save an army from annihilation; in fact I had risked sending it into one!”

“Which is precisely the point, Lucius!” Pedites encouraged him. “If anything had gone wrong every man could have been lost. But in fact not one was! This is the fourth battle in two months in which you have won an overwhelming victory without losing as much as one man to enemy action!” Pedites' grin had not diminished. “You deserve it!”

Palyane, standing atop his palace roof and looking out over the burnt-out lower city, was thinking much the same thing but without the smile. Tagadur was beside him, having rushed from Vanchi as soon as the report had reached him.

“I knew it was an empty boast when he told Ranjit that he had not lost a single life in defeating our armies,” Palyane fumed. “Now I suspect it was the simple truth.”

“I suspect so as well. To win a victory and seize the battleground is one thing. But to be able to devastate a city and then evacuate by sea without losing a single man; that is pure genius.” Tagadur fell into thought again.

“He told Ranjit he would be back. But next time we will be ready for him!” Palyane promised himself. “We will have this field under constant watch. As soon as his men unload their machines we will cut between his ships and his men, annihilate his crews, and seize his catapults to use against him!”

“I don't think he will be so stupid as to try to do the same thing twice,” Tagadur suggested quietly. “I think it's much more likely that he'll do something totally different and totally surprising. I fear that you will always be preparing to fight the last battle and not the next one.”

Only Tagadur would dare speak so bluntly to Palyane. The two men were closer than brothers.

“Then what do you suggest we do?” Palyane challenged.

“I suggest you find a ship, fit it with blue sails, stack one thousand talents on board, and sail north.”

“What?” Palyane exclaimed, incredulous.

“How much will this cost to repair, brother?” Tagadur asked as he gestured to the city below them. “How much will it cost you to replace the cavalry you lost?”

“Much smarter to make a payment, maybe two; the Republic will go away when they think they have you properly submissive. That's when we march on Ezhimala again. But this time we don't simply demand tribute; we loot it of every brass coin and every stick of furniture! We enslave the entire population and we either fill it with our own people or burn it to the ground!” Tagadur closed his fist for emphasis. “Then everyone will see that the Republic's protection means nothing if the Republic isn't there to protect!”

“But the Republic will come, eventually, and take their revenge,” protested Palyane.

“From what base?” Tagadur snorted. “Are they able to invade from a month's sail away? They would not even be able to supply such a force, much

less have it fit for battle as they land! With no-where here as a foothold, they will be powerless.” Tagadur waved a hand dismissively.

Palyane nodded thoughtfully. “I see your point, brother,” he agreed at length. “A few thousand talents to lull them into complacency and then into withdrawal would be a sound investment.”

Thales was surprised to see the blue-sailed ship appear from the south. He had been on patrol in the waters south of Ezhimala since the first arrival of the Republic forces, the primary duty of his three-ship squadron being reconnaissance. Although fitted with ship's ballistae fore and aft these were intended to be used only as a last resort. His primary orders were to report back at utmost speed so the main naval force could be deployed.

Thales used the new-fangled telescope to inspect the intruder's decks for any sign of weapons. The decks seemed bare, with not even a carefully draped sail that might conceal a surprise. He ordered his other two ships to stand off while he investigated, and ordered the tension would onto his ballistae. The firepots and a torch were readied. As he drew near, he heard a voice hailing him in Greek.

“We come unarmed, as instructed by lord Nicanor!” the voice called.

“Then drop your sail!” he responded, following Standing Orders written for this possible encounter. The sails were furled and the ship started to wallow in the swell. He saw a small sea-anchor thrown over the bow to turn the ship bow-first into the wind and swell. A good sign, Thales thought. You don't do that if you intend a surprise manoeuvre.

“I will sail around you to verify that you are unarmed,” he hailed back. “Clear your decks of any obstruction to my inspection.” The last was a bit of wasted breath; the deck was already clear but Standing Orders required him to say it. The circuit of the Muzirisi vessel complete, Thales hailed again. “Prepare to accept a pilot!” A longboat was slung over the side, and Thales' First Officer was rowed to the stranger. Soon the sea anchor was hauled in and the blue sails re-set. Thales took up station a hundred paces to windward as the stranger set for Ezhimala. One of Thales' squadron was following a further hundred paces astern Thales and the other sent sprinting to the north to alert the city.

A richly-clothed Tamil stepped off the plank and onto the quay at Ezhimala, followed by Ranjit. Pedites and Asoka were waiting to greet him, with six resplendent legionaries behind them as a guard of honour. The Tamil dignitary and Ranjit approached Pedites and Asoka, stopping a few paces short as Ranjit announced in Greek for the benefit of the real power here “May I introduce to you lord Muttiah, advisor to King Palyane. We seek audience with King Asoka and lord Nicanor, please.”

“I am lord Asoka,” Asoka responded in Greek, careful to use the term 'lord' in the presence of his republican guest. “My father died recently. Allow me to introduce to you General Alexander Pedites, commander of the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force currently enjoying our hospitality.”

Ranjit rapidly translated for his companion. The two visitors bowed deeply. "Our sympathy for your loss, lord Asoka; and we are honoured to meet General Alexander."

"Please walk with us to the palace and take refreshments," Asoka said in Tamil, gesturing up the quay. He turned and started walking at a dignified pace with Muttiah and Pedites level with him.

An informal but still impressive spread had been prepared, thanks to the warning from the squadron at sea. Asoka and Muttiah wandered in the garden briefly, exchanging courteous pleasantries. A servant had been sent to fetch Nicanor, who arrived at the palace during this stroll. Ranjit sought him out. "Lord Nicanor; I must speak with you urgently, while lord Muttiah is otherwise occupied.

"Palyane and Tagadur fear that other cities will also refuse tribute and seek Republic protection. However, Palyane feels he cannot defend his city against another raid. So he intends to start paying the tribute but will do so only until he feels the time is ripe to strike hard at Ezhimala. He intends to utterly destroy it and thereby intimidate his other tributaries. Be assured that as soon as the Republic's garrison leaves he will move without mercy."

Nicanor was not surprised that Palyane would adopt this approach. But he was surprised that Ranjit would convey this information. "You're taking a big risk to tell me this, Ranjit. Why are you doing it?" Nicanor asked.

"Because you are a man of vast power and authority," Ranjit replied, "yet you treat me as a friend and are concerned for me and my family. You have bought my loyalty with the most valuable coin in the world; you have respected me."

Nicanor nodded. "Because you are a man worthy of respect. I knew it that first day."

Ranjit smiled a genuine smile of friendship, not the ingratiating grin he used for his official face. "Thank you. But now I must leave you alone lest Muttiah might see me speaking to you privately." Ranjit slipped away quickly but casually. Nicanor wandered casually over to a servant to collect a small cake from his tray and then found Pedites.

Asoka thought there had been enough genteel chat and broached the issue. "Your man said you wished to speak with lord Nicanor as well as me. Would it be appropriate for us to do that in one meeting?"

"Indeed, it would. And with the General as well if it pleases him to take the time," Muttiah agreed. "But may I also have my servant with me? I know you speak Greek, but it is below your dignity to act as a translator."

"I would welcome him, lord Muttiah; he will also be able to inform you of any private conversation between the Republic's men, thereby easing your mind." Asoka smiled warmly as he divined the real reason for Muttiah wanting his own translator in the room.

Asoka led his guest into the cool of a moderately-sized room for better privacy and ordered a servant to invite Pedites, Nicanor and Ranjit to join them.

Soon all five men were seated around a table with light food and drink before them.

Muttiah opened the talk. "Lord Nicanor met with King Palyane almost two months ago, and requested the return of the tribute that your esteemed father," Muttiah bowed slightly towards Asoka, "had delivered to king Palyane; tribute which was rightly payable in return for Muziris guaranteeing that Ezhimala would not be attacked. Of course, Palyane considered this an absurd request. He had ensured the safety of Ezhimala. He had earned that payment for his services in keeping your people safe from predatory neighbours.

"King Palyane considered this explanation adequate and the matter was closed. But some six weeks later, lord Nicanor again visited Muziris and repeated his request. He was invited to the palace so our rights and customs could be explained to him in more detail. But sadly he refused our hospitality and patience. He left without speaking to anyone except a slave who had no authority to do anything. This was most regrettable.

"Even more regrettable was an unprovoked attack on Muziris the very next morning. It was reported to King Palyane that this attack was carried out by the Republic's men. The king is most unwilling to believe this report. Men of honour, such as the Republic's generals, do not attack under cover of darkness, nor without a proper ultimatum and declaration of hostilities. Yet even so, there is strong circumstantial evidence of the Republic's involvement.

"My mission today is to seek your confirmation that this attack was not carried through by the Republic, but rather by pirates posing as the Republic's men with the aim of creating antagonism between us." Muttiah waited for the last paragraph to be translated by Ranjit, and sat erect in his chair.

Asoka looked to Pedites to reply.

"I was not personally present when Nicanor visited your city, but I believe his report is accurate. If he could present his own recollections of those visits...?" Pedites looked to Nicanor.

"I did indeed visit your beautiful city two months ago," Nicanor agreed. "My request that the tribute be returned to lord Asoka was not an idle wish. It was explained to Palyane," he saw the reaction in Muttiah's eyes as he deliberately omitted any honorific to Palyane's name, "that neither the Republic nor lord Asoka considered a thousand talents each month as a fair fee for protection against third parties. We deemed it to be extortion because the only third parties able to attack Ezhimala were yourselves and your ally in Vanchi." He paused as Ranjit translated.

"Therefore we demanded, not requested, that the tribute be repaid. However, I allowed that it might not be possible to raise so large an amount quickly and said I would accept a thousand talents per month until repaid. Palyane very politely but very clearly refused and immediately dismissed me before I could complete my instructions. Therefore I relayed to this slave," indicating Ranjit "the rest of my message and asked him to inform Palyane. That message included the ultimatum you claim is lacking, in that I warned him we would take action unless the first payment arrived within a month.

“And I know that message was indeed relayed, because the instructions about a single ship with a blue sail for an embassy were part of that message and your ship fulfilled those requirements. So there can be no doubt that the ultimatum had been relayed.” Nicanor took a slight pause, to prepare for a summation. “So Palyane was presented with an entirely legitimate demand, an ultimatum was included, and he failed to act. He has no ground for complaint.” Nicanor gestured back to Pedites.

“Your other complaint, that we attacked under cover of darkness,” Pedites took up the narrative. “Don't blame us if your watchmen are asleep! Yes, it was a Republic force that attacked and they did so only after the ultimatum had expired. You have no grounds for complaint.” Pedites crossed his arms.

Muttiah tried to look astonished. Instead, he looked terrified. At length, he shook his head slowly and sadly.

“It appears we have here a misunderstanding brought about by different cultures. But King Palyane desires peace with all, not war. We entreat you again; let us start afresh, forgetting all that has gone before. Palyane will forgive your ... ah, shall we say, 'uncustomary'? ... attack and consider all obligations wiped. Are we agreed?” Muttiah asked.

“The captured criminal is always the first to say 'forgive and forget'; it is only the victim of his crime who is unwilling to agree.” Pedites smiled mirthlessly. He deliberately waited for this to be translated, to catch Muttiah's reaction.

“Are you implying that King Palyane is a criminal?” Muttiah challenged with a proper show of outrage.

“Yes,” Pedites agreed.

Muttiah was at a loss. His instinct was to storm out of the meeting but his instructions were to negotiate as much relaxation from the tribute as possible. Leaving now would only invite another raid on Muziris.

“Your attitude is most unhelpful, General. I am here to try to work towards a peaceful resolution of our differences,” he protested.

“Then let us do that,” agreed Pedites. “As lord Nicanor informed you during his first visit, the tribute must be paid. Further, any costs we incur in enforcing compliance will be added to the amount. That raid cost us a hundred talents of gold. It would have been more if we had sent our full strength, but we were confident that a small raiding party would be sufficient to attract your attention. Do you have any questions?”

It was clear to Muttiah that further protestations would be counter-productive. “We have a thousand talents in our ship at the moment. It was intended to be a good-will gift upon reaching a treaty. But if you are not prepared to make a fresh start to our relationship, then let it be the first payment.”

“Yes, let it be the first payment,” Pedites agreed. “But tomorrow it will be two months since lord Nicanor made his demands. Will you be able to get the second payment here by tomorrow?”

Muttiah's jaw dropped. “No! You will get the second payment next month!”

“That's a pity,” Pedites mused. “That will mean another lesson will need to be administered. And that will cost you another two hundred or more talents for our troubles; we have already given you the cheapest lesson.”

“Please, General; delay for five days and the second payment will be here,” Muttiah bargained.

“Very well. Five days and the third payment within the remainder of the third month, so you are back on schedule,” Pedites agreed. “Any additional fees, like our hundred talents for the raid, can be settled within a month of the last payment.” Pedites stood to indicate the end of the meeting. “Now let us go down to the docks to weigh out the gold.”

The second shipment of a thousand talents arrived on the fifth day. Eight days after that they were visited by a ship from Nelcinda, a city well to the south of Muziris. A gorgeously-dressed envoy was greeted on the quay by Asoka. He was introduced as Duran, Advisor to King Shavrit of Nelcinda.

“My lord King Shavrit has been informed of your heroic stand against the tyrant Asoka. You have become an inspiration to many!”

“I am honoured by such praise from King Shavrit,” Asoka replied formally. “Come, let us take refreshment together!” The two men paraded side-by-side in their majesty to the palace.

After a proper interval of polite chatter, Duran came to the point. “My lord King Shavrit would be honoured if you would consider him a friend and partner in bringing peace and prosperity to our peoples.”

“I would be honoured by the friendship of King Shavrit and see great benefit in a partnership with him.”

“And such a partnership and friendship should also include others to make it stronger and more effective,” Duran added.

“That would seem wise,” agreed Asoka. “But that would depend on the attitudes of those others.”

“I am informed that the Republic enjoys your esteem, King Asoka. That recommends them highly to my lord,” Duran steered the conversation in the desired direction. “Would it be possible for you to introduce me to one of their envoys?”

This didn't take Asoka by surprise. In fact he had both expected and hoped this would be the case. Anything that threatens to surround Muziris with multiple threats would not only weaken their ability to take action against any one, it would also proportionately reduce the chance that he would be the one that Palyane might try to deal with. “Indeed, I would be eager to bring you together!” Asoka exclaimed. “Please accept my hospitality tonight while I send to see if General Alexander is available.”

Pedites met with the two kings the next morning.

“Nelcinda is a city very much like Ezhimala,” Duran opened. “We seek to live in peace with our neighbours so all may prosper. However we have been subjected to the same threats and unjust impositions which formerly burdened King Asoka's venerable father.

“It is widely known that the Republic is a faithful Ally, bringing both peace and justice wherever it is welcomed. King Shavrit values these things very highly and therefore seeks to be a Friend and Ally of the Republic.”

Pedites thought for a moment. Did he have the forces to garrison and protect two cities? But then, how much force did he need, given that Muziris seemed to be totally cowed. They had been towelled up repeatedly without inflicting so much as a single casualty. It would certainly do no harm to find out more.

“When the Republic adopts a Friend and Ally, we take our mutual obligations very seriously,” Pedites explained. “We do not impose a tribute because a Friend is a Friend and not a slave. However we do expect an Ally to do all within its power to protect our interests, just as we pledge to do all in our power to protect that Ally. Would your lord be prepared to commit to that deep a bond?”

“King Shavrit would be eager to do so,” Duran assured him. “For that is how honourable men should always treat each other.”

Pedites stood. “Then let us go and speak to your lord,” he concluded. He offered Duran his right arm. Duran also stood and accepted the arm, smiling broadly. Asoka had shown him how to do this in the Roman manner.

A month later Palyane was in Vanchi to discuss the worsening situation with his brother-in-law. “I had hoped to cover the costs of the tribute to the Republic by raising more funds in Nelcinda; but that bastard Shavrit sneaked off to the Republic and asked for their protection too!” Palyane fumed. “Now I'm not only paying to Ezhimala and without the tribute from Nelcinda. Now I'm being told to repay the last five years of tribute from that scum-sucking Shavrit!” Palyane swung a foot at one of the cats that his sister kept in the court. Naturally he missed.

“So how is the cash flow?” Tagadur asked casually.

“Outwards!” Palyane exclaimed in his frustration. “Ezhimala and Nelcinda were my two best milk cows. Without them I could barely manage, with just a few smaller towns and villages to tax. But to pay back that tribute as well....” He threw up hands in despair. “It just can't be done!”

It can't be done forever, brother, but it can be done for a few more months,” Tagadur urged him. “Have you been building up your army? Have you been working on cavalry drills?” Palyane nodded sombrely.

“Then in a few months' time, when the Republic has gone home,” Tagadur continued, “or even if they haven't, you can land your army on the coast instead of marching into overland traps. Then you can devastate the lands of Ezhimala starve them out. You will have enough forces to protect Muziris against another attack. And I will march against Nelcinda, to divide their attention.

“They won't be able to protect both; my guess is that they won't be able to repel us from either. The whole land will see that the Republic might be good at surprise attacks, but they're not able to protect anyone in a serious, protracted

war.” Tagadur smiled. “That's when these pipsqueak cities will come back, offering entire treasuries for our clemency.”

Meanwhile Pedites was only too aware of how thin his forces might be stretched. There were only so many ways in which surprise can be gained, and an enemy who is alert should not fall for surprise too often.

The training of the Ezhimala militia was going reasonably well, considering. They were learning but there seemed to be some fundamental problem with them. They were simply not soldiers in the Republic mould. They could go through the evolutions and the drills well enough, but they lacked ruthlessness, they lacked initiative and – not to put too fine a point on it – they lacked courage. At the first sign of something going awry they would not be able to rely on each other to stand firm and make the required corrections, but would scatter as a disorganised rabble. And each of them knew that the man to his right and his left would do that, so his own only hope for survival consisted in being the first to scatter, not the last.

So he had taken to a two-tiered defence of Ezhimala. He was now training up a much larger contingent of artillerymen and building new artillery pieces for them. The Republic corps would be the guardians of the approaches while the Ezhimalans would be the city battery.

Meanwhile he was also doing something unknown in Tamil waters; he was building a fleet of triremes. He honestly thought they were a waste of time and resources, the trade winds being reliable in these waters, but it was Tamil time and Tamil resources he was wasting so he had no qualms. At the very least, any enemy coming against them would be unsure of what to expect and that confusion alone could turn a battle.

He had sent Mello and the main body of artillery to Nelcinda with two of his legions. Mello had been instructed to adopt the same approach; train up the locals and build a trireme fleet. Reports were coming back every fifth day, with the message packets making a point of passing by Muziris at close range to spy out any works.

Mello was very disappointed with the terrain around Nelcinda. The land was flat with a myriad of shallow channels; not good terrain in which to identify a line of advance and funnel the incoming army into a killing ground, all from a position of relative impunity. This land was much better suited to light cavalry and he was aware from the Muziris raid that the Chera had hit on that precise answer to his own favoured doctrine. To put his heavy onagers out on that land would be very risky indeed. He would need legions to protect them from assault from any direction on the compass and to re-deploy in these boggy conditions could not be done easily while under attack.

Instead he opted for a siege approach but it was siege-in-depth. He set every available hand to digging a moat some twenty paces wide, starting thirty paces from the base of the walls. Not too close, lest he weaken the wall foundations. The water depth was not great, only a few feet at high tide and an

exposed mud flat at low tide; but the depth of that churned-up mud was enough to make it an impassable barrier for a horse or a man. Even the men digging it needed to be hauled out with ropes. Two timber bridges were built over this bog, near the middle. Dozens of ballistae in concealed positions were pre-set to focus on these bridges, plus a few onagers to demolish them if the need arose.

Another ditch was dug another hundred paces outside that, except that this didn't connect to the river. Again about twenty paces wide, the base was taken to about one-and-a half times a man's height below the high tide level, and men assigned to pumps to keep the ditch dry against seepage. Stakes were driven into the bottom, leaning towards the outside bank, their tops set about two feet below high tide and dense enough to ensure that horses couldn't swim it without injury. Only when everything was complete were the banks at either end trenched and pipes laid in them, connecting the ditch with the river just below high tide. This allowed water to enter and fill the trench just above the level of the tips of the stakes. But water would not be able to drain back below that level. Thus the stakes were submerged at all times, even at low tide in the river. The trenches were then filled to provide passages past this moat. Dozens of ballistae were set on the city walls and a few onagers behind the walls, focused on these choke points.

Thus the approach to the city required an attacking army to pass through the two narrow choke points formed by the narrow banks at either end, these being the focal points of dozens of ballistae, then to traverse across the face of the walls to the bridges in the middle, again the focus of another two batteries of ballistae.

No siege towers could possibly be brought to the walls without the super-human effort of first filling passageways over these ditches, during which the labourers would be subjected to withering fire. Catapults could be set up beyond the far ditch but at that range they would not have the power to throw a projectile capable of doing substantial damage. If these Tamils thought that they had learnt the techniques involved in the use of fire-bombs, then let them just try! Mello thought. They were more likely to burn themselves than the town; that technique was not learnt quickly and they would themselves be under fire from his own concealed onagers while they fumble around, his firepots landing on top of the attackers' ammunition!

Mello was happy with his work after a month. From here on it would be little more than augmentation. For lack of anything better he set the labourers onto a third ditch, some fifty paces inside his own extreme range. This was enough to cause some worry among anyone who tried to fill it in while under fire, while remote enough to be outside the range of the inferior Tamil catapults. Let them earn the right to come within range!

After consideration of the site and correspondence with Pedites, Mello decided that the effort and materials intended to be spent on a trireme fleet would be better used by installing a moveable barrier across the river mouth and a battery of onagers targeting the killing zone. A steel chain was constructed with

half-logs bolted to it to provide buoyancy, for a length equal to the river width. This chain was anchored at one end onto the southern mouth of the river and the logs arranged concertina-style so they could be pulled into the water. The other end of the chain, with no attached timbers, was taken to a capstan on the northern mouth and allowed to drop onto the river bed so it wouldn't interfere with normal traffic. When an enemy fleet was sighted the chain could be winched across the river, pulling the floating section across the passage and the capstan end locked into place. Any enemy vessels would be caught against this floating barrier, and easy targets for fire-bombs. By the time the enemy discovered how to release this barrier the battle would be over.

After the fifth payment to Ezhimala and the second to Nelcinda, Palyane realised the Republic forces were not going to leave. Tagadur reluctantly agreed; it was getting to the point that he had already doubled the tribute burden on his own cities to help subsidise Palyane. There was a serious risk of more defections of Tagadur's inland fiefs if the Republic could show they were not restricted to the coast.

The plan was set for five days before tribute was due. The tides would allow Palyane's forces to beach a few miles north of Ezhimala in the evening and march through night, transporting his catapults in pieces to assemble on the spot. The route of march was over open country unobstructed by anything bigger than a stream. Tagadur would set out on a march to Nelcinda on the same day as the fleet sailed from Muziris, arriving four days after the attack on Ezhimala. This should be enough time for Nelcinda's defences to be stripped to meet the attack in the north.

The Muziris fleet set sail on the morning tide with an estimated forty hours of sailing to Ezhimala. Unfortunately there was no element of surprise; the fast message packet from Nelcinda to Ezhimala sighted it in mid-morning and had overtaken it before sunset. A fleet of more than fifty vessels, all sailing in convoy, was unmistakably an invasion fleet.

The packet arrived at Ezhimala shortly after midnight and immediately reported the invasion fleet sighting to Pedites. By first light the next morning the defensive fleet was already under sail, each vessel with three ballistae on each broadside. The new triremes slipped their cables shortly afterwards, making a relatively leisurely five miles per hour after them under their reduced sail.

Dilip's initiative in taking control after Kumar's death had not gone unrewarded. Palyane had confirmed him as his General and this was his first real battle as Commander. He was looking forward to it eagerly. But he had also learned that these Republic soldiers were no fools; he had to be careful, prepared for anything. By mid-morning the next day he was still twenty five miles short of Ezhimala and well out to sea to remain out of sight. He was uneasy that his fleet had been spotted by the Republic ship but there was little that could be done about that; perhaps it might even work out to his benefit if the Republic deployed their defences to the south while he slipped around them out of sight and came in from the north.

Pithes had never taken part in a proper sea battle before. A skirmish with pirates was nothing like the real thing. Yet here he was, in command of the maritime defences of Ezhimala and facing an invasion fleet of some fifty vessels or more! But fighting them might be the easy part; first he had to find them. If they slipped past him the legions would be subjected to a battle of attrition, a battle they were not numerous enough to fight.

‘So they must not pass!’ he resolved. He had instructed his fastest vessels to press out to the east to form a cordon seventy miles wide and sweep south. He didn’t think the enemy fleet would have reached this far north, based on the estimates reported by the packet, but he couldn’t be certain of that. The main fleet of twenty-five vessels would divide into three squadrons. The home squadron of eleven were the slowest and would station themselves fifteen miles due east of the city. The others would sweep up and down, fifteen miles off the coast in either direction for a distance of thirty miles, and then return. Anyone sighting the enemy would fall back on the city to report and the available forces would consolidate for the battle. The triremes would remain off the city as a last line of defence.

Well, that was the battle plan. And the first casualty in any battle is usually the battle plan, Pithes mused grimly. He looked out over his beam and saw his other ten ships in a passable line abeam. The coast seemed very distant on the starboard and the city was dropping over the horizon. Perhaps it was time to wear around again and reach back across the city. He was about to give the order when there was a shout from the lookout.

“Sail to port!” the sailor cried. Pithes grabbed his telescope and swept the horizon. He could see nothing.

“What bearing?” he asked the captain.

“What bearing?” the captain bellowed up to the lookout.

“Two points aft of port beam,” the response came down. “It looks like one of our screen ships!”

Pithes swept the area and found the faintest smudge on the horizon. How could that man have picked it up? And how could he identify it at this range? Pithes marvelled at his acuity. “Give that man a silver mina as a bonus,” he told the ship’s captain standing beside him. The minutes dragged by. Pithes was eager to confirm the contact and wondered if it was an incoming report or simply out of position.

“Contact is definitely one of our screen,” the lookout shouted down. “He’s turning north onto an intercept course.”

This is it! Pithes rejoiced. An incoming report!

“Captain, please order the squadron to work up towards the contact,” Pithes ordered calmly. He might be opening the gate to the city but the northern and southern squadrons would be watching the coastal route and he could always fall back quickly, running before this westerly wind. Best to get information as soon as possible.

Orders were bellowed around him and the bow of the ship swung more into the wind as the reach became a beat.

“Contact is flying a black flag!” the lookout bellowed.

The enemy has been sighted! Pithes rejoiced inwardly. Trying to look confident rather than eager, he casually raised his telescope to his eye. The billowing sails were more obvious now; that ship's captain had pulled on as much canvas as he dared in his haste. But where is the flag? The contact was almost directly upwind of him, any flag would be edge-on, and almost invisible. Again he marvelled at that man's eyesight.

Pithes glanced at the rear stay to confirm his standard was flying. The screen ship would know where to report. The city behind him was becoming indistinct. Once again he felt a shiver as he realised that this might be a feint to draw him out of position, but a good general is the one who makes the right choices, not the one who is afraid to trust himself.

The black flag was visible now. Pithes remained on the port tack rather than complicate the interception. The screen ship was coming in very fast, spray flying under her foot. She adjusted her course slightly, as if attempting to pass across Pithes' bow. Less than a mile separated them as she started to reduce sail. Then, only fifty paces away in front and to windward, she swung up into a port tack, almost perfectly in line and in front of the flagship. Pithes admired the precision of the seamanship and walked forward to the bow.

The screen ship de-powered her sails slightly to drop back to a position just in front of and below the flagship, her aft deck only a dozen paces from Pithes' bow.

“A very large fleet almost due west of the city two hours ago,” the master of the screen ship bellowed across to Pithes. “Estimated distance forty miles from here. Continuing north at about six miles an hour. One screen ship stationed due east of the enemy, flying a black flag; one due north, flying red flag; one due south flying green flag. All maintaining maximum separation while remaining in telescope range.”

“Excellent work!” Pithes called back, his voice carrying in the wind to the screen ship more easily than the other's did to him. “Drop back to the city and inform the other squadrons. Order southern squadron to maintain close guard, northern squadron to continue coast sweep.”

The captain of the screen ship saluted and dropped off the wind, gibing around to run to the city. Pithes walked back to the aft deck. We are making about six miles an hour in northing on this tack, perhaps more; and making sea room at a good six miles an hour. So if we hold to this course, we should be able to sight them in perhaps five hours' time. He glanced up at the sun. With luck, that will be before sunset.

Dilip was annoyed that his fleet had probably been sighted. It was only a small vessel and had disappeared quickly, but if his position is reported then Ezhimala will know he is coming. But still, we're sixty miles offshore. By the time a message gets back to Ezhimala and any action is taken, it will be after sunset. And then they have to find him again tomorrow! He looked out to the

east and was re-assured by the empty seas. At least we're not being shadowed, he consoled himself. There is no-one within sight of us.

It was now almost noon. Time to start angling in towards the coast. He wanted to be barely in sight of land at sunset, so he could drive southeast onto the beaches just north of Ezhimala in darkness.

"Bring the fleet onto a new heading, captain," Dilip ordered. "Just a touch north of east. I want to sight land twenty miles north of Ezhimala just before sunset." Then he watched impatiently as this cumbersome monster of more than fifty separate ships inched around onto the new heading, each trying not to run into another.

Pithes couldn't believe his luck. In less than an hour on this north-west tack, there was another call from the lookout. "Sail to the south-west!" was the cry. Again, Pithes was unable to see any sail. A few minutes later came a second call. "A screen ship, heading straight at us."

That was good. Pithes ordered the captain to signal 'Prepare to tack'. Then the order to tack. The ship at the rear of the line, on the extreme port wing, started to swing into the wind. As soon as she was head-on, the next ship started to swing around. This rippled up the line until Pithes' own ship swung onto the starboard tack. Pithes was pleased with the precision.

The range to the screen ship was closing rapidly. "Black flag!" was the next cry. By some fluke they had hit the enemy right on the head! The screen ship didn't break away from her station to report. There would be no point in that, Pithes agreed; everything she could tell me is already being told.

The screen ship was only a couple of miles away when another cry came down from the lookout. "Sail due west!" Then a short pause before "Many sails due west!" They had found the main enemy fleet! And it was still more than four hours before sunset! Pithes immediately resorted to some mental arithmetic. The enemy would be perhaps twenty miles away, at the limit of the lookout's visibility. If they are coming towards us, as implied by the screen ship, they should be making some six to ten miles per hour. We can manage perhaps five miles per hour of distance-made-good into this wind. So a closing speed of ten to fifteen miles per hour means we will be in close quarters in less than two hours. But if they turn away it will be a long chase and I could lose them. That would be intolerable. I could be clawing through vacant ocean while they slip past and get between me and the city.

"Break out a signal," Pithes ordered. "Make top speed due west!" Then, quietly to the ship's captain, "If they turn away, we simply have to fall off them when we lose contact. We can still run back to Ezhimala faster than they."

Dilip was dismayed when he heard the call from the lookout. "Sail due east!" He looked over to the body of the fleet. The transports were wallowing along in a central pack behind him, and the escorts formed a loose and ragged line to either side of his command ship. He hoped this was an innocent encounter and not another Ezhimala reconnaissance.

"More sails!" another cry from the lookout. "At least six!"

This was no reconnaissance! This sounded more like a battle squadron! Dilip again looked to either side; his twenty escort vessels could probably handle six enemy vessels, but the element of surprise in his attack from the north would be lost if any of the enemy broke away to take back word. The attack should be aborted, he decided. But how to do that? The escorts might be able to turn away and disappear into the darkness before the enemy could run them down but the heavy transports with all his men and equipment would not be so quick. He would need to provide a screen between the transports and the enemy.

“Eleven sail visible!” came an update from the lookout.

There was no way he could protect all the transports from that many enemy! At least a couple would be able to break through. The transports must scatter but the enemy were too close.

“Captain,” he called to his command ship's master. “How much time would it take for the transports to be able to turn away, without ramming each other?”

The old sailor looked troubled. He frowned and rubbed his beard. “The Transport Master would have to give orders to each ship, individually, if they are to turn that far in safety. It could take an hour, perhaps more, and they would be scattered so widely that another hour would be needed to re-gather them.”

“And what speed could they make to windward?” Dilip persisted.

“Perhaps four miles an hour in distance-made-good,” The mariner advised. “Probably less,” he added almost as an afterthought.

“So in two hours, our transports should be able to turn and make good their position where they are now,” Dilip summarised, “and the enemy will probably be able to make at least ten miles on their current position. That will mean they are perhaps five miles apart, perhaps less. And they will have two hours of daylight left to close that five miles, and at an overtaking speed of perhaps three miles per hour in distance-made-good.”

The Captain nodded mournfully. “Yes, Commander. It seems the transports won't be able to out-run the enemy. They won't have enough time.”

Dilip took a deep breath. “Then we must buy them some time,” he announced.

“Make signals to the Transport Master. He is to turn the transports away, and ensure each can escape as best he can. Each ship shall make its own way back to Muziris, taking care to avoid enemy patrols.”

The captain summarised these orders to the signal officer. 'Transports to turn away, scatter, return home.'

“And to the escorts, make signals to launch grapples, close with the enemy and board. Take care that every one of the enemy ships is attacked by at least one of ours,” Dilip ordered. “We are twenty to their eleven, so we should be able to delay every one of the enemy ships. At least the army will be able to escape.”

He looked back to the transport fleet. Already the ships on the sides and at the rear were turning outwards and the crews of those hemmed in at the front centre were standing by, eager to be given the sea-room to follow.

Dilip was broken from his thoughts by the shouted orders and bustle as the crew put on more sail. No longer restricted to the slower pace of the transports, they were now racing downwind onto the Ezhimala line. The marines were taking their positions, armed with cross-bows for the approach and swords for the assault over the rails.

Pithes smiled as he made out the pattern in the confusion to the east of him. It was obvious by now that the transports were scattering. The invasion had been abandoned, that much was obvious. The line of escorts was making more sail, bearing down on him as fast as they could. But the line was becoming very ragged as one ship drew head and another fell behind. He looked along his own line of battle. No ship was more than twenty paces ahead or behind the line of his command ship, so that when they turned on a flat reach they would all be line astern.

“Close the gaps!” he ordered. The signal flags were attached, and rattled up the halyard. Immediately all ships except the one on the extreme right end of the line fell slightly off the wind. As each drew to within a hundred paces of the ship to its starboard, it nosed up again. The line was compact. Pithes was pleased with the seamanship of his captains. He glanced up at the oncoming enemy line, if 'line' was the word for it, he snorted to himself. It was more like a ragged pack and he saw that some of them were crossing in front of their laggard fellows as they tried to respond to his shortening of the line of battle. Perhaps another half-hour and they would be in contact.

“Tension the ballistae!” he ordered. “Stack the firepots, port side first!” Each of his ships were fitted with five ballistae; one between foremast and mainmast each side, one between main and aft each side, and one on the aft deck. The aft ballista could be traversed to fire on either side or astern. They could fire either pots which broke on impact or darts which lodged in the timberwork carrying an incendiary collar. Pithes preferred the pots from long range because a pot hitting the sails would be caught and fall to deck while a dart would go straight through. In his opinion, darts were only of use against fully-covered decks or against fortification walls. He waited while these orders rattled up the halyard and he saw each ship acknowledge.

“Deploy the firing torches!” This was the time of greatest tension and danger. The torches used to light the ballista bombs immediately before launching them were now struck. With a deck full of oil-laden bombs, carelessness could destroy them. Pithes saw the acknowledgements flagged.

“Prepare to drop onto a flat reach and accelerate! When clear of the enemy flank, make best distance into the wind.”

The closest enemy ship was less than half a mile away now, notionally within extreme range but the range of a ballista into the wind this strong was considerably less than downwind. “Thank the gods that these guys don't have our weapons!” Pithes muttered to his captain. “They have the upwind advantage but they have no idea how to use it!” And then the order. “Execute! Open fire at will!”

The eleven Republic ships flattened into a perfect line astern as they reached square across the wind and started to draw across the face of the Muzirisi rabble. The first of the firepots arched into the air, most falling short but a couple landing between the Muzirisi front-runners. The Muzirisi ships swung across to a reach to ensure they remained between their fleeing transports and their enemy but their staggered line of deployment crippled their co-ordination. Two came together in the middle of the pack and others swung wildly to avoid them. Another two Muzirisi ships collided in the confusion.

While the traffic jam was happening, more firepots had been fired and a few had hit their targets. The deck of one Muzirisi vessel was an expanse of flames, with men leaping overboard in full armour to escape being burned. As its sails burned and it lost power it formed yet another obstruction for the following vessels to avoid. Fires sprang up on three more Muzirisi ships as they came within range of the rear of Pithes' line.

Already the lead Republic vessel was outside the left wing of the Muzirisi attack. The bow lifted slightly, but not so much as to lose too much speed. In so tight a formation there was a genuine risk of the following ship ramming from behind. A total of five Muzirisi ships were burning now and the others dropping too far astern to be within range.

“Loose formation! Line abreast to wind! Maximum distance-made-good to wind,” Pithes ordered. He wanted to annihilate the assault force on the transports. Palyane must be taught that attacking a Friend and Ally can be a very expensive mistake!

The transports were becoming more widely scattered as Pithes watched. There were less than three hours of daylight left, and those transports were spread over a semi-circle of sea perhaps five miles in radius. The closest was some ten miles away, dead upwind. He looked back over the port stern. The surviving Muzirisi escort ships were giving chase. Even if we manage to overhaul the transports before dark, those escorts will intervene. With a last, wistful look at the transports, Pithes made a prudent decision. The transports could be picked off by a blockade on Muziris, if it came to that. Now to take the consolation prize.

“Battle tack. Destroy enemy to port.”

The flags rattled up and each of the other ten vessels flew the acknowledgement. Then the ship on the extreme left of the line swung up into the wind, and settled onto a starboard tack. As the bow passed through dead centre, the next ship started to swing up. Eventually it had rippled right down the line. Now that the Republic ships had turned away from the transports, the pursuing Muzirisi escorts were having second thoughts about the chase. They had achieved their objective of guaranteeing the transports' safety, so there was now no need to risk their own safety again. They dropped off their tack towards the Republic line, and fled before the wind.

Ignoring the five ships now engulfed in fire, Pithes headed for the other five entangled in each other's rigging, one collision of two ships and a second a couple of hundred paces away involving three ships. The Muzirisi men saw them coming, and made a big show of their wish to surrender. The marines were

conspicuously waving their swords in the air before throwing them into the sea. Body armour soon followed.

“What are your orders, sir?” the captain asked Pithes. “Burn them or enslave them?”

“I think enslaving them, so long as we can keep them at arm’s length,” Pithes replied. “I don’t want them on our ships; they might try to seize them.”

“Very well; I’ll get one of the Tamil seamen to translate.” The captain sent up the signal flags “Do not fire. Do not approach.”

Pithes took his command vessel to within hailing distance of the group of three ships. “Separate out one ship in condition good enough to make port. Then all get on that one ship; the other two will be sunk.” He waited for the translation to be made and understood. “If this is not done before dark, all three ships will be sunk.” This last order sparked instant action. Immediately orders were being barked and axes were being swung to remove inter-tangled spars and rigging. The other two collision ships were provided with the same instructions. As dusk fell over the sea there were two Muzirisi ships with butchered but jury-rigged masts and spars, filled to overcrowding with men. The other three shells were boarded and inspected. Two were hull-damaged and taking water; they were allowed to sink. The third was taken by a prize crew.

The two occupied ships were ordered to put up sail and set up a lantern over their aft decks. They were then to set sail due east to anchor off the beach and await further orders.

“Three ships and almost five hundred men in their prime as slaves. Nice prize money coming our way!”

Pithes signalled to his squadron. “All stay alert!” There were still ten Muzirisi ships at large, somewhere between him and the city. Although Pithes had no doubt that a safe return to Muziris was their top priority, they still constituted a threat to a small force that might stumble across them. He signalled to the ship to his immediate south where Clopas, his senior captain, held command. “Captain to come alongside immediately.” It took less than a minute for the signal to be acknowledged and Clopas’ ship changed course to intercept.

“Clopas, I want you to sprint back to Ezhimala,” Pithes bellowed across the gap as soon as Clopas was within earshot. “Report the battle and advise that there are still ten escorts unaccounted for, each with a hundred marines on board. And suggest a blockade of Muziris to take the transports as they return. Take five ships with you in case you bump into those escorts.” Clopas and his six ships disappeared into the gloom of dusk. The two slave ships could be made out in outline against the stars as they limped towards the coast. It had been a good day!

Pedites was pleased to hear of the victory and the destruction of ten enemy ships without so much as a single casualty in reply. He was much less happy to hear about the captured prisoners. “Here we are, threatened with invasion, and he uses five of our best ships as escort duty on prizes!” he fumed at Clopas. “He should have just scorched them and come back with you! Now I’m without those

five ships for a couple of days, as well as having to make arrangements to handle the captives.” The general paced the length of his office a few times.

“Get Nicanor here!” he snapped to one of his messengers. The man snapped to attention and strode out of the room quickly. Then Pedites turned his attention back to Clopas. “The northern and southern squadrons are still on coastal sweeps, aren’t they?” he demanded,

“I believe so, General,” Clopas answered. “They were the last orders issued to them by Pithes.”

“And the triremes?”

“Still on station, sir,” Clopas confirmed.

Pedites continued his pacing. “This would be easy if I had those other five ships. I could put you back on patrol and strategic reserve, and send Pithes down to blockade Muziris. But that money-grubbing little merchant is more worried about prize money than victory!”

Nicanor knocked on the open office door and entered.

“Ah, Nicanor!” Pedites welcomed him. “We need to send a message to your friend Palyane. Tell him that he cost us – let’s say three hundred talents of gold today.” Pedites smiled broadly. “He’s lucky that we lost no ships and no men killed or the price would have been even higher! So leave immediately with a blue sail and an interpreter.”

Nicanor saluted and left.

“See what I mean, Clopas?” Pedites gestured to the open door. “Instead of sending your squadron with him, I have to send you back out on close patrol! So off you go!” Pedites commanded impatiently. “Fill the patrol zone directly off the city, just in case those enemy ships full of a thousand marines happen to find our triremes or decide to raid a town, or something!”

“What will I report back to Pithes, sir?” Clopas dared to ask.

“You will NOT report back to Pithes!” Pedites roared. “I’ll send him a message myself in the morning, when we know the messenger is not going to be ambushed by a squadron of enemy escorts! Now, go!” Clopas went, quickly.

Pedites looked around his office until his eye rested on a messenger. “Get me Metellus!” he growled.

Pithes could not help but to detect Pedites' anger when the orders arrived in mid-morning. No greeting was included, just the terse commands.

1. *Sail your ships and your prizes to a point approximately three miles north of Ezhimala. You will know the correct spot by a red flag on the beach. Anchor off the beach and confirm that Caius Metellus is in position waiting for you and ready to receive your captives before proceeding.*

2. *Order your captives to row ashore in longboats. Six of the captives shall return each boat for the next load. No weapons or body armour shall be worn by any captive.*

3. *As the captives land, they shall be taken under the care of Caius Metellus.*
4. *Once all captives are on shore, take your prize vessels in tow or under prize crew as you see fit and return immediately to Ezhimala. Report to me immediately upon docking.*

Alexander Pedites, Commander.

As it happened, he was almost at that rendezvous spot when the message arrived. He made orders to turn towards the coast.

Pedites was smiling as Pithes entered his commander's office. But there was no humour in the eyes. "Pithes, I hear you have taken three ships as prizes and five hundred captives!"

"Yes, General," Pithes replied uneasily.

"Tell me, what do you think each vessel would be worth as a prize, and I'll pay out whatever you say!" Pedites said expansively.

"Well, they do have damaged rigging, but that can be repaired cheaply enough," Pithes replied. "I would estimate perhaps five talents of gold each?"

"Done!" Pedites thumped his table, as if in triumph. "And what about the captives? Men in fighting condition make good slaves; what do you price them at?"

Pithes didn't know where this was leading. His instincts screamed at him to be cautious. "Well, they speak neither Latin nor Greek, so they might need to be taught. But if nothing else, they would be good gladiators. Perhaps two thousand sesterces each?"

"Done again!" Pedites slapped his table top.

"So I owe you fifteen talents for the ships, and a thousand sestertium milia for the slaves!" Pedites summarised. Then his expression turned dark. "Now let me tell you how much you owe me!" he glowered.

"By your delay you have probably let thirty transports and over six thousand men escape back to Muziris! That will be one hundred and fifty talents for the ships, and almost five thousand talents for the slaves, please!" Pedites hammered his impatience home hard. "I'll allow you credit from your current prizes, but you're still way behind! You need to catch up."

Pedites rose from his seat. "Now get your squadron down to Muziris as fast as you can! If you can intercept some of those transports, well and good; but everyone you miss will be costing you. Now, go!"

Palyane was surprised to be woken to the news that a single ship with a blue sail was standing a mile off the coast outside Muziris. He didn't expect the Republic to try to parley so quickly; the very morning after his attack on Ezhimala landed! He quickly dressed in his finest and ordered the Royal Platform to be erected. Let the whole city see this Republic officer kiss his hand!

“Are you sure that’s wise, my lord?” Muttiah ventured. “We can’t be sure that the attack has been successful.”

“If it had not been successful, then he wouldn’t be in a ship with a blue sail. He would be at the head of a retaliatory force,” Palyane argued.

“That might be how a civilised person might act, my lord. But these Republic people have different ways.”

Palyane thought for a minute. “I’ll take your advice, Muttiah. He can always walk behind me and kiss my hand before leaving.” Muttiah smiled, bowed, and slipped out of the room to send for the foreigner.

An hour later Muttiah returned with Nicanor, who strode into the audience hall in full dress uniform. His four attendants were behind him. He stopped some ten paces short of Palyane’s throne. “I bring sad news, Palyane,” he opened. “And I bring it because it might be a long time before you hear it from any other source.” Ranjit, standing beside the throne, translated for him.

Palyane flushed at the failure to add the honorific to his name. But he suppressed this instant anger. He must not allow himself to be provoked by this barbarian. “And what is this sad news, Nicanor?” he asked casually.

“I regret to inform you that a substantial proportion of your army and navy have mutinied against your authority,” Nicanor went on smoothly. “Rather than complying with your wisdom and moderation, they have taken up arms against the Republic’s Friend and Ally, Ezhimala.”

“That’s terrible news, Nicanor!” Palyane responded, playing along with this pretence. “And what have you done in response? Have you tried to bring them to their senses?”

“We have captured many and enslaved them, and destroyed several ships,” Nicanor grimaced. “It causes us embarrassment to admit this, but because of the surprise we were not able to apprehend all of them.”

“And those whom you could not apprehend; what has become of them? Have they persisted in their attack on you? Have they caused you any further distress or losses?”

“They have caused us no loss at all. They fled before us in every direction,” Nicanor responded. “I don’t think they’ll cause any problem to us because we have effectively crippled their ability to fight and I doubt they will return here having rebelled against you.” Nicanor dropped his head slightly, and his voice. “Be assured that you have our sympathy, Palyane. It is the greatest shame that can befall a leader, to suffer a mutiny.”

Palyane was struggling with both rage and confusion. Who was this pup to declare that he had been shamed, and then patronise me with his offer of sympathy! And besides, what had happened to the attack on Ezhimala? Had it succeeded and this man is weaving a tale to deceive him into a withdrawal, or had it – impossibly – failed? But it couldn’t have either failed or succeeded so completely and so swiftly; they would barely be at the walls by now! Palyane swallowed his indignation one more time. “Thank you, Nicanor. Please keep me informed and I will also let you know what I hear from other sources.”

“There is yet one additional point that the General asked me to pass on to you,” Nicanor continued. “Although he is confident of your good will and that this attack was by malcontents rather than at your instigation, yet he holds that you must accept some responsibility for not keeping a tighter control over your armed forces. General Pedites has estimated the costs incurred by us in quelling this rebellion at three hundred talents of gold. This amount will be added to your outstanding repayments.” Nicanor smiled broadly. “It is a good thing that not one of our ships and not one of our men have been lost in this police action and no damage has been suffered by Ezhimala, or the cost would have been much higher. We have had to account only for the use of consumables and wear-and-tear on our equipment.”

Palyane once again was almost overcome with rage at this smarmy whelp before him and his slimy way of boasting disguised as off-hand comment.

“Yes, most fortunate,” he agreed.

“No, I didn’t say ‘fortunate’, Palyane,” Nicanor corrected him. “I said ‘good’. That’s how the Republic operates; we leave nothing to fortune.”

Palyane stood, his temper at breaking point. But he caught himself in time. “Thank you for your visit, Nicanor. But I must act quickly on your news and attend to the discipline in my forces as a matter of urgency. If you will excuse me now...?”

Nicanor bowed his head, and turned for the door. Palyane could scarcely wait for the door to close behind him. “I must know what has happened!” he snapped to Muttiah. “Send a blue sail north to investigate. If it’s intercepted we can say we were sending an apology and condolence message! I want a full report on the conditions on the ground and the Ezhimalan reaction as soon as you can get there and back!” Muttiah bowed and walked quickly to the door, but it opened before he reached it. Dilip entered, unwashed and visibly exhausted.

“My lord, we have suffered a terrible defeat!” he blurted out. He approached the throne and fell to his knees.

Palyane composed himself, and resumed his throne. “Muttiah, come back here and listen.” Then to Dilip, “Your report, General?”

“We were sighted by a Republic ship from Nelcinda as we left port. I knew that our fleet would be reported to Ezhimala, and the Republic would attempt to intercept. Therefore I set well out to sea to go around any interception force. This was successful; we gained our attack point north-east of Ezhimala on time and then headed directly into the coast, timed to arrive after dark. We were met by a dozen Republic ships, spread out in line abreast, already prepared for battle and coming straight at us. I can’t understand how, but they knew exactly where we were!

“I could see that the raid was now doomed. If even one of these ships broke away and reported to Ezhimala, our landing would be opposed and therefore could not succeed. I could also see that if any of these ships attacked my transports we would lose many men. I ordered the transports to scatter and flee as far as they could before sunset, and then seek safety in the dark to make their own way home. But there still remained four hours of light and the

transports needed more time to escape. So I ordered the escort vessels to attack. If we could defeat this force, that would of itself send a message to the Republic, but even if not the delay would ensure the safe escape of the transports.

“As we closed the range, I could see that they were equipped with those mechanical cross-bow machines they had used in their raid but did not have many crew. I ordered our ships to rush the enemy and board. The marines were to take shelter against the cross-bows until the ships were together. But the Republic ships did not launch arrows; they attacked us with those accursed fire-pots. We lost five of our ships to fire before we could draw close enough to board. Another five became entangled with each other as they tried to avoid the fire ships.

“The enemy then tried to sweep past us and press their attack on the transports, but they soon realised that our attack had delayed them enough to allow the escape of the transports. So they fell back on us. We turned away, hoping to draw them even further away from the transports but they did not give chase. My remaining ships returned home as quickly as we could to report to you.” Dilip bowed his head.

“How many of the Republic ships did you sink?” Palyane asked.

“None, my lord.”

“What damage or casualties did you inflict?” Palyane continued.

“I think none, my lord.”

Where are my transports?”

“I ordered them to disperse and make their own way home. I hope and expect that they went well out to sea to avoid interception. I would expect them to arrive in another day or two,” Dilip explained.

“Did they have supplies for that length of time? They were supposed to be on land yesterday.”

“They will be short on water, my lord; but half-water for two or three days is survivable.”

Palyane sat in silence for a couple of minutes as he digested this report. He was on the point of screaming with frustration, coming so soon after the measured insults from Nicanor. But the colder, rational part of his mind realised that Dilip could not have done much better. He showed courage and daring to cover the escape of the transports and wisdom in trying to draw the enemy further away. He had suffered a defeat but had avoided a catastrophe. “Dilip, you have done well,” Palyane re-assured him.

“Thank you, my lord.”

“What do you propose to do next?” Palyane asked.

“I am at a loss, my lord. The Republic's use of fire as a weapon is like nothing we have ever seen before. We have no way of defending ourselves against it, either at sea or on land.” Dilip realised that he was sounding defeatist; he had to correct that impression.

“Yet, it is only effective on land in a set-piece battle. If we can attack before they have their equipment in place, we can over-run them. I am convinced that General Kumar's emphasis on light cavalry and mobile warfare is the correct approach on land. As for an appropriate response at sea, I am no expert on naval

warfare. I suggest that our chief captains should be commissioned to investigate that matter. Those captains who returned with me have seen it first-hand; they should be asked to address this tactic and develop a proper response.”

“Thank you, Dilip. Please direct your captains to do so,” Palyane instructed. “You may rest now.” Palyane turned to Muttiah as Dilip left the hall. “Do we have any news from Tagadur?”

“The latest report said that they expected to arrive at Nelcinda tomorrow evening, rest a day, and attack the next morning. We have twenty light cavalry with Tagadur's forces, so they can return with daily reports.”

Palyane nodded. “Then let us see what happens there. Tagadur should not be ambushed as he was at Ezhimala; the land is flat and open.”

“Another thing, my lord,” Muttiah continued. “Does the defeat at Ezhimala mean that we resume the tribute payments? One is due in two days’ time, so it should leave today. If we are going to send it.”

“I don't think so, Muttiah,” Palyane answered. “They were only of use in an attempt to lull the Republic into leaving. That’s not going to happen now so I see no point in continuing them. Better to keep the gold and be on guard.”

Nicanor had continued south after leaving Muziris rather than returning north. Mello must be kept informed and told to expect attacks himself. Nicanor arrived at sunrise. This warning was superfluous; Mello already had reports of the Vanchi army moving towards him. He took Nicanor to the walls and showed him his earthworks and defences, just in time to see the advance scouting units of Vanchi in the distance.

Nicanor was not a career soldier. He had been taken into the Expeditionary Force primarily for his business management skills. But even he could see that Nelcinda would be almost impregnable, short of a very long and expert siege. He wondered out loud what Tagadur would do when he saw how the defensive works had totally transformed his task.

“If he has any sense he’ll turn around and go back home!” laughed Mello.

The two men watched as the advance screen of cavalry came upon the outermost ditch. This had not been flooded or saturated and was reasonably easily passable on horseback. Only large wheeled pieces such as siege towers or catapults would have difficulty. The cavalry men, much more cautious than at Ezhimala, dismounted and lead their horses across the ditch, apparently watching for pitfalls. They found none.

Still on foot and frequently glancing up to the walls, they crossed the open land to the second ditch, flooded and filled with submerged stakes. They tentatively walked along the edge to the narrow embankments at one end. These embankments were quite close to the wall. Mello could almost smell their fear as they crossed them, constantly glancing up at the walls. Mello started laughing, and the gentle breeze carried the sound to the ears of the cavalrymen. Their attention was riveted to Mello, Nicanor and a half-dozen of Mello's staff on the walls.

Mello spoke with one of the Nelcinda liaison officers who then called down to them in Tamil, "Welcome to your death! Make sure you bring lots of friends." The Tamils on the walls started laughing at this and the cavalry men quickly mounted. Again Mello muttered to his liaison who then called down to the men, "Don't worry, you're quite safe! We want you to have a good look so you can tell Tagadur everything he needs to know."

The cavalry men looked to each other uneasily, but slowly heeled their horses forward to the last ditch. They looked over the near-vertical edge, a drop of perhaps six feet to the shallow water. They trotted along the side as far as the bridges, looked about them, then continued to the far end of the trench. They returned over the second embankment and trotted away towards the approaching army.

By late afternoon the army had make camp beyond the outer ditch. As expected it was well stocked with siege towers and catapults. As sunset approached a resplendent rider wove confidently through the winding path to stand at the two bridges. He hailed the walls.

"Surrender your city and save your lives! Resist us and you will lose both city and life!"

Mello murmured again to his liaison, who called back, "Do you remember the bridge at Ezhimala? That was just a training exercise!"

The horseman turned and trotted back to his camp.

Mello had trained his telescope onto the Vanchi camp. "Those siege towers have been covered on the front and the sides with hides. My guess is that they'll soak them in water before they advance. They know about our firepots now," he commented. "But they're open at the rear. I suppose they would have to be or it would become unbearably hot and too dark to work properly." Mello turned to his legate. "Have the ballistae untensioned, but ready to be tensioned at a moment's notice. Equip them with porcupines and fire darts. I want them fully-manned around the clock. Also, I want a dozen ballista-ships ready to sail with a minute's warning. Equip them with fire-darts and bombs." The legate saluted and trotted down the stone steps to the street below.

"But seriously, Lucius; what do you expect Tagadur to do?" Nicanor persisted.

He has a few options," Mello replied. "If he's stupid he'll send one of his siege towers down one of the sides, over the embankment, and use it as a shelter while he fills a passageway over the inner ditch. If he tries that I'll do nothing to stop him. Then, when he advances all his towers down that flank, I will send the ballista-ships along the riverbank, a few hundred paces along so they get a clear line to shoot fire darts and bombs into the open rear sections of the towers as they approach the walls.

"If he's a little bit smarter, he'll build his earthworks to come straight at us at right-angles to the river. That means a lot more digging for him and will be slower, but we can't use our ships against him. If he does that, I can't oppose him laying an embankment across the second ditch, so long as he's forced to work under cover. But if he tries to use exposed men, I'll pick them off. I want him to

take a very long time. All the while his supplies are being consumed and his men are at risk of an epidemic sweeping through his camp.

“When he gets to the inner ditch, he’ll find it very difficult to build an embankment that will support his equipment. That deep layer of very soft mud will squeeze out the sides under the weight of the earthworks and just keep on sinking. While he’s doing that we’ll be hitting him with fire darts. At that close range we can’t miss and eventually the hides will dry and catch. Any men who try to continue drenching them can be picked off by snipers with cross-bows. That last trench, although it looks shallow, will be impassable. That will be our killing ground.”

“You said that would be if Tagadur were a little bit smarter.” continued Nicanor. “What about if he is *very* smart?”

“I’ve already told you that!” Mello replied. “He’ll go home today!”

Tagadur was not stupid. He had been told how the ships lobbing flanking fire bombs had secured the safe withdrawal of the defensive line at Muziris, so he was very wary of putting anything within range of the ships along the waterfront. He filled the outer ditch at four crossings to permit free access to the inner ditches, and then advanced towers in line with these four points, to start filling passages over the second ditch. It was laborious and time-consuming. The modified towers were hit by fire-darts and men had to be delegated to continually douse the protective hides. These were targeted by porcupines from time to time to make life yet more difficult, but at that range the men had enough warning to take cover if they were quick enough.

When the fill reached the required level planking was laid across the soil to spread the load and prevent the wheels from bogging. These were targeted with fire-darts and bombs and burnt out. Even more labour was required to keep the timbers soaked. Nuisance volleys made life difficult for the crews assigned to this duty. After a week the passages over the second trench were half-completed.

Mello had noticed something unusual in the enemy camp. A few of the siege towers had been modified to act as shields for filling the ditch, as was to be expected. But there were another eight towers being modified in a most unusual way. They were being given complete new front shields of heavy planking. And the sides were also being strengthened by side-shields so that in section the shield looked like a huge trough.

Mello was perplexed by this. Such a shield, extending for the full height of the tower and wrapping around both sides, prevented the siege ramps from being deployed; the tower became useless. Then one day he saw in the distance a frightening thing. The strange shield was dropped on end onto the ground and then the top edge pushed away from the tower so it fell flat. It’s a bridge! Mello realised. They intend to bridge the inner ditch rather than fill it! With eight bridges it will take only a couple of hours to deploy all the towers plus many more following behind.

Mello carefully checked the length of these bridges by comparing them to the height of the siege towers and the men working around them. As well as he

could estimate, they were some twenty-five paces long. Five paces longer than the ditch was wide, allowing two-and-a half paces at each end for support and errors in placement!

Mello felt a grudging admiration for his opponent. He had obviously sent out scouts under cover of darkness to measure the ditch width. Well, there was one obvious way to counter these bridges. That night Mello sent out men to destroy his two bridges over the ditch. By morning they were gone and there was now no way for the enemy to notice what was happening next.

The next night he marked a line one and a half paces in from the edge of the ditch. An army with shovels bit back the earth to this line, down to the level of the mud in the trench. Before the sun rose, the inner ditch was now one and a half paces wider, but looked much the same to a casual observer. The same process was repeated on each of the following two nights. Mello hoped that the enemy wouldn't notice the difference.

Late the following day the enemy's embankments over the second ditch were complete. Mello could see the bridge towers being brought up from the rear areas. He expected the assault to be early next morning.

He was not disappointed. By first light he saw that the bridge towers were lined up, two behind each of the four ditch crossings, and more towers behind them. The draught animals had been unharnessed. The rest of the trip would be by human muscle power operated through a large treadmill within the tower and geared down to drive the wheels. Then the front towers lurched into life.

Mello didn't challenge them until they had cleared the second ditch. As they approached the inner ditch he ordered volleys of fire-darts. These embedded themselves in the shields and flames licked up the timbers. Not much effect, he noted; these timbers had been thoroughly soaked. But he kept up the fire regardless. The enemy might suspect something if this advance went unchallenged. The eight bridging towers were now spread out around the perimeter. Slowly they lumbered up to the edge of the inner ditch. Each stopped about one or two paces short, and lowered the shield so its end stood on the ground. At this close range Mello could see that the bottom edge had hinged spikes to embed into the ground, so the whole assembly wouldn't slide forward when it fell flat. That testing behind their camp had obviously been valuable. Then the top edge of the shield started to lift away from the reclined face of the tower until it over-balanced and fell flat across the ditch.

Four of the bridges fell short, dropping into the mud with a plop. One reached to the far side, only for its momentum to break away the edge of the cut face. Three bridged the ditch, but with precious little to spare.

The three successful towers started to inch forward again. The bank under one crumbled and collapsed as it took the weight of the tower and the tower lurched face-first into the ditch. Another met the same fate a few minutes later.

The last surviving tower was now half-way across the inner ditch. Its follower towers were lined up behind it and the towers that had followed the other seven were slowly wheeling around to join the queue. Then as that last tower almost completed the crossing, the bank under the city side of the ditch gave way

and dropped into the mud. The tower dropped suddenly, lurched up against the bank, and then slowly toppled sideways.

“General fire!” Mello ordered. The ballistae had, up to now, been concentrating on the bridge towers; now the order was to spread their fire to all towers. Mello glanced up at the sun. It was well past mid-morning by now. The tension of the attack had belied how slowly those siege towers could move across pasturelands under human power alone. Those treadmill men must be exhausted by now, Mello thought to himself, and the attack troops in the belly of the towers starting to feel the heat. Although the towers were open at the back to provide ventilation, their approach from the east had meant that the sun had been beating on their backs all morning. It also meant that the soaked hides that had been positioned to inhibit fire were now becoming dry.

The towers were all now attempting to drive backwards from the ditch to the safety of long range.

Ah! One of the towers had now caught fire! The hide was visibly burning in its own right, and not merely smouldering under the heat of the fire-dart fuel.

“Prepare to switch to porcupines!” Mello bellowed. “But not until I order it!”

The darts continued to rain on the towers, now barely moving from the exhaustion of the treadmill men. Mello idly wondered if it was physically possible for them to be relieved by fresh legs from among the attack troops. You would think so, he thought to himself, but perhaps under the pressure of the unexpected, minds just freeze. He mused that these guys certainly are not the most imaginative of troops, remembering back to the scandal at the Ezhimala bridge site.

More towers were on fire now and the remaining ballistae were concentrating on the intact ones. He could see burning hides falling from some, exposing the relatively dry timber beneath.

“Every second unit; hold fire! Switch to porcupines and wait for further orders!” The intensity of the fire dropped away; but it was still sufficient to ensure that the towers were doomed.

There! One of the more seriously ablaze towers! Men were streaming out of the base of it, and running for the safety of longer range!

Porcupines! Fire at targets of opportunity! One volley each, then reload and draw back for the next!”

Every tower was now solidly on fire.

“All units, switch to porcupines!”

The last of the fire-darts already loaded were let fly. Men were streaming from more burning towers. Many were motionless on the ground. Noon had come and gone. Mello looked down into the inner ditch. Probably the last men left alive on this field will be those who fell into the ditch and took cover under the near edge. Or perhaps still in that tower that dropped straight down on the far side rather than pitching forward.

“Two units; fire on the towers in the ditch. I want them burnt!” Mello ordered. Mello looked back to the main killing ground. Every tower was

immobile now and fully ablaze. Bodies littered the ground in strings, like trails of ants leading from the towers to the enemy camp beyond.

“I want one maximum-range throw from an onager!” he bellowed. “No, withdraw that order!” Why should we let them know how far we can reach? Let them think that they’re at a safe distance! “All right, men; cease fire. De-tension your weapons and stand down.” Mello smiled. “And well done!”

Tagadur broke camp the next morning. It was a long and solemn march back the Vanchi. He was met that evening by a rider from Muziris bringing news of the naval disaster. That didn’t help his mood. “Srinath,” he addressed his commander. “I can’t fairly blame this defeat on you. I was aware of all of your decisions, we discussed them, and I approved each at the time. You need not fear my anger. So take the army home. I’ll ride with a cavalry detachment to Muziris and speak with Palyane.”

The meeting in Muziris three days later was subdued.

“We have met the Republic in six battles so far. We have yet to inflict one casualty, or destroy one weapon! What are our other tributaries starting to think?” Tagadur pleaded.

It’s even worse than that,” Palyane responded. “They have laid blockade to my city! As each of my transports arrives the Republic warships divert it to Ezhimala. They take the ship and the contents as prizes and sell my soldiers into slavery.”

“But that’s an act of war!” Tagadur protested. “How can they take your soldiers as prisoners if we are not at war?”

Palyane smiled thinly. “They have invented a fiction that these men acted without my approval, which makes them pirates. So what am I supposed to do? Say that I *did* approve? If I admit to attacking Ezhimala the Republic would be entitled to not only take them prisoners but sack Muziris as well!”

Conversation lapsed into silence for a while. Then Tagadur asked “Have you paid the last tribute?”

“Not yet. It was due two days ago, and I’m expecting Nicanor to turn up again any time. What do you suggest?”

Tagadur cradled his chin in his hand. “The Republic is brilliant at a defensive battle; we know that already. But now that we know their tactics I don’t think they’ll be able to carry the attack to us if we stay alert. They need time to set up their battles. They can’t fight on the run.”

“Perhaps not inland, but I’m exposed to the sea!” Palyane pointed out. “They can raid my trade with impunity.”

“Then trade by land routes. It might cost more but not a thousand talents a month more!”

“Anyway, we’re not the only ones having trouble with the Republic,” Palyane changed the subject slightly. “I hear that the Chola tributaries in the far north have also revolted and turned to the Republic for protection.”

Tagadur raised his eyebrows. “Really? Which ones?”

“The whole lot, everything inland from Ezhimala, right into the Central Hills. Camara now controls only the coast.”

Tagadur thought for a moment. "The Republic is spreading itself very thin. I didn't believe it at first, but I think Nicanor was telling the truth when he said they had only twenty thousand men. So how can they garrison so great an area with so small a force?"

"I don't know, I don't care, and I certainly don't want to find out the hard way," Palyane replied. "Let Camara handle its own problems."

"I have an idea, my brother," Tagadur announced. "Many of Camara's soldiers were conscripts from their tributaries. Which means that their armies will now be in chaos. Perhaps we can go fishing in those waters."

Palyane looked up, pondering this new possibility. "Perhaps we need to talk to Dilip and Srinath about that. It might be worth the effort."

Two days later it had been agreed. Vanchi would march on Camara as soon as possible. Although most of their siege towers had been destroyed at Nelcinda they retained their catapults and could build siege towers from the rich forests just outside their target. This would be quicker than building them at home and then dragging them over the Central Hills. Muziris would provide carpenters and engineers, but no troops or cavalry in case the Republic launched another attack to support their demands for tribute.

Srinath and Tagadur went home to Vanchi to set things under way.

A blue sail was sighted off Muziris the next day. As expected, Nicanor had returned to demand the payment.

"You are causing General Pedites considerable frustration, Palyane," Nicanor lectured the king. "He has advised me that henceforth, an additional ten talents will be added to the outstanding amount for every day late. As well as placing yourself in danger of experiencing a more expensive reminder call than simply my words."

"Thank you for your advice, Nicanor," Palyane replied through teeth he could barely restrain himself from gritting. "General Alexander's concerns have been noted. Having delivered your message, you may now leave." Palyane stood and walked out of the audience hall. If there was more to be said he can say it to Ranjit. Palyane was in no mood to be hectoring any more.

And of course, there was more to be said. Nicanor walked back to his ship with Ranjit by his side. "Ranjit, please advise Palyane that he will be granted two more days for the payment to arrive. If he takes longer he is in peril of another punitive raid."

"Another raid might not be as easy as the first, lord Nicanor. The defences have been improved. You will find your landing contested this time."

"Thank you for that information, Ranjit; your services are most appreciated. In time, you and your family will be richly rewarded. Please let me know as soon as you can arrange for them to be taken to safety."

The two men walked a little further in silence.

"If I may ask without offending you, lord Nicanor...?" Ranjit asked tentatively.

“Please, my friend. I might not answer but I will not be offended by the question.”

“Is it your deliberate intention to insult Palyane so deeply? Or is it simply that I don’t understand your customs?”

“It is indeed my deliberate intention, Ranjit,” Nicanor replied. “I’m absolutely committed to ensuring that Palyane knows that we are much mightier than he can ever hope to be and that we don’t fear him in the slightest. If ever he were to imagine that he could impede our will he would only cause needless waste of lives and resources. So it is kinder that he be insulted rather than his men die.”

The two men were almost on the wharf now. Ranjit spoke. “I’m not certain of this, but I hear that Palyane doesn’t intend to pay any more. He is of the opinion that you are impregnable in defence, but fragile in attack now that your tactics have been revealed,” Ranjit informed Nicanor.

“Thank you again, Ranjit,” Nicanor responded. “We suspected that ourselves, and have planned accordingly. Now, I don’t want to endanger you, so I don’t want you to be observed being farewelled as the friend you are. Please allow me to take my leave of you rudely.” Nicanor did not break step as he marched straight from the wharf and onto the plank. Once on board he did not turn back to see the land, but went straight to his cabin. The ship was under way within minutes.

As expected, the payment was not made within two days. The morning of the third day dawned to reveal a Republic blockade on the horizon and a half-dozen ships closer, about a mile off the shore. All ships, incoming or outgoing, were being intercepted. The rare ship belonging to a city other than Muziris was told that Muziris was now closed and that they should go to their home port and let that be known. But most ships were Muziris-owned. These were taken as prizes and directed to Ezhimala with their crews locked down and under the control of prize crews.

It took Palyane only a few hours to see this pattern. He called on Muttiah to take a blue sail out to the Ezhimala blockade for a parley. The first ship he approached directed him to Nicanor’s vessel, one of the close blockade.

“What are you doing, lord Nicanor?” Muttiah blustered. “This could be seen as an act of war!”

“Does Palyane see it as an act of war?” Nicanor asked casually.

“That is why he sent me out here, to seek clarification,” Muttiah replied non-committally.

“We intend it as a police action,” Nicanor replied. “Muziris owes money, and we are here to enforce collection of that amount. Now that Palyane has reneged the monthly payment the whole amount outstanding falls due. That’s five thousand four hundred talents of gold, with an additional ten talents per day late fee. We intend to remain on station until goods and slaves to that value have been taken.

“And of course, any additional costs we incur in the process will be added to the debt,” Nicanor went on. “We estimate that will be approximately one

hundred talents per day for maintaining the blockade and ten percent of the value of seized goods to cover transport and sale.”

“One hundred talents per day!” Muttiah exclaimed. “That’s three thousand talents per month! Three times the repayments originally demanded!”

“Yes, that’s correct, Muttiah. I tried to explain to Palyane that it would be much cheaper for him to simply make the repayments.” Nicanor shrugged. “And by-the-way; this doesn’t mean that we won’t also launch more direct punitive action as well if he continues to delay,” Nicanor warned. “So you should get back to the city and start loading your blue-sailed boat with gold, right now. The minimum payment due by sunset tonight will be... let's see...Five thousand four hundred, plus three hundred for three days of blockade – that is, one day to get here, one day on station and one to return – plus one more late payment fee for each of the five days since you were advised of that fee... that is a total of five thousand seven hundred and fifty talents of gold.

“Plus another hundred and ten talents for each day of delay if you do not pay by tonight. Naturally, any value of ships and goods confiscated in the meantime will be refunded to you; less the ten percent handling fee, of course.”

Muttiah was speechless. He crossed back onto his embassy vessel and returned to port.

Palyane was dismayed at the news. Almost six thousand talents? That was twice his total reserves and with the port blockaded there was no way to bring any more in. He had already called Dilip to the palace to hear the report and discuss a response but it was clear no response could be made to this demand except one. “Dilip?” Palyane asked. “What can be done?”

“My lord,” Dilip began, “My senior captains and I have been discussing nothing except tactics against the Republic since we returned. The first point is that the Republic prefers to fight at long range. They can throw their firepots further than we can throw a grapple. Also, we prefer to board and capture while they prefer to disable and destroy. Finally, our ships tend to be slower than theirs, mainly because we carry many more marines to allow us to seize a ship in hand-to-hand combat. Their vessels are not so heavily laden.

“Our best hope is to get within grapple range, and then draw the ships together. This will allow us to capture. And when the ships are bound in this way it would discourage the Republic captain from setting us afire because the fire will spread to his own ship as well. The best way to get within grapple range is to approach under cover of darkness. They have to actually hit us for their fire weapons to be effective but we need only to throw a grapple over them for it to lodge and be effective. Therefore we don’t need to estimate distance, only direction. So I suggest we launch at night and attack by grapple,” Dilip concluded.

“How many ships can we launch this evening?” Palyane asked.

“We have the ten survivors from the attack on Ezhimala,” Dilip answered. “The Republic ships are dispersed on blockade duty so we will have the overwhelming advantage if we remain concentrated in one group.”

Palyane nodded slowly. "Good! Then do it! But don't over-reach yourself, Dilip. Once the sun or moon is above the horizon their advantage of longer-range weapons will re-appear. Do what damage you can tonight, get back safely, and then you can sortie out another night. We don't need to win all in one blow."

"The moon is only six days old, my lord. It will set before midnight tonight, allowing us plenty of time for action. But every night after that it will set almost an hour later, decreasing our time available," Dilip commented. "I would say that we will probably only be able to raid the close blockade tonight, and after that I expect the enemy will withdraw the close ships during the hours of darkness to negate this ploy. Further sorties will need to reach the outer cordon. That will probably mean three hours' sailing to reach them, and leaves us vulnerable to interception as we return."

"Do whatever you can to make life difficult for the Republic, Dilip. I trust your judgement," Palyane said dismissively. "Now gather your captains and prepare."

Things were going well, Dilip thought to himself. Sightings from the city just before the moon set had confirmed that the close squadron had remained on station. More helpfully, they had lit lanterns on their aft decks, probably so they did not collide in the darkness Dilip guessed. That will make it so much easier for us to locate them in the dark and fall upon them!

His own squadron were also aware of the need to avoid collisions in the dark. This had been solved, he hoped, by a similar but much less obvious trick. They had lit lanterns in the aft cabin, visible only from behind the ship; they would sail in line-astern to be able each to watch the ship ahead. Unfortunately this meant that no ship could see where the following ships were, so the orders included for the head ship to sail comfortably below maximum possible speed so they don't get strung out too much.

The wind was a gentle westerly so the first tack was out to the south. The plan was to then return north, passing to the west of the close blockade, and then come at them from windward. The lee shore gave them only a mile of sea-room and should prevent an escape. The gentleness of the breeze was a bonus. There would be no splash of phosphorescence to give away his approach.

After an hour on the tack to the south he had lost sight of the lanterns of the close blockade ships; so he ordered the tack. Last he had seen, those lanterns looked close to due north, anyway, so he expected to pass to windward without any further work. And he would need that wind, he thought to himself; already it was weakening. At least it would be the enemy trying to work up into it; an almost impossible feat in these light conditions.

Less than an hour later he caught sight of the blockading lanterns again, to the north-east. Excellent! Everything is coming together! There was still more than four hours to dawn; plenty of time to work out to seaward and windward, and come down swooping on the hapless victims. He could afford to take his time.

Pithes was very eager to make no more mistakes. Pedites had relented after a while, imposing on Pithes a fine almost equivalent to his entire personal worth but that was much better than being sold into debt slavery. And there were still great prospects of plunder to re-establish his fortune! What was very clear was the underlying message. He mustn't be content with winning the day but must also look immediately to preparing for the next day.

He had come up on deck at midnight to ensure the second-in-command of his flag vessel had the benefit of his experience at hand. He had confidence that his flag captain wouldn't need his hand held but wasn't so sure about the first officer's abilities.

He scanned around him, counting the lanterns of his close blockade vessels. If anything were to happen it would happen here, not out on the horizon! All accounted for. The wind was dropping. The sails above him had been set to maintain steerage at sunset, but now the ship was simply wallowing. He walked across to the first officer and suggested that a bit more canvas might be in order. He dutifully agreed and called for another sail to be deployed.

He then scanned the shore. Muziris was in darkness. After midnight there were very few lights still showing in the city. And with no moon the stars blazed brilliantly overhead. He looked over to the Milky Way sitting on the horizon to the south-east. He saw what appeared to be a dark smudge against the background wash of the Way. Judging by the size of the silhouette, it seemed only a mile or so away. Could it be the sail of one of his outer blockade ships? What's an outer blockade ship doing in so close? He asked himself. That captain is way out of position.

Then he saw other smudges off to the south. That's not a blockade ship on its own! It's a convoy or perhaps a squadron! And we don't have any squadrons this far inshore except this close blockade squadron! After the telling-off Pedites had administered he dare not let any enemy ships make good on a sprint to port. He must intercept them! But in passing he made a mental note to find out who was on distance blockade to the south. Some-one had let them through!

He strode quickly back to the first officer at the helm. "We have the enemy trying to sneak around us. Look out to the south-west," he said in a conversational tone. "Put up full sail and pull over to our other ships."

The sails went up and the ship started to make way towards the nearest of the aft lanterns. But the breeze continued to drop. By the time they had closed the few hundred paces distance to come along side their boat speed had dropped to only a slow walk. "Enemy squadron to the south-west. Full battle sail! Prepare to reach south to intercept."

In the fading breeze it took an hour to pass the message to all ships. The line of battle they formed was ragged, their being barely enough boat speed to steer by. Those who had been on port tack had decided to gybe downwind rather than attempting a tack; it can be very embarrassing for a fighting ship to be stalled head-on to the wind and it would take a long time to get under way again. They inched southwards until they were almost directly between the city and the

enemy. And that was the last of the breeze. With over two hours of darkness left they were virtually dead in the water, the current slowly taking them to the south.

Dilip was near despair. The plan had been perfect and the approach exactly as planned. In fact, by some miracle of good luck the targets had unwittingly helped him by coming together into a single target and then sailed right into the trap, that narrow lane between his ships and the lee shore. And then the wind had finally died only half-a mile short of interception.

“That happens sometimes, my lord,” the ship's captain told him casually. “If the monsoon breeze is light and the sky is clear, there forms a breeze off the land and out onto the water. It can be enough to block the monsoon until mid-morning, when the land warms up again and the sea breeze adds to the monsoon.”

Dilip gnashed his teeth in anguish. Why had this experienced sailor not bothered to tell his land-lubber commander about that a couple of hours ago? They sat becalmed until the east started to lighten. Dawn was approaching. And here he was, immobilised two miles off the shore and surrounded by ships with the range advantage in their weapons. As the breeze returned, however slight it might be, they would be able to shower him with fire-pots and he would be helpless to fight back. All Dilip could do was hope for wind and he might yet escape.

Pithes ordered signal flags to be run up. ‘Follow me.’

“But no-one will be able to read them in the dark, my lord,” the first officer objected.

“You idiot!” Pithes spat. “I want them up now so that they can be read as early as possible.”

The officer gave the orders and the halyards rattled. Pithes stared up into the darkness. He could make out the shapes of the flags, hanging limply from the halyard. It would take a genius to read that message even in good light, he said to himself sourly. Then there was just a puff from the shore. A land breeze was forming! A glance out to the west and he could just make out the smudges of the enemy sail. Hard to tell the distance, so let's fire a pot and see how it falls. That will also serve to draw the attention of the rest of the squadron.

“Tension the ballistae!” He ordered. “Pass the same order to the other ships.” Men ran fore and aft with speaking-trumpets to hail the other ships. In these still conditions an aided voice would carry well. “Fire one bomb. Set for maximum distance!” One bomb arched over the water, the fuse visible in the gloom, and fell short of its target. “Close the distance! Prepare for battle!”

Ever-so-slowly Pithes' line inched towards the centre of the ragged Muzirisi line. The enemy ships took recognisable form as the sky brightened. But Pithes now saw something startling in the improving light. The enemy ship was equipped with a catapult and grapple on the bow. These were not merchantmen trying to sneak through the blockade; they were fighters!

“Fire one bomb, set for maximum distance!” This bomb arched over the water, smashing low against the hull of the target. This was good enough for

Pithes; natural variation would mean that some would go further than others, and as the distance slowly shortened the fire would become more accurate. "Fire at will!"

The two other ballistae on his starboard side let fly shortly afterwards as the aft unit was re-wound and loaded. One bomb landed barely short, the other caught the lowermost sail of the target and dropped to the deck. Flames erupted.

The aft ballista flung another pot, this one landing on the deck and spraying its burning oil. Two more bombs followed it promptly, both catching the sails and dropping to deck. The bow of the enemy ship was solidly ablaze now and the crew were passing up buckets to try to wash the oil through the scuppers.

"Aim for the stern and amidships!" Pithes ordered. "Give them no place to stand!" Obediently three bombs arched through the air and found the sails of the mainmast, dropping and breaking in the midst of the fire-fighters. Half a dozen men splattered with burning oil jumped over the side rails on into the sea. Another three bombs landed on the aft deck.

Even Pithes, a man who took pride in the training of his men, was pleased with the accuracy of fire. But then the sea is flat, there is no wind, we are both virtually stationary and they have a full rig of sail to aim for. So the aim should be accurate? That should put paid to the first ship, Pithes decided. The improving light showed him that all of the enemy ships were fighters. By now the fluky breeze had carried him past the target enemy.

"Maintain maximum range! Target next ship!" Pithes ordered. He looked along the line of the enemy. Six more to the south of the burning ship, three to the north. "Make signal; 'rear two ships to engage three northern enemy at maximum range.' And another signal, 'remainder of squadron to follow me.'"

Pithes felt the bow of his ship edge up into the land breeze slightly. He looked forward along the ragged enemy line. The next enemy ship was closer in to the coast; the helmsman was doing well to take us inshore to maintain maximum range. He glanced back to see the first officer pointing a heading to the helm. Perhaps he's not such a dope after all, Pithes conceded.

"Ballistae to fire at will as target comes into range!" Another glance back confirmed his second ship was now pouring bombs into the stricken enemy and men were jumping overboard in a steady stream now. The rear two ships in his squadron were roasting the rearmost enemy.

Pithes looked forward to the next target. He could see frantic activity around the catapult. It looks feeble, Pithes thought to himself. I hope it doesn't have the range of our ballistae! There was also activity along the side of the enemy vessel. The glint of metal was everywhere. They are taking off their armour! Pithes realised with amazement. Some were waving their swords in the air and then throwing them overboard. The meaning of the action at the bow soon became clear. With a large heave the catapult was toppled over the side.

Pithes was struck by doubt. These men were surrendering. His orders on this blockade were to intercept enemy shipping, and order them to sail to Ezhimala under escort. Yet the last time he took ships prize he was fined for not

following up on the victory. So what was expected of him here? Complete destruction of the enemy or taking prizes? “Hold fire!” Pithes ordered, to give himself more thinking time. “Get me a translator!” he demanded, and one of the Greek-speaking Ezhimalan officers allocated to each of his ships appeared beside him. “Tell that ship to sail directly west, away from the coast!” Pithes commanded. The translator took a voice trumpet and bellowed to the enemy.

The enemy ship waded to acknowledge, and the helmsman wound at his capstan. But in this light air, there was little visible movement. Pithes looked ahead again to the next Muzirisi ship in the line. It was already without its catapult and its men bare-chested. Another surrender. He looked back over his stern. The two furthest enemy ships were now ablaze, and the third from the end was obviously trying to swing out to sea. Closer again was the first ship he had attacked, now burning fiercely.

The surrendered ship had swung its bow out towards the sea by now so they must finally be catching some of the land breeze. The next in line behind him, already surrendered before coming into hailing range, was also swinging out towards the open sea. The rest of the Muzirisi line beyond that was also swinging westward. Pithes caught the splash of another catapult hitting the sea.

At last Pithes allowed himself the time to scan out to sea. Yes! Three of the outer blockade ships were heading towards him. From the angle of their sails and the shape of the canvas, there was a mild southerly blowing out there now, out of range of the land breeze. He looked up at his own sails, to see his effective wind was south-easterly. His southward reach had become a tight tack.

Back to the north the third of the three northerly enemy ships was now running north-west at a snail's pace. His two rear ships were cutting across to intercept. “Make signal; 'cease fire. Demand surrender. Maintain maximum range.” he ordered. The flags went up the halyard. “Make signal; 'Lakrites to take command, southern group. Commander detaching'.” Pithes ordered. “First officer, gybe to change heading for due north.” The bow came around and Pithes ran before the freshening southerly to re-connect with his northern ships.

Palyane had gone to his rooftop before dawn. He longed to see the Republic's close blockade crews being brought in as prisoners. How he ached for that, knowing that the insufferable Nicanor was on board one of those ships! That is one Greek who will regret every insult, every arrogance, every humiliation that he had so calculatingly piled on Palyane's head. Palyane was determined to be no less calculating in his revenge. Let the Republic do what they will! It could be no worse than this blockade and his ships would have the advantage of the night to launch one sally after another.

The dawn was just breaking but the darkness off the western shore was still impenetrable. He could just make out the lanterns on the rear of the close blockade, strung out like a line of fire-flies parallel to the coast. Excellent! That's where Dilip wanted them! But isn't it a bit later than he expected? Never mind, the Muzirisi ships were absolutely invisible and twice the number. Perhaps

the Republic's ships were so close inshore because they had been driven there by their unseen attackers.

Then Palyane saw a pinprick of light moving out to the seaward side of the southernmost one. It disappeared. Eager to see his ships alongside the enemy and swarming over their decks, Palyane urged the sky to lighten. There! Another moving pinprick! And then a burst of flame! This is not right, Palyane said to himself in a panic. We were supposed to board them. Fire is their weapon, not ours! The flame grew brighter and it was obviously not one of the line of the Republic blockading vessels but hundreds of paces to seaward. Then another burst of flames, small at first but growing, appeared well to the north of the first. Again, it was well seaward of the Republic fire-flies.

The gloom was starting to lift. Almost in an instant Palyane could recognise the ragged line of his own squadron, lined up outside the Republic vessels. It was a dance in slow motion, a tragic dance, as the enemy ships drifted down the line of his ships. A second of the northern Muzirisi vessels burst into flames while the southern ships slowly turned away, out towards the sea.

Why were they not grappling? Palyane wondered. Probably not close enough, he thought. Then why are they not coming closer? Then the icy dagger of despair ran up his spine. Those that are attacking are being destroyed before they can get close enough and the others are running for their lives! Palyane remained on his roof until mid-morning, unable to turn away from watching the inevitable doom of his remaining seven ships being surrounded and ordered to sail north under escort.

When he went downstairs to the cool of his rooms, Muttiah was discreetly waiting. "Ah, Muttiah; how prescient of you to realise I would call for you. Have you heard the news of the battle?"

"Yes, my lord." Muttiah thought it wise to offer no comment, only to reply respectfully.

Palyane dropped onto his comfortable chair. He didn't feel like taking his throne at the moment. "This is the sixth – no, the seventh battle we have had. We lost every man and every ship. We have yet to inflict a single casualty!" Palyane jumped to his feet again. "How can they do it? Dilip had them exactly where he wanted them but for some reason it made no difference! They knew exactly where Dilip was and let him fall into his own trap! Are they men or are they in league with the demons?"

"I don't know, my lord," Muttiah replied, the king's exasperation giving him confidence to speak his mind. "But I do know this. A plan that could not possibly go wrong has been a total failure. We could not possibly have done any worse. We are like new-born puppies, eyes still closed, confronting a tiger."

Palyane flopped his hands in surrender. "Then what do you advise?"

"I advise submission, my lord," Muttiah answered evenly. "They allowed Asoka to remain as king. You should seek the same arrangement as he enjoys."

"They will strip my treasury!"

"The way I understand it, they didn't do that to Asoka. They might well demand the six thousand talents from you. But when they see you can't pay they

will do no more than take what they can and take the rest as it arrives. But if you don't have to pay for and equip your army then that won't not take too long. After that, their "fee" is only a fraction of what your army would have cost anyway." Muttiah opened his hands. "If you don't submit they will strip your treasury of even more for even longer, and perhaps strip the meat from your bones as well," he concluded.

Palyane sank into silence. After half an hour he spoke again. "If we submit then we will learn how the Republic does things, how they achieve these marvels. Then, when we have learnt their secrets, we can rise up against them," he proposed. "To take your metaphor, we will no longer be blind pups. We will be a pack of wolves. Still faced with a tiger, but only one tiger against all us wolves."

"That would seem wise, my lord," Muttiah agreed.

"Then do you feel up to another boat ride?" Palyane asked, trying to lift his own spirits.

"Yes, my lord. Now?"

"Yes, Muttiah; don't try to haggle for terms; simply submit. Tell them that I seek the status of Friend and Ally, as they so quaintly put it, and I'll do exactly as I'm instructed in order to gain that status." Palyane gave one deep sigh. "Go now."

Muttiah tried to look his most splendid as he stepped from his blue-sailed ship onto the longboat for the transfer to Nicanor's vessel. His eight oarsmen pulled smoothly and he was beside the blockade ship within a couple of minutes. He ascended the ladder lowered for him. Ranjit followed him up the ladder.

"Welcome aboard, Muttiah," Nicanor greeted him cheerfully. Ranjit translated dutifully.

"Thank you, lord Nicanor," Muttiah replied.

"So you address me as lord Nicanor now?" Nicanor noted the honorific. "What has brought about this change of attitude?"

"I have been instructed by my lord Palyane to seek Friend and Ally status with the Republic," he replied evenly. "Lord Palyane has pledged that he will do whatever you require of him to achieve this aim."

"All this, and we're still standing on the deck!" Nicanor remarked. "That's negotiation with no time wasted!"

"Lord Palyane regrets that too much time has been wasted already," Muttiah offered.

"Indeed it has," Nicanor agreed. "Well, I'm not authorised to negotiate that outcome, Muttiah," Nicanor continued, "I'll need to take you to General Pedites at least, and you might have to go even higher. But could I suggest a couple of things that would assist you in your discussions?"

"Indeed, we seek your wisdom in such matters," Muttiah agreed.

"First, the outstanding debt must be paid. You will need to bring that when you return," Nicanor demanded. "And a letter from Palyane confirming that you have complete authority to negotiate on his behalf. Unless Palyane

himself would care to accompany you.” Then Nicanor hardened his face. He called for one of the Tamil liaison officers to join the group and translate for him.

“Also, I want this translator” gesturing viciously to Ranjit “and his whole family surrendered to me. He has offended me. He has too often chosen a most insulting form of words when addressing me!”

Ranjit contrived to gulp as though dry-mouthed, and started to translate hesitantly. Nicanor cut him off sharply. “No! My liaison officer will translate. I don’t trust that turd!” The Tamil officer translated all that Nicanor had said, including the insult, and Muttiah looked to Ranjit with disgust.

“If this man has done such things, then he has betrayed us no less than you, lord Nicanor,” Muttiah asserted. “You shall certainly have your satisfaction from him!”

Nicanor held up an index finger. “But I insist that I must have his whole family and that they be delivered to me in good order! You are not to take any action against them and no harm must come to any of them in any way! Vengeance will be mine alone and I will share it with no-one!” Nicanor glowered at Ranjit, who shrivelled as these words were translated.

“That is all, lord Nicanor?” Muttiah continued questioning. “Lord Palyane specifically instructed me to ensure we complied with all of your requirements.”

“That will be enough for the moment, Muttiah,” Nicanor concluded. “We await your return when you have done what I have asked for.”

Muttiah bowed and descended the ladder. Ranjit started to follow him down, but Nicanor grabbed him by the hair. “Not you! You’re staying here!” And then to Muttiah “Don’t forget, Muttiah; I want every member of his family and I want them untouched.”

It was approaching sunset when Muttiah returned. “Lord Nicanor, I have here a letter from lord Palyane. If it’s not in the form you require it will be corrected.”

Nicanor handed it to the Tamil liaison on board who scanned it and then translated it. Nicanor nodded, “That will be suitable.”

“I also have to advise you that lord Palyane does not have available the full amount required to satisfy the debt at present. We have been able to rake together just over three thousand talents and invite you to carry out whatever inspections you might wish. You may take whatever security you might desire against the repayment of the balance. That amount which is available, a total of three thousand and eighty talents, will be available on the wharf for your collection tomorrow morning. We think that might be a more secure way of handling such a sum, rather than risking some being dropped in the transfer between ships,” Muttiah smiled ingratiatingly.

Nicanor nodded approvingly. “That will be sufficient for the moment, Muttiah. We can negotiate on that basis.” Then gesturing abruptly towards Ranjit, “But what about this pig's family?”

“They are on board my ship even now. He is a slave and has no parents here. He has only a wife and two sons. Shall I order them to be brought over now?”

“Yes, now! And make absolutely certain that none of them jump overboard or I will be asking for your life as compensation!” Nicanor said with ferocity. Ranjit, now lashed to the foot of the mainmast, cringed as these words were translated, and managed to weep just a little bit. “Until tomorrow, Muttiah,” Nicanor offered his right arm. Muttiah took it and smiled.

“Until tomorrow, lord Nicanor. I’ll send the longboat with the woman and children now. They are yours to do with as you will.”

Muttiah returned to his ship, the longboat returned with a weeping woman with an infant and a crying boy aged about three. The woman and older boy had been trussed so they couldn’t move, much less jump overboard, and then wrapped in netting and tied inside the boat. Ranjit was roped around the neck and untied from the mast, and taken below decks. The woman and her children were hoisted on board in their netting like sacks of grain and taken below decks immediately. There a beaming Ranjit embraced his wife and older son. “We are free, my beloveds! We are free!”

Nicanor stood smiling beside him.

Six days later Muttiah was reporting back to Palyane the results of his negotiations. “My lord, the main points of the agreement are as follows,” and he started reading from a paper in his hand.

1. *King Palyane shall repay the remaining two thousand, nine hundred and eighty talents of gold at a rate of five hundred talents per month, to be delivered to Ezhimala before sunset of the first day of each new moon. Ten talents shall be added for each day late.*

2. *This amount shall be reduced by the value of the goods, ships and persons taken during the blockade, less ten percent for transport and processing. The value of this deduction shall be advised to King Palyane as the value of these items is realised.*

3. *King Palyane shall retain sovereignty over Muziris and all its possessions.*

4. *King Palyane shall allow Republic vessels, persons and goods free entry and exit from Muziris and all other areas under his control.*

5. *King Palyane shall accept a Republic legate as an advisor in his court.*

6. *King Palyane shall extend his protection to all Republic persons and property in lands under his control.*

7. *No penalty, punishment, tax or fee shall be imposed by King Palyane on Republic persons or goods for any cause whatsoever. Any claim against or allegation of wrongdoing by a Republic person shall be referred to the Republic legate, whose judgement in regard to penalties imposed on Republic persons or*

goods shall be final. The King shall retain jurisdiction over non-Republic persons and goods.

8. *King Palyane shall not harm nor allow to be harmed any Friend and Ally of the Republic. Any claim against or allegation of wrongdoing by a Friend and Ally shall be decided by the Republic legates of the parties concerned.*

9. *King Palyane shall pay for the reasonable expenses of the Republic legate, his staff, and any Republic forces stationed in his territory for the purposes of defending that territory.*

10. *The obligations and undertakings listed above shall pass to any and all successors of King Palyane.*

11. *Subject to satisfactory performance and fulfilment of the obligations listed above, the Republic shall protect King Palyane, his successors, his subjects, his interests and his territories against harm by any other party; and shall do so with such vigour and commitment as would be extended in protecting its own subjects, interests and territories.*

“What? No tribute?” Palyane asked.

“No, my lord. However, the sting is in point 7,” Muttiah explained. “This means that we have to allow their merchants and traders to buy or sell as they please, without any taxes. However, they are not obliged to permit our merchants access to their markets.

“That is how they will skim us, all the while pretending that they are being even-handed.”

Palyane nodded his understanding. “That’s precisely what my father did to them when he insisted that their traders were locked out of this port.” He drew himself up. “Let that be a lesson you drive into the awareness of my son, Muttiah; an empire built on armies costs money, but an empire built on traders makes money.”

“So long as you have the armies to protect the traders,” Muttiah added.

“Yes, and the Republic has that, too,” Palyane agreed. “Well, you have done well, Muttiah. I had expected much worse.

Palyane rose from his chair and walked over to the window. He stared out over the sea. “We will still have our local trade but now that we have been stripped of our tributaries I won’t be able to afford an independent army. We should make a copy of that treaty and send it to my brother-in-law for his information. I’ll no longer be able to support him against the Chola.”

Tagadur's advance against Camara was going well. Much of the territory he was crossing had been subject to Camara levies until their cities declared for the Republic. Resentment against Camara was running high and many of the

landless or unemployed flocked to join his army, enticed by food now and the prospect of loot later.

Although all the cities and towns had gone over to the Republic only the larger cities were provided with a full-time Republic legate. These legates also served as absentee legates for the smaller centres. Invariably these legates 'advised' their nominal kings to take no part in the attack on Camara but they could do little to prevent individuals from joining the march. However, their reports caused Pedites some worry.

"My orders were to pacify the Tamil lands and open them to trade," he complained. "But instead I've upset the balance between Chera and Chola. This could turn into a full-scale war!"

Nicanor knew his master. Pedites loved to complain about a problem and loved even more the challenge of solving it. "So what do you intend to do, General?"

"Re-balance the equation, of course!" Pedites exclaimed. "Nicanor, how would you like to lead a small embassy to Camara?"

Nicanor stepped onto the waterfront at Camara six days later, with Ranjit at his side as a translator. He was greeted by the king's Master of House. The humiliation suffered by Palyane was well-known and there would be no repeat performance here. He was conducted with considerable ceremony to the palace while his fleet anchored offshore, a show of force nobody could ignore.

Even more ominous was the Vanchi army, swollen by volunteers from the previously-oppressed Central Hills areas. They had fortified their camp a few miles from the walls and were obviously building siege engines. Camara was arming and training men as quickly as possible.

Raman had been well-advised since the Republic fleet had arrived and a message sent ashore that Nicanor would like an audience with the king. Raman stood and walked to Nicanor, extending his right arm in the Roman way and smiling. Nicanor took the proffered arm and smiled in return.

"King Raman, I bring greetings from General Alexander Pedites, commander of the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force. General Pedites offers you assistance in repelling the Vanchi army threatening your well-being."

"Lord Nicanor, it is good of you to visit my city!" Raman enthused. "And it is a great joy to be assured of the good will of the esteemed General Alexander."

"I thank you for your warm welcome, King Raman," Nicanor replied. "I had feared that you would be resentful since so many of the Central Hills areas which formerly looked to you for protection have now become Friends and Allies of the Republic."

"Not at all!" Raman waved it away as a small thing. "In fact, it is a relief that you have undertaken to protect them from Chera aggression, a burden off our shoulders. It is an unintended consequence that the Chera have turned their warlike tendencies against us instead."

“Which is why we extend to you that same offer of assistance,” Nicanor explained. “We invite you to become a Friend and Ally of the Republic. We already have a substantial force waiting offshore, ready to come to your help.”

“Then by all means call them ashore! I will arrange for their accommodation while your officers see to their proper deployment,” Raman replied, releasing Nicanor's arm at last and guiding him into the garden.

“Tell me, lord Nicanor; how many men do you have with you?” Raman inquired.

“I have five thousand artillerymen and their equipment,” Nicanor answered. “Not a large force by numbers, but very effective if protected by your fortifications and infantry.”

Raman continued smiling, but his heart sank. A mere five thousand! He had twice as many in his own catapult divisions! “Then it should be possible to deploy them quickly,” Raman said, trying to make a positive out of the situation. “The Vanchi have already built a great number of catapults and siege engines. It will not be long before they have the confidence to attack.”

“Then with your permission, King Raman, I will take my leave of you. My officers will assess the situation and make their deployments as they consider best,” Nicanor offered. “I have much to do as well.”

Nicanor walked down to the docks and ordered signals to be made for the landing of the force. Mello had been appointed his legate for this expedition and was given orders to reconnoitre the city and the surrounds and deploy the forces. He also unshipped his horse and mounted. Still in his dress uniform from meeting Raman and with his four-man retinue marching behind him, he called one of the Tamil liaison officers to join him on a second mount. Then he asked to be led to the city gates. To the consternation of the troops on the walls he set out towards the Vanchi camp.

He was half-way there when a mounted man, also with four in his retinue, came out towards him. The two parties met.

“My name is Nicanor,” Nicanor announced. “I have come to suggest that you should march back to Vanchi immediately. Camara has sought the status of Friend and Ally of the Republic and we have our artillery within its walls.” He waited for the translation to be made. Nicanor smiled wryly. “I am sure you are familiar with our artillery. They are commanded by the same officer that you met in your previous five land battles.”

“My name is Srinath,” Srinath replied. “Yes, I am familiar with your artillery. However, I note that this city has no earthworks as in Nelcinda. There is nothing that would prevent our reaching the city walls, and nor are we pressed up against a barrier as in the Ezhimala engagements.

“So I suggest you withdraw your men lest you lose such a fine fighting force.” Srinath matched Nicanor's wry smile. “This will be a very different battle!”

“Every battle is different, General Srinath,” Nicanor replied. “Only the results are the same.” Nicanor pulled his horse around and headed back into the city.

Mello was on the wall and looking out over the approaches to the city as Nicanor returned. He met Nicanor at the gate and Nicanor dismounted to walk beside his legate.

“What do you expect to happen, Nicanor?”

“Nothing. He won’t attack while we are here for fear of losing another army, but nor will he withdraw so long as he thinks he can force us into withdrawing first,” Nicanor summarised. “We need to hang a sword over his head or we could be here for a year! But continue your work just in case he tries something rash, and it will also be good for our larger objective if Raman sees how quickly we can get our act together.”

Mello did indeed get his act together. Before sunset his ballistae had been mounted on the walls, his long-arm onagers behind the walls and set up for indirect fire and fire-proof shelters put in place for the bombs just in case the Vanchi might try a fire attack of their own. Then the ammunition was unloaded and stored in the secure shelters. They were completely ready for an attack at dawn should it come.

Nicanor made another ride out to the Vanchi camp the next morning. Again Srinath came out to meet him. The difference was that this time Nicanor took Ranjit with him, mounted and in a borrowed dress uniform.

“Greetings, lord Nicanor,” Srinath greeted him with a smile. “How much time do you require to pack up your men and equipment?”

Nicanor ignored the question. “Greetings, General Srinath! Have you met my colleague?” gesturing towards Ranjit, whose face was largely obscured by the helmet and cheek-flaps.

“I don’t believe so, lord Nicanor; but I note he is a Tamil, not a Greek.”

Nicanor asked Ranjit to remove his helmet. Srinath studied his face but there was no recognition.

“May I introduce you to lord Ranjit. He was formerly a slave in the service of Palyane.” Nicanor saw the shock of recognition on Srinath's face.

“What’s he doing here?” Srinath demanded.

“Much has happened since you left Vanchi,” Nicanor explained. “Muziris was foolish enough to challenge us in battle again and not one of their men returned. Muziris is now garrisoned by the Republic and Ranjit was given to me as part of the treaty.” Nicanor waited for this to be translated and allowed some extra time for the impact to sink in.

“I have now set him free and formally adopted him, so you will refer to him now as 'lord Ranjit'. He will fill you in on the details.” Nicanor waited until the liaison officer finished the translation, then gestured to Ranjit and nodded.

“Now these are my own words, General Srinath,” Ranjit continued. “Soon after you left, Palyane refused payment. The Republic responded by blockading Muziris. They confiscated any ships or cargo entering or leaving the port and enslaved their crews, except for foreigners. Dilip attempted to sneak out at night to board and destroy the blockade vessels. This cost him his own life, three ships burnt, and seven captured. Once again, not one Republic casualty.

“Palyane asked for terms to lift the blockade. He has submitted to the Republic, which now garrisons his city. He has retained his throne and his life but can do nothing without the Republic's approval.” Ranjit looked over to Nicanor as he finished.

“Good,” Nicanor said. “Now tell him that he is needed back in Vanchi. Unless he starts moving back there immediately, the Republic and its combined Friends and Allies will march on Vanchi in defence of Camara, its newest Friend and Ally.”

Srinath was shaken, but affected to be unconcerned. “What nonsense! Had anything like this happened, then surely a fast rider would have arrived by now to tell me!”

“Think back about your route, General. Wasn't a large part of it through the territories of Republic Friends?” Nicanor replied. “What makes you think we would allow your riders through? Oh, General! You are a long way from home, home is in deep trouble and you have to make your way back through territory that could turn hostile to you in an instant!” Nicanor chuckled mirthlessly. “You should be very nice to me or I could have your army cut to pieces by launching a new ambush every hour as you trudge through the Central Hills! The Death of a Thousand Slices!”

Nicanor turned his horse towards the city. “I will see your back tomorrow, your dust the next day and only your footprints thereafter. Or a message will go back to march on Vanchi. The choice is yours.” Nicanor started back to the city with Ranjit beside him. Srinath watched for more than a minute before turning back to his camp.

Nicanor took Ranjit with him to the debriefing with Mello.

“I don't think he sees the percentages in playing a waiting game any longer,” Nicanor said after a recount of the conversation. “What's your opinion, Ranjit? You know these men better than we.”

“He is deeply troubled, lord Nicanor,” Ranjit said in opening, but was interrupted by a raised hand.

“Not 'lord Nicanor' please, unless we are trying to impress someone. You're no longer a slave.”

“Thank you,” Ranjit smiled. “He was very surprised when he recognised me. He knows that I'm privy to many of Palyane's secrets and I wouldn't have been handed over to you unless Palyane had no choice. I think showing my face has convinced him that Muziris has fallen.”

“In which case Vanchi is left virtually defenceless,” Mello finished the chain of thought. “Yes, I expect he will try to get home now before he makes an enemy of us. He's cut off from any help at all once Vanchi is put under pressure.”

Nicanor spoke next. “I think we might not parley tomorrow morning, in that case. Let Srinath sit in doubt for the day and we'll revise our plans tomorrow night depending on what he does.”

Mello shrugged. “You two know him better than I.”

“What do you say, Ranjit?” Nicanor asked.

“I agree, Nicanor. We don’t want to look like supplicants, begging him to leave.”

“Then it’s settled!” Nicanor closed the meeting.

Ranjit's heart swelled with gratitude towards Nicanor. Not only had this foreign noble saved himself and his family from slavery; he was seeking his opinion and considering it with respect. Quite apart from providing his family with their own house, fit for a modestly prosperous merchant rather than an ex-slave and paying him a handsome monthly retainer!

They need not have made the decision to not speak to Srinath the next morning. Early morning revealed all of the Vanchi artillery, dragged so many miles over the Central Hills, and the new siege towers just completed were being drawn together in a tight knot. Then they were set afire. Srinath was obviously going home and intended to travel light and fast. But he would not leave this valuable equipment for Raman to call his own. By afternoon the camp was empty.

Raman was overjoyed with the result. A victory, and no damage done to his city in the process! He called Nicanor and Mello to a Royal Banquet that evening.

The next morning Nicanor and Mello called on Raman. “King Raman, it is appropriate for us to now confirm your petition to become a Friend and Ally of the Republic.”

“Yes, lord Nicanor, let’s discuss that in more detail.” He indicated a smaller side room. “These things should not be done in public gaze, though.”

Raman gestured to Duran his Chief Advisor and another man to accompany him into the room. Nicanor, Mello and Ranjit followed. Nicanor politely waited for Raman to open the conversation.

“When you arrived you invited me to become a Friend and Ally. Precisely what would that entail?” Raman asked.

“First, it would require you to refrain from attacking any other Friend and Ally,” Nicanor started. Ranjit translated each point progressively.

“You would also be required to respect the person and property of any Republic citizen. If any allegation is made against a Republic citizen you must refer it to the Republic legate to decide the case. If the citizen is found guilty he will be punished according to the legate's decision but if he is acquitted he may not be harmed in any way.

“You may not impose any taxes or charges upon a Republic citizen or his property without the consent of the legate.

“You must permit free access and egress to your markets and territories by Republic citizens.

“You must come to the assistance of any Friend and Ally of the Republic as directed by the legate and you will be expected to maintain a modest but effective military force for this purpose. If you don’t the Republic will station a force here at your expense.

“In return, the Republic will guarantee your security and protect your interests.” Nicanor sat back in his chair. “For your convenience I have asked

Ranjit to write the requirements for you in Tamil so you and your advisors will be able to study them at leisure and understand them thoroughly,” Nicanor tabled a sheet of paper.

Raman read the sheet and sat in thought for a short time. “I would be most pleased to become a Friend and Ally of the Republic,” he said at last. “But what you have just outlined is much more than that. Why should I give up my right to administer justice in my own lands, just because an offender is a Republic citizen? That would be granting him a licence to do whatever he liked so long as the legate chose to ignore his crimes!”

Nicanor paused for a moment before speaking. “I can understand that you might be wary of any opportunity for corruption and injustice. You are to be applauded for your diligence in that regard. But I must advise you that the Republic abhors corruption and I assure you that any Republic citizen who does anything wrong will be required to make proper compensation to any who suffer as a result.”

“I am also most uncomfortable that I might not impose any charges or taxes on a Republic citizen.” Raman spread his palms. “Why should foreigners be exempt from taxation but not my own people? I fear that might breed resentment.”

“That’s because Republic citizens will be subject to Republic taxes,” Nicanor responded bluntly.

“I need to discuss the various points with my advisors,” Raman said at length. “Perhaps if you could allow me a day, and we will meet to negotiate these things at noon tomorrow?”

“King Raman, you seem to not understand the situation,” Nicanor persisted. “You have already asked for Republic help in repelling an attack. We have repelled that attack completely and without any cost or damage to your city or its people. In short, you have already agreed to these terms and received the benefit of them. There is not much to negotiate.”

“With respect, lord Nicanor,” Raman replied, “You invited me to seek ‘Friend and Ally’ status, and told me you had an army aboard your ships. But I didn’t seek that status, nor did I seek any military support. I did no more than invite them ashore and offer more comfortable accommodation for them, as any polite host would do. Nor did I ask you to deploy your forces in my defence; I merely permitted it, so as not to cause you embarrassment in the face of your troops by requiring them to be confined. All soldiers like to feel that they are prepared. Nor did I ask you to speak with the enemy. You chose to do that without any reference to me at all.” Raman looked around the other men present.

“So you invited me to seek ‘Friend and Ally’ status, an offer I didn’t take up but politely deflected rather than embarrass you. Then you deployed your soldiers and otherwise intervened without my request and largely without even my consent. I have committed myself to nothing more than considering how we might establish a mutually beneficial relationship. I am now proposing that we do precisely that without preconceptions and preconditions.”

Nicanor sat for a moment. Then he turned to Ranjit. "Don't translate this. Do you recall our first audience clearly? I suspect that Raman might actually be correct here. In which case he can honestly say he has not been a faithless ally."

Ranjit searched his memory. It was clearer than usual because he had been the translator, required to pay more careful attention than a mere listener. "I don't recall Raman actually making any request at all, only offers," Ranjit agreed. "And when you offered support he gently changed the subject without actually accepting it or even thanking you for it."

Raman thought he had an idea of what was being discussed but the anonymous courtier he had brought with him could understand Greek; he would be more accurately informed later.

Nicanor turned his attention back to Raman, who had been sitting patiently while this discussion in Greek was carried out before him. "Back to translation, please Ranjit. King Raman, I must apologise for my erroneous assumptions. I agree that you neither sought nor accepted 'Friend and Ally' status, only that you welcomed us as guests and were pleased that General Pedites wished you well. We will close this session now and meet again at noon tomorrow as you suggest." Nicanor stood, tipped his head slightly, and left the room. Mello and Ranjit followed him.

"Lucius, I want you to spend the rest of today painting the key parts of this city so we can target them indirectly from outside with our onagers," Nicanor growled angrily but in Latin rather than Greek for the sake of security. "Meanwhile, start setting up your onagers outside the walls and the defences around them, so that they can't be harmed by a sortie from the city. Something like you did in that first raid at Muziris would be ideal. Perhaps on the other side of the river would be suitable. If this smarmy, two-faced bastard wants to negotiate on the basis that there is no 'Friend and Ally' relationship, then let's play along with him!"

Raman welcomed Nicanor and Ranjit into his meeting room at noon the next day. "I notice lord Lucius is not with you today," he observed. "I trust his health is good?"

"Lucius has professional duties today. He must administer our forces," Nicanor replied.

"Yes, I noticed that your men are moving from the city and setting up a camp outside," Raman commented. "Please understand that my words yesterday didn't mean that you are not welcome to enjoy our hospitality as discussions continue. Your men are welcome to stay inside the city and enjoy its amenities."

"That's very generous of you, King Raman, but we don't want our men becoming soft. Military discipline is essential to our military doctrine. But if we could now move on to the main issues, King Raman," Nicanor cut the courtesies short. "Do you or do you not seek 'Friend and Ally' status as outlined in the document I handed to you yesterday?"

Raman was not put off his path by this bluntness. "Indeed I do seek to be recognised as a friend and ally of the Republic but some of the terms of that

document will need to be modified to make allowance for the special conditions that apply in our unique relationship,” Raman smiled broadly, inviting a response.

“I understand that to mean ‘no’, King Raman,” Nicanor pressed. “My question explicitly included the phrase ‘as outlined in the document I handed you yesterday’, and your answer failed to accept that document as the basis of our relationship.”

“It certainly will serve as a basis, lord Nicanor,” Raman replied soothingly. “It only requires some minor modifications.”

“King Raman, I take that as a second ‘no’. If you do not respond with an unqualified ‘yes’ the next time I ask, I will leave this table immediately,” Nicanor said sternly. “Do you seek ‘Friend and Ally’ status as outlined in the document I handed you yesterday?”

Raman smiled and spread his palms as if to pacify Nicanor. “Lord Nicanor, I seek ‘Friend and Ally’ status generally as outlined in the document you handed me yesterday.” Raman continued smiling. “Now we need only to work through the broad points of that document, defining precisely the extent and applicability of each of them.”

Nicanor stood. “If and when you change your mind, you will know where to find me.” He waited only long enough for Ranjit to translate, then turned on his heel and left the room with Ranjit following closely.

Mello had set up camp across the river directly opposite the city. Nicanor walked down to the city walls and noticed that the fleet had pulled out of the harbour and was patrolling offshore. He continued along the shoreline to the bridge over the river and then into Mello’s camp.

“How went the talks?” Mello asked breezily.

“As expected,” Nicanor answered. “How goes the work?”

“The work goes well,” Mello reported. “You see here how they have narrowed the river at this point by lining both banks with stonework?” Mello pointed to the bridge Nicanor had just crossed and waited for Nicanor to nod.

“That wasn’t just to allow a shorter bridge to be built at that point. They have also dropped a lot of stone on the bed of the river, too; probably to prevent erosion from undermining the bridge piers and the shore revetments. But the end result is that the water upstream of this point is almost always fresh. Except for a short period around the very highest of tides, the flow of the river through that narrowing is enough to flush out even the incoming tides. The inflow from upstream allows fresh water to back up high enough to counter the tidal rise.

“And that’s where they get their fresh water,” Mello pointed slightly up-river from the bridge narrows. “I intend to cut another river channel around behind us, to divert the river. Even a small channel will erode out quickly because that narrowing of the river will mean the water upstream has some head behind it. Then we’ll start to throw an embankment across the river downstream from the diversion but upstream of their watering point. That will seal off the river from their water supply, which will then be drawing from the reach downstream instead. And after a few tides that reach will be almost entirely salt.

Nicanor looked dubious. “How long will that take?” he asked.

“The diversion, about three days to get some flow. After that the river itself will cut the channel wider,” Mello assured him. “The closing of the river upstream might take a bit longer, depending on the condition of the river bed.”

“And you say we’re safe here?” Nicanor continued.

“Absolutely!” Mello assured him. “We will have triple guard duty, we have cleared the banks of any obstructions to our field of fire and we are setting up palisades. No ditch this time; we don't think they will be able to land horse, and we don't want to provide cover for infiltrators. And remember, when we divert the river it will make us an island here. That will prevent them from attacking us from inland,” Mello concluded.

Nicanor looked out into the bay. “What orders have you given the fleet?”

“None yet. Only to stand out to sea and watch for signals.”

“Please call one in. I want to give them orders now that we know that Raman is playing silly games with us.”

By sunset Nicanor could say he was happy with the situation. A fast ship was on its way back to General Pedites in his new headquarters in Muziris to report the news to date and Nicanor's intentions. Mello had also placed a request for supplies.

The diversion trench, starting at the seaward end, was going well. The men would extend the length of the trench during rising tides, down to the high tide level; then excavate deeper as the water receded, down to low tide level. The trench was about one-third finished already. The shore defences were excellent. Mello was a master of fortification and set-piece battles, as he had already proven. A makeshift jetty had also been constructed. This was long enough for a ship to tie up either side at high tide and be grounded in the mud flats at low tide. It would be extended until it could berth a ship at low tide, but for the moment it was enough to be able to unload supplies directly rather than transferring by boat.

What was being unloaded as supplies included an inordinate amount of sail canvas, which was being sewn into bags. These bags were being filled with the soil taken from the diversion trench, each weighing almost one hundred Roman pounds. As fast as they could be sewn and filled they were being placed on the camp side of the diversion trench to protect that side against erosion. Some were also being placed in the river just downstream from the intended connection with the diversion to create the cutoff embankment.

However, Mello was informed that even if the entire fleet gave up all their supplies of sailcloth, there would still not be enough bags to reach even halfway across the river. The cutoff embankment could not be completed by this sandbagging technique, and to dump the soil loose would result only in it being eroded away. His solution to this was startlingly simple. He walked across the bridge to the city and found all the shipfitters he could, buying sailcloth by the wagonload.

The second day in the new camp went smoothly. The central part of the trench provided slower progress, the natural ground level mid-way between the shore and the river being slightly higher and the earth slightly harder. But he still expected the breakthrough by the evening of the third day. Mello also ordered

the construction of a timber tower near the end of the embankment. This would be the only connection from the mainland to his new island and therefore the most likely place for any confrontation. He wanted to be able to see the battlefield. Why should Raman have that advantage of an overview from his city walls but not I? He ordered it to be built forty feet high to be able to look down on the far side of the river as well so enemy movements could not be masked by trees.

The completion of the diversion trench was delayed until early on the fourth day to coincide with a suitable tide. The new jetty had been extended to water deep enough to allow ships to berth at low tide. The cutoff embankment was completed to above high-water over half its length by evening, and with the digging now complete those crews were now available for carrying the bags. This diversion dam was expected to be completed by the end of day six. As the embankment was extended, closing the river ever more tightly, they found that their existing embankment had to be taken higher to hold back the obstructed river. The current through the diversion channel grew ever stronger, eroding the far bank at a startling rate. However the sandbagged near bank remained intact.

“I wonder what Raman is making of all this?” Nicanor asked Mello that evening.

“I doubt he has the faintest clue,” Mello answered. “He probably thinks the diversion ditch is a defensive moat, and the embankment a way of funnelling the river through it to make a crossing more difficult.”

“He’ll soon find out when his drinking water is foul. By the way, have you ordered our latrines to be emptied into the dead stretch of river?”

Mello smiled broadly. “Now that would be a good idea!”

The embankment was finally closed at noon on day seven. Some of Raman's troops were watching warily but a battery of ballistae fitted with porcupines was set up on the embankment to discourage any interference. They were not molested. Raman still kept up the pretence of being ready to negotiate for friendship while hoping the Romans would tire and go away.

Now the fleet could be given their new orders; Camara was now under blockade. Nicanor sent a letter to Raman advising him that until Camara petitioned for ‘Friend and Ally’ status it would be considered ‘hostile’. Henceforth any ship entering or leaving would be seized; the ships themselves, the cargo and their crews were now forfeit.

Nicanor's next action was to raid the dockside and destroy any vessel that looked like it might be able to challenge the blockade. Only those vessels clearly incapable of being a threat were spared. By sunset the whole waterfront was ablaze and the undamaged vessels putting out to sea to avoid the flames of the burning ships near to them were all captured.

So Nicanor was not surprised to see Duran on the bridge the next morning, flanked by an honour escort of four men. He walked out to mid-span with Mello and Ranjit to meet him.

“Lord Nicanor! What is the meaning of this attack? Are we not in the midst of negotiating a treaty of peace and friendship?” Duran asked, his voice dripping with injured innocence.

“Lord Duran, King Raman assures me he has not asked for recognition as a Friend and Ally. This means that we are under no obligation to respect his realm,” Nicanor replied.

“But our negotiations, although interrupted, have not been abandoned. Let us continue to speak peace and not act war,” Duran argued.

“We of the Republic speak peace to our friends and allies. But when negotiating with those unwilling to trust in the justice of our legates, we negotiate from a position that makes no secret of our relative strengths.” Nicanor looked him up and down while Ranjit translated. “Let me know when Raman is prepared to accept reality. The longer he delays, the more uncomfortable will his position become. He can start by tasting his water supply.”

Duran looked confused. “What about our water supply?”

Nicanor sighed, as though explaining elementary arithmetic to a dullard. “You draw your water supply from the river, don’t you?”

“I would expect so,” Duran agreed. “But I’m not an engineer; what do I care about that?”

“That’s why you will never be able to withstand us,” Nicanor advised. “You assume that if you don’t know something, then it must be unimportant. In fact such things are usually the most important. Allow me to explain.

“Your water supply is drawn from that part of the river that we have now cut off from its supply of fresh water upstream. As the tides flush in and out it will become progressively more salty. Not to mention the fact that we are now emptying our latrines into it.” Nicanor smiled as this was translated and enjoyed the look of horror on Duran's face at the last sentence. “So next time you drink, hold your nose and chew well!”

Duran turned abruptly and hurried back to the city, his four-man retinue behind him. Mello, Nicanor and Ranjit strolled back casually.

“What do you expect now, Lucius?” Nicanor asked.

“I expect they will try to destroy the cutoff embankment,” Mello answered. “But we located it out of range of their feeble catapults, even if lobbing rocks would do any good. In fact, it would just add to the barrier.

“So instead they will try to send out infantry to pull it apart by hand. Our porcupines will make that easier said than done.”

“Won’t they try to roll out their catapults to drive off the porcupines?” Nicanor asked.

“That is why I deployed our onagers behind them,” Mello replied. “Their catapults will be within range of our onagers long before our porcupines come under threat.”

“By the gods, Lucius, you’re a military genius,” Nicanor enthused.

“Make sure you keep telling the General that!” Mello smiled. “But it’s just standard practice. Or at least, standard practice for a competent Republic officer; these Tamils seem a bunch of amateurs.”

The first response from Raman came that night. The moon was six days past full, so it wouldn’t rise until almost midnight. An hour after sunset Mello sent a man out along the embankment, crawling just above the river level on the

side shadowed from the fires. He was invisible and silent; that he took almost an hour to reach the far side was an irrelevance. His task was to listen for any men trying to approach the embankment under cover of darkness. He took up a concealed position on the far bank a dozen paces upstream from the embankment. He untied the thin cord from around his waist and tied it to the low-hanging tree branch beside him. Then he gave three sharp tugs. After a moment there were three sharp tugs in response. The soldier at the other end now knew that he was in position. He gave another three sharp tugs in acknowledgement.

It was only half an hour after that when he heard movement and a hushed voice. The stealth sentry gave one long tug on the rope. Immediately he felt the tug in response.

One tug meant nothing; a fish or some debris coming down the river could do that. But the acknowledgement meant that his colleague was alert at the other end. Now he gave two long tugs, waited a moment, and then two more of equal strength and separation as the first two. That pattern could not be accidental; it meant there were enemy nearby. He felt the two-tug acknowledgement.

A handful of minutes passed; there was a tug on the rope; his other end was starting to become concerned. He tugged back once to acknowledge. There were more voices now; they seemed to be directly inland from him now, as well as near the end of the embankment. This was enough for him! He was unarmed and clad only in a tunic to ensure he was silent himself and also to ensure he could use his ultimate means of returning to report in person. He gave five evenly-spaced tugs, paused and then five more. The acknowledgement came back down the rope. Then, slowly and silently, he lowered himself belly-up in the knee-deep water and started pulling slowly and evenly on the rope. Totally exposed but totally invisible in the darkness, he pulled himself across the river to the camp bank.

He ran back to report to the point officer. "There are many enemy moving up to the far bank, sir," he said between pants. "They would seem to be setting up a wide frontage onto the river; my guess is that they're preparing some small equipment to target our ballistae and perhaps shields to protect demolition teams.

The officer looked at the sky. That was no help; he had no idea of telling how long before moonrise. "Report immediately to General Mello. Bring back instructions," the officer decided. Do nothing in haste, he told himself. So long as the enemy think they have the advantage of surprise but don't, then the stronger your own advantage. Don't let them know that you know!

Mello reacted immediately. "Send back word to do nothing unless the enemy makes itself obvious. Await further orders." The sentry was sent back on his puffing way. Mello called out three men to come with him to the tower. He took with him a special new instrument.

This looked like a telescope, and technically-speaking it was. But its primary purpose was not to magnify, but to gather more light and thereby make the image brighter. Its front lens was the size of a man's palm, so it gathered about four hundred times as much light as a fully-dilated pupil, but it magnified only some five times, so this light was concentrated into an image only twenty-

five times the area. Hence the image was sixteen times brighter than to the naked eye. It gave a distorted image, due to the extreme curvature required for the front lens to achieve this short focal length, but it was seriously better than the unaided eye.

With this instrument Mello could make out darker patches against the background of the grass. Some of them were obviously stunted trees or shrubs, but others were slowly moving. Trees don't do that! More ominously, shrubs tend not to form raggedly-straight lines ten feet back from a river bank.

Larger dark outlines could be seen behind these smaller ones. They were more-or-less evenly spaced, and again formed a ragged line behind the front line. Mello's opinion of Tamil soldiers multiplied enormously as he took this in. Somehow this commander had managed to get his troops into an almost perfect jump-off point in total darkness and almost total silence! And with only one day to plan the mission and train his men for it! He must never again write them off as 'amateurs', as he had only that morning.

What might the enemy's plan be? The dispositions seemed to indicate that the forward units were either small artillery or companies of bowmen, intended to destroy or suppress the ballistae defending the embankment and then attempt a mass charge along the embankment once the defences had been reduced.

When might this happen? The most probable time would be when there is sufficient moonlight to target the ballistae and their crews. That would be in less than an hour from now. So now is the time to pre-empt their attack!

"Stentor," he called to one of his men. How could any mother name her son that? he wondered yet again. He must have had a fearsome reputation for crying as a new-born! "Go to the onagers immediately. I want rapid fire, spread over the far bank for one hundred paces depth and one hundred paces either side of the diversion dam. Go!"

The onager battery officer was prepared for such an apparently impossible order. Although the darkness was total and the target invisible, Mello had already made sure that the direction and distance to every conceivable reference point had been marked on the edge of the onager platforms. They need only take offsets from these known marks and fire blind. The fires were struck and the bombs prepared as the onagers were swung into proper azimuth and their tendons tensioned. Within five minutes the bombs were arching over the river. Watching from the tower, Mello saw the first pinpricks of flame blossom in the target zone and multiply. By that light he could see men running in fear.

As the rain of bombs continued and the small fires merged into a continuous blazing wall he noted with approval that the barrage had started at the rear of the target zone and crept towards the river, driving the men before it. He must remember to commend that onager officer. Excellent tactical work against an unseen target!

Many of the enemy were now wading into the river to escape the closing wall of flames and those already in the river were being pushed out into the deeper water or trampled in the press. Now, clearly visible against the backlight

of the fires, they were presenting perfect targets to the ballistae. Porcupine barrages were cutting them down as they waded along the shallows.

One group of attacking infantry saw the carnage happening in the water. Perhaps because they were unwilling to fall into the same trap or perhaps because they saw desperation as their only hope for survival, they tried to charge along the embankment to take the ballista batteries. But in the poor light the sandbagged surface was impossible to cross at a run. They stumbled, tripping over each other, and a spray of porcupines slashed at them. Half their number was wiped in a single volley. The survivors gathered themselves together to charge again and were clear-felled again. The few survivors, seeing only the deep water of the river to either side, raised one more charge. Only two men made it past the half-way point to be felled by single-shot cross-bow snipers.

The moon, just over half-full, was now lightening the sky in the east. The fires in the killing ground were still being fed by the onagers which had not yet been told to cease their rain of death. "Arius, go tell the onagers to cease fire and stand down," Mello ordered another of his men standing by. "Let's not work those tendons any more than we have to."

Mello and Nicanor never knew how many men died in that slaughter. Most of the casualties occurred in the water where their armour pulled them into the mud on the bottom. But it was certainly well in excess of a thousand.

The next morning Nicanor sent one of his Tamil liaison officers to the centre of the bridge. After a wait of half an hour a Camara officer appeared on the docks and marched out to meet him.

"Lord Nicanor admires the courage and competence of the men who died last night," the liaison officer announced. "Therefore we will allow you to collect the dead unhindered. We will not fire on your men as they do this duty, provided no-one attempts to cross or interfere with the sandbagged embankment."

"I appreciate the honour you pay our men," the Camara officer replied. "Do you have anything else to say?"

"No, that is all I was instructed to say."

"Then I thank you again and will now return." The Camara officer returned to the city. By noon the burnt-out bank opposite the embankment was covered with men collecting the burn victims. Others were working their way along the shallows to retrieve the sunken bodies, fixing ropes to them so men on the dry bank could haul them out.

There were also quite a few officers who were totally oblivious to the recovery work. They were standing in a group, pointing out features of the defences opposite their position and discussing what they saw. This proved too much an opportunity for many of the Republic troops. They began to heckle the enemy, taunting them with encouragement to 'just try it!'. Rather pointless, really; none of them understood Greek. But at least it sent the morale message. These Republic men were willing and able to fight.

"Nicanor; I think we should rip out the planking from the bridge," Mello suggested.

“But why, Lucius? You have that covered with so many ballistae that a sparrow wouldn’t survive the attempt to storm over.”

“Not so, Nicanor. I wasn’t too worried back in the days when Raman was happy to talk and not fight. But now that he’s thinking seriously about dislodging us, that bridge makes us too vulnerable.”

“I don’t see how,” Nicanor continued.

“That’s perhaps because you’re looking at it and thinking ‘How can I defend this bridge against attack?’ That’s a very poor way of defending anything,” Mello persisted.

“Well, how else should I think if I want to defend?”

“The best way to defend, Nicanor, is to think to yourself ‘How could I attack this position, if I were on the other side?’ To be a successful defender, you must first get into the mind of your attacker.”

“I take your point, Lucius; but how could anyone attack over this bridge? Look at the artillery focussed on it!”

“Too easily, Nicanor,” Mello scoffed dismissively. “All you need is a box on wheels. Eight feet height of wet timber at the front, so neither bombs nor bolts could harm it, continue that down the sides for, say, twenty paces in length, and put a roof on it as well. Put your men inside it and have them push it across the bridge. Once here you fold the sides down and attack hand-to-hand.”

“They would lose a lot of men that way,” Nicanor objected.

“Yes, but so would we. And we don’t have the numbers to play the attrition game.”

Nicanor thought for a few moments. “You’re right, as usual. Do you think we would be able to do it though? Wouldn’t they attack the men doing it?”

“As you say, Nicanor, we have the bridge well covered by ballistae. So long as we act before they have time to think about preparing an armoured vehicle, we will succeed.”

Nicanor shrugged. “Then do it!”

By sunset that day Mello’s men had removed three planks in every four for half the length of the bridge. The gaps between the remaining planks were slightly greater than a comfortable walking pace but would allow a man to cross. But it was also too short a distance for a running pace. This would take a precise and unnatural gait, particularly for men wearing armour and carrying weapons. And to try that en masse would be suicidal, with other men in front impeding your vision, concentration and freedom of movement.

Some of the planks collected in this way were laid in a narrow strip, so narrow that men could go only in single file. And that strip was laid out at a zig-zag, to ensure nobody would be able to run it. “Nothing on wheels could cross that bridge now. And not much on legs either, in a hurry.” Nicanor continued to be amazed by Mello’s complete control of every situation.

“I wonder how the water is starting to taste over there,” Mello said, changing the subject completely.

“Good question,” Nicanor responded. “It’s been two full days since the embankment was closed, and even before that the flow was reduced. So that’s at

least four full tidal flushes by now. If each tide replaces only a quarter of the total volume in the bay, would that mean it is now fully salt?"

Mello shook his head. "No. The first flush would replace a quarter; but a quarter of what the second tide would take out would be salt from the first tide. Let me think for a moment," Mello muttered to himself as he did some mental arithmetic. "It would be about two-thirds sea water after four flushes. But don't forget all the latrines we are emptying into it as well. I wouldn't like to drink it."

There was a Camara officer and a retinue of four soldiers standing at the centre of the bridge the next morning. Nicanor went out to meet with them, accompanied by Ranjit and two soldiers. He had decided overnight that Mello mustn't expose himself to the risk of ambush or assassination. His brilliance was the best weapon they had.

The Camara officer smiled. "King Raman sends you his best wishes and asks to renew negotiations."

Nicanor smiled back. "Please tell Raman that negotiations can only resume if he accepts, fully and without reservation, the usual form of treaty for a Friend and Ally of the Republic."

The officer smiled again. "King Raman anticipated that answer. He has instructed me to assure you that he does indeed accept the outline you left with him in earlier negotiations. Therefore there is now no point of difference between our positions. Your interruption to our water supply is no longer appropriate."

Again Nicanor returned the smile. "Then I would invite Raman to come down to this bridge to say so for himself. And I would also suggest that he should be accompanied by his Chief Advisors and military leaders at the time so there will be plenty of witnesses to what is said."

"That can be done, lord Nicanor," the smiling officer assured him. "I am authorised to tell you that King Raman will comply with any request you make. So please be assured that King Raman will appear here as soon as possible. But let us not waste time in restoring the water supply to your latest Friend and Ally."

"Camara will be a Friend and Ally as soon as our negotiations are completed; not before." Nicanor smiled back. "So let's waste no more time. Please report to Raman as soon as possible."

The officer bowed again and took two steps backwards to show his respect before turning his back on Nicanor.

It was noon before Raman appeared on the centre of the bridge with Duran and two soldiers.

"Well, it looks like we have action," Mello remarked.

"Not yet we don't," Nicanor snorted. "Let him wait out there for a little while. He took five hours before acting on my invitation, and I don't want anyone to think that I need to respond immediately whenever he sees fit to appear. This is all about the people on the walls and the people behind him on that bridge knowing exactly who is in control of whom here today."

After half an hour Nicanor sent out a liaison officer to meet him.

“Lord Nicanor will be with you as soon as possible. He begs your patience.” The liaison officer returned to the camp.

After another hour Nicanor ordered his engineers to lay out straight planking for him to walk out on, wide enough for men to walk comfortably three abreast.

Nicanor made his appearance after another hour. He made a point of appearing in full dress uniform rather than his customary marching uniform and was accompanied by Ranjit and four soldiers in full parade equipment. “Good afternoon, Raman,” he greeted the king, pointedly refusing the honorific.

“Good afternoon, lord Nicanor,” Raman replied, ignoring the opening insult. “I would be pleased to become a Friend and Ally of the Republic on the basis of the standard treaty arrangements you have already provided to me,” Raman announced.

Nicanor paused before answering. He wanted to make sure everyone behind Raman was paying close attention. “The Republic would be pleased to accept Camara as a Friend and Ally,” he replied. “But I do not believe that such an arrangement would be possible so long as you are king, Raman. You have dealt with us in a way which might be technically legal, but not as forthright and candid as we expect from a Friend.”

Raman was taken by surprise by this response. He had expected this meeting to be a formality. He recovered quickly enough. “I must apologise for the misunderstanding. That was a cultural difference which has now been overcome.”

“It has not yet been overcome, Raman, and we fear that the possibility of a similar misunderstanding will remain so long as you are king.” Nicanor looked sternly at Raman, and then deliberately averted his eyes to the other Tamils behind their king.

“We require Camara to surrender your person to us as a faithless Friend, to be punished according to our customs. When that is done we will certainly accept a petition from your successor.”

“Lord Nicanor; I am sovereign. I *am* Camara,” Raman replied as if stating the obvious to a dullard. “What you are asking for is a nonsense. If you have terms in addition to those already provided to us, please state them clearly.”

“I can state our requirements no more clearly, Raman,” Nicanor said bluntly. “The Republic will not treat with Camara so long as you are its king. The sooner you are deposed and surrendered to us as a prisoner, the sooner the water supply will be restored.” Again Nicanor's eyes swept across the line of officials. “How that is done and when is a matter for those in positions of influence within your city to decide.”

“No, lord Nicanor, it is for me to decide,” Raman asserted.

“No, it is for we three to decide, Raman,” Duran countered him. “It is obvious to me that we cannot resist the Republic. And it is also obvious that we three will die as soon as we are back in the Palace. You will not allow us live, now that we know that the city's survival can only be secured by handing you over.”

Duran had time to complete these sentences only because Raman had been struck silent in his indignation. As he turned on Duran one of the uniformed men grabbed Raman by the arm and twisted it up his back. The other soon jumped to his assistance.

“What did they say, Ranjit?” Nicanor asked quietly.

Ranjit translated the sense of Duran’s words for Nicanor’s benefit.

By now Raman was held with both arms locked behind his back by the two soldiers. Raman struggled feebly to break free as Duran turned back to Nicanor.

“Lord Nicanor; there has been a change of government in Camara since we last spoke,” Duran opened glibly. “I am now in charge of the city and I offer you this person as your prisoner,” gesturing towards Raman.

“Thank you, lord Duran,” Nicanor responded, careful to use the honorific this time. Turning to his own escort, “Take charge of the prisoner, two of you!”

The soldier closest to Raman tied a loop in a short chord and slipped it over Raman's head, and adjusted it around the ex-king's neck. Another soldier stepped forward to tie a chord around Raman's upper arms just above the elbow and passing behind his back as the Tamil soldiers restrained Raman. Thus restrained, the former king was led away into the camp.

“Lord Duran; I take it that you are confident that you will have sufficient support to be able to govern the city in peace?” Nicanor asked.

“Yes, lord Nicanor,” Duran replied. “These men behind me are the commanders of the army and navy. We will be able to keep the peace, provided we can restore the water supply.”

“What about Raman's oldest son? Isn't he the rightful heir?” Nicanor persisted.

“Allow me to be blunt, lord Nicanor,” Duran said flatly. “The younger Raman will do as I advise or he will die.”

“Excellent!” Nicanor exclaimed. “Then let us visit the new king and complete the agreement.” Nicanor stepped forward to join the Camara delegation and started marching towards the city end of the bridge, his remaining two soldiers behind him. Duran fell in beside him.

Alexander Pedites had taken the time to read through Nicanor’s report twice, and carefully. It covered all the outcomes, but it was frustratingly short on the detail on how these outcomes were achieved. Now Nicanor stood before him. He looked rather pleased with himself.

“Nicanor, take a seat and relax,” Pedites indicated a chair.

“Thank you, General,” Nicanor replied as he sat. Pedites waited for him to get comfortable.

“Crucifying Raman was a bit extreme, don't you think?” Pedites asked. “Strictly speaking, he was in the right. He had not broken any pledge.”

“Strictly speaking, you are right, General,” Nicanor agreed. “But practically speaking, he had created an impression and very meticulously taken pains to ensure it was not corrected. I felt that we needed to make it clear that we

expect candid and honest dealings rather than fine shades of technicalities. We offered friendship. It was up to each princeling to either accept our offer or to politely decline. Either would be honoured. But to play with us as pawns is an insult that we will not tolerate.”

Pedites nodded to himself for a moment. “Yes, you’re right there, Nicanor. To simply accept his weasel-words would have made us look both foolish and weak. But you did risk dropping us into another war.”

“With respect, General, that risk was very small,” Nicanor persisted.

Pedites tapped at his desktop as he thought. “And then you went to Nikam, just to the south. How did they respond?”

“They were obviously nervous,” Nicanor answered. “The first thing I told them was that we had no intention of harming them. If they want our friendship, then let us tal. But if not, we will honour their wishes and leave them alone. I explicitly told them that Raman pretended to be our friend and then refused to honour his obligations. I made it clear that had he simply said ‘No, thank you.’ then we would have sailed away.”

“And left him to be overthrown by Vanchi,” Pedites finished the thought.

“And left him to be overthrown by Vanchi,” Nicanor agreed. “We didn’t send the Vanchi against him so we can’t be blamed for the dilemma he faced.”

Pedites paused again before he spoke. “You realise that what is clear to you might not have been clear to your hosts, Nicanor. How could they be confident that you were not spying out their defences while looking for a pretext?”

“Lucius was indeed spying out their defences, just in case. But I did offer them our standard Trading Treaty, if they didn’t want the full Friend and Ally relationship.”

“But they chose to take Friend and Ally, immediately, instead of testing the water with the Trade Treaty first,” Pedites broke in with some emphasis. “Didn’t that seem to you like a response driven by fear?”

“Yes, they did seem rather more eager than I expected to sign up with us,” Nicanor agreed. “So I spoke to them very sincerely, saying that they need not accept that alliance simply because they feared us. I positively suggested that they might prefer to simply host a legate for a few years until we grew to know each other better. I emphasised that we didn’t want to control their city, merely to trade with it.”

“So you’re telling me that Nikam actually demanded Friend and Ally status?” Pedites said with some incredulity.

“Yes, General. And they even told me why,” Nicanor went on. “They had been tributary to Camara for more than twenty years. Although this had been burdensome, it had at least ensured that Camara had deterred any other city from raiding and plundering them. Now that Camara had been defeated they feared that they would be seen as fair game by more powerful neighbours.”

“Ah!” Pedites saw the picture clearly now. “So we are cheap protection!”

“Exactly, General,” Nicanor agreed. “And that attitude was evident in every Chola city we visited on the way back. They all lived in dread of the

Pandya now that their own greatest city had been subdued. It was only the Pandya cities that politely declined our offer of Friendship.”

“Not even our Trade Treaty,” Pedites commented as if to himself. Then to Nicanor, “What was your reading of them?”

“Grimly defensive, General, but certainly not prepared to provoke us by attacking. I think they’re just hoping that we might go away sometime soon.”

“I don’t think they’ll stay that way for very long, Nicanor. Only this morning I received an envoy from Madurai, one of the inland cities. They currently pay tribute to Korkai, and came to sound me out. They want to refuse tribute and are asking for our protection in case of reprisals.”

Nicanor pondered this for a moment. “Korkai is a rather large city. It has a large navy to protect its pearl trade. And it also has a large army made up mainly of troops levied from subject cities. Large but brittle, I’d say.”

“I’m already spread too thin, Nicanor,” Pedites complained. “I came out here with four legions to garrison one city and protect a naval base. But now I already have a dozen cities looking to me for protection, and who knows how many more will line up if I accept Madurai?”

Nicanor was not perturbed by this. Pedites loved to complain about problems before solving them. “However many cities line up, General, we will be able to protect them all. Move men out of Ezhimala and Muziris if you have to. Those cities are safe and at peace now. And if the Pandya move against Madurai, then muster a navy to threaten a blockade of Korkai, or even a raid.” Nicanor smiled. “Do this, and the whole Pandya network of tributaries will collapse like a tent with its ropes cut! And with that, the Pandya will lose any power to resist anyone. All of TAMILIA will be either our grateful friends or helpless.

“Once that stage is reached, we will be able to demand Friend and Ally status from any hold-outs, under threat of blockade or siege. All TAMILIA will be disarmed and easily held by four legions.”

Pedites smiled back. “Blast you, Nicanor! You know me too well!”

Judaea – 781 AUC (28 A.D.)

Yohanan had been increasingly troubled by dreams lately. He felt trapped, despite being safe in the community, protected from the wrath to come. But he could find no comfort.

He was one of the senior members here. He had joined when his mother died so soon after seeing him become a man. His uncle, whose family had supported him for as long as he could remember, had joined the community in protest against 'that Idumean half-cast' Herod as Ethnarch. Yohanan had been glad to join him in this holy enclave where every man was a priest and the Law kept undefiled.

He was one of the Faithful Remnant. So why was he troubled? What could he do to regain his peace?

"Tell them," his mind whispered.

It had all been caused by that text. "I have set you as a watchman over Israel," said the Almighty. Of course, He could only have been speaking to the Remnant, no other addressee being conceivable. Then He went on to say "When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you shall surely die,' and you do not speak to warn him from his way, the wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require from your hand."

Yes, he was a priest over Israel and the community was the holder of the secret that the Day of the Lord was at hand. Every man of them was trained and ready to take over the service at the purified Temple the instant that He appeared. It was expected any day now and had been for decades. The Day was almost upon them but the wicked were not being warned.

Would he be judged as a negligent watchman? Would the whole community be condemned for this failure in spite of its noble purpose and studied purity? Is this failure, in fact, the reason for His delay? As the scriptures say, 'Who will stand when He appears?'. Even the most devoted can be caught in sin.

He would speak to the High Priest tomorrow. The people must be called to repentance, and soon.

"Yes, you have point there," agreed the High Priest, "but our very existence is a warning to anyone who has it in his heart to obey the Law. That is sufficient."

"Is it sufficient for a watchman to be seen? Surely he should shout and beat drums, do everything to warn of the peril!" Yohanan pressed his argument.

The High Priest brooded a moment. A shame about Yohanan; a zealous man like few others but increasingly radical. Why can't he be content with private holiness and leave the rest of the world to Him Who created it? Like so many these days, he just won't trust The Most High to work out His own good purposes in His own good time. Perhaps I should let him go, he thought. When he sees how bound in sin they are, unable to avoid gentile contact and taint.... yes, let him go and come back a wiser man.

"Are you willing to go or do you ask me to send another?"

"Send me," Yohanan replied immediately.

"Then go," the High Priest commanded. "But keep this in mind; since the Romans have come everyone out there has paid a tax to the Republic, traded with Greeks, eaten foods that had been sold by sinners.... they are so tainted by the Goyim that they should be treated as Goyim. So if anyone hears you he is to be baptised as a proselyte rather than greeted as a brother.

"Remember that you are warning against judgement, not offering salvation. Remove mistaken ideas about other matters, too. If anyone would say 'my sins are covered by a Temple sacrifice', remind them that the Jerusalem priests are wicked and the Temple profaned so long as they serve in it. He who resorts there only compounds his sin. For there is no salvation outside the true community of Israel in this place. Anyone who would remain in any contact whatsoever with gentiles or sinners shall surely be cut off. As the Law says, 'Whatever an unclean person touches shall be unclean; and anyone who touches it shall be unclean also'." The High Priest realised that he had started another sermon. The habit came with the position, he supposed. He sighed.

"Go, be our watchman. But do it well, making sure every man knows that there is no salvation outside these walls." He nodded to dismiss Yohanan.

Yohanan left the room and returned to his cell. This was the Day of Preparation. He would spend the rest of the day in prayer, celebrate the Sabbath, and then leave the next morning.

"A very pleasant city this time of the year," Yacob decided to himself. The hills and gardens of Jericho were lush, the air fresh, and even the crowds seemed happier than in Jerusalem. Perhaps it had something to do with the beggars. Jerusalem was crowded with them, all angling to exploit the piety of pilgrims. Here in Jericho they were scattered in more reasonable numbers.

He stopped at a cart laden with plates, goblets and bowls to consider the wares. He stood soaking in the feel of the town while five bowls changed hands for a denarius. A much better price than could have been found in Jerusalem!

"Do you want to sell this pitcher or not?" called a woman through the hubbub.

"Three asses for one of these small plates!" Yacob shouted at the dealer, indicating some serving trays three palms wide.

"You know nothing of pottery, friend!" the dealer laughed. "Not one plate in ten that size comes from the oven without bending or cracking." He must fetch a price worthy of his nine lost brothers!"

"You're a better potter than that!" Yacob replied. "Four asses will cover him and his lost twin."

"Sorry, but I cannot take less than seven."

"Then I will pay you seven, but for two of them."

"If I sold them to the synagogue at that price I would be praised as a benefactor!"

"Then you will sell only one to me, for I will pay no more than eighteen quadrantes."

"You are a student of the Law; I will let you have it for six."

"I am a poor student of the Law; I can afford only five."

"But you offered to spend seven!"

"To honour two hosts; I cannot afford six for one!"

"You are wise to think to honour them equally. Two for ten asses."

"No doubt they would drink to my wisdom. Two goblets would be appropriate."

"Certainly, sir!" the dealer laughed again. "But I will not bargain over these; one ass for this pair, or six quadrantes for these?"

"The cheaper ones will do. I am too humble to desire an elaborate toast." Yacob held out ten asses. The dealer paused for a moment, and then took the coins with another roar of laughter. "And could you please tell me where Rabbi Simeon the tentmaker lives?" Yacob asked.

"The tentmakers are over that way," the dealer waved vaguely. "Someone will tell you."

Yacob placed his purchases in the folds of his spare cloak in his sack, and turned for the tentmakers.

He arrived at the Rabbi's house just as the sunlight lifted from the hills of Moab across the Jordan. He touched the mazuzah, spoke the blessing and knocked. The door was opened by a thin man with a phylactery and a shrewd gaze.

"Shalom alekhem," Yacob greeted him. "Are you Rabbi Simeon?"

"Yes," he replied reservedly.

"I am Yacob bar Yoseph," Yacob explained. "I bring greetings and news from your son Simeon in Jerusalem."

The door swung wider and the old man, obviously arthritic, backed awkwardly into the house. The lamp was already lit and on its stand, revealing a comfortable if bare house. There were no annexes but the single large room was almost as large as Yacob's family home which had four annexes off a central area barely big enough for a table.

Yacob again touched the mazuzah as he entered and a woman placed a bowl and a small pitcher of water at a bench. Simeon gave him the formal kiss of greeting. Yacob placed his sack and bag beside the couch and sat to wash. When he had finished Simeon's wife presented a platter with cakes and cups to him. He took a cake and the cup, as did Simeon after him. The cake was tiny, heavy and stodgy, the cup nothing but water. He smiled and nodded as he nibbled the cake and sipped the water. Then, as soon as decency permitted he took a letter and a small pouch from his belt and handed them to his host.

"I study the Law with your son in Jerusalem. When I told him I would be going home to Galilee he asked me to deliver this to you on the way."

Simeon opened the letter and read it, turning it to the light of the lamp. At first his face was impassive and he read with only an occasional nod, but after a few moments his eyes widened. Unable to control himself, he peeked into the pouch with only a feeble attempt to hide his excitement behind decorum. The light was weak and impatiently he shook the contents onto his palm. It was a

scrap of cloth. He unrolled it to reveal a silver mina. Simeon's lips trembled as he returned the money to the pouch.

"Please forgive my rudeness," he said, "but my son has done a marvellous thing for his brother." Yacob could see him struggling to put his emotions to one side and become a fit host. "He also speaks very highly of you. I would be honoured if you would stay the night in my house."

"It would be my honour. Simeon has spoken most reverently of you." Yacob fumbled in his sack to bring out a plate and a goblet. "Please accept these as a token of my respect."

Simeon accepted them gravely, thanking him. He called his wife over, saying "This is Rabbi Yacob, greatly esteemed by our son. He has consented to stay the night with us."

She bowed her head to the guest and turned to inspect her stores. Simeon and she had already eaten lentil soup but a visiting Rabbi should be given something better than soup dregs. Salted fish, she decided, thankful that she had been to the market that day. Breakfast could be more soup.

"And how is my son?" Simeon asked Yacob.

"He is in good humour," replied Yacob. "When did you last hear from him?"

"About two months ago he sent a letter. But I would like to hear from the lips of one who knows him."

"He is still with the same employer. A harsh man, I am told, but he fears no other would employ him if he leaves."

Simeon nodded wearily, thankful that tentmaking was a sedentary trade. A club-footed man has at least a chance. But too many had rejected his son out of hand.

"His tastes are simple," continued Yacob, "his health is good, and his knowledge of the Law remarkable. Therefore he lacks nothing. His only regret is that his employer will not allow him time to visit you himself." Yacob shrugged. "What more is there to say? He is not a complicated man!"

"No, nothing more, I suppose," agreed Simeon. "He is a cheerful, dutiful son." Simeon regretted opening the pouch in front of Yacob now. Had this messenger avoided any mention of hardship to prevent me feeling guilty for accepting the gift? he wondered. It would not be unlike his son. He remembered the hard times when Simeon had sneaked some of his own food onto his younger brother's plate. No, he sharply corrected himself. Believe the witness of two, the letter and the friend. His son prospered.

"You are from Galilee?" Simeon started again.

"Yes."

"I have never been there. How does it compare to Judah?" Simeon asked, his interest genuine.

"The bigger cities are all Greek. Our own cities are barely towns, our people poorer and not as well educated; but by and large they are more devoted to the Law. The average workman in Jerusalem is more worldly than his brother in Nazareth."

"You mean our knowledge takes the edge off our zeal?"

"Not for the truly pious. Knowledge and zeal go hand-in-hand with them and they excel in both, here as at home; but the average man here has adopted more foreign ways than in Galilee."

Simeon nodded. "It's these Greeks," he lamented. "And the Romans, too, but they're usually happy to collect their taxes and keep their noses out of our affairs. But the Greeks! They try to change us! They mock our circumcision and laugh at us for being 'uncivilised'!" His voice took an edge. "We had an Empire and the Law of the One Who is above all, before they had even thought of their idols to wet themselves for fear of them! And they call us 'uncivilised!'"

"When have the nations not raged against God?" Yacob asked softly. "They will pass like all the others. Only the Chosen of God will remain forever."

"Yes, but I wish they would pass quickly," Simeon muttered bitterly.

Yacob didn't answer. He was prepared to await God's pleasure but didn't think it appropriate for a young guest to commend patience to an older host.

Conversation resumed again after a few moments, mostly Yacob answering questions about Jerusalem while Simeon told of the days when he was able to go up. Soon Simeon's wife presented Yacob with fish and wine, and Simeon with another cake. The men washed, blessed their food and ate in silence. Yacob promptly took his leave to sleep, explaining that his band would be leaving early in the morning. It was still four days' walk to Nazareth.

Miriam was washing the last of the cooking utensils when she heard a shuffle from the street. The figure in the doorway touched the mazuzah and spoke the blessing. Miriam turned anxiously,

"Good Sir...Yacob!" the last word a scream of delight as she recognised her son. She fell against him and embraced him, drawing him into the house.

"Deborah, get some water!" she called over her shoulder as the fifteen-year-old squealed to see her brother back from Jerusalem. Yeshua and Simon appeared from behind their curtained annex to see Yacob finally permitted to drop onto a stool. Instantly he was up again to kiss Yeshua. Simon kissed his hand, shouting "My brother the Rabbi!" in excited awe. Yacob laughed and kissed Simon's hand in a return salute.

"My brother the prophet!" he mocked good-naturedly.

"Simon, get your brothers and sister. No, wait!" Yeshua commanded. "Mother, do we have enough wine?"

"I'm getting it now," she called from the store. "Maybe Yoseph should bring some. Yudah wouldn't have any," was her judgement.

"You heard your mother, prophet! Now move!" he ruffled his youngest brother's hair to set him going. Then he turned again to Yacob, his eyes glistening.

"Getting some muscle on yourself at last, eh?" he noted as he held his celebrity brother by the arms and inspected him. "They must need heavy-duty stools in Jerusalem to keep their fat portions off the ground!"

Yacob snorted through his grin. Yeshua and Yoseph had always done the heavy work like yokes and ploughs, leaving the youngsters to keep up stocks of smaller dressed items such as handles and stools. Yacob had early shown himself to be a perfectionist, adept at intricate designs and fitting odd angles. His last job before leaving for the beth-sefer was an ornate couch for Yudah's wedding feast. It had been the talk of the whole town.

"Things have gone well for me, brother," he replied. "The Temple work goes on and I was chosen to work on the panelling." Tears of pride welled in his eyes at the thought. He hugged his brother fiercely. "You taught me well!"

"My son comes home a Doctor of the Law and now he is too high to accept my hospitality!" Miriam broke in, as if in grief. "Why else would he refuse to sit so his feet could be washed?"

"No, mother; he is so hungry that he can stand no longer." Yacob collapsed back onto the seat and started to pull his sandals off. Deborah placed the footbowl before him and knelt to wash his feet.

"No, Deborah; I'll wash myself, thanks." Yacob started to scrub the dust from his feet, reciting a prayer to himself as he did so. He had always been meticulous but his family now noticed that he took longer and was more methodical, and instead of looking at his feet as he washed them he was looking around the house. 'He's not washing his feet,' thought Yeshua; 'he's purifying them.'

Yacob started washing his hands and forearms using the same rhythmic motion born of long habit rather than present need, his eyes lost in memory and inspection. "Another pitcher, Deborah."

The girl started out of her fascination. "Yes, right away!" she stumbled out, and refilled it from the water jar.

Yacob held first one foot, then the other over the bowl and rinsed his feet in the flow. Then he did the same with his hands.

"Don't waste it!" Deborah blurted out. "It's uphill from the well!"

"Is the Law too burdensome for you?" Yacob asked neutrally.

"No, but the water is," replied Deborah defiantly.

"Deborah!" interjected Miriam.

"I'll use as little as possible," conceded Yacob. "Besides, there are too many wooden stakes in this house!" he added in good humour.

While the sister blushed the others laughed at this reference to the fate of an earlier Deborah's enemy. The whole family had been uneasy at how a Doctor of the Law from Jerusalem would react to returning to their humble lifestyle. Miriam was pleased beyond her hopes to hear a rebuke softened so graciously. Yeshua saw that the homecoming would go well and went out into the courtyard at the back of the house to stoke up embers of the cooking fire.

"Quick, before they arrive; is Rebecca with child yet?" Yacob asked. Yoseph was twenty seven now but after nine years his wife was still childless. This was a cause of chronic gloom to the family and no small disgrace to Miriam. Yeshua's own failure to marry deepened the gloom. Many tongues would point

out that a first son who *would* not and a second who *could* not produce offspring was a fitting judgement on a mother who had been 'perhaps too prompt' herself.

"Elizabeth has twins," Miriam said, a reply that was more a plea to change to a more congenial topic.

"Yes, and Ruth is pregnant again!" Deborah broke in eagerly, unaware of her mother's cringe as she did so. Ruth was the wife of Yudah, her third son. Ruth's miscarriage and prolonged weakness after her first pregnancy a few years ago had added a new twist for the village gossips to work on.

"Thanks be to the Mighty One," Yacob enthused. "Is she healthy?"

"See for yourself!" called Yudah from the doorway as he brushed the mazuzah and entered, his wife a couple of paces behind. Yacob jumped up again and the two men embraced and kissed.

Yeshua had been in the courtyard while these things were happening. Now that the cooking fire had been brought back to life and there was sufficient light, he asked Yudah to help clear the yard and set up the trestle.

"It's good to have the boy back home, isn't it?" Yudah chuckled as he hoisted a plough into a corner.

"He isn't a boy any more," answered Yeshua. "He's a man, and a better man than most. Before you arrived - take the other end of this, will you? - Before you got here he told Deborah to obey the Law gladly, promised to make it easy on her and then left us laughing."

"Sounds good. Just like old Rab Simon." Yudah liked old Simon, who had a homely way of repeating well-worn aphorisms.

"He's smarter than Simon; always has been, ever since he was learning Hebrew- no, a little further. Take note; the day will come when our Yacob will be respected by all Jerusalem. Cripples will wait for his shadow to pass over them."

Yeshua went inside, leaving Yudah to wonder what he meant. After all, Yacob was a Galilean, not a Jerusalemite. His cleverness was in being useful and, well, *wise*. Such a man could never be at home in Jerusalem, where only wealth and power mattered! Still, Yeshua didn't usually make predictions. Yudah gave up this line of thought, poked the fire and went inside.

Elizabeth and Mordecai had arrived with their children, the last two only babes a few months old. Young Mordecai, their nine-year-old, was staring at uncle Yacob. His eyes were wide with wonder. A real live Rabbi in the family!

"Mummy, if Uncle Yacob is a Rabbi, why is his beard so soft?" he kept asking.

"How did you find a job in Jerusalem?" Yudah was asking. "Who did you know?" Yudah had been most impressed when his brother decided to go up to Jerusalem to learn at the feet of the famous. The two had always been close, the more so since their father died. Yeshua and Yoseph were 'the men', separated from them in attitude as well as age by Elizabeth, and Simon was 'the baby', born after Deborah. Yet Yudah, the senior of the two by almost four years, had always been the cautious one, the stay-at-home. Yacob became the leader in skills, in learning, in confidence. It was a measure of both Yudah's generosity and Yacob's pleasant nature that Yudah respected rather than resented him as a result.

"You remember that puzzle I made? The one with the notches?" Yudah remembered it. No-one had been able to solve it until Yoseph accused him of gluing it together and Yacob took it apart to prove his innocence.

"I took it to a craftsman near the Temple. He roared with laughter when I showed him the secret, and said the Greeks and nobles would love them. He promised me tools and lodging as well as normal wages if I made them for him."

"Why didn't you say so in your letters! Mother was worried sick about how you were living, but all you wrote about was your studies and teachers!" Yudah reprimanded him. "And all the time you were earning a fortune!"

"I only had that job for a week," Yacob confessed. "After he knew how I made the pieces he told me I was too slow and threw me out. He kept the puzzle and everything I made. That left me with a couple of denarii I had demanded in advance so I could buy a pair of sandals." Yacob shrugged. "I went barefoot for a while and bought food instead."

"I would have come home," Yudah commented.

"Well, I went around the workshops and asked the artisans if the master was honest or not. To the good ones I offered to work a day without pay to prove myself. Most paid me anyway but they all said I was too slow. They were right, too; I was as good as any in the City but took twice the time!

"After a while I stumbled across one who referred me to a friend doing work on the Temple. Costs didn't matter on that job. It had to be perfect, as the Holy One is perfect. The master supplied new tools, which I needed anyway, and told me to take my time. 'Get it right first time', he said. He told me to go in and pray before the trickiest bits!" Yacob closed his eyes in memory, and a tear squeezed out. "How good it is to work and worship together!" He took a breath as though to sigh. Instead he sang, his hand going to his head as he stood.

*"How lovely is your Dwelling-place, O Lord of Hosts!
My soul longs, yes, faints for the Courts of the Lord!
My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.
Even a sparrow finds a home, and a swallow a nest for herself
where she may lay her young
at Your altars, O Lord of Hosts, my King and God!
Blessed are those who dwell in Your House,
ever singing Your praise!*

*Blessed are the men whose strength is in You,
in whose hearts are the highways of Zion!
As they go through the Valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs,
the early rain also covers it with pools.
They go from strength to strength,
the God of gods is to be seen on Mount Zion!*

O Lord of Hosts, hear my prayer,

*give ear, O God of Israel!
Behold us, O God, our shield;
look upon the face of Your anointed!*

*For a day in Your Courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the House of my God
than dwell in the tents of wickedness.
For the Lord God is a sun and a shield;
He bestows favour and honour.
No good thing does the Lord withhold
from them who walk uprightly.
O Lord of Hosts, blessed is the man who trusts in You!"*

The tears were obvious now, glistening in the candlelight. Everyone, even the children, had fallen silent after the first few words. Now they waited. The joy that poured from Yacob gripped them. After the space of a few deep breaths Yacob opened his eyes and lowered his hand. He looked to Yeshua.

"You are the head, brother; your choice next."

Yeshua stared at him a moment, lost in his own thoughts. Then he set himself to sing.

*"O God, You are my God, I seek You, my soul thirsts for You;
my flesh faints for You as in a dry and weary land
where there is no water."*

The rest of the family joined him after the first couple of words

*I have looked upon You in the Sanctuary,
beholding Your power and glory.
Because Your steadfast love is better than life
my lips shall praise You.
I will bless You as long as I live,
I will lift up my hands in Your name.*

*My soul is feasted with marrow and fat,
And my mouth praises You with joyful lips
when I think of You upon my bed,
when I meditate upon You through the night;
for You have been my help
and in the shadow of Your wings I sing for joy.*

*My soul clings to You, Your right hand upholds me;
but those who seek to destroy my life
shall go down to the Pit.
They shall be given to the power of the sword,*

*they shall become prey for jackals.
But the King will rejoice in God
and all who swear by him shall glory,
for the mouths of liars will be stopped."*

Yoseph and Rebecca had arrived during the Psalm. When it finished they fell upon Yacob with kisses. Simon broke this up, calling upon Yoseph as the next senior to make his choice for the next Psalm.

"Wait a while, Simon," Yoseph answered in good humour. "I haven't seen my brother for four years!"

"The lad's got a point," Yacob interjected. "Give the Lord the firstfruits!" Both men laughed, then Yoseph motioned for silence. His eyes locked for a moment with Rebecca's, and she smiled and nodded minutely.

*"Hear my prayer, O Lord,
and let my cry come before You!"*

Simon and Deborah joined promptly, proud of their knowledge. Rebecca sang with an odd fervour

*"Do not hide Your Face from me
in the day of my distress..."*

Miriam wondered why her son would choose a Psalm of Affliction on such an occasion,

"For my days pass away like smoke..."

indeed, even seeming to boast of their distress.

*"My bones cleave to my flesh.
I am a vulture of the wilderness,
like an owl..."*

Everyone was singing, but perplexed.

*"All the day my enemies taunt me,
those who deride me use my name as a curse..."*

Miriam could scarcely restrain her tears at those words. She was still taunted, her name given as an example,

*"For You have taken me up
and thrown me away..."*

the hurt the sharper because her children bore the shame as much as she;

"I wither like grass..."

their fruitlessness seen as both proof and punishment of her sin.

*"Yet You will arise and have pity on Zion;
it is time to favour her..."*

Will the Lord *ever* vindicate her? Or would her children remain accursed after her?

"He will regard the prayer of the destitute..."

She was thankful that Elizabeth was fruitful; had she been barren for only a year, Deborah would never have been betrothed. At least Elizabeth's firstborn son was healthy and whole,

"He looked down from His Holy Height..."

so the death of the two younger daughters in infancy was softened.

"to hear the groans of the prisoners..."

Deborah's Yacob was a good boy, but his father is still wary. O Lord, let both twins live! Surely then the wedding will go ahead! Deborah must not become an old maid!

"He has shortened my days..."

Even if her sons were to remain childless, bitter though that would be,

"They will perish, but You endure..."

at least they can support themselves; that is sufficient to gain a wife of some sort.

"They pass away, but You remain the same..."

But what good is a barren woman? Or even worse,

"The children of Your servants shall dwell secure..."

what perils await a fertile woman believed to be barren?

"Their posterity shall be established before You."

Miriam shuddered to think of the dangers, and the shame.

"Brothers and sisters," shouted Yoseph, "today this promise is confirmed! In six months our parents shall have grandchildren by two of their children!"

He embraced Rebecca on his right and Ruth on his left. Ruth's expression changed first; she lunged across to Rebecca and fell upon her shoulder, shrieking in delight. The others were only a moment behind her, except for young Mordecai who was still fascinated by Yacob, and Miriam starting as though from a trance.

"What happened?" she demanded as she stood, bewildered.

"Don't you listen? Bekky's pregnant!"

Miriam was shocked. She staggered against the wall. "My son!" she called faintly.

Yudah, the closest to her, lowered her to a stool. Yoseph waded through his kin to kneel beside her. "Are you well, mother?"

"Oh, my son!" she laughed and sobbed together. She would yet be vindicated!

*"My soul exalts the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;
for He has looked upon his humble handmaid..."*

In the back of her mind she was aware that no-one had joined her;

"From this time, all generations will call me 'blessed'..."

in fact, they were looking at her quite strangely.

"for He who is mighty..."

And then it hit her. She wasn't singing one of the Psalms! These were the words sung by a girl almost thirty years ago, a girl who thought the world would never be the same again. The words she had kept in her heart, repeating them as a talisman.

The song became a wail of anguish. What had happened to the promise of glory, the hope of Israel, the Day of the Lord? And what had happened to that quiet, faithful fourteen-year-old? Did she really turn into an old woman, a widow, crying for an heir for her sons? And the world continued without even a hint of a pause!

Her heart was crushed to see how little had come to pass. 'All generations shall call me 'blessed' indeed! They turn away from me, they talk of me behind their hands and some even to my face! My sons are cursed after me! My firstborn was not born of sin, but who believes it? And even if he had been, why should he bear my guilt? She rocked to and fro in her grief.

"O Lord, why have You broken me?" she groaned, but her words were only a mumble between cries, and no-one understood.

Yeshua was at her feet now; she recognised the scarred left hand on her knee. She lashed out with her right hand, catching him on the side of the head.

"Get away from me!" she screamed. "Failure! Worthless soul! Dung!" She paused for a moment, unaware of the shock in the room.

"You came with so much promise," she lamented, and then shouted "But you've done nothing!" Her voice broke on the last word, and she collapsed into sobs. No-one moved.

"Will you stay with Mama all your life?" she groaned, too dispirited to sneer. When Yeshua said nothing, she asked "Are you afraid to set up your own household?"

"Mother, this is my household."

"You were happy to see Yoseph married!"

"Why not? Should I have mourned?"

"Why not?', he says," Miriam repeated bitterly. "Anything that could make you indispensable! You rejoiced when Yoseph married, you rejoiced when Yudah married, and then you rejoiced to see Yacob off to Jerusalem. But you're running out of excuses now, milksop! The next half-year will see Deborah's marriage and Simon's bar-mitzvah! What will you do then? Will you never marry?"

"Mother, have you forgotten Naomi?"

"Oh, so that will be your excuse! How clever of you!"

Yoseph could take no more of this. "Is this how you greet the promise of my firstborn, mother? To quarrel with your own?"

"I'm sorry, Yoseph." Miriam was exhausted now that she had vented herself at Yeshua. "You are just like your father, a lover of peace. We named you well."

Everyone in the room was stunned. It had never been explained why the second son rather than the first had taken the father's name, though the rumour-mongers were quick to hazard their guesses. Now Miriam was as good as admitting that Yeshua had not been her husband's son.

Yeshua stood silent. Or almost silent; he fought to breathe without sobbing. Then he turned and paced out of the rear door and into the courtyard.

Uncomfortable smalltalk started up after he left. Yacob asked Elizabeth about her babies, surprisingly healthy for twins, while the others crowded around Rebecca and Yoseph. Simon and little Mordecai grabbed a few of Rebecca's cakes and slipped into the street. Miriam remained slumped on the stool, too drained to weep, while Yudah knelt and embraced her.

Yeshua had climbed the rear wall of the courtyard. It was only shoulder height, high enough to keep goats out but low enough to see and speak over. He slumped behind it.

As so often before, Yeshua's mind went back to his seventeenth birthday. He had been betrothed for a year to a small, soft-spoken girl from Cana, where his father Yoseph had a brother named Benjamin.

"You will like her, Yeshi," his father had said. "She is a very gentle girl who will give you a peaceful house. You are a gentle man yourself, and she will suit you. It is not good for a man and wife to march at different speeds... (how talkative his father would become when he was excited; indeed, the betrothal of his firstborn meant more to him than to the son himself!)... Yes, she is like your mother in so many ways. She is clever enough to give advice and wise enough to know when not to. Good family, too. As I said, she is my nephew's sister-in-law..."

Yeshua's uncle Benjamin was a carpenter, naturally enough. He had gone into partnership with a mason to build houses. His only son had already married one of his partner's three daughters, and Naomi was the youngest of these sisters.

Yeshua was surprised when he saw her. His father had spoken exclusively about her family and placid nature, making him suspicious of virtually everything else. But she was not ugly; her face was plain, but an inner warmth made it pleasant. Although her thinness hinted at a sickly disposition, her mother had the same build and was still strong at the age of 40. "But anyway," Yoseph had whispered to him, "better five years with her and two sons than a lifetime with a wasp! And if she lives to see grandchildren, that will be a bonus."

The fathers were wise enough to consult the pair before announcing the betrothal, but they knew that neither would object. Naomi was relieved to see a firstborn who was not arrogant; she would not be abused. Yeshua found her a comfortable person, with a quick wit and open manner. Both were pleased.

Yoseph had provided additional labour for Benjamin in the busier periods, especially as Yeshua and Yoseph junior had become more competent to mind the shop at home. After the betrothal Yeshua was sent instead so he and Naomi could visit and talk in his uncle's or her parent's house. A genuine affection soon grew between them.

He was on one such trip to Cana just before his seventeenth birthday, with the wedding still six months away. His father arrived to invite the Cana side of the family to Yoseph's bar-mitzvah and suggested that it would be a good time for Naomi to meet the rest of the family as well.

Two days later the nine of them set out; Yoseph, Benjamin and his wife, Benjamin junior and his wife with their five-year-old son (also called Benjamin), Yeshua, Naomi and her brother.

They had all been left for dead by the bandits. Naomi's brother had been struck on the head. He had learned to walk again, but not well. Yeshua had scars on the back of his left forearm and hand and one in the belly from a stab wound that should have killed him. The oldest and the youngest Benjamins had also survived.

There had seemed little choice after that. Yeshua spent most of his time in Cana to fill the space left by the death of the middle Benjamin, returning home every second Sabbath and staying a few days as required. Young Yoseph's basic

skills and naturally even temperament kept the routine orders filled, but the heavier or more complex jobs had to wait for Yeshua's advice or assistance. They seemed to muddle through, but not too easily.

When the busy season came around it was obvious that this was not going to work any longer. The farmers were not going to wait for their ploughs or yokes, so Yeshua stayed full-time in Nazareth and sent Yoseph to Cana instead. Benjamin objected strongly to the change, Yoseph being younger, less experienced and not as strong. But Yeshua was "not prepared to leave Nazareth and let my family starve; now, would you consider employing your nephew or would you prefer him to beg outside your father-in-law's door?" Benjamin didn't resent this for too long. Yoseph was a willing worker and quickly learnt the ropes.

"Did I do the wrong thing back then?" Yeshua asked himself. "I honoured my mother and did what I could for my father's family. True, I didn't find a wife for Yoseph, but when he found one for himself I discussed it with mother and we both approved. She said nothing about *me* taking a wife!"

Yoseph's choice had taken them by surprise. He was only fifteen at the time, a year younger than Yeshua at his betrothal. But the choice was shrewd. Yoseph had seen how his uncle had prospered from his partnership and in Nazareth there was a mason with a seventeen-year-old son and a fourteen-year-old daughter. Such a marriage would give him an employer now and a partner in later years. Yeshua approached the father, who had been impressed with Yoseph's maturity while Yeshua had been in Cana. Besides, a son-in-law would be a better worker than a stranger!

Rebecca was given no say in the matter, but she was delighted. Although Cana was only a few hours away, her man had shown he can stand on his own feet in a strange town. And with old Yoseph dead, her man wasn't going to be her father-in-law's puppet!

Despite his early betrothal, Yoseph was in no hurry to marry. He had secured his future and would enjoy it at leisure. Three years were to pass before he would actually marry a Rebecca who had learnt that her Yoseph was not only gentle and patient, but also shrewd and strong. He had made of her the wife he wanted, but looking back she had no regrets.

"How had the family stood then?" Yeshua asked himself. When Yoseph married at 18, Yeshua was still single at 21, Elizabeth betrothed at 15, Yudah and Yacob were 13 and 9, Deborah 6 and Simon was 4.

As things turned out, Yoseph and Yeshua could still have supported the whole family as well as wives; but nobody realized that Bekky was barren - would be slow, Yeshua corrected himself with a smile. At the time it seemed best to make sure Yoseph could feed his own family without being too much of a burden on the rest.

Then Yudah decided to marry Ruth when he was just 16! A good thing Ruth's father held things up for a while. Even at 18, Yudah had two hearts in his chest but not a brain in his head; at 16 he would have been a disaster! Now at 22, experience was making up for his slowness. Ruth's miscarriage a few years back

had been a blessing in disguise, Yeshua mused, giving them the breathing space they needed. Even now Yudah did most of his work from mother's courtyard, asking Yeshua for advice when thinking for even the space of a heartbeat would give the answer. Gentle, cheerful Yudah was still a tradesman's assistant.

And Yacob, of course. Yacob had stayed home long enough to see Yudah's wedding and then gone to Jerusalem. Everyone loved Yacob, but in terms of cold cash he hadn't been much of a loss. He would take a week to do perfectly something that even Yudah would do 'well enough' in a day. How well he remembered one urgent job, and how Yacob would rise after every third or fourth stroke to sharpen his chisel! No, Yacob would have trouble feeding a sparrow.

"I suppose I could have married a few years ago, with Yudah and Yacob both gone. A few more mouths to feed and backs to cover, but Yoseph was doing well and could have helped in the bad times. Yudah was managing; well, almost. A little bit more leaning on Benjamin for a day or two each week..." Yeshua turned these might-have-beens over in his mind, knowing that his main reason for not marrying was probably that he just hadn't wanted to. As he told his mother, he had a household already. But underneath it all was the stunned shock of his mother's curses.

Yes, he knew the vicious gossip of two or three. Yes, he knew his continued single state was seen as an admission of sterility by some and he even saw the pain in his mother's eyes. But he had been able to ignore the gossip and thought his mother's pain was sorrow that his duty was to play the part of the father in the household. He thought she pitied him for not being able to marry, but for years she had resented it!

"Sometimes my mother keeps too much locked away in her heart", he muttered to himself.

"Yeshua?"

Yeshua started. Someone had heard him mutter. He thought for a moment, then stood and turned to look over the wall.

"Oh, there you are!" Yoseph came up to him, then embraced and kissed him. "You are my father's firstborn. You have been a father to me since before my bar-mitzvah. You obtained me my wife, and Yudah his wife, and you found husbands for my sisters. You became Simon's father before he was born. So if my mother will not accept you as lord of her house, tell her that she spurns the second son with the first!"

Yoseph spoke with a vehemence Yeshua had rarely seen in him before.

"You must not say that, brother!"

"And why not, head of my father's house?" Yoseph challenged.

"Because she is your mother! She is my mother!"

"And you are our head!"

Yeshua was at a loss. "If I am your head, then why do you not honour her whom I honour?"

Now Yoseph was lost for an answer. He stared at Yeshua for a few breaths.

"The feast is a failure," he said, tossing his head back towards the house. "We will need to talk later." He turned and walked into the house. Yeshua heard

his words above the murmur, "Can't see him out there. He must have climbed over the wall."

Farewells were spoken, and the front door moved on its hinges. There was a pause before another voice carried from the house.

"Do you know where he might have gone?" That was Yacob.

"Maybe up into the hills. He often does that." Simon.

"Simon," Miriam sounded old beyond her years, "would you please go to his favourite places? Tell him his mother has come to her senses and cannot sleep 'til she sees his face."

Yeshua swung himself over the wall to save Simon a futile and dangerous trek.

"I'll go with him. There's no moon tonight," Deborah offered.

"You can both stay here," Yeshua said as he reached the doorway. He continued across to his mother. "And you can sleep, too" he said, kneeling and placing his hands on hers. "Tomorrow will come soon enough."

Yeshua rose as he finished his bread. "Yacob, let's go for a walk. The work can wait."

Yacob looked up questioningly. "Whatever you say, Yeshua."

"We should be back within the hour, mother," Yeshua called over his shoulder. "Tell Yitzak that his oxcart will be back in his yard before the Sabbath starts, if he comes." The two men walked out the front door, Yeshua turning up the hill and Yacob heading off with him. Once out of the village Yeshua left the road and struck uphill. Yacob climbed with him, allowing Yeshua to set the pace and choose his own time to talk.

Soon they reached the ridge. Yeshua sat, motioning Yacob to sit beside him.

The view was magnificent. The Great Plain of Esdraelon was spread before them, blending from the ripening fields over in the Vale of Jezreel through to the forests at the foot of Mount Carmel. Carmel itself stood to their right, immense and pure with its crown of snow.

"What shall I say to her?"

Yacob was surprised by the abruptness of the question.

"Tell her that you will look for a wife." If he wants it blunt, he gets it blunt, thought Yacob. They sat in silence for a few more minutes.

"Take a woman half my age? No father would permit it! And you know what some people say about Miriam's sons!" They sat through another pause.

"What of older women?" Yacob suggested. "Maybe their fathers won't be so fussy."

Yeshua smiled at this. "You have a strange way of encouraging your brother!" He held up a hand to forestall the explanation. "But I know what you mean." He mused for a few minutes.

"There are only a few in town", he commented at last. "Azariah's Rebecca is a she-devil. Yacob's Esther is simple, but she would be alright, I suppose. Then there's Martha the widow:- you knew Simeon died, didn't you? - But she has

two sons and her father will support her until they can manage. Mother would never risk the shame of her firstborn being rejected by a widow!"

Yacob paused again, considering his words.

"I think you're looking at it the wrong way. Tell me, are you still thinking of Naomi? I was too young then."

Yeshua picked up a pile of pebbles, and started to toss them at a rock in front of him.

"Perhaps I am. I don't know... It's just that I'm past the age of marrying; in my own mind I already have a household. I'm like a widower, and Deborah and Simon are my children. I even took Simon on my knee, you know; father died before he was born."

He turned to face Yacob. "Even you, brother; I know I treat you more like a son, and I'm sorry if it gives offence."

"No, of course not," Yacob hurried out. "But why don't you talk to Yoseph? He's more your age and more in touch. I'm just a boy."

Yeshua resumed tossing pebbles. "Something he said last night. He's so interested in proving one side wrong that he can't see clearly about how to make it better. And Yudah's always good for compassion but isn't the deepest thinker in the land. So that leaves you, and you've got a better head than most grandfathers, anyway."

Yacob took a deep breath and sighed. He took up a handful of pebbles himself, and started lobbing them at a wildflower.

"I'm slow to say this, but if you want my opinion I'll give it. You can always ignore it, I suppose. What was the first Commandment given by the Maker of Heaven and Earth?" Yacob asked.

"I am the Lord your God, Who brought you out..."

"No, no, no! I meant the first instruction ever given to Adam?" Yacob interrupted in explanation.

"About the Tree? But what's that got to do with this?" Yeshua demanded.

"What about 'Be fruitful and multiply'?" Yacob smiled apologetically to soften the implied rebuke.

"But was I to let you all starve?" Yeshua cried out in his frustration. "Things were hard enough trying to feed one household, never mind a second!" He lifted his hands and let them fall again in an expression of helplessness. "Moses commanded us to honour our father and mother, and scant honour is paid by forcing them to beg!"

"Did Yoseph dishonour his father's house?" Yacob asked softly. "Did Yudah? If it's a matter for rejoicing when the second and third sons marry, then why would it be shameful for the first to do likewise?"

"Because things just didn't work out that way. Yoseph asked to marry as soon as he dared and his choice was excellent. Mother and I would have been stupid to disagree. On the other hand, Yudah needs my help occasionally even now, and I wouldn't have been able to do much for him back then with more mouths of my own to feed!" Yeshua shrugged again. "I suppose I'm saying that I was never in the position to marry; my brothers kept beating me to it!"

"Circumstances might have made it awkward for you to marry, but they did *not* make it impossible. And unless it is impossible, the Law must be obeyed. That's what being a Jew is all about! You must obey the Law and trust in the Almighty to supply all that is necessary."

Yeshua was exasperated. "But there are times when the Law must be read with an eye to commonsense, respect, people's needs!"

"If the Law opposes commonsense, then so much the worse for commonsense; 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, and My ways not your ways' says the Mighty One. As for respect, I would rather show my respect to the Most High by obedience than respect to any man by compromising. And as for people's needs, the Merciful knows our needs and will provide for them, if only we trust in His bounty."

"That is hardly what Micah says", Yeshua responded. "For what does the Lord require of you, but to deal justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with the Lord?"

"Precisely!" agreed Yacob. "And the Law tells us how that is to be done!"

"Look about you, Yacob! The snows, the forests, the flowers and grass! They come rejoicing that the Creator has created them, and obey His ordinances without so much as a glance at the Law! And is not a pious Jew more glorious than the Lebanon? Why then should he need to study Moses when all creation obeys the Creator from its heart?" Yeshua held his hands out and shook his head, so obvious was the answer to him.

"Because we were Adam's children before we became Abraham's," said Yacob softly. "What you want was given to our first father, and he destroyed it. In the Garden he saw the Lord face to face; but we are outside the garden. 'He drove out the man, and at the East of the Garden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way, to guard the way to the Tree of Life.' The fault was caused by disobedience, and can only be cured by obedience."

Yeshua looked away from his brother, and resumed tossing pebbles at the rock. "I will write my Law upon their hearts; I will be their God and they will be my people..."

Yacob joined him in reciting the prophecy "And no longer shall each man teach his neighbour, and each his brother, saying 'Know the Lord'; for they shall all know Me, from the least to the greatest..."

The two men stared out over Esdraelon, each with his thoughts. Yacob broke the silence. "That sits well with your choice of Psalm last night," he remarked. He waited for a reply.

"The Law is beautiful," acknowledged Yeshua. "'The Law of the Lord is perfect', as David says. But it can become a beautiful barrier. It was given to show what He is like, what sort of man He delights in; But it is robbed of its purity by men who would wish to justify themselves instead of enjoy Him. But how can any man hold the Lord to a contract? Because no-one can fulfil the Law perfectly, it has become a wall between Him and His people."

"Not so, Yeshua..."

"Let me finish, Yacob. If a man would just accept His generosity and then do His will out of gratitude, then all would go well with him! But men are too proud to beg, even from the Most Gracious. Instead they try to sell their obedience. Not much obedience, not much blessing; a lot of obedience, a lot of blessing. As if the Most High is in need of our pitiful praises or is bound by our scale of prices! How deep His mercy must be, to endure such an insult!"

Yeshua stood abruptly, his inner turmoil compelling him to move as he poured his heart out to his brother. "But I don't want money, fame, respect! No, I don't even want children, a wife; no, not even food! I only want to know the Lord as Jeremiah promises! I want to know Him as my tongue knows my mouth, to follow His will as my right hand follows my thoughts. Then, in joy and gratitude, I will serve him with my whole being. I lust for one thing only; to see Him face to face, as Adam did."

Yacob sat quietly for a time. Soon Yeshua stopped his pacing and sat beside him.

"When Messiah comes," said Yacob. "Or in the Resurrection of the Just. Then from your flesh shall you see God."

"Why not now?" Yeshua asked, as though pleading.

"Moses asked to see God's glory, but was allowed only to see his back; are you a greater than Moses? When Elijah heard the Voice, he wrapped his face in his cloak; are you a greater than Elijah?" Yacob shook his head sadly. "Obey in this wilderness yet forty years more, and then you will enter into the Promise," he advised. "And don't be slow to marry> Your brothers are still childless, and can easily support our father's house. Is this not a provision from the Almighty, in a way?"

Yacob was pleased to see old Rabbi Simon, still the hazzan at the synagogue. The old man embraced him when he entered, with Shaloms coming from every side.

"My brightest student!" Simon greeted him proudly. "I know this is sudden, but would you please read the first Scripture?"

"Well, yes; have you chosen it?" Yacob agreed.

"I would be pleased if you would choose," Simon deferred.

Yacob thought for a moment. "A portion of the fifth Book has been much on my mind lately; it would also be a most fitting first Scripture," he replied. In typically thorough fashion Yacob had thought of all the texts that could be used to support Yeshua's position, examining them to see how valid was his attitude to the Law. He acknowledged that obedience was the result rather than the cause of God's choice of Israel; but still, a Commandment was a Commandment and must be scrupulously obeyed. Why else was it given? While obedience would never earn acceptance, disobedience certainly deserved rejection.

"The fifth Book it is," agreed Simon and busied himself with his preparations while other well-wishers greeted Yacob.

At length Simon stood before the Ark and sang the Sh'ma. Yacob thought the text from the fifth Book would best show the balance between God's choice

and Israel's response. If only he could speak for hours! But a few sentences was the customary limit. The men called back the Amen to the Sh'ma. The Shemoneh Esreh began. But Yacob had argued it in his own mind in academic terms, as he had argued in Jerusalem. How should he explain the Scriptures to these simple folk? He decided quickly; read the Scripture, tell them what they already know then put the two together. The Shemoneh Esreh ended and the Amen was pronounced.

Simon took a scroll from the Ark and held it out to Yacob. Yacob walked to the front and stood to read the Law.

"And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, and to keep the Commandments and Statutes of the Lord, which I command you this day for your own good? Behold, to the Lord God belong Heaven and the Heaven of Heavens, the Earth and all that is in it; yet the Lord set His heart in love upon your fathers and chose their descendants after them."

Yacob sat to make his comments upon the passage. "The Most Merciful chose our fathers before He gave them the Law. He redeemed them from Egypt before He gave them the Law. He brought them back from Babylon after they had broken the Law without ceasing. So don't think, any of you, that we are Chosen for our merits; we are Chosen because He chose to choose us.

"So why give us the Law?', you might ask. This Scripture tells you why. The All-possessing does not profit if we obey; it is *we* who profit! For it is written 'which I command you *for your own good*', not for His own benefit. He gave us the Law out of his love for our fathers!

"So a man who does not obey everything which is commanded in the Law is not only sinful. He is also ungrateful and foolish, harming himself and his neighbours in his blindness. So if love for the Almighty does not provoke you to observe the Law, then perhaps love for yourself, your family and your neighbours should make you more eager." Yacob stood and returned to the main floor.

They arrived home from the synagogue.

"Do you think this might be a good time to talk about things?" suggested Yacob.

They knew what he meant. The events that had taken place on the evening of Yacob's return had been constantly on everyone's mind but no-one dared start the discussion that Yeshua and his mother had to have.

"If you like, I could take Simon and Deborah over to Yudah's house," Yacob continued.

"Mother?" Yeshua looked across to Miriam.

"Would you please stay, Yacob?" she asked.

"If you like," Yacob replied, and sat slightly away from them. Deborah also sat expectantly and Simon less happily. He much preferred Yudah's tales to what he knew would be a boring and tearful argument.

Miriam gathered her thoughts and began tentatively, looking at her hands the while. "You have been a good son. You are well known to be honest, faithful and reliable. You have kept your father's house for almost a generation now and provided everything it needed at the proper time. You have played the part of Head of House better than most husbands, and I am grateful for that. We *all* are," she finally looked up and spread her hands expressively. "But there comes a time when one generation must give way to the next. Soon Yacob will take a wife, and Deborah will become one, and Simon's bar-mitzvah is soon. Any one of my sons will be able to feed me, married or not, and together they will support me in comfort. So I don't want you to think that your duty prevents you from marrying. In fact, nothing would give me greater pleasure than for my firstborn to lay his firstborn on my knees." Miriam stopped, hoping she had spoken well and not daring to risk any more.

"Nothing, mother?" asked Yeshua.

"No, nothing," she confirmed.

"Henceforth, all generations shall call me blessed..." he sang lowly to her.

"Stop it!" she screamed. She stared at him, wild-eyed and breathing away a sob.

"What does it mean, mother?" Yacob was filled with concern about this mysterious song.

Her eyes closed in anguish. "Yacob, please take Simon and Deborah to their brother's house," she said at length. The three left without a word. When they had gone from earshot Miriam took another breath to steady herself. Only Miriam and Yeshua remained.

"No-one alive knows this," she said awkwardly, "and no-one would believe it anyway!" she added with a shake of her head.

"Once there was a fourteen-year-old girl, barely a woman. She was pretty, and betrothed. They married young in those days! And like all young girls, she dreamed of being a mother. Her son was going to be the greatest man in history! Then one night she dreamed about an angel, and the angel told her that in her case this dream would come true. Have you ever heard anything so silly? One dream saying that another dream would come true!

"A few weeks later strange things started happening. It turned out that the girl was pregnant. She refused to say how; in fact it seemed that she didn't know herself. But occasionally, when by herself, she would sing this song:-

*"My soul exalts the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;
for He has looked upon his humble handmaid.
From this time, all generations will call me 'blessed';
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and Holy is His Name.*

*"His Mercy is shown to those who fear Him,
to their children for generations.
He has done mighty things with his Arm,
scattering the proud of heart
and casting rulers from their thrones,
but exalting those who are humble.*

*"How He gives the hungry their fill,
but the rich He sends away empty!
How He helps Israel, His Servant,
remembering the mercy He promised
to our fathers, to Abraham,
and to his children forever!"*

Miriam knew better than to allow herself to reflect on her song. She didn't want to break down again, not now. There would be time enough for that later, and again, and again, as there had been for years now. She pressed on with her story to divert herself quickly.

"That young girl so long ago sang this song because of her dream; she was convinced that she would bear a son who would be God's own man. How else could she be with child, but still a virgin? Hadn't the angel foretold it? And when word came that her aunt Elizabeth was also pregnant, this confirmed the vision. The angel had foretold this, too.

"At first her betrothed was going to disown her. To marry her now would be to admit to fornication. But after a time he decided to marry her anyway, and to this day everyone believes the child to be their son by fornication. But really, he is no-one's son at all." Miriam shrugged awkwardly.

"Little girls grow up and so do their sons. But I tell you, dreams die hard." She clenched her teeth at the bitterness of the disappointments and scorn she had endured, and for what?

"Dreams die very hard! Especially the dreams that are a scorned widow's only consolation. And when such an old woman is finally forced to admit that dreams don't come true, she is likely to say things that she doesn't really mean. But she still loves her son and wants him to be happy, even if he won't be great." Her words hung in the air. She didn't know what to expect.

"Elizabeth, your aunt?" Yeshua spoke as a man stunned.

"Yes", she replied. His quiet, almost vacant intensity was terrifying.

"Where is she now?"

"Yeshi, she would be... almost ninety now! She's probably dead!"

"When did you last hear from her?"

Miriam was fast becoming exasperated. "When you were a baby, on the way back from Egypt. We visited her at Hebron."

"What happened to her child?"

"Why all the questions, Yeshua?" Miriam challenged. She wanted him to take a wife. Digging up the past was worse than useless. Yeshua was merely using it to sidestep the main issue again. "Just find a woman you could bear to live with and then make me a grandmother, eh?"

"Mother, one last answer. What happened to the child?"

Miriam sighed. "His name was Yohanan. He was healthy. And that's all I can tell you. Honestly!" She looked at him, pleading that her answer be accepted.

"Thank you, mother," Yeshua smiled and reached for her hand.

"Will you take a wife?"

"I have to talk to my brothers first."

Miriam nodded quietly but her heart was leaping within her. The first moves! He would marry yet!

"I'll go to Yudah's place now and bring the others back for the meal."

He walked to Yudah's house very slowly indeed. Miriam had explained it as nothing but a dream; but two children had confirmed the vision! Maybe it was only a coincidence, but... and Yacob had chided him for wanting more than was given to Moses and Elijah! He had to know! And this Yohanan could be the key! He was tied into this Yohanan somehow, and the only way to find out was to go find him. If he was a nothing, then he would come home and marry. But if Yohanan confirmed his mother's story, and perhaps told him more besides... or even if he were a prophet! There had been no prophets for hundreds of years, not since ancient days! But that would be too much to expect. First he must find Yohanan bar Zechariah.

He was at Yudah's door. He stroked the Mezuzah and spoke the greeting as he entered. Simon was crying with laughter at one of Yudah's stories, while Yacob and Deborah veiled their enjoyment with at least a tithe of decorum.

"Oh, hello, Yeshua," Yudah replied to the greeting, using it to continue the suspense before returning to his audience to deliver the final line. Simon folded double, wheezing in pain.

"You know it's the Sabbath, Yudah!" Yeshua said in mock-reproach. "I can't carry him home, you know!"

"Youngsters recover quickly at mealtimes," Yudah replied. "On your feet, Simon! And don't zig-zag too much, either. Your Rabbi brother will be counting your steps!"

They said their farewells as they filed out the doorway, Simon barely upright and still wheezing. Yeshua re-entered as the others set off.

"Yacob and I will be around after sunset, then we'll all go to Yoseph's," he said before following them. Yudah wondered if he had done anything wrong.

This Yohanan bar Zechariah, thought Yeshua. He's a Levite, the first son of a Jerusalem priest. Could he be the one foretold by Malachi? Will he be the one who will 'purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver'? One question at a time he cautioned himself as his imagination started to run away from him. First he must find Yohanan.

Yacob was talking about Jerusalem when Yeshua caught them. Simon and Deborah were struck with wonder and shocked at the same time.

"Of course, I didn't get to know the city very well," Yacob was qualifying something he had said earlier. "I spent all day working in the Temple and most nights with my Master. But in the Court of the Gentiles you hear nothing but Greek. Oh, a bit of Latin, too, but the Greeks are like dung in a sheepfold. You can't walk without stepping on some!"

"Why do they go to the Temple if they don't believe?"

Jacob shrugged. "It's a beautiful Temple. And they like to hear the rabbis argue. Greeks love arguments about God, it gives them an excuse for not obeying! Then again, some of them are 'God-fearers'; silly people who want to stay Greek but want to serve the Almighty. They're like fish who want to breathe air! They are encouraged by even sillier people called 'Hellenists', who are Jews who want to be respected by the Goyim. They cut their beards close to the skin and wear Greek clothes, and even speak Greek; they're like sheep who want to be friendly with fish. Most will end up drowning!"

"Can you speak Greek?" Deborah asked.

"I learnt enough to get by," Yacob conceded. "I can go shopping, or give directions, simple things like that. But it's a soft language, only fit for men who are ashamed of their beards and who smell like Jezebel."

"Yeshua and Yoseph speak Greek, too!" Simon volunteered.

"We learned it," Yeshua explained to Simon, "when we worked for cousin Benjamin. A lot of the houses we built were for Greeks or Romans. They were always giving orders or asking questions or arguing about something or other."

"Didn't the Romans speak Latin?" persisted Deborah.

"Most Romans can speak Greek," Yeshua said. "Or at least, those who can afford cousin Benjamin's prices can!" he joked as he touched the mazuzah on his doorpost and stepped into the house.

They stood before the table, Yeshua in the centre with Yacob on his right and Simon on his left. Deborah went to help her mother while the men washed and sat. Yeshua spoke the blessing, tore a piece off the loaf and dipped it. He gave this to Yacob, and then did the same for Simon. At this point the formalities were dropped.

"Your reading today," Yeshua's words were pushed around a mouthful of bread, "I couldn't understand your commentary. At first I thought you were agreeing with what I said to you the other day, but the meaning you drew from it was exactly the opposite."

"I have given much thought to your words, brother. To put it simply, I agree with everything you said. The man you described, the one who wants nothing except to 'know the Lord's will like his tongue knows his mouth' as you said, and to obey it as heartily as the flowers that spring up at his Word; that man needs no Law. He is a son who has come of age. No longer must he be told not to touch the pretty flames or he'll be burnt, because he already knows that sin will hurt him." He paused to dip another piece of bread.

"Unfortunately, such a man does not exist. It is part of the Curse that we can't understand everything; but all we need to understand is that 'our God is a gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast Love'. We must therefore

obey the Law because the Almighty has given it, and rejoice in obeying it because the Gracious One gave it for our own good."

"Do you *never* thirst to see His Face?" Yeshua asked, almost in pain from the sheer intimacy of the question. "Are you always content to obey with eyes downcast? Don't you ache to see the Face of Him who commands?"

Yacob dropped his wrists to the table, and met Yeshua with a gaze that told of iron discipline and unspeakable melancholy. "Yeshua, you strip bare my heart," Yacob confessed. "But when Messiah comes the age of the Law will be past. All the important rabbis agree on that. 'Then from my flesh shall I see God'. But if He delays, then at worst I'm content to await the Resurrection of the Just."

Yeshua groaned inwardly to hear this. He had hoped that when Yacob returned he would somehow set his heart on fire. He had lived in God's house, devoting himself to study; but he came back saying not 'I have drunk', but 'I thirst the more'. Why should the holiest also be the hungriest?

Simon on his left had obviously heard enough and eaten enough. Yacob appeared satisfied too, so Yeshua stood to signify the end of the meal. His brothers stood with him and stepped away from the table, leaving it for the women.

Yacob was concerned at his brother's countenance. Had his words cut deeper than intended? "Yeshua, why do we debate this point? You live by the Law yourself, so why do you argue against it? Maybe Shammai himself could find some technical fault, but there are any number of Doctors who would pronounce you blameless."

Yeshua remained despondent. Yacob meant well, he knew; but his attempt to commend him had only condemned the Doctors. Everyone was intent on being seen by men to Lawful instead of being seen by God to be righteous.

"Why do men obey the Law, Yacob? Is it simply because it *is* the Law, or is the first thing in their mind to give glory to the Glorious?"

"I do the first to fulfil the second," Yacob replied. "Which brings us back to yesterday."

Yes, it does, thought Yeshua. "How long will you stay with us?" he asked.

Yacob was caught for a moment by the change of subject. "I must go to Sepphoris after Hasartha. A God-fearer asked my master to have a panel identical to one of the Temple panels made for his front door. He will guarantee me work for a year, paying me out of his harvest rents, and give the rest of the year's rents to the local synagogue. I can name my own price up to that amount."

"You'll live in Sepphoris?" Now it was Yeshua's turn to be surprised, much to Yacob's amusement. Sepphoris was a Greek city, where it was commonly thought that a pious Jew would starve for lack of kosher food.

Yacob shrugged off-handedly. "He's a God-fearer. He has promised that his hazzan will give me lodging and he will allow me time to walk home for the Sabbath if I prefer the Nazareth synagogue to his own."

"Well, it's what you're best at," agreed Yeshua as the shock wore off. "What tools will you need? Hey, what did you use in Jerusalem?" It had just

struck Yeshua that Yacob had left home all but empty-handed. He had expected a workshop job, not an artisan's task.

"The master supplied a new set of tools every Yom Kippur, and took the money out of our pay over the next few months. I almost starved the first year; unlike the other men I couldn't raise money by selling my old set!" he laughed. "In other years it was better; I took good care of my tools, and they fetched good prices." He reached over to his sack and pulled out a chisel to show his brother. "I've worked with this non-stop since last Yom Kippur." he repeated as he handed it over.

Yeshua had never seen anything like it. The handle was perfectly grained and well bound, with a no-more-than-noticeable burring from the mallet blows. When he removed the sheath to reveal the blade its edge seemed impossibly keen, straight and square. He thought for an instant to test it on the leg of his stool but the recollection that it was the Sabbath checked him.

"You've never seen steel like it," enthused Yacob. "It holds its edge well, but never chips like the other hardened blades. It comes from Asia or Phrygia, somewhere over that way."

"You don't do a bad job of dressing it, either," Yeshua noted as he handed it back.

"It's a pleasure to work it. It's magnificent."

Silence followed. At least he has a job, thought Yeshua. The people of Nazareth had neither the need nor the money for an artisan like Yacob. He was a city worker now, through and through. And a city job will bring in more than enough for a household, regardless of how generously he pays the hazzan at Sepphoris for his lodging. A job guaranteed for a year! By then all the gentiles in Sepphoris will be fighting for his services, covetous and proud creatures that they are. Of course, Yacob wouldn't work on anything that even hinted at decadence or anything like that, but the wealth flowing into the palaces of Galilee's absentee landlords was so great that he could afford to choose his jobs and still be kept busy for a lifetime. Yacob need never be uncomfortable again.

"I'd like the four of us to talk tonight," said Yeshua. "I've already mentioned it to Yudah."

Yacob nodded, more in agreement to the reason than in submission to the request. Yeshua could have only one thing in mind.

Yeshua drank from the goblet and handed it to Yacob. He drank, then handed it on to Simon. Yeshua and Yacob then left for Yudah's house.

Yudah was waiting for them at the door, wondering if there was some fault that the afternoon's worrying had failed to reveal to him. That his brothers were walking in silence added a solemnity that reinforced his apprehension.

"All set?" Yeshua asked as he drew up to him.

"Should I bring anything?" he asked by way of a reply.

"No, we'll just be talking."

Yudah shrugged. "Then let's go."

A hundred paces later they were at Yoseph's house, his voice faintly audible from within. Yeshua knocked on the door and called and they were told to come inside. Yoseph's house was not as large as Yeshua's, boasting only two alcoves off to the right of the main area instead of the two on each side in the ancestral home. The whole family had thought, at one time or another, that it was ample for just the two of them; but that sort of thing was naturally left unsaid.

Yoseph stepped out of one of these alcoves with a stool in each hand as his brothers filed through the door. How many of those stools had they made in the idle times, thought Yeshua, as they waited for a job to come in? There must be at least one in every household in town! Yoseph motioned to Rebecca for mugs and the wineskin.

"Have you come to tell me about Jerusalem, or scold me for not spending the Sabbath with you?" he asked in good humour. "Or just to drink my wine?" he added as the mugs were placed on the board.

"Jerusalem is Jerusalem," replied Yacob easily, "and Yeshua can answer the hard ones."

"How's Rebecca? Healthy?" asked Yeshua. Although she was standing right behind him, it would be unthinkable to not ask through her husband, their host.

"She is well, but we think it wise for her to walk as little as possible; so we must apologise for not spending the afternoon with you."

"And how is your wine?" Yeshua grinned.

"About to suffer a grievous diminution!" Yoseph laughed as he poured from the skin. "Well, that's my questions answered; now what about yours? Perhaps you want me to build a house for you, Yacob?"

"Benjamin would give better value," Yacob said sagely. "His eyes won't be so red tomorrow."

Yudah began to feel easier. Such levity hinted that this might be a pleasant evening after all.

"This is good wine," commented Yeshua, "as befits the head of so large a household."

The others looked at him strangely.

"One child in the new year is hardly a large family," Yoseph replied evenly.

"But your father's house is a large one."

"Yeshua, speak plainly!" Yoseph's voice had an edge to it now. What had mother said to him? he wondered. Had she disowned the man who had fed her and her children for half his life? "I meant what I said that night!"

"Be calm, brother. Nothing like that has happened. But I intend to go up to Jerusalem soon, and I have no idea when I will return. Will you support Yacob and our mother's house until Hasartha?"

"What are you doing, Yeshua?" Yacob demanded. "What about marriage?"

"I swear to you that I will take a wife when I have finished. But I have to do something before then."

"What something?"

Yeshua dropped his gaze. "I don't know," he confessed. "But I must go to Judaea, and after that I will know."

The three brothers stared at him.

"Let me get this straight," Yoseph said cautiously. "Nothing is amiss between you and mother?"

"No."

"And you will soon leave for Jerusalem. You don't know what you will do after that, except that you don't expect to be back until Hasartha?"

"I will leave for Jerusalem as soon as possible. I don't know when I will be back, perhaps never," summarised Yeshua. "I mentioned Hasartha because Yacob will be able to support our mother's house after that. Is that acceptable to you, Yacob?"

"Well, yes, of course. But what of marriage? You swear to take a bride when you are finished, but give no idea when that will be! Does mother know about this?"

"I told her I would speak with you first."

"Yeshua, what do you have in mind?" Yoseph's question was put with authority, and Yeshua answered with equal authority.

"I intend to find Yohanan bar Zechariah, the only son of our great-aunt Elizabeth. After I speak to him I'll know more about what I should do."

Yacob muttered the name to himself. Where had he heard of Yohanan bar Zechariah? He had this vision of a wild man standing waist-deep in water. And this feeling that he had heard the name in the Jericho marketplace!

"What has this Yohanan to do with you?" Yoseph was worried. Yeshua had always been so predictable!

"Yoseph, I'm not seeking permission from you. I'm telling you beforehand so the family's affairs can be put in order. You now know everything I can possibly tell you, so it's pointless to question me further. Nor will you persuade me otherwise; at worst I'll waste a few weeks, and surely you don't begrudge me that! Have I spoken plainly enough?"

Yoseph obviously didn't like it but saw nothing to be gained by fighting it.

"As you say, Yeshua. Yes, I can support them for as long as you are gone; let Yacob take over at the school if he wants. He'd be better than that old woman Simon."

An uneasy silence settled on the brothers. Yacob broke it with another question.

"Yeshua, why do you think this Yohanan will be able to tell you anything?"

"You'll know when I get back." Yeshua answered.

Yoseph and Yacob were silently exasperated, while Yudah sat wondering and listening as those he acknowledged to be the wiser heads sorted out the family's problems.

At last Yoseph topped up the goblets and took the bread left over from lunch. He broke this into four pieces and handed a piece each to Yeshua, Yudah and Yacob in strict order of priority.

"It is good for a man to take Passover in Jerusalem before choosing a wife," he said with forced bonhomie. "We wish our brother and head of our father's house a great blessing and a safe return."

The others gave their 'Amen' of agreement as they ate and drank. The subject was closed and the family bond strained but unbroken. It was the best they could hope for.

"Do you have enough money for your journey?" Yoseph asked Yeshua.

"Thank you, but I have all I need," Yeshua replied evenly.

"When you get to Jerusalem seek out Rabbi Nathaniel on the Portico," Yacob offered. "He's a carpenter too and will find you room for your bed."

"Rabbi Nathaniel on the Portico," Yeshua repeated.

Conversation became desultory with short exchanges and long pauses. After half an hour without improvement Yoseph stood.

"Perhaps we should all go and tell our mother," he suggested. He was still worried about the tension between her and Yeshua. Her reaction would tell him a great deal about that in particular; and besides, it would be best for the family to be together anyway. The others stood in agreement and they filed out the door.

Miriam was alarmed by the unconscious solemnity of her sons as they entered. "What's wrong? Is Rebecca..."

"Don't worry, mother," Yoseph interrupted her. "We've been talking about things. Yeshua is going up to Jerusalem before he takes a wife. He goes with our blessing."

Miriam thought it strange that the head of the family should be given the blessing of his inferiors. There had obviously been some disagreement for Yoseph to bother with making a point of it.

"When?" she asked.

Yeshua took a breath. "I would like to leave tomorrow."

"Will you be back for Passover?" The feast of Passover was still two months away.

"Maybe. Maybe not." Yeshua shrugged. "I'll come back when I can."

"What are you going to do, that you don't know how long it will take?" Miriam demanded.

"I'll try to find Yohanan," he said bluntly.

Yacob saw the anguish leap into her eyes for a moment and then she sagged slightly. He wondered what she knew about this strange man and how he tied into that strange song that only she and Yeshua seemed to know. As he wondered Miriam straightened again.

"If you must go," Miriam said in resignation, "then perhaps Simeon can help. He's Old Simeon's grandnephew. He breeds donkeys in Bethphage. Do you remember him from when we went to the Temple when you were a boy?"

"Good thinking, mother," Yeshua agreed. "He's family to Yohanan so he might know something."

The five of them were left staring at each other. This unnerved Yoseph first. "Well, Yacob is back with us now; this is as good a time as any," he tried to explain.

Still no-one knew what to say or do. At last Yoseph tapped Yacob on the arm and motioned him outside.

"I am not a poor man any more, brother," said Yoseph. "Just ask for whatever you need and I will give it to you. I would not dishonour you in our mother's eyes by giving it to her directly."

"Thank you, brother; I will need to buy some very expensive timber soon for a job in Sepphoris and I don't know if I have enough for everything at once. I'll be paid after Hasartha and then I'll be able to repay you."

Yoseph was surprised. He had assumed that Yacob was just visiting home between jobs in Jerusalem, the only place where his style of work would be in demand. He hadn't thought of a pagan city, much less a Rabbi like Yacob working in one.

"Until then my purse is yours," Yoseph promised. He went to turn away but curiosity got the better of him. "Sepphoris?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Yacob. "A Greek merchant wants some, ah, pretty panels," he explained provocatively, and then burst into laughter at the look of shock on Yoseph's face.

"Don't worry, Yoseph! He's a God-fearer who wants a copy of a panel from the Temple," Yacob soothed him. "Do you think I would even touch a scene from a Greek orgy?"

Yoseph shook his head and gave a wry smile. "I suppose even Sepphoris might have a couple of righteous men!" he conceded. "I'd better get back home now," he said, and left.

Yacob went back inside. Miriam seemed weary rather than angry, and Yeshua... well, Yeshua looked like a man who was determined to do something without knowing what to do. Which was pretty close to the truth, mused Yacob; so must it always be for a man who saw the Law as an impediment rather than an aid to righteousness. Yacob pitied him, a man trapped by his own purity of heart. Both Yeshua and Miriam were trying to not look at one another.

"Who is this Yohanana," Yacob asked. "I swear I've heard of him somewhere."

"He is a cousin of mine," Miriam answered. "Perhaps you remember the name from your childhood."

"No, it was more recent than that," he argued. "Somewhere busy; I can't help thinking about Jericho." His eyes glazed over as he sorted through his associations with the name. Nothing made sense.

Yeshua took a cloak and six asses with him next morning, partly because there were only a couple of denarii in the household purse and he was reluctant to take more than he had to. But his main reason, which even he himself felt rather than knew, was a desire to stand bare before God on this journey. Yeshua had long felt that people were forever trying to protect themselves against acts of God

and thus making slaves of themselves. He was determined that one day's worth of food and lodging was enough and tomorrow would bring enough for the morrow.

By mid-morning he was in the Vale of Jezreel. This is the broad land, Yeshua thought to himself in his exhilaration as he walked past citrus heavy with fruit and fields luscious with green young barley waving in the breeze. Out of the sheer joy of life he shouted,

"The earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer 'Jezreel!'"

What a day that will be! Here, walking through this hint of the Garden of the Lord with a gentle north-west breeze at his back, Yeshua recited the whole passage from Hosea to himself. As he reached *'I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you will know the Lord'*, he felt his chest would explode with exultation. He would know the Lord as a wife knows her husband!

He tucked the skirt of his robe into his belt and started running, overjoyed with being alive and the hope that this prophecy might be fulfilled in his own time. He covered a mile or more on the long, gentle slope down the valley before he missed his footing and fell. He sat chuckling in the dust, picking a sharp stone from his elbow and brushing the dirt from the rashes up his right thigh and hip.

"You're acting like a child!" he told himself with mock severity before bursting into laughter again. He stood, hitched the right side of his robe even higher to stop it rubbing against his grazes, and started walking again.

Near the parting of the ways to Samaria and the Jordan he caught up to a group travelling together for protection. He declined their invitation to join them. He would be impatient with the pace of the children and he doubted that bandits would attack anyone travelling as light as he, thus alerting the richer victims. But underneath was that odd exuberance, a certainty that if God protected him he would be safe and if God didn't, a whole legion of angels would be useless. On this impulse he took the road to Shechem.

The climb up the ridge into Samaria was tiring but the pleasure of walking made resting seem undesirable. By the time Yeshua allowed himself to stop the sun was only an hour or so off the horizon. Yeshua considered his choices. Samaritans were famous for giving Jews as little help and as much trouble as possible and he had no idea where he would find food and lodging. He decided to walk until almost sunset. If he found a place where he could buy lawful food then he would eat; if not then he would find and sleep in a sheltered spot on the eastern side of the ridge to catch the warmth of the morning sun.

The sun was hanging on the western horizon when he came up to a merchant's train and a group of travellers taking advantage of his armed guard. Ten men and three mules; a fair sized party, he mused. He took no note of the three women except to unhitch his skirt to cover his leg and the rash as he approached them. All but one were Greek, the sole Jew obviously a slave kept as an interpreter. Yeshua saluted the master, and then fell into step beside the Jew.

"Shalom, brother," he greeted him.

"Shalom," the slave replied disinterestedly.

"What manner of man is your master?" Yeshua asked.

"He is a Greek." The tone implied that no more need be said.

"Where will you stop tonight?" Yeshua persisted.

"A village. Just over the pass."

"An inn or a private house?"

"A pigsty!" the slave spat.

Obviously he meant a Samaritan house; only they deserved such an epithet. Yeshua was disappointed. In a gentile's house he might have found lodging and food, if only bread. But to ask a favour of a Samaritan would be worse than useless.

The moon, almost full, had appeared above the eastern horizon already, so Yeshua decided to keep walking. The night would be light enough and he might yet find a place to sleep. He thanked the slave who was doomed to sleep under a Samaritan roof and eat their foul bread tonight and lengthened his stride.

The village was something more than a mile further on, and he reached it as evening was deepening into night. It was nestled into a bowl with hills on three sides beyond a circle of rich fields. A watercourse meandered past the edge of the village but it was dry. A well stood on the far bank. A scrawny, tattered child was drawing from it.

"Please, give me a drink," Yeshua asked gently, afraid that he would scare the child away. She started at the voice but stood her ground. In the moonlight she seemed about six years old. Yeshua slightly exaggerated his tiredness as he stumbled across the watercourse to her. She held out the gourd and Yeshua drank.

"Thank you, little girl," Yeshua smiled at her.

"Do you want to visit my mummy?" she asked.

Yeshua thought for a moment. The accent sounded a bit odd but she was a Samaritan; she probably knew he was a traveller the same way. Now, if this girl was accustomed to Galileans visiting her mother, then her mother must be an innkeeper that serves kosher food! Here was his food and shelter for the night!

"Yes, I would like that, please" he replied.

The girl refilled the gourd and led off in an awkward scamper, trying to hurry without spilling the water. She was about twenty paces ahead when Yeshua saw her run up to a bundle in the shadows.

"Mummy, I've found a man who wants to visit!" she said quietly but proudly.

The bundle was a woman, huddled against a wall. She put a roll on the ground beside her and pushed herself to her feet.

"Good girl, darling," she said tiredly.

Yeshua stopped in his tracks as he realised what he had walked into. The woman stepped out of the shadow and into the moonlight; the shock he felt and the pale light made her nondescript face unforgettable. Behind her, the girl picked up the roll her mother had put down. Distantly, Yeshua guessed it must be an infant. The woman smiled as she walked over to him.

"Three asses" she said.

Yeshua groped for words.

"I...I was looking for lodgings" he stammered out.

"I'm warm and soft" the woman smiled coyly, "a nice place to lodge."

"I misunderstood." Yeshua turned to leave as the woman grabbed his elbow. Her eyes sparkled.

"You see I have no home! Naomi can beg for food, but I have no milk for my son!" she hissed at him. "Two asses, and perhaps I will be able to feed him tomorrow!" she challenged, staring at him.

Slowly Yeshua drew the pouch from his belt, turned her right palm upwards, and emptied his six asses into her hand.

"Shalom alekhen" he said, and walked past her to the south.

"You claim that you are the sons of Abraham; but so were those whom the Assyrians scattered. They have never returned.

"You claim that you have a Covenant with Him who brought us out of Egypt; but so did those who made the calf at the foot of the Mount of the Law. They perished for their sins.

"You claim to be observing every article of the Law. Yet even if you do, by serving the Republic as well as the Almighty you bring upon yourselves the curse 'Accursed are they who swear by the Lord and also swear by Molech.'

"You claim to have sacrificed in the Temple; but the Temple was a threshing floor in David's time and will be again. For behold, He is coming! His threshing fork is in His hand..."

"Fiery sort of fellow, isn't he?" one traveller asked another who, judging by his hair full of dust and grass seeds, had slept cheaply the last few nights.

"The land is full of these crackpots," interjected an older man. "They promise nothing but trouble, and then they keep their promises. The people would be better off if he went back to his cell." The speaker appeared to be the head of a small party of officials. He looked the sort of man who uses authority the way a butcher uses a knife. The travellers kept their peace, a sure sign that they preferred their own conversation. The scribe glared at them for a moment, then pushed down to the river where Yohanan and his disciples were talking with a ragtag group of geriatrics and wild-eyed youths.

The traveller who had spoken moved on. The other stroked his beard with a scarred left hand and moved closer to the Baptist. He wanted to hear what he would say to the scribe.

"Yohanan bar Zechariah!" the official bellowed from the bank. Yohanan was only a dozen paces away, the scribe's excess clearly an attempt to assert authority and let the whole crowd know it.

"Do you repent of your sins?" Yohanan went on catechizing an old man standing beside him in the waist-deep water.

"Yes" replied the man.

"Do you bind yourself to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Yacob, to serve him and no other, according to His Law, all the days of your life?"

The scribe bellowed again, drowning out the response.

"...join the Holy Remnant, the true Israel, until Messiah comes?"

"Yes," replied the man.

Yohanan then drew him below the water, then raised him again. "Nothing stops you. But remember Lot's wife."

One of the official's attendants growled in frustration and started into the water but the scribe pulled him back and slapped him.

Yohanan had finished with his proselyte and now he looked over to the bank. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" he challenged the party. The crowd rippled with laughter at Yohanan's pretence that the officials came as penitents. Then Yohanan's manner became deadly serious. "You are a brood of vipers; how can you bear fruit worthy of repentance? The axe is now being put to the root of the tree. If it bears bad fruit it will be hewn down and cast into the fire!"

"Will I arrest him?" whispered the angry young attendant. The scribe stared contemptuously at him for a moment.

"You and which legion, idiot? Look around!" he answered him, and cuffed him again. He had been sent to examine this preacher but he would need more troops to force a private interview upon this wildman from the wastelands. He trudged back up the hill to his donkey. Tomorrow would come soon enough.

Yeshua sat on the bank, watching and listening to the ritual of baptism used by Yohanan. He had expected to find a junior priest in a monastery, devoted to useless trivialities. Obviously Yohanan was not like that. He had a fire in his belly. But this was a problem in its own right. Yohanan's fire was for a harsher, stricter Law than Yeshua had thought possible. Where was there room in that for the spontaneous, joyful, instinctive conformity with the will of a creative Lord? Could Yohanan even imagine such a dream as had seized Yeshua? Well, he had spent these eight days to come to him and nothing would be lost by speaking with him now. Patiently Yeshua waited for the last of Yohanan's proselytes to rise from the water and the priestly band to set off towards the Judaeen wilderness. He fell in behind them and sought out Yohanan.

"Yohanan, do you remember your cousin Miriam, wife of Yoseph bar Yacob?"

Yohanan turned his head to see who spoke with that coarse Galilean accent. "Why do you ask?" he asked with reserve as he walked.

"I thought perhaps that your mother might have spoken of her strangely."

Yohanan smiled and continued walking, the stranger now at his side. His mother had been an old woman, senile before Yohanan had been old enough to notice. His earliest memories were of that vacant smile, the glazed eyes, and the words "wait 'til you see Miri's little boy!", said over and over like a promise of a great feast.

"My mother was heavy with years. She spoke of few people and all of them strangely. Now, who are you?"

"I am Miriam's firstborn, and I beg you to stop and talk for a short time," Yeshua answered directly.

Yohanan looked at him more intently this time and turned aside to sit on a rock. Yeshua breathed his relief.

"My mother was always saying 'wait 'til you see Miri's little boy!'. She talked more of you than of her husband!"

"And what did she say?" Yeshua pursued the question eagerly.

"She was weak-witted," Yohanan sighed. "She had no memory to speak of, just a few broken glimpses into the past. You know how old people go."

"But what did she say about Miriam and me?"

Yohanan rolled his eyes up, trying to remember twenty-odd years into his boyhood. "'Just wait for Miri's boy! He's the one!'" he recited, as though reading a faint text. "'Miri's boy will do it!'" He opened his eyes again and shrugged. "See? Nothing, really. Just a vague, unbounded confidence. Now, you tell me if it means anything to you."

"She never called me 'Yoseph's boy'?" Yeshua asked.

"No, she didn't," Yohanan raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Seems strange, now that you mention it, doesn't it?"

"Keep on thinking," urged Yeshua.

Yohanan's interest had been tickled by that oddity. He went rummaging again in his chestful of memories. "'Dove on his head, crown on his shoulders'; She used to chant that sometimes. I thought it was a nonsense verse, like children always seem to like. Or perhaps she was talking about these statues of various Consuls or Generals the Romans put up everywhere; they put a wreath on his head and the birds put something else on his shoulders and mother got tongue-tied one day and made a joke out of it. She did that sort of thing often, but that saying was her favourite." Yohanan sat a few more moments in silence then threw his hands up. "That's all! Now I've been patient with you, so how about telling me what this is all about?"

It was Yeshua's turn to answer the questions.

"My mother had strange dreams at my birth. Other unusual things happened too, but the witness of one is insufficient."

"The witness of two is insufficient, if one is a woman," Yohanan replied.

"Insufficient to condemn, but sufficient to justify," Yeshua rejoined.

Yohanan stared at him. "And who are you, that you need to be justified?"

A good question, Yeshua thought to himself. Who am I? On impulse, words rose to his lips.

"I will tell you who you are," he said by way of a reply. "You are the one of whom Isaiah spoke; you are the voice in the wilderness, crying 'Make straight the way for the Lord!'"

"No. I am the watchman, warning of the wrath to come." Yohanan gave a wry smile and stood. Obviously his own mother had been senile even at his birth, and this stranger's mother a neurotic and impressionable youngster. Who could guess what weird ideas they must have given each other! And what better place to nurture them than in Galilee, a hotbed of illiterates who try to do with the sword what can only be done with the Law! "And now I must catch the others," he smiled, and turned away.

Yeshua, his mind in confusion, watched him as he hurried after his disciples. Yohanan appeared to know precisely what he was doing, independent

of any thirty-year-old dreams. Was Miri's little boy a fool, chasing after the wind? He knew nothing, not even what he wanted to do; only this compulsion to do it. He slumped back onto the rock behind him, tears of bitterness stinging his eyes. How bravely he had spoken to Yacob about obedience from the heart, untrammelled by thought and decision! Here he was, longing to be obedient, but he didn't have a clue what was required! He shook his head as he wept, amazed at his own idiocy. How could a man obey unless a command is given? The painfully obvious question that he had never thought to ask himself rose up to taunt him. In anguish he cried out for a Word.

"If only You would come down as You did on the Mountain," he cried. Then, recognising what he had said, he took up the words of the prophet:-

*"The eye has not seen a God besides You,
Who acts for the one who waits for Him.
You meet him who rejoices in righteousness,
who remembers You and Your ways.
You are my Father;
I am clay, You are my potter;
I am the work of Your hand.
Behold, look at me!
I am a wilderness, a desolation!
Will You restrain Yourself at this?
Will You keep silent, and afflict me beyond measure?"*

These words left Yeshua almost comatose with grief. He saw without noticing the evening fall, and shivered without feeling the cold grip of the night wrap around him. From nowhere in particular he heard (or did he himself recite?) the words of Isaiah to a people who had thought themselves abandoned.

*"Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness,
who seek the Lord;
Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father,
and to Sarah who gave you birth in pain.
When you were one I called him,
then I blessed him and multiplied him.*

*Indeed the Lord will comfort Zion;
He will comfort her waste places.
He will make her wilderness like Eden
and her desert like the garden of the Lord.
Joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the sound of a melody.*

*Pay attention to me, O my people,
and give ear to me, O my nation;
for a Law will go forth from me
and I will set my justice to enlighten all peoples.
My righteousness is near, my salvation has gone forth,
and my arm will judge the peoples.
The coastlands wait for me,
for my arm they wait expectantly.*

*Lift up your eyes to the sky,
then look at the earth beneath;
for the sky will vanish like smoke
and the earth will wear out like a garment
and it's people will die in like manner;
but my salvation shall be forever,
and my righteousness shall never fade.*

*Listen to me, you who know righteousness,
you in whose heart is my law;
Do not fear the reproach of man,
nor be dismayed by revilings.
For the moth will eat them like a garment
and a grub will eat them like wool;
but my righteousness shall be forever,
and my salvation to all generations.*

*Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord;
awake...*

Yeshua felt a weight on his head, like a hand. Suddenly it became sharp, like a thorn, and he jerked himself awake. It was morning.

Yohanan had dismissed the stranger from his mind by the time he had rejoined his disciples. He was completely occupied with thoughts about his converts. After less than a month, hundreds had accepted baptism and twenty of those had followed him into the monastery. This had caused some consternation at first. Virtually all the monks were Levites, mostly of priestly families and sponsored by relatives already members of the community.

When Yohanan had returned the second evening with his first two converts, both Galileans, the High Priest had been most perturbed. In a flash of insight Yohanan realised the High Priest had been so certain that the mission would fail that he had not thought through the possible consequences of even the tiniest success. For an instant Yohanan had loathed the robed man as a shallow hypocrite, oblivious to the wretched state of the bulk of Abraham's seed. While

his years of training brought him to mortify himself inwardly, he remained aware of the tension in the community and unconsciously had started to see his converts as 'us' and the other monks as 'them'.

The admission of these converts was dismissed as 'unthinkable' at first, so great was their contempt for non-Levites. So almost in spite Yohanan legally adopted them and all his subsequent converts to ensure their legal status in the community. But he had very little confidence for the future of his 'sons' in the community if ever the Jerusalem authorities decided that they had seen enough of Yohanan bar Zechariah.

He exchanged greetings and the formal kiss with the doorkeeper as the sun left the hills of Moab across the Salt Sea. His three assistants did likewise and passed inside as he waited to introduce his four newest 'sons'. Again he saw the disdain on the doorkeeper's face as he kissed them, barely attempting to conceal his disgust. Instantly indignation flamed in Yohanan's breast and just as quickly the years of discipline turned it inward to an urge to mortification.

"I shall fast tonight, Nathaniel," he told the doorkeeper, his voice tight with anger. "Please inform the High Priest and take care of my sons."

Yohanan went directly to his cell and prostrated himself on the floor in prayer. Laying face down on the stone, he recited the Sh'ma. Then he took his candle into the courtyard, lit it from a torch and returned. Heavy with weariness, he turned to seek comfort in the scrolls he had copied as a youth. He chose the scroll of Isaiah to remind himself of the limitless patience and majesty of the Almighty, and the marvellous destiny of the Servant, the True Israel, the community here in the monastery.

The scroll was not wound right back. 'Unlike me to leave it open after reading,' Yohanan rebuked himself in surprise. He started to read where he had left off last time.

"Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are for signs and wonders in Israel from the Lord of Hosts, Who dwells on Mount Zion."

"Yohanan, I must speak to you."

Yohanan leapt to his feet. The High Priest stood at the door of his cell.

"Don't you think you should change your approach to these novices you seem bent on collecting?" the High Priest challenged him. Yohanan was nonplussed.

"In what way, High Priest?" he stumbled out eventually.

"For a start, most have an excruciating ignorance of the Law; secondly, only one is a Levite and all but three are Galileans - one is even an uncircumcised Greek! - thirdly, we have only their word that they have repented, no proof or character witnesses. Hardly ideal candidates for a purified priesthood!"

"Remember who made the golden calf at the very foot of Sinai, before you say only the sons of Aaron are fit to stand before the Lawgiver!" Yohanan exploded.

Both men stood shocked. Neither had thought it possible that a full member of the community would dare rebuke the High Priest. There was not a sound except their laboured breathing and not a movement except the leaping of the candle flame for what must have been a minute or longer. At last the High Priest recovered enough of his composure to speak again.

"What are you doing, Yohanan? Are you trying to defile the Remnant? Are you determined to create your own faction, to overthrow the appointed order of things?"

"No, High Priest. I am fulfilling the commission that you yourself gave me. You told me to be a watchman as commanded by Ezekiel; and it is written in his prophecy

"When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, and commits iniquity, he will die. Again, if a wicked man turns from the wickedness he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life."

"These my sons have turned from their wickedness. If you do not accept them then you set yourself against the judgement of the Righteous Judge!"

The two men stared at each other. Yohanan was amazed at the words that poured from his own mouth while the High Priest fought to think clearly through the torrent of indignation that threatened to sweep him away. Who does this pup think he is, to withstand the true High Priest over Israel?

"Yohanan," he whispered, afraid that a more conversational tone would run away to become a shout, "the Holy One of Israel has laid upon my shoulders the task of preserving the Remnant in all purity. Does not Isaiah say of the True Servant 'Depart, depart, go out hence, and touch no unclean thing.'? Yet you..." the High Priest's voice started to waver as the horror of it overwhelmed him, "you not only touch what is unclean, but you even bring it back into the Servant's breast!" The High Priest tore the front of his robe with a sob of despair.

Yohanan felt strangely remote from events. Perhaps it was the shock that such an unimaginable confrontation was actually taking place, or perhaps it was the realisation that he was crossing a personal watershed beyond his most outrageous dreams.

"You do well to mourn the repentance of Israel, for it has revealed your secret sin and the humble poor are seen to be the true servants of the Lord. Now the Word of the Lord you have just quoted binds me and my children, saying 'Depart, depart, go out hence, touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of her, purify yourselves, you vessels of the Lord.' For as you walked into this cell, the Scriptures said 'Behold, I and the children the Lord has given me are for signs and wonders in Israel from the Lord of Hosts.'"

He walked past the dumbstuck High Priest and into the courtyard, crossing to the novices' eating hall in a few firm strides. "My sons, come out!" he bellowed from the doorway. The soft clatter of tableware ceased, the diners amazed at this breach of the Rule.

"My sons, come out!" Yohanan repeated, then without looking for a response he turned back to his cell.

By now the High Priest had recovered his tongue and shrieked curses at him. Yohanan took the open roll of Isaiah from the floor, put it in its place in the chest and called for help to carry it. Simon was first to his side. The big fisherman from Bethsaida looked worried.

"What's the matter, Master?" he asked anxiously.

"Take the other end of this," Yohanan instructed. Simon lifted his end and bit back further questions.

Outside were Simon's brother Andrew, their erstwhile partners the brothers Yacob and Yohan bar Zebedee, Loukas the proselyte, Benjamin from Hebron, Philip from Bethsaida and Nathaniel from Cana. Yohanan was not surprised to see the four fishermen come out. They had been in the community almost a week, long enough to see the contempt on the Levites' faces. Loukas, who had only been a godfearer until yesterday, was openly weeping. Yohanan could guess that his fresh circumcision was the least of the scars that had been inflicted upon him. Benjamin the Levite looked puzzled more than anything else. The practical Phillip and the quietly pious Nathaniel, friends since their baptism together on the Day of Preparation, were always close to each other and took their 'adopted' status quite seriously.

"My sons, we are leaving," Yohanan announced without breaking step. Meanwhile the High Priest called down curses from heaven, begging that these apostates be the first to burn on the Day of Wrath. Simon followed with the tail end of the chest while the other seven grew in fear and confusion. "This whitewashed tomb knows of only one tribe in Israel, and would use all but Levi as his saddlecloth!" Yohanan explained over his shoulder. The other fishermen fell in hesitantly beside Simon, causing the others to follow instinctively. Only Benjamin stood fixed, looking to the High Priest.

The High Priest saw he was having no effect on the eight heading for the monastery gate so he launched his fury at Benjamin.

"You left your meal without prayers or permission! Go to your cell!" he screamed at the novice. Benjamin winced at his ferocity and ran to the novitiate. A door slammed behind him.

Yohanan was a dozen paces from the gate when the doorkeeper challenged him.

"You may come with us if you wish, Nathaniel," Yohanan offered evenly. "This place is doomed to suffer the fate of Gomorrah her sister."

"What are you saying, Yohanan?" Nathaniel asked in puzzlement.

Without further comment Yohanan lifted the bar to the gate and pulled it open. The master and his seven sons walked out into the wilderness towards the Jordan.

Darkness had made the foot-track down the mountain quite treacherous, specially for Yohanan and Simon who were still bearing the chest of scrolls. It was well after midnight and several changes of porters before they had stumbled and bumped their way to the foot of the slope, helped by the light of a waning

moon for the last hour. Yohanan called for a rest and considered his position. He had no torch and no way of striking a fire, no food, and no weapons to beat off the beasts that might be scavenging in the area. More immediately, his seven followers had only the slightest idea of the reasons for this exodus. He could do nothing about fire, food or beasts until the morning, but he could at least tell his sons why they had left the community.

"My sons," he called to them to attract their attention. "For twenty years I have believed that the community is the True Remnant of Israel, the Servant of the Holy One. But tonight the High Priest told me that I should no longer proclaim the Word of the Lord, just as his forebears tried to silence Jeremiah. He said 'It is not good for Israel to repent, but only those of Levi.' While the Almighty says 'I desire not the death of a sinner' that limestone tomb says 'It is better that the people perish.'!"

"I no longer believe that the community is the Remnant, for it has been unfaithful and the High Priest has rejected the Word of the Lord. We have been called out of it, the True Remnant out of the Remnant. We will proclaim His Coming of which our calling is a sure sign."

He opened his chest and took out the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. The light of the moon would not have been sufficient had he not known the text virtually by heart anyway, but ancient custom forbade any more than a couple of lines be recited from memory.

"Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are for signs and wonders in Israel from the Lord of Hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion. And when they say to you, 'Consult the spiritists and the mediums who whisper and mutter', should not a people consult their God instead of the dead on behalf of the living? To the Law and the testimony! If they do not speak according to this Word, it is because they have no light! They will pass through the Land oppressed and starving, and when they are hungry they will be enraged and curse their king, their God as they face upwards! They will look to the earth and behold distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish, and they will be driven away into darkness.

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former days He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but in the latter days He will make glorious the way to the sea from the other side of the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walked in darkness will see a great light; those that live in a dark land, on them will the light shine.

You will multiply the nation, You will increase their gladness; They will be glad in Your Presence as with the gladness of harvest, or as men rejoice when they divide their gains. For You will break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders, the rod of the oppressor, as at the battle of Midian. For every boot of the footsoldier in the tumult and every blood-soaked cloak will be burnt, as fuel for the ..."

Yohanan's voice faded in amazement. He leapt to his feet. "I must go back to the Jordan!" he said with great urgency. "Follow me as soon as you can!" he added as he set off in a stumbling run. His mind was crowded with hundreds of questions, with the most fantastic possibilities. There was no way the stranger would still be at the ford! He would surely have returned to Jericho or pressed on into Moab. Why would he wait in the desert night for one who had politely humoured him like a child or a grandfather in his dotage? What did this man know?

He was Galilean, a contemptible just like his own 'children'. The Judaeans considered them ignorant, little better than proselytes. Galilee itself was virtually a Greek colony now; the land was owned almost entirely by Gentile landlords and worked by labourers who were charged merciless rents in the good years and allowed to starve in the bad. 'Galilee of the Gentiles' indeed! No wonder they either crawled to the Goyim or turned to the sword in revolt! But is this stranger the prophet who will bring the 'great light', who will make the northern province glorious?

Indeed, this stranger had known Yohanan's task better than Yohanan himself! Is this what his mother had guessed in her heart? Or had it been revealed to her? Is this why the stranger had not declared himself, but instead had reminded him of his mother's words? 'The witness of a woman is insufficient', he had glibly told the stranger, only to be answered 'Insufficient to condemn, but sufficient to justify.' Yohanan rolled the prophet's words before his mind like a scroll, progressing past the point where he had left off reading to his 'sons'.

"For a child will be born, and a son given to us; and the government shall be upon His shoulders. His name will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace; there will...

Then his mother's words came back to him like a hammer blow; he stopped dead, his jaw slack. 'Dove on his head, crown on his shoulder.' Of course! Government will rest on his shoulders like a yoke. It will be a duty appointed to him. But he is called the Prince of Peace because his glory will be in the peace he brings. He will wear a dove as his crown!

Yohanan felt weak with dread. The Scriptures also say his name will be 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father'; it is plain, therefore, that he will be given the wisdom, the power and the length of days of the Most Holy One Himself! He is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God! This man whom he had trifled with and answered as though an eccentric! If he had known at the time he would have trembled, but to approach him now after such an insult...

Yohanan fell to his knees in horror. Then more of Isaiah's words came to him. "'My hand made all things,' declares the Lord, 'but I will favour him who is humble and contrite of spirit, who trembles at my word.'" Yohanan regained his feet trembling indeed, his heart in his mouth, and set his face to the meeting he knew would take place.

The moon was high and the eastern horizon was lightening as Yohanan approached the ford. He was treading quietly in spite of himself. The urge came over him to take off his sandals, like Moses as he approached the burning bush in the wilderness of Horeb. He looked up to the rocks where he had spoken with the Stranger the previous day. There he is! Yohanan caught his breath as his eye caught the splash of white on the rock. He had known Yohanan would return and was waiting, sleeping by the road!

Yohanan was seized by remorse. He tore the neck of his tunic down to his navel. Wailing like a young widow he took handfuls of dust from beside the road and threw it over his body and face, rubbing it into his beard and hair. He then sat a dozen paces from the Galilean, sobbing without shame. What could he say? he asked himself in his euphoria of grief. He resolved to wait until the man awoke. He would do better to listen than to speak.

Something flashed overhead in the half-light. Yohanan, still in a daze of dread, looked up to see a pigeon land on the road towards the ford. 'Dove on his head, crown on his shoulders', he chanted his mother's words to himself again. After a few disconsolate snatches at the ground it took wing again for a short hop towards the two men. Yohanan watched bemused as it circled them as if inspecting them. It then dropped confidently onto the stranger's head. After a few moments' hesitation, as if to ensure it had Yohanan's full attention, it pecked twice at grass seeds and then flew away as the stranger raised his head. Yohanan fell face down as if dead.

Yeshua's first thought was that a traveller had collapsed trying to reach him. Then he heard the plea and recognised the voice.

"What do you want of me, Master?" The voice was Yohanan's.

Yeshua stared at the dust-covered head, nonplussed.

"Tell me, and I will do it," Yohanan continued.

"Well, sit up for a start," Yeshua offered.

Yohanan's heart leapt within him. The tears already streaming down his cheeks became tears of joy. Acceptance! Messiah would treat him as a friend! Yohanan, delighted as a child with his favourite uncle, sat cross-legged in the middle of the road.

The time stretched out. Yohanan was bursting with questions but the habits of years clung to him. He would await his orders and not question those above him. It was enough to be recognised. Yeshua was at a total loss. Something had happened to Yohanan during the night. That much was obvious. From the look of him and the early hour it must have shaken him badly and cost him a lot of sleep.

But after the previous day Yeshua could find nothing to say to Yohanan. He knew next to nothing about Miriam, and his strict view of the Law left no common ground for them. Also, the memory of the Voice held Yeshua's imagination. He would go back to his roots, into the wilderness, to await the Lord's pleasure.

Yet, something had shaken Yohanan and it must have been something to do with him. Why else would Yohanan have come back?

"What do you know?" Yeshua asked at length.

"I now know who you are," Yohanan replied, lowering his eyes.

"I am your second cousin."

"You are the Son of the Most High."

What has happened to this man? Yeshua asked himself in shock. If anyone hears him say that in public...! "A servant of the Most High," he replied quickly.

Yohanan bowed his head even further, wondering whether this was a correction or an addition to his confession. Or perhaps his own role was being described. Again the minutes rolled on with Yeshua wondering what to do next and Yohanan with his face downcast awaiting instructions. Eventually Yeshua realized that Yohanan wouldn't go until dismissed. But who was he to dismiss a priest? Maybe they could simply part as fellows. He stood to say his morning Sh'ma, delayed by the bizarre start to the day.

"Hear, O Israel; the Lord is your God, the Lord alone!..."

These words crushed Yohanan again. Even as he had most earnestly sought to be penitent and obedient, he had sinned by preventing a man from reciting his prayer first thing upon awakening! There was no cleanness in him!

"...and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might..."

Now Yeshua was growing perturbed. Instead of joining him in the Sh'ma, Yohanan had collapsed in the most desolate grief. This was all the more pitiful, being accompanied not by wailing but by almost silent choking.

"...and these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart,..." the flutter of clothing down the road caught Yeshua's eye "...and you shall teach them diligently to your sons, and talk of them...". Yohanan's disciples were approaching. If they found him in this condition, with a stranger standing over him...! Yeshua thought it wise to slip away quietly. It might cost him his life to stay any longer. He stooped to put a hand on Yohanan's shoulder.

"Your followers are coming, Yohanan. I must go." Yeshua turned and jogged northward and was soon hidden by the shoulder of the ridge as the road swept to the left.

Yacob first saw the form on the road and guessed it was a victim of thieves. He assumed the man was dead, rushing the last few paces only as the sound of breathing showed there was still life in the body.

"Father!" he cried in shock as he recognised Yohanan. "Come quickly!" he called to the others. They ran up to him, except for Andrew and Simon lumbering along with the chest.

"What has happened to you, my father?"

Yohanan was still bemused. "I have seen...I have seen things I must think about. Please, go on to the ford."

"Would you like one or two of us to sit with you?" Gentle Nathaniel, Yohanan thought to himself.

"Yes; if you and..." his eyes fell on Simon as he and Andrew arrived. "If you and Simon could stay, please." Pious Nathaniel and practical Simon; what one misses the other should see, he thought. "Please, the rest of you, I'll meet you at the ford." The five moved on as ordered taking the chest with them but they were becoming very apprehensive. Every time they saw Yohanan anew the world had been turned upside down again.

"What have you seen, father?" repeated Nathaniel, still on one knee beside him.

Yohanan let his eyes glaze over for a few moments, regathering the events of the last evening in his mind.

"My mother was an old woman before I opened the womb, and there was none after me. She always claimed that my birth was not just remarkable but miraculous. But there was another child that seemed even more important to her, the first son of her cousin. 'Just wait for Miri's boy!' she would sing in her dotage. She would also sing a nonsense verse, 'Dove on his head, crown on his shoulder'. Yesterday I met this man and he brought these things back to my mind but he wouldn't say what they meant. I left him, taking him for a fool.

"Then last night the High Priest showed himself to be a faithless servant, as I have already explained, and then I read the Scriptures to you at the foot of the hill. As I read, I realized that this man is the one of whom the prophet spoke, the one who would make glorious the land of Galilee. That was why I left you in such great haste, because I knew in my heart that he would be waiting for me where I left him. As I hurried to meet him, reciting the words of the prophet to myself, I came to the prophecy 'and the government will be upon his shoulders; his name will be Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace'. The words of my mother, drawn up from the depths by this stranger, came back to me! 'Dove on his head, crown on his shoulder.'"

Yohanan licked his lips and craned forward for emphasis, willing his sons to understand. "I came upon him exactly where I left him. And behold, a dove came down and descended upon him and rested upon his head!"

Nathaniel's lips parted as he glimpsed at the meaning, but immediately his brow was furrowed. Simon was more impressed by Yohanan's earnestness than the story itself.

"What can it mean?" Nathaniel wondered.

"I said to him, 'You are the Son of the Most High!', and he answered, he did not deny it but he answered, 'Servant of the Most High!' Then he stood and said the first few lines of the Sh'ma and left." Yohanan paused, and then asked, "Well, what do you make of it?"

Nathaniel started uneasily, "If he is a prophet sent from God..."

"He is at least that!" Yohanan interrupted.

"If he is a prophet sent from God, then we should remember his words to determine what promise or command is in them."

"Exactly!" Yohanan agreed triumphantly.

"He didn't deny that he was the Son of the Most High?" Simon asked, stunned at the thought. He accepted without question that the stranger was a prophet, since Yohanan and Nathaniel seemed to agree on that point.

"He didn't agree, either," warned Nathaniel cautiously.

"What sort of prophet would allow that sort of statement to go uncorrected unless it were true?" Yohanan exclaimed impatiently, rising to sit on a boulder by the road. The others followed him to the roadside.

"But he did correct you, saying he was only a servant!" Simon interjected. "He can't be both Son and servant!"

"No, his words were to salute me as the servant, since I had already saluted him as the Son!"

"What else did he say?" asked Nathaniel.

"Only the Sh'ma; or at least, a part of it."

"He didn't finish the prayer?" Nathaniel said in surprise. Only in the most pressing of circumstances could the Sh'ma be cut short. "Then obviously he was not praying but rather giving you instruction."

"But the Sh'ma is already written!" Simon was baffled. "Why would a prophet be sent to say what has already been said?"

"In that case there would have been fewer prophets," Nathaniel snorted. "We need to be told once and reminded a thousand times!" He turned back to Yohanan. "Exactly where did he start and finish?" he asked. Yohanan closed his eyes and started reciting to himself.

"Hear, O Israel; the Lord is your God, the Lord alone!
And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your might. And these
words which I command to you this day shall be upon your
heart, and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and
talk of them..."

Yohanan looked up. "That's where he stopped," he said quietly. "There can be no doubt that there is a command, and it is to me. For too long I have not loved the Lord our God with *all* my heart; I have made room for the Law as well. This word tells me that I may hold nothing dear to my heart except the Lord of Hosts. And it tells me to teach you the same."

"Are you saying it is sinful to love the Law?" Nathaniel was incredulous. "What of purity before the Lord? Surely we are to obey *all* the Law, and this command was given as one of many!"

Yohanan fixed his gaze on him. "Your own words convict you. You say 'we are to obey all the Law', and this is true. But you then ask if it is 'sinful to love the Law'. I tell you now that we are commanded to obey the Law but to love the Lawgiver. And as for purity, the High Priest maintained purity. Would you rather go back to him or hear the word of the Lord through a prophet who stops halfway through the Sh'ma?"

Nathaniel saw that the High Priest and the new prophet condemned each other. He could not choose both. "II will see what happens," he stumbled out. "In the meantime, you are my father."

Behind him Simon nodded soberly.

Yeshua stepped off the road about a mile away and hid in a ravine. He had to think about his dream. 'Look to the rock from which you were hewn', were the prophet's words. Abraham had been called into the wilderness to receive his promise and Israel into the desert of Sinai to be made the Chosen Nation. Yeshua resolved to go into the wilderness himself to wait upon the Lord. He would not return until he knew how to obey from the heart, he would thirst until satisfied, he would stay until the desert blossomed for him.

But on the way he would hear Yohanan once more to find out what had happened to him overnight.

Yohanan's followers had been confused and uneasy even before Nathaniel and Simon joined them and this report of a new prophet caused no little concern about Yohanan's sanity. Loukas, already on the point of despair, met it by screaming his rage and grief at the madman who had betrayed him. He then set off down the road to Jericho as fast as his recent surgery allowed. His father was an important man in Antioch; he would be able to get home somehow, he hoped. This left the other six depressed to the point of despair.

"He promised he would be here by dark," Simon repeated solidly. "I'm staying."

The human and animal traffic ground past in the noonday dust. The crowd of spectators that had gathered on the bluff for the regular morning preaching had shrunk to a handful.

"What does he intend to do for food?" asked the ever-practical Andrew. "This will be two days and a night between meals - if we're lucky!"

Nathaniel shrugged. "You won't starve in that time."

Conversation trailed off as the heat grew. Yacob was convinced that Yohanan had disappeared and this 'time to pray' was a smokescreen. Did they not keep all the proper hours for prayer every day at the ford? If any more would be of benefit, why had they not been keeping them up until now? And why not keep them together? Yet he was prepared to wait a day rather than press on home without his brother and partners. By tomorrow not even Simon could doubt

Yohanan's duplicity and they could all head off together. Meanwhile the heat and humidity were oppressive and gathering thunderclouds promised a storm in the afternoon.

"You should have spent your time reading the prophets, my sons," Yohanan said as he appeared from behind a caravan on the road. The six scrambled to their feet.

"We are late, father," said Phillip. "The morning crowd has gone home and their report will keep the afternoon crowd at home with them."

"Not too late, but right on time," Yohanan answered, pointing up the road to Perea. "It's never too late for the Mighty One." A band of pilgrims, obviously intending to take Passover in Jerusalem, were approaching the ford.

"I want you all to pay careful attention today," Yohanan urged. "What I say will be much more important than anything else you have heard me preach." Yohanan turned to wade into the ford. He was on his customary rock near midstream as the pilgrims halted on the bank to hitch their skirts to wade over.

"If you go up to Jerusalem to praise the Merciful, and to thank Him for His faithfulness to His promise, you do well.

"If you go up to learn more of Him, to love Him the better, you do well.

"But Jeremiah warns you; do not trust in these lies, 'The Temple of the Lord!' Do not sin against the Almighty, then stand before Him in His House and claim deliverance, only to continue in your sin! For if you then go home to cheat your neighbour, you have lost everything; for the word of the prophet Micah is to this generation when he said, 'What does the Lord require of you, but to act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your Lord?' Remember that He who said to Moses 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might' also said through him 'You shall not bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself'."

The pilgrims splashed past him as he spoke, and thunder rolled down the valley.

"But this is not a hard word! He asks only what He performs Himself. He commands us to love our neighbour because He Himself loves our neighbour. If the Lord loves him, who are you to hate him?"

"You would make it very hard for me to do my job!" one of the soldiers guarding the band mocked him.

"Not at all," Yohanan replied as conversationally as a bellow could be. "You are paid to protect the innocent, and are given authority for that purpose. Do not use your authority for dishonest gain but be content with your wages."

The six were amazed. Not only was the address completely out of character with the rest of his preaching, but here he was telling a Roman soldier, a man whose life was sworn to protecting the Republic, that it was an easy thing for him to serve both the Republic and the Lord! And apparently those few lines were all he had planned to say today. He never answered gibes until his prepared speech was finished. The six waded out to join him and four pilgrims who had stopped to

either hear or argue some more. A stranger hung back in the crowd, unnoticed but within earshot.

"None of us has loved the Lord with his whole heart, nor has any of us loved his neighbour as himself. We are unworthy to be called His people until we repent and live to please Him by obeying these two great commandments."

"But father, what does it mean to love the Lord, if not to obey all that is written in the Law?" Nathaniel was struggling within himself to make sense of what was happening. The others were simply stunned.

"It means to obey as a grown son for love of his father, instead of a child for fear of the rod; to not only obey with your body as the hypocrites do, but to rejoice with your heart and soul as you do so!" Yohanan's eyes blazed with passion and the unseen stranger's eyes moistened.

"How can you tell me to love my neighbour? He is a sinner!" objected one of the pilgrims.

"You are a sinner, too, but you clothe yourself, feed yourself, protect yourself. The Law tells you, to love him in the same way as you love yourself. If you have two coats, give one to him who has none. If you have two loaves, give one to him who is hungry."

The stranger nodded to himself, and stepped away from the crowd to come down to Yohanan.

"You are an old fool!" spat out one of the pilgrims and turned up the road to Jericho. Two others followed him. The fourth stood looking at him in pity; or was it longing? Thunder boomed along the valley as the promised storm gathered itself overhead.

"When Messiah comes," he said simply, and followed the others.

Yohanan watched him go until the stranger walked into the line of his vision. When he saw who he was, he fell on his knees in water.

"I would be baptised by you," Yeshua said.

"No! I need to be baptised by you!" Yohanan protested.

"Would you deny me a place in the Israel of God?" Yeshua asked.

The thunder cracked and roared overhead as Yohanan gaped then regained his feet to wade into deeper water. Yeshua followed.

"Will you love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might?" Yohanan demanded.

"Yes."

"Will you love your neighbour as yourself?"

"Yes," Yeshua replied.

Yohanan lowered him into the water then raised him again. As he came up, the rain hit them like a mallet, and a rapid series of thunderings hammered across the valley. Yohanan and Yeshua looked sharply at each other, as though they had heard something through the din. Yohanan's eyes widened and he nodded slowly. Yeshua waded out of the river and set off to the south. Yohanan watched him until the driving rain hid him from view.

"What are we going to do about food, father?" Yacob's voice jarred him. Yohanan waved the question away without looking.

Yeshua knew he was getting weaker. The nights should be getting warmer this time of year but he felt chilled beyond shivering after a day that had swum before his eyes. He forced himself to keep moving as he had for... for how long? A week? Two weeks? A lifetime?

He had walked south along the margin of the Dead Sea. There had been a couple of pools of fresh water from the thunderstorm still in the beds of the wadis running down through the wilderness. He remembered thinking that one of them must have been the Kidron, so he must have drunk water from Mount Zion without knowing it.

That realisation had staggered him at the time. For some reason (what was it again? he mused) it seemed to sum up his whole life. The thought skipped away from him before he could study it.

There had been some berries on some bushes too, and then some bird's eggs but he had left them untouched. Couldn't remember why. He felt his mind drift away again.

He remembered the Word he heard in the dream, though. And the Voice in the thunder, too. Yohanan had also heard it, obvious from the look on his face. "I am well pleased," it had said.

So here he was. In the Wilderness. Waiting on the Lord to receive his own Law. Did not He promise through Isaiah that the wilderness would be made like Eden, like the garden of the Lord? Well, he hadn't starved yet! But the weakness...

*"Encourage the exhausted, strengthen the weak,
Say to the anxious hearts
"Take courage, don't fear!
Your God comes with vengeance,
His recompense will save you.'
Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then the lame will leap like a deer
and the tongue of the dumb shout for joy.
Water will break forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert..."*

He realised with dull surprise that he was lying face down. He must have fallen again.

*"A highway will be there called the Highway of Holiness.
The unclean will not travel on it
and fools will not wander there,
nor will any vicious beast go on it.
But the redeemed will walk there,
the ransomed of the Lord will return.*

*They will come with joyful shouting to Zion
with everlasting joy upon their heads.
They will find gladness and joy,
sorrow and sighing will flee away..."*

He noticed he was still lying on the same rocks but the chill was suddenly more intense. He must have dozed off before regaining his feet. A vague light made him think that dawn was coming.

"Getting hungry?" the voice startled him. He looked up to see a man sitting on a rock at the edge of the gully.

Somehow he found the energy to roll over and sit on the rounded stones of the wadi he had fallen into.

"Yes," he croaked out, wondering how else to answer.

"Remember how Moses fed Israel in the desert? They gathered bread from the ground. And remember how David boasted 'You have set a table for me in the face of my enemies'?"

"Yes," he croaked again. The stranger's face seemed to constantly change, as though a reflection on water; no, as though it were constantly melting and being remade. 'I must be sick,' Yeshua thought to himself.

"Well, the same has been done for you!" beamed the man. "See that stone there? The one by your foot? Doesn't that look like a loaf of bread?"

Yeshua looked down. It did indeed look like a loaf. "Yes," he croaked a third time.

"You have been given the perfect loaf! All that remains is for you to change it into bread! Surely if a prophet like Moses can do it, someone such as yourself will also succeed!" The stranger leant forward to emphasise his words, earnest that Yeshua be reasonable.

Yeshua stared at the stone. "Moses did not make bread, nor did David. They both ate what the Lord provided." At the mention of the Lord the stranger flickered with what might have been rage, but by the end of the sentence he was smiling again, as friendly as ever.

"But what of Elijah? Didn't he make more oil?"

"No. The Lord provided." Again that merest instant of rage.

"They were only prophets! What are *you*?" The stranger paused for a moment. "Yes, what *are* you?" he repeated contemplatively. "Are you in fact a nothing? Are you simply fooling yourself, because no-one else would be fooled?" The stranger's eyes bored into him.

'He knows me, and all the questions of my soul,' Yeshua thought to himself. "I am... I am not sure," he stumbled out. "I mean... If I am His own, He will supply my needs. If I am not, I would rather perish than live to blaspheme Him."

The rage was scarcely contained now; the stranger's eyes glowed with it. Yet the face remained poised, and the eyebrows rose politely as he responded evenly. "Then now is the perfect time to find out! Command this stone to become bread! If it does, then you are vindicated. If it doesn't, then you will perish as you

wish but knowing the truth at last!" The face seemed to flicker faster than ever. Only the eyes were hard.

Yeshua heard his own voice replying "It is written 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of the Lord.'"

The stranger screamed as he leapt at him, his hands crooked like talons. In an instant they *were* talons, and the man a lion, no a bear, a vulture, a.... nothing! Shock flowed through Yeshua's body like ice and his heart hammered in his throat, blocking his scream. He sagged in relief.

He looked back at the stone that looked like a loaf. The light was stronger now and he could see the ants crawling on it. Ants! Unable to believe it yet knowing it was true, he leapt forward. He snatched at the bread and tore it. It was stale but it was bread! He fervently thanked his Father for this manna in the wilderness as he crammed his mouth with the hard crust, his tongue too swollen to chew and his mouth too dry to swallow. He gagged and coughed out his mouthful.

Clutching the rest of the loaf to his chest he staggered down the wadi, looking for a pond. There was one only a few dozen paces downstream, with goat dung around it and the Dead Sea another hundred paces or so further away.

Revived by the food and water, Yeshua wondered what to make of the stranger. Had it been a dream? Perhaps a vision? He remembered the strange vagueness about the face and the eyes that had been so hard, never blinking. He recalled how they had flared at the mention of the Mighty One. In hate, he thought, or was it perhaps in agony?

"He was a demon," Yeshua said to himself, hollowly. As though outside himself, he realised he was not afraid. Just another problem.

He chuckled to himself at the thought of how earnest the temptation had been at the time but how feeble looking back on it. The bread had been there all the time! The All-powerful had already provided it but Satan had tried to trick him into thinking that his own power had fed him. Moses had warned against this:-

"In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. Otherwise you might say in your heart 'My power and the strength of my hand have gotten me this'."

Yeshua thought long on this warning and on his words with Yacob back in Nazareth. Do the flowers say 'With my own strength I have gotten this sunlight and rain'? He had told Yacob that he hungered to obey as spontaneously as they, yet they do nothing except wait on the Lord to provide. Is this the Law he had come out here to receive?

The loaf was almost gone. He tucked the last of it into his belt and started to walk again. "Let no man leave any of it till the morning," Moses had said. Yeshua stood still. The manna had been provided one day at a time and any kept for later had turned to worms. The meaning was clear; each day's blessing must be awaited in trust. The mercy of the Almighty cannot be stockpiled. To attempt this is to deny His faithfulness.

Yeshua took out the morsel and finished it, the full loaf sitting in his belly like wine in a full skin. 'Each gathered according to what he could eat,' he said to himself. He struck out uphill to lose himself in the gorges of the wilderness.

The heat beat upon him like a hammer upon copper. The cliffs stood above him like flames in a kiln. There had been a small puddle at the foot of a dry waterfall. He had dug it deeper to drink from it and to plunge his head into its coolness. Now he felt weak from hunger but at least rational. He would soak his cloak in the water and climb that hillock to catch the breeze and look for a bush. It was the season for berries; he had eaten nothing but a handful of them since the loaf several days ago.

He had climbed only a few dozen paces before he started losing his balance. 'The heat,' he muttered as he steadied himself against a slab of rock. He started up again but had hardly covered his own length before a pain stabbed his bowels like a sword. His legs buckled under him and he fell, wide-eyed from agony as his belly threatened to explode. Only half conscious he pulled his loincloth free. After an eternity the pain faded enough for his vision to clear. What was he doing? Oh, yes; climbing the hill. He turned lethargically to crawl up the slope, but the effort brought the spasms back again.

His body was being crushed by a giant. He started to groan, but this became a gargle as his stomach cramped and emptied itself. He was not aware of his bowels opening, only the dagger-like pain shooting through them. The agony endured for ever, and then eased enough for him to draw a breath before returning. Again and again this happened, until he was heaving bile and aware of nothing but a sea of bitterness and the endless pain. Eventually even this ebbed enough to dump him into the sleep of exhaustion where he lay.

"You look in a pretty bad way."

Yeshua startled and looked up. The stranger was back.

"Go away," Yeshua replied, exhausted.

"Not very good, is it?" the stranger persisted. "Water that turns your stomach bitter, berries that melt your bowels... even a gentile would give his son bread if he asked for it, but what have you been given? Poison, washed down with poison! I don't think you need wonder who you are any more. You must be His enemy if He would take such delight in destroying you."

"I am not destroyed."

"Ha!" the stranger snorted. "What has He given you that has not been bitter?"

"You already know. The bread."

The stranger roared in merriment, slapping his thigh.

"You fool! That was left by a goat-herd! Didn't you notice all the dung?" The stranger's eyes gleamed. "There was a village barely an hour south of you! If you had kept heading south you would have been safe, or even if you had waited an hour the boy's father would have carried you back home! But you..." the stranger couldn't control his laughter any longer, "you have been led out here so the beasts could eat you while your flesh is still warm!"

"I will not perish!" Yeshua replied stubbornly. "He has promised

*He will give his angels charge of you
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up
lest you strike your foot against a stone.
You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot."*

The stranger's eyes again held that buried fury but the smile was cheerful. "So He makes promises. And this..." he waved his hand at the surrounding desolation, "this is how He fulfils them."

"The Lord is not false," Yeshua stated. But he was so tired! He closed his eyes and slumped to the ground.

"Think of what it would mean to thousands of pious Jews if, just once, He fulfilled a promise!"

"He does it every day," replied Yeshua without opening his eyes.

"But I mean an obvious fulfilment, a miracle like in the days of old," persisted the stranger. "Perhaps you're just the one to do it, too. Look at this!"

Yeshua opened his eyes. He caught his breath in shock. Far below him was the Court of the Gentiles. He was on the peak of one of the towers on the Temple wall.

"Just think," said the stranger. "All these men coming to worship, eager to see the Great Salvation; all these learned Doctors, teaching that when Messiah comes He will proclaim Deliverance from the pinnacle of the Temple; and here are you, trusting in that psalm you have just now recited, where it is promised

*'His angels will bear you up in their hands,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.'*

"So take hold of this promise! Here, throw yourself down and vindicate Him before all these thousands! You need not be afraid of dishonouring Him. If you are preserved men will glorify Him and if you perish they will simply think you a fool. You will be granted your wish, to glorify Him or perish in the attempt."

Yeshua stared down at the crowds. "It is not for me to tell the Almighty where and when. 'You shall not put the Lord God to test.'"

The stranger became exasperated. "Don't you see what I'm saying to you, man? Look at them, every one of them aching for you to claim the crown! Think

of what you could do for them, think of what you could teach them! And not just them, either. There are the gentile nations, too!"

In a moment Yeshua saw men of every nation flash before him, great expanses of strange lands, the babble of their tongues, the pomp and arrogance of their kings. And as he watched the stranger kept talking, his voice gaining urgency with each sentence.

"You think of Israel as a great people; and you are right for they are indeed great. But compared to the Goyim they are as a grain of dust in a bushel of wheat! Look at the rulers of the nations, how they oppress the poor and deny justice to the innocent! Myriads of myriads of men crying for a just king! While you sit here doing nothing, how many of the righteous die for righteousness' sake? How many of the ignorant die with the name of a vanity on their lips? How many more are born to darkness, to walk in darkness, to die in darkness?"

"The whole world is crying out for you to declare yourself, to take the crown of your Father, to destroy the evildoers and establish justice under the whole heavens! Yet you sit here in your own shit and debate subtleties! Don't you want to help these people? Why do you wait? Is it because you are afraid to take God at his word?"

The stranger steadied himself and dropped his tone from urgency back to sincerity. "You can do so much for so many countless myriads and all their generations after them. You have so much to teach them, show them, tell them. You could help them, heal them, defend them. Most of all you could give them peace. All that you see is mine; but just stretch out your arms to me and I will place it all in your hands."

The vision faded. There was the stranger's face, pleading with him to show compassion on the suffering of the world. "If you have any love for your neighbour, any thought at all for his welfare, how can you refuse?" the man asked quietly.

Yeshua was still stunned by the vision. He drew himself together. "If the Holy One would make me King, I shall be King. But I will not stretch out my hands to you, for it is written 'You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only'."

The stranger seemed to swell with rage, his features quivering and his eyes blazing. "You fool! You weak, cowardly, moralizing fool!" he exploded. Yes, he was growing perceptibly, his features changing as he spoke. His rage blended into a King's oratory.

"Everything that is mine, I offer you. Lands, thrones, men, yes even their hearts and souls! A whole world and all in it, yours for the asking." By now he was a tall man, unbelievably handsome and noble of bearing. His voice had the texture of dark, rich velvet, his gaze the authority to command emperors.

"Ask, and you shall receive," he pledged. Then his eyes flashed with wrath as he clenched his fist. "But oppose me and I will surely crush you! I will hang you from a tree for the crows to peck at, accursed forever!" Then, in a change no king could match, he opened his palm and smiled warmly.

"Yet I am also merciful. I will give you some time. You might yet repent of this folly!" The hands swept beautifully, graciously as he promised "I will listen to you and grant you everything ask. Just call on me any time at all for anything at all." Surely no prince was ever more magnanimous to any favourite! The smile changed the tiniest amount, from interested to intent. "Even as you hang from your tree it will not be too late!"

Then Yeshua was alone on the hill, his body still aching from the spasms.

He let his head fall against the stony slope. "Please, my God," Yeshua groaned. "If you would destroy me, do it now. But if not, show me how I am to please you!"

Then he heard a Voice. "Why did you come out here?"

It was a quiet, powerful voice, like a mighty torrent heard at the limit of earshot. Yeshua paused, considering his answer.

"You know better than I," he submitted.

"Then I will tell you. You came out here to die."

Yeshua knew the Voice spoke the truth. He accepted the verdict. "My life is yours," he surrendered.

"Then live it!" the Voice commanded.

Yeshua was perplexed. "I am to live?"

"You are to live for me," the Voice confirmed.

Yeshua struggled to understand. "How am I to live for you? What must I do?"

"The flowers don't ask me that. They obey without instruction."

Yeshua bowed his head. He had been rebuked in his own words. "But flowers don't *obey* anything. They just *be* flowers!"

"Just so. And you will not obey what I command, you will *be* what I command."

Yeshua groped for a meaning. "Am I to be a prophet? Like in ancient times?" His thoughts leapt ahead. "Am I to reveal your word to the people?"

"No. You are to *be* my word to the people."

Now Yeshua was stunned. "But I don't know you!" he cried in anguish. "Oh, how I long to know you but I don't!" he wept.

The Voice did not answer immediately. It seemed to weigh its words as Yeshua waited in expectation. "You asked your brother 'Do you never thirst to see God's Face? Are you always content to obey with eyes downcast and not drawn to gaze at the Face of Him who speaks?'"

Terror crept over Yeshua. Now he realised the full meaning of those words. Now he knew the power of that ancient question, 'Shall a man see God, and live?' Now he knew what the Voice had meant when it said 'You came out here to die.' His resolve to wander until he either perished or knew the Lord; was it not just another way of saying 'I shall perish of exposure; if not exposure to the elements, then exposure to the Fear of Isaac.?'

The Voice had paused again. Now it spoke. "Do you still thirst to see my Face?"

In an ecstasy of dread, Yeshua replied, "Lord, you know I do!"
"Then look!"

Yeshua sensed as much as saw that he was no longer on the hillside but on a floor of purest marble. He was still lying face down and the burden of Glory passing over him was grinding him into the floor, the Psalm that filled eternity was crushing his bones. It took more strength than he had, but he forced his chin forward to look.

Before him was a vast sea. The source of the Psalm and the outflowing torrent of Glory was on the far shore. How powerful it must be at its source! he thought awestruck, as the force of Majesty on his forehead threatened to snap his neck back. And despite the immense distance every detail on that far shore could be discerned.

For there were four living creatures, marvellous and powerful, who were the greatest powers on Earth; and they cried out constantly,

*"Great and wonderful are Your deeds,
O Lord God Almighty!
Just and true are Your ways
O King of Ages!
Who shall not fear and glorify Your Name, O Lord?
For You alone are Holy.
All nations shall come and worship You,
for Your judgement has been revealed!"*

And as they sing, one of the creatures in the form of an eagle soars across Heaven, shouting "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty!"

And the second creature in the form of a bull kneels before the Throne, roaring "Worthy, Worthy, Worthy is the Lord God, from whom comes all Glory and Honour and Power!

And the third creature in the form of a lion crouches before the Throne, roaring "Merciful, Merciful, Merciful is the Lord God, who exalts the humble!"

And the fourth creature with the face of a man falls before the Throne, crying "Just, Just, Just is the Lord God, who will destroy the Destroyer!"

And as everything that has power on Earth gives praise, myriads of myriads of mighty angels arrayed as though for battle proclaim with one voice "Our Lord and God is worthy of all Power and Glory and Honour and Praise and Worship and Tribute and Blessing!"

And as everything on Earth and in Heaven tells the Glory of Him who sits upon the Throne, the depths of the sea and the foundations of the dry land find voice to shout "Amen! Amen! Amen! The God of gods and King of kings has all power in Heaven and on Earth and under the Earth!"

And all these things happen without ceasing.

And there in the midst of the Glory are twenty four lesser thrones, twelve on either side of Him who lives through countless ages. Whenever all creation praises the Glory of Him who sits on the Throne (and this was happening without

pause) the twelve Elders of Israel on His left hand cast themselves before the feet of the Majesty and cry "Great, Great, Great is the Holiness of Him who gave us His Law!"

Then the twelve on His right hand stand before the Throne of Glory and exult "Great, Great, Great is the Love of Him who gave us His Son!"

Then there is silence in Heaven.

There is silence on Earth.

There is silence under the Earth.

The four Powerful Creatures look to the Throne.

The myriads of myriads of mighty angels look to the Throne.

The twenty four Elders look to the Throne.

And He whose Name is above every name and whose Power is above every power and whose Majesty is above every majesty....stands!

Yeshua is as a dead man. The torrent of Glory hammering into his face and the weight of the Presence crushing him into the floor, he is held in a vice of dread. He could not bear to watch but he would give his soul rather than look away. For the Almighty is walking towards him as all Creation keeps silence.

The Shekinah pummels him, it melts his bones, it grinds him into the flawless marble as there but an arm's length from his face are the Feet as the Voice of Him who Commands says "Stand!" and every tongue in Heaven cries "Who shall stand in His Holy Place?" and the Voice again says "Son of Man, stand upon your feet" as the Spirit enters him and the powerful hand the outstretched arm lifts him who has no strength of his own and he sees the legs the body of the shoulders of the Lord of All and as he sees the Face that dread that terrible Face his heart leaps because he sees that Face and now he knows what he must do as the Almighty leads him no carries him across the sea as the Creatures cry

*"In Your strength the king rejoices, O Lord!
You have given him his heart's desire
and have not withheld the request of his lips."*

And the myriads of myriads of mighty angels take up the song, singing

*"For You meet him with good blessings
and set a crown of fine gold upon his head.
He offered his life to You, and You gave it back to him,
length of days for ever and ever."*

while the Throne swims in his sight and he swoons from the Power of the Presence that carries him he knows he is being placed how could this be? his mind is overpowered as the Glory shines about him as he is seated on the Throne and those who sit on the twenty four lesser thrones proclaim

*"His glory is great through Your help;
yea, You have made him blessed forever,*

*Glad with the joy of Your Presence.
Through the steadfast Love of the Most High
he shall not be moved."*

as the Glory pours over him to anoint him to the Throne not oil for an Earthly throne but Glory for the Heavenly Throne as the Power beats him senseless his head rolls to one side and he is fed a piece of bread and a goblet of wine is held to his lips the first to taste the Feast of the Just and then another sip of wine as the Mighty One closes his eyes and ears promising "You shall surely live!"

"Has he opened his eyes yet?"

"No; he hasn't moved since you brought him in."

David studied the stranger he had found in the wilderness this morning. What a mess!

"I poured some oil onto his burns," his wife ventured timidly. Oil was expensive and she was unsure whether or not David would approve. This stranger would probably die anyway. Even if he didn't he looked too poor to be able to pay for it when he recovered. But she knew her husband was a tender-hearted man and besides, better to tell him now when there was still hope than later when he was dead.

"Good," he agreed. But those burns were nasty! Even on the eyelids! He must have collapsed looking up that hill sometime before midday the previous day, and the sun had scorched his face all afternoon; he had been facing southwest when he found him.

"He has to drink!" David insisted. "Even if we just wet his tongue and let it trickle down his throat!"

The stranger had been delirious for a time this morning as David carried him home and had swallowed a few sips of water and a morsel of bread placed into his mouth before lapsing back again. But he needed more than just a few sips! The blistered face weeping his juices in places belied his true condition. He was desperately dehydrated. The swollen tongue and the rough breathing showed it now, though David had known it when he saw the discarded loincloth and the foulness he had passed on the hill.

His wife poured a cup of water from the pitcher and let a few drops trickle into the stranger's mouth, taking care to do it just as he started to breathe out. David watched, half wondering who this stranger was and half wondering if a demon lived in that wadi he crawled out of before collapsing. Why, only last week a couple of his sheep had fallen to their deaths into it just upstream of where he had found the stranger. He had left them there to distract the jackals from the remainder of the flock.

The stranger seemed to be trying to swallow, his oversized tongue working in his mouth. Esther was being very cautious. She was a good woman and would be patient with him. He then looked to the table for dinner and noticed that she had not prepared a proper meal. Oh well, she must have been busy with the stranger and bread one night wouldn't hurt him. He rose to get a loaf.

"I've prepared everything for a stew, but couldn't collect firewood in case he needed me," she explained as she saw him move to the oven. "I'll go over to Elizabeth now and borrow some." She rose from the stranger's side and went outside. It was dusking but not dark yet.

David crossed the hut to the stranger and took up the cup. Perhaps he was just getting used to it but his breath didn't seem to rasp so much now. In, out, in, out, in, and a tiny trickle of water as he started to exhale. The tongue worked, the stranger gave a slight gag, and after a few broken breaths the rhythm returned. He repeated the process and the stranger gagged again, this time with a low moan. He waited. Another moan, this time with a cadence. He was trying to speak, but his swollen tongue and parched throat prevented his words from being recognisable. But he could probably hear! thought David.

"You will live!" David assured him as he had while carrying him home. "You will surely live!" The stranger still tried to talk. 'Manuel', was it? Or 'Peniel'? Yes, Peniel! Had this man walked from the Jabbok? Or was he bound for it and lost? David shrugged the questions away. "You shall surely live!" David repeated, and the stranger fell back into unconsciousness.

Yeshua awoke when David returned after midnight from his watch over the sheep. Spring had truly started but with the fine weather came the early morning frosts. David went to throw another skin over his guest before turning in himself. He startled when he heard the blessing from the huddle on the floor.

"Do you want something to eat or to drink?" he asked as his surprise subsided.

"A cup of water, kind sir, if you will," Yeshua replied thickly. The words were all but a mumble.

It took David a few moments to light the candle and find the goat's milk. By the time he turned back to the stranger the breathing from the floor was once again slow and regular. David decided he was in need of liquid more than sleep. He lifted the body, slumped him against the wall and shook him until he woke.

Yeshua surfaced into consciousness. He saw a friendly, concerned face.

"Here, drink this," the face urged him. It seemed to flicker, as though unsure of its own shape. Yeshua's body jolted rigid with sudden recognition and he started to cry out "Hear, O Israel; the Lord is your God, the Lord alone!..." and then as he truly awoke he realised that this was not him who had tempted him. The flickering was not in the face itself but from the candlelight. The face joined him in the Sh'ma, and the joy of praying with a fellow Israelite swept through him. So what if his words were only mumbles!

David was relieved that this stranger had recovered enough to be lucid and was satisfied now that he was an Essene, lost from the monastery away to the north. Who else would pray before drinking when dying of thirst?

"Don't gulp it," David warned. "Just sip it slowly."

The stranger slurped noisily between cracked lips and past a swollen tongue.

"You're a long way from home," David commented.

"Nazareth," Yeshua replied, in both agreement and explanation.

David was surprised. A Galilean? How then could he be an Essene, who were all from the Jerusalem priestly caste?

"What's your name?" David asked.

"Yeshua bar Yoseph. Carpenter. May the Most Merciful bless you for your mercy to me." The blessing faded towards the end.

David was confused. A Galilean carpenter in the middle of the Judean wilderness? Not even near a road? But Yeshua was already asleep again. David laid him down and covered him.

Yeshua was shaken awake the next morning. The face staring into his own lost its frown and smiled, speaking his name as his eyes focused on it.

"Who are you?" Yeshua asked, his thick tongue still clumsy.

"My name is David. I found you in the wilderness. Now, how about some soup?"

A woman appeared beyond David's shoulder. She held a rough mug in each hand. David took them and offered one to Yeshua. Yeshua took it and only then did he notice how hungry, thirsty and weak he had become. He could barely lift the mug to his lips.

David was taken by surprise. No prayer! But last night...!

The soup was not very hot, or Yeshua would have made a mess of it. His lips were cracked, his tongue swollen and his movements clumsy.

"You are most generous," he acknowledged the kindness as he gathered his wits and strength. Then he noticed that his face was stinging; no, as he became aware of it he realised that his face was in torment. What had happened to him? He lifted a hand towards his cheek but the movement was so slow and feeble that David held his wrist before he made contact.

"Don't touch it!" David warned him. "You'll make it unclean."

Yeshua gaped, as much in confusion as in pain. "How... When did this happen?" he asked David.

"In the wilderness, the day before yesterday."

Yeshua took another mouthful of soup. Lentils floating in it, the thought flashed through his mind.

"You have been very good to me," Yeshua repeated.

"You are my brother," David shrugged in reply, drinking his own soup.

Yeshua took another mouthful. "But what do you know of me, to call me 'brother'?" he asked.

David finished his cup. "You were dying; that's enough. The details will come later." The laconic voice made further questions seem pointless.

Yeshua was now gulping his soup as much as the burning mask of his face would allow. He noticed that David, despite his apparent indifference, was watching intently. The mug was soon empty.

"Stay inside as much as you can for the next few days," David advised.

"When you do need to go outside, wear this to cover your face." He indicated a makeshift veil made from sticks and old cloth. Yeshua nodded dumbly.

"Do you feel strong enough to stand?" David asked.

Yeshua felt like a traveller's cloak; dirty and limp, thrown in a corner. But he nodded and struggled to get his feet under him. David reached over to hold his shoulders and pulled him upright. The exertion made Yeshua's head spin and he stood still for a few deep breaths while David held him steady.

"Is that enough for now?" David suggested.

Again Yeshua nodded. David lowered him to the floor.

"I'll be back about noon," he said, and left the house.

Yeshua remained slumped in the corner all morning, drifting from a daze to sleep and back again. Associations drifted into his mind, jumbled against one another and then drifted away. But through it all, recurring irrepressibly, was the Face. He had seen the Face and now he knew. To see is to know.

He couldn't help but feel his face glowing with the radiance of the blessing, like Moses' so long ago. Don't touch it, you'll make it unclean. Wear the veil when you go out of the tent of the Ark. The Face. He had known it all his life, but he had never known it for what it was. Now he knew what to do, because to see the Face is to know the Spirit. Of course! He shook his head in wonder. How could the Face possibly have been anything but that which he had seen it to be? Like a puzzle that must be studied for hours before the jumble of splotches becomes a face, but which forever afterwards cannot be glimpsed without the face being the most obvious part... he had seen the Face and now he would never be able to not see it. Everywhere he looks he will see it because to see it once is to see it forever. And now his own face bore the scars of it as his mind wandered back to the veil.

Two days passed before Yeshua was strong enough to go any distance from the house. He found a shaded ledge and sat to watch David and Mordecai his cousin at work. He was amused by the sheer stupidity of the sheep who would all wander over a cliff if their leader happened to fall. They even needed the shepherd's wail to lead them from one clump of grass to the next or they could starve within the week, he mused.

On the fourth day a jackal got amongst the flock, killing one lamb and scattering the rest before it fell under David's staff. Most returned after an hour of calling, but there were still two missing at nightfall. David set off to find them before the moon set. Yeshua offered to take the first watch at the stone sheep pens, the more difficult watch without the moon would be better left to Mordecai. Yeshua heard David's wail drifting up the valley from time to time.

Shortly before midnight David returned with a lamb over his shoulders and a ewe at his heel. Yeshua, seated on a rock in the middle of the fold, challenged loudly as he heard the rattle at the gate. He didn't feel strong enough to fight a jackal. He'd much rather scare it away! The sheep trembled in panic until David's voice calmed them.

"Don't worry so much about the gate, Yeshua!" he called in good humour. "The nasties prefer to come over the walls!"

Yeshua met him as he closed the gate behind him and lowered the lamb to the ground. He looked happy but exhausted, a hard job well done. Both men walked back to the rock and sat.

"You're not hurt?" Yeshua asked.

"No, just a few scratches and bumps," David replied. "How are you taking the cold?"

"Mordecai was most generous, allowing me to take the first watch," Yeshua admitted obliquely.

"Then go to bed," David ordered. "I'll watch until he comes."

"No; I slept half of the day! You need the rest more."

"I am the shepherd; you are the hireling," David answered. Then, fearing he might have been too blunt, added "I only meant that it is my right to command. Now, go."

The next morning was the Day of Preparation. Yeshua was struck to see it treated like any other day. When he took the midday loaf out to David he asked how they celebrated the Sabbath.

"We pray," David answered simply.

"Of course; but how do the sheep manage by themselves? Can they stay out of trouble for a whole day or do you leave them in their pens?"

"Don't be stupid!" David answered with contempt. "We take them out to drink and pasture, like any other day."

"But it is the Day of Rest!" Yeshua protested.

"Yes, so we allow the sheep to rest," David replied. "It's not a Day of Imprisonment, or a Day of Thirst, or a Day of Starvation!"

Yeshua looked lost for words. David softened his face.

"Be assured that if we locked our sheep away for two nights and a day, they would survive. But ask yourself, is the Day of the Rest to be enjoyed, or to be endured? It's a gift, not an imposition! So we allow our sheep to enjoy it as well."

"But you unlock the gate. You lead them out. If one is injured, you carry it back," Yeshua protested. "This must not be done!"

"And the rabbis open the synagogue. They walk there from their homes and back again. They carry the scrolls from their box to the lectern and back again," David answered. "Make no mistake, they work on the Sabbath! The difference is that they make up their own rules about what is work and what isn't work to gain praise from men, and thereby to increase their profits from business during the other six days. We work to bring relief to our sheep but no man praises us. So ask yourself; is it lawful to do an act of kindness on the Sabbath or to impose hardship? Which is more pleasing to the Lord?"

Indeed, Yeshua said to himself as he chewed on his bread. The Commandment says that the ox and the ass must be given rest, as well as Israel; if the men and women may eat during the Rest then surely the livestock may eat as well! Here, too, he saw the outline of the Face.

Judaea – 782 AUC (29 A.D.)

The year had been one of continual walking and preaching. And from time to time he had seen the Face bidding him to do something impossible. The first time he had been totally at a loss but the Face was there urging him, showing him how He did it and inviting Yeshua to do likewise. Young Yohan, brother of Yacob, asked him how he could heal lepers with a touch. Yeshua found it impossible to explain. He just shrugged and answered “I can do nothing by myself. I only see what my Father does, and whatever He does I do the same.” “But the pharisees say you're breaking the Law by healing these sick!” Yohan pleaded.

“Whoever takes offence at what I do is taking offence at what my Father does every day.” That was the end of that issue but his followers heard the murmurings and were concerned.

There were a dozen or so men who had followed him; Yacob, Andrew, Simon, Philip, Nathaniel; they had all left the Baptiser to follow him. Yohanan had told them to do that, they said. Since then they had been joined by another handful who were usually there. They disappeared from time to time to attend to family or other business but were always eager to return.

And then there were the women. Yeshua was not sure what to do about them. It was dangerous for them to leave the protection of their families. But could he tell them to go away? They were not his to command, and if the Lord would have them follow him then he must accept that. Certainly they seemed no less devoted to the Kingdom than any of the men!

He was concerned that the leading Jews were starting to call for his death as punishment for what they perceived as blasphemy. How could it be blasphemy, to proclaim what the Lord God was about to do to fulfil all His promises to His people? Even though Yeshua could not comprehend their fervent opposition, he had to accept it as a fact. Only the Republic's rigidly-enforced separation of religious and civil authority guaranteed his safety against their fury.

But Yeshua's insistence on preaching the Kingdom was coming close to forfeiting even that protection. Yes, the message of the Kingdom! That was what it was all about and that was what was attracting the attention of the Republic authorities more than anything else. It was an offence against Republic Law to argue in favour of a Kingdom of any type. The Republic would not tolerate Kingship. He had already been warned about that. Yeshua was being threatened from both sides.

He needed to pray. He needed to be refreshed again, to get away from the crowds and the beggars and the cripples that flocked around him constantly. He would get out of the house early tomorrow morning, well before sunrise, and climb up into the mountains. That was how he had refreshed himself while living in Nazareth and he would do it again tomorrow.

“Simon, Yacob,” he said to his companions on either side, “Tomorrow we will leave early and go into the hills. Pack a shoulder-bag with some bread and fill a waterskin.”

“Yes, master,” Simon replied and rose from his sleeping-place on the floor beside him to prepare the packs.

The pre-dawn air was not cold but it felt humid, there being a light summer breeze off the Mediterranean. Yeshua turned resolutely towards the slopes of Mount Hermon to the north-east. The road beneath their feet was clear in the light of the waning moon.

Dawn had spread across the sky by the time they left the road and turned onto a goat track more directly up the slope. Once far enough from the road to be concealed the three men stopped for a quick bite of bread and a drink.

“What was that?” Simon asked in alarm. “Did you hear a scuffling of rocks?” The other two men looked to each other. All three reached for their staves. The sound was clearer now. It was no animal. Someone was following them. Young Yohan came around the spur of rock. “Hello,” he said breezily. “I have more food and water so I won't be a hindrance,” he said in pre-emptive self-defence, patting his shoulder bag.

Yacob looked to Yeshua as if to apologise for his brother's presumption, but Yeshua just shrugged. “Then let's get moving again.”

The day wore on. Thankfully some cloud cover came over in mid-morning to take the sting out of the sun. The humid breeze from the south-west turned slightly more westerly and as they climbed higher it was only their exertions that kept them warm. The air itself was becoming clammy. The sparse grass under their feet seemed to be collecting dew even as noon approached, and wisps of a light mist developed upslope of them. Still Yeshua felt driven to climb higher as he had so often climbed the hills around Nazareth. Soon they were into the mist.

“Master, how much higher do we need to go?” Simon asked. “Otherwise we might not have enough daylight to get down off this mountain and the moon rises late.”

Yeshua fought down the compulsion to continue climbing indefinitely. He recognised in his heart that same urge that took him into the wilderness a year ago. That would have caused his death had he not been found by David. Had he thought more clearly he would not have brought these other three with him. But they were here and he owed them to not expose them to danger. He looked longingly up the slope where the sun trying to break through the inconsistent mist gave the slope a mottled texture.

“I'll go just a short distance further, Simon,” he answered. “Wait for me here.” Yeshua walked further up the hillside, the breeze whipping his cloak as it pushed up the slope from behind him. After another hundred paces the image of the Face overwhelmed him. He placed his palms against two outcrops of limestone, leaning against them.

“What do you have in mind for me?” he cried out in anguish. “The Gentiles are rousing against me, and even some among the Jews are plotting against me and my message! My life and my work could be snuffed out at any time!” He paused, pleading for understanding. “Am I to be like Moses? He died

without ever entering your Promise, having only seen it from afar. Or will you grant me to enter as Elijah did, without tasting death?"

"Who is he talking to?" Simon asked, as the mist muffled Yeshua's cries. Then a momentary gap opened up. There was a vague glimpse of Yeshua as a burst of sunlight fell on him. Two indistinct white blurs, one either side of him, seemed to glow through the mist as the sun fell on them for a moment. But only for an instant before the mist closed in on them again.

"I heard him name Moses and Elijah!" Yohan answered. The mist parted for another instant, to reveal Yeshua and the two white outlines before closing again. "See them there! Their robes glow!"

"Quick, take off your cloaks, gather sticks to make tents!" Simon urged. "We must build three shelters, one for each of them! We must show hospitality to Moses and Elijah!"

As the three busied themselves looking for spindly saplings on that sparsely-grassed slope, Yeshua continued praying. Eventually he returned to the three. "Master, where are Moses and Elijah?" Simon asked.

"Moses and Elijah?" Yeshua asked, perplexed. "They are no longer with us. Only I am here."

"Yes, Master," Simon replied. He was terrified as he thought through the implications of what he had seen and heard. "What must be done now?"

"Listen to me," Yeshua said. "We must go to Jerusalem and witness to the Kingdom of Heaven in the Temple. We have wandered around Galilee long enough and we must now take it to the heart of God's People. Then everything will be finished. Be strong!" Yeshua smiled encouragement, like a soldier about to lead his contubernium on a suicide mission.

Judaea – 783 AUC (30 A.D.)

They were now approaching Bethphage, within sight of Jerusalem. Yeshua recalled that Simeon, grandnephew of Old Simeon, the Baptiser's father, lived there. He had provided hospitality to Yeshua's family on his first visit to Jerusalem and again after he returned from the wilderness after finding Yohanan. He dealt in mules.

“Yohan, you're young and quick; and...” Yeshua looked over his followers, “Yudah, you too. Go into Bethphage, quickly. You will find a house just as you enter the village, with a yard full of mules. Untie one and bring it to me.”

“But what if the owner objects?” Yohan asked.

“Just tell him that Yeshua needs it. I'll be entering Jerusalem on it and he can have it back then.”

Yohan and Yudah ran ahead and found the house. There was one young colt still tied outside the yard, so they started to untie it rather than opening the gate.

“And what do you two think you are doing!” a voice boomed from behind them. Four armed watchmen confronted them, positioned and ready to cut off any attempt to escape.

“Please, sir,” Yudah's heart was in his mouth. Theft of so valuable an animal could mean death. “We were sent by Master Yeshua to borrow this animal so he can ride into Jerusalem; we will return it later.”

The watchman in command looked unimpressed. “Tell the master,” he said to another. The subordinate climbed the yard fence and entered the house by the back door. The remaining watchmen, with daggers in each hand, ordered the youths to sit on the ground while waiting.

Simeon appeared soon. “You say Yeshua sent you?”

“Yes, lord,” Yudah replied. “He will use this animal to ride into Jerusalem this afternoon. We will return the beast before sunset.”

Simeon regarded them suspiciously. “What does Master Yeshua have on the back of his hand?”

“That's a trick question, lord; the Master does not wear the tefillin.”

“I meant the back of his left hand,” Simeon explained sternly, although he was pleased with the answer so far.

“He has a scar, lord.”

“Then take the animal. And assure the Master that he will be welcome in my house for Passover. I'll send my man to the fountain in Jerusalem each evening as a messenger.” Then Simeon turned to his watchmen. “Go, tell everyone that Yeshua will be entering Jerusalem today. This is a day to rejoice!”

Half of Bethphage turned out to line the last fifty paces of the road from Bethphage to the Gate of Jerusalem. Others, asking their reason and curious to see the desert prophet, stayed with them. They were disappointed. This was no triumphal display. It was just a dusty bunch of men, one on a donkey – not even a

horse, much less a quadriga! - and a rag-tag group of women following. Some of the crowd followed them into the Temple but most were annoyed at this waste of time and went back to their business.

“Simon,” Yeshua called as the sun neared the horizon, “Go to the pool and look for a man carrying a pot of water.”

“But carrying water is women's work!”

“Then you should have no trouble finding the man I have in mind,” Yeshua smiled. “Greet him and tell him to let the Master of House know that we will take Passover at his house.”

“Will we stay there tonight?”

“No,” Yeshua answered wistfully. “We need to be careful or the authorities will arrest us in the middle of the night. They'll be watching the houses of everyone who knows me, so we'll sleep with the bands of pilgrims on the Mount of Olives the next couple of nights. We can appear only in a crowd, when they dare not move against us.”

The next couple of days were fraught with anxiety as Yeshua stood in the Court of the Gentiles, telling parables and answering questions. The followers felt the Temple Guards gazing on the backs of their necks every moment. Yet Yeshua seemed strangely relaxed as their minions baited him constantly, listening for some excuse to arrest him without provoking a riot.

“Rabbi,” asked one man with an insincere smile, “Is it lawful to pay the Republic Tax?” The surrounding crowd fell into a hush. This was one question that was suicide to answer. All other teachers either ignored it or substituted the question they would have preferred to have been asked. Would Yeshua adopt the same dodge?

Yeshua stared at the man for a moment, and then smiled. “A very good question, young man! It deserves a clear answer! Tell me, how much Republic Tax is demanded of you?”

“Three denarii every month, Rabbi.”

“And do you pay it?” Yeshua asked. The man shifted uneasily. His question had been turned around on him. If he answered ‘yes’, then he could be considered a collaborator by some, and lose the credibility he needs to ask the question in the first place. But if he answered ‘no’, then Yeshua or his followers need only report this to the Captain of the small patrol stationed in the area and he could be charged himself with tax avoidance at the least, and possibly sedition. Then a stroke of genius occurred to him.

“My father has only died a few days ago, Master; until then I was covered by his Household Tax. But now that I am confronted with this decision myself, I seek your guidance.”

Yeshua kept his smile, but it seemed edged in irony. “I am flattered that you have broken your period of mourning to listen to this humble desert preacher!” The crowd snickered their appreciation. “But please, show me the three denarii demanded of you by the Republic.”

The questioner nodded that he understood the request and opened his purse. As he rummaged he realised first that he had only Temple coins on him. He also thought that he would do well to get a respected witness to hear the answer now that it seemed Yeshua was about to take the bait. "I don't have the coins with me. I will return soon," he said quickly and scampered away, rejoicing that he would soon have this troublemaker trapped. He thought to himself quickly. This Yeshua is always talking about the Kingdom of Heaven, so if he answers 'yes' to paying the Republic tax then he will be undercutting everything he has been preaching. So he's most likely to answer 'no'. In that case, the Captain of the patrol would be the ideal witness and he can arrest him on the spot. And the Captain would probably have a few denarii with him. I could borrow those coins for the demonstration!

Soon he was back before Yeshua. "Master, the three denarii demanded from me by the Republic." He held out the coins.

Yeshua turned to the man. "Thank you for taking the trouble, young man. This will help me make clear something that needs to be understood by all." Yeshua stood and looked around the surrounding crowd to ensure he had their attention. "Tell me, young man; whose face do you see on the obverse of those coins?"

The questioner looked down to the denarii on his palm. "The heads of three different Consuls, Rabbi," he answered.

"And what do you see on the reverse side?" Yeshua asked.

The questioner turned the coins over. "They bear the image of the goddess Roma," he answered.

"Tell me, young man; is it lawful to bring a graven image of a foreign god here, into the Temple?"

The questioner realised in a flash that he had been trapped. He gaped soundlessly as he tried to think of an answer.

"But never mind that, young man," Yeshua waved away his own question. "In whose image were *you* created?" The questioner continued to search for words. Then Yeshua spoke again, raising his voice so all would hear clearly. "That which bears Roma's image belongs to Rome. That which bears the image of the Most High belongs to the Most High. Whose image do you bear?" Then he scanned the audience. "When men look at you, whose Face do they see?" Yeshua paused. "Let everyone examine himself, and answer that question in his own heart."

Yeshua and his followers had spent the last two nights sleeping on the Mount of Olives, among the pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for Passover but too poor to afford the inflated costs of peak-period accommodation. For safety these pilgrims relied on two things. The first was that their very poverty made them unlikely targets for robbery, and the second was their massed numbers and instinct for mutual self-defence. Everyone had a weapon.

Yeshua knew that although this was sufficient to deter a band of robbers but a large enough detachment of genuine soldiers could not be resisted. The

Temple spies would draw from the repetition of the previous two nights the conclusion that they could be confident of his whereabouts tonight and seize him at will. More than that, the Face had come to him again. He had no doubt what would happen. But first they had to get out of the city for this one last meal together. He had so much more to tell them before the Temple authorities swooped. Then he would return to their usual sleeping place on the Mount of Olives, where he knew he would be arrested.

“Men, we will take Passover tonight in Bethphage,” he announced quietly once he was away from prying ears. “Scatter as we leave the Temple. Make sure no-one is following you and make your way to Simeon’s place. You all know where it is; where we returned the mule.”

Yeshua was the first to arrive at Simeon’s house. He noted that the table was ready. The food and drink had already been laid out and there were two slaves on hand to serve. Yeshua dismissed them. Yeshua studied the seating. There was a padded chair with armrests at one end of a broad table, and six humbler timber chairs down each side. He looked around the room and found what he wanted; a smaller chair, little more than a stool with a backrest, in one corner. He pulled out the padded chair and exchanged it with the stool, and then draped his cloak over the stool’s backrest. Just as he completed this re-arrangement Yacob and his young brother Yohan were shown into the room.

“Good evening, Master,” Yacob greeted him. “Where would you have us sit?”

Yeshua gestured vaguely towards the table. “Wherever you will,” he answered. The two brothers glanced at each other.

“I’ll sit on the right of the head of the table,” Yacob said to Yohan. “You take the left.”

Five others followed over the next quarter-hour, filling the seats from the honoured end progressively. Simon and Andrew arrived and took in the situation.

“Yohan, you barely have a beard,” Simon ordered the youth. “Get down to the end of the table where you belong.” Before Yohan could respond Yacob stood.

“The Master said we could sit here,” he glowered. “*You* sit down at the end!”

Simon looked to Yeshua for a judgement on this dispute. Yeshua simply shrugged. “Each of you may decide for himself where he should sit.”

“And we two have decided to sit here,” Yacob rushed out his statement before Simon could start to intimidate his younger brother. “There are many other places for you to choose from, Simon.” Simon glanced from Yacob to Yohan and to Yeshua as he considered his response.

“Yohan,” Yeshua broke the deadlock. “You may remain there if you will, or you might freely decide to sit at the place of lowest honour. That would be at the foot of the table on the left. It is your decision.”

Yohan looked from Yeshua to his brother, and then back to Yeshua. He pushed back his chair and moved to the foot of the table. Simon smiled grimly as

he took his place. Such a shame that Yacob had taken the most honoured chair, but this was good enough!

Within the next few minutes Yudah arrived to take the second-last on the right, and then Thomas and Matthew filled the last two places. Yeshua remained standing, looking wistfully along the rows of seated men. Then he shrugged off his coat and stripped to his loincloth. He placed on the floor the basin the slaves had left, a towel and one of the large jugs of water beside it, and went to his knees.

“Come, all of you; your feet are dirty from the dust of the day. I will wash them.” There was uneasiness among the twelve. According to the Law, only a gentile slave or a woman could be required to wash a man’s feet because the inevitable traces of dung picked up during the day would make a male Jew ritually unclean.

Simon was the first to speak. “But Master; if you wash my feet you will become unclean! You must not do that!”

“It is not what touches a man that makes him unclean,” Yeshua replied. “If a man is already clean, then everything he touches becomes clean.”

“Then Master, wash not only my feet but also my hands and my heart!” Simon blurted out.

Yeshua smiled. Big, boof-head Simon! At one moment a bully towards Yohan and in the next fully aware of his shortcomings! Others might see him as a bluff, raw, common man but underneath there was a thirst for genuine righteousness. Simon was in so many ways a man after his own heart! “Let me just do the feet for the moment, Simon,” Yeshua answered. “The rest will come later.” Simon was almost indecent in the haste with which he now pushed back his chair and rose. The others followed him.

When all were seated again, Yeshua spoke. “My brothers! Yes, I call you my brothers, which makes you brothers of each other. Until now you have called me ‘Master’, and yet none of you offered to wash my feet! But I have washed yours. So must you also be prepared to wash each others’. Remember this always; and do as I have done.”

Then Yeshua walked over to his stool and took his cloak off it. “I also noticed that not one of you offered to exchange your own chair for my mere stool. I tell you this; if you will not make sacrifices for me, your Master,” he looked along the two rows of men, “then how will you ever make sacrifices for each other? You must learn to love one another as I have loved you! For I tell you this with absolute certainty; if you remain faithful to me you will not be required to give up a chair. Rather, you will be required to take up a cross!”

Yeshua paced the floor for a moment. “As you came into this room, each of you was told to choose his own seat. Even Yohan, the youngest and least of you, was invited to declare to all of you how he saw his position in this band. As was Simon. Each man, in one way or another, declared his own dignity.” Yeshua paced a few moments longer. “I will not contradict any of you! Surely you know your own worth! So I will accept your own self-assessments. And now I will make my own self-assessment.”

Yeshua took up the stool and carried it to the opposite end of the table. “I am meek and lowly of heart. I am not worthy to sit between Yacob and Simon, the Mighty and the Glorious of this band. Instead, I choose to sit on the left of Yohan, the youngest and least of all of you.” All eyes took in the significance of the new arrangement. The place of highest honour was now with Yohan and the second place was held by Matthew, the tax-collector and Republic collaborator. The lowest place was held by Yacob and second-lowest by Simon, both as a result of their own explicit demands.

“Yes, my brothers! Be forever mindful that My Father overthrows the proud and lifts up the humble!” In this chastened, introspective mood the ritual of the meal commenced.

At length Philip could hold himself in no longer. “Master, you talk to us repeatedly about the Face of your Father. Please show us this Face, and we will know what is required of us.”

“Philip; if you have truly seen me then you have seen the Face of the Father. Pray that He will confirm in your heart His Face.”

The meal continued through the formal statements and responses. But then Yeshua dipped some bread and handed it to Yudah, the second on his left. “Go! I know what you must do. You know it! So do it! We will be going back to the Mount of Olives later tonight.” Yudah looked shocked for a moment. He stared back at Yeshua. Yeshua nodded. Yudah rose from the table and left.

Once outside, Yudah was in turmoil. He had the nick-name ‘Sicariot’, meaning ‘the dagger-man’, because of his Nationalist political leanings. The Sicariotes were well-known for their low-level assassinations of random Republic soldiers and minor officials, aiming to rouse a response from the Republic that could be construed as ‘oppression’ and to use this to trigger a general uprising. Not that they expected to defeat the Republic! But if they could gain a strong enough negotiating position they might be able to achieve autonomy rather than being a small part of Mesopotamia Tribe. This would be enough!

So Yudah had thought through one possible way forward. If he could engineer an attempt by the Republic to arrest Yeshua in the middle of a group of pilgrims on the Mount of Olives; and if this triggered a response that turned into an uprising against the Republic... Even if the Republic won the first battle, the sheer brutality of it against pious pilgrims would galvanise all Jews everywhere... But these had been idle thoughts. How had the Master known what he was thinking? And yet he had! It was obvious that Yeshua had seen deep into Yudah’s heart, read it correctly, and was now giving that plan his approval! That was why Yeshua had moved his chair from one end of the table to the other, to be close enough to instruct him!

But the big problem was that Yeshua was not where he was expected to be. He was in Bethphage, not in his sleeping space on the Mount of Olives. The Temple guards and their Republic auxiliaries would soon become impatient with his no-show and perhaps go back to their barracks. Yeshua was obviously telling him to go to them, tell them to wait longer, to be patient. Yudah ran to the Mount of Olives as quickly as he could.

The final stages of the Passover meal were now in progress. Yeshua said the Blessing over the Bread and distributed it, but added an unfamiliar coda under his breath. Only Yohan heard it; 'my body'. And again with the last goblet; 'my blood'. What did these mutterings mean?

But the Passover Meal had been completed. Unlike any other Passover and full of things to think through. Yeshua and the remaining eleven walked back to the Mount of Olives to sleep.

There was no mistaking the sound of swords being drawn. "Do not resist them!" Yeshua ordered his followers, as Simon instinctively launched himself at the man closest to him. His swinging dagger snipped his target's ear as the man jumped back and turned his face away from the slashing blade, but a soldier lunged at Simon with his shield and bashed him to the ground. The soldier laughed at him.

"Would it not have been easier to take me while I was in the Temple, in broad daylight?" Yeshua asked. "But you are here now, so take me wherever you will."

"Bind him!" ordered the man with the cut ear. But before the men could do so, Yeshua reached out to touch the man's ear. The man backed away, startled, and tripped over his own feet. Then, in regaining his feet in embarrassment, the official snapped at the other followers "Well, why are you hanging around? Do you want to be arrested as well?" The followers backed away as Yeshua was led towards the path to the city. As they left, Simon regained his feet and followed at a distance.

Yeshua was taken into the courtyard of the High Priest's house. The High Priest's allies were waiting, hoping that the arrest had been successful. A sigh of satisfaction rose as Yeshua was paraded into the centre of the courtyard.

"Excellent! Now we can take him to the City Governor and be rid of him," Caiaphas exclaimed. "Just a few hours to wait first. Pilatus doesn't like being woken too early."

Rather than taking the risk of annoying Pilatus, widely known for his surly disposition, Caiaphas restrained himself until well after the first hour of daylight. Then Yeshua was presented to the Governor.

"This is the man who has been causing the disturbance in the Temple for the last couple of days, Governor," Caiaphas introduced his prisoner. "He is the same wandering prophet who has been preaching against the Republic for over two years now."

"Preaching against the Republic, eh?" That piqued Pilatus' interest.

"Yes, lord Pilatus," Caiaphas confirmed. "He has been proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven since he first came to notice."

Pilatus looked into Yeshua's face. "The Kingdom of Heaven, eh? Don't you know that the Republic takes a very dim view of kings, Prophet?" Pilatus sneered. Yeshua returned the gaze evenly, but did not answer.

“The Kingdom of Heaven, eh?” Pilatus rolled the phrase around his mouth. “That seems a bit awkward, doesn't it? Who would act as King here on the ground, eh?” Yeshua continued to simply watch Pilatus in silence.

“Answer me, you trumped-up magician!” Pilatus snapped in anger. Then he smiled a sneer. “Would you feel obliged to step into that role, eh? The Reluctant Regent for an Absent God, eh?” Pilatus looked around his attendants as they all dutifully chuckled at the Governor's little joke.

“You said that, not I,” Yeshua replied.

Pilatus was not famed for his cultural sensitivity or his patience, but he was no fool. He recalled the time he had slaughtered thousands of Hasidim who had protested when he had taken the legions' eagles into the Temple, and the rebuke this had prompted from the Tribal Consul in Babylon. The Consul had made it clear that he was expected to keep the peace, not provoke more trouble. So he knew well enough that his instinctive heavy hand here might only make things worse. This desert prophet, unimpressive as he appeared, had a following out in the countryside; and perhaps some influence even in Jerusalem, if Caiaphas was so keen to get rid of him... Perhaps it would be best to leave well enough alone. If and when this crackpot actually starts pulling together a military force he might need to take firmer action, but for the moment this religious fool was not a threat and might well disappear if left to his own devices. Many others had.

“Argh! Get this idiot out of my sight!” Pilatus waved away Caiaphas. “When you actually have a case perhaps then you can bring him back to me; but right now he is just another desert madman.”

“Lord Pilatus, you must be very careful here,” Caiaphas suggested quietly. “Not everyone in Babylon is your friend. If word gets back to the Comitia that you are releasing men who are advocating Kingship instead of supporting the Republic.... The fact that this fool is only talking religiously and not politically might unfortunately be left out of the gossip.” Caiaphas edged closer. “It might be said that if you sympathise with this man, then your sympathies are insufficiently Republican.”

Pilatus stared at Caiaphas with obvious distaste but he knew better than to ignore his advice. “All right, Caiaphas, I find him guilty of sedition,” Pilatus conceded with a wave. “Never mind a formal trial, just carry out the sentence! One less religious Jew in the world will make it a better place, anyway!” he continued, staring at Caiaphas to make sure his point was understood; it could be applied to recognised establishment figures as well as these wanderers if Pilatus was sufficiently annoyed.

Yeshua was taken away for the routine flogging. Within three hours he was on the cross. There was no step for his feet on this post; it had broken off during a previous execution. So the soldiers simply drove the spikes through his ankles just below the top of his heelbone, into the sides of the upright. We mustn't let him die too quickly, they thought. That would spoil the entertainment!

The agony in his ankles and wrists was unbearable as Yeshua hitched his body up for one more breath. He gasped out his last instructions to his mother and the handful of followers who had dared to come out and stand vigil with him.

Then he looked towards the small crowd that had gathered a few dozen paces away.

There! Was it the heat, the pain and the dehydration? Or was that face in the crowd shimmering slightly? As if he knew he had been noticed, the semi-familiar face called out to him.

“If you really are who you think you are, then what are you doing up there?” the man taunted. Those around him chuckled. These Galileans were such a rough lot, and this was just one more preacher who had played on their gullibility. But to try that story on us sophisticated Jerusalemites... well, he deserved what he was getting.

Under the physical stress of the crucifixion, Yeshua’s bladder emptied itself. He knew already that this was one of the purposes of crucifixion; not only to cause pain, but also to reduce its victim to abject humiliation, totally unable to control his own bodily functions. And there he was, naked to the world, so all could see his complete lack of control over his own body. The crowd roared to see this urinary milestone passed. Next they expected uncontrolled defecation, and then the end would then be near. There was no dignity in crucifixion!

“How are the heels feeling, friend?” the unstranger continued, referring to the steel spikes driven through his joints and into the timber. “I remember, once upon a time, you saying something about not striking your heel against the stones. Well if ever there would be a good time to fall to the ground, now would be it! Come down off that cross; better than staying up there!” More chuckles from the small crowd. This heckler was a good one!

‘Yes, he’s the demon I met in the wilderness,’ Yeshua confirmed to himself. ‘He has nothing worth listening to.’ Instead, Yeshua tried to recall the Face he had seen that day in the desert and had seen many times every day since then. That is all he needed at this time.

But the Face would not come to him! There was nothing before his mind’s eye, not even a recollection of what he expected. In a shock of panic, it was as though he had forgotten everything he had ever treasured. He had lost that which was more than life itself!

Frantically he tried to recall the Face, something he had sworn he would never be able to forget. But it was a terrible black void, with no semblance of light. He felt as though his soul was plummeting down into an abyss.

He looked to the unstranger again, whose shimmering face was grinning with delight and who stretched his arms towards him. “Your arms are stretched out now, Prophet, but that’s not doing you any good! Never mind the nails, they will melt if you want them to! Stretch your arms out towards me!” he taunted.

‘That was what he invited me to do in the desert, to receive the Kingdom from his hand instead of from the Lord’s!’ Yeshua thought to himself. But still the Face would not come.

Yeshua cried out in terror at his inner desolation. Then, recollecting himself, ‘Yet even if I have only been fooling myself these years; if even I’m nothing and deserve this fate; yet I will not trust in any but You!’, Yeshua pledged

silently. Then he paused, in dread. 'So show me your Face one more time, I beg you.'

The Face did not appear. In desperation Yeshua started reciting to himself Psalm 21, the Psalm he had heard the angels singing in his first Vision.

*"In Your strength the king rejoices, O Lord!
You have given him his heart's desire
and have not withheld the request of his lips."*

*"For You meet him with good blessings
and set a crown of fine gold upon his head.
He offered his life to You, and You gave it back to him,
length of days for ever and ever."*

*"His glory is great through Your help;
Yea, You have made him blessed forever,
Glad with the joy of Your Presence.
Through the steadfast Love of the Most High
he shall not be moved."*

Yeshua struggled against the all-compassing pain and the all-consuming blackness that seemed to engulf him. He pressed on with the Psalm.

*"Your hand will find your enemies;
Your right hand those who hate you!
You will burn them as in a furnace in the time of your anger!
The Lord will swallow them in his rage, and fire will consume them!"*

A shock ran through Yeshua as he continued the Psalm past where it had ended in his vision. Why had he presumed to apply the first half of the Psalm to himself, and ignored the second half? In horror, he continued his internal recital.

*"You will destroy their descendants from the earth,
and their children from among those born of men.
For they plan evil against you, they devise wickedness,
But they will be unable to achieve it!*

*You will put them to flight
When you take aim at their faces;
You will be exalted in your own strength,
and we will sing and praise your power!"*

There it is! 'When you take aim at their faces!'. And here am I, craving to see that Face! What I took for my greatest comfort has been taken from me! I am without hope! He knew at that moment that he was totally accursed. In total

despair and having finished Psalm 21, he cried out the first line of the next Psalm, number 22.

“My God, my God; why have you deserted me?” Yeshua bellowed in his anguish. And then, hearing no reply and seeing not the faintest glimmer of light as he fell through a viscous black void without any hint of a bottom, “It is all over!” Yeshua muttered and lapsed into unconsciousness.

Rome – 785 AUC (32 A.D.)

“Baiorix, could you please spare me a few minutes?”

“Of course, Pandites,” the Gallic Praetor answered with a smile as he gave his bag back to his slave to carry. “Here or somewhere quieter?”

“Oh, what I want to put to you is no great secret. As we walk back to your office might be the most convenient.”

Baiorix gestured for Pandites to head for the door out of the Great Senate chamber and into the rear lobby.

“I understand that you recently received a delegation of goldsmiths who are complaining that some Roman workshops are making copies of jewellery in the traditional Gallic designs,” Pandites opened casually. “Not that the copies are anywhere near the level of craftsmanship of the genuine articles, of course; but it's giving those genuine articles a bad name as well as depressing the market.”

“You seem well-informed about who comes to me, Pandites,” Baiorix commented. Pandites shrugged.

“We all pretend that we don't pry into each other's Tribal matters, but we all know more than we let on. Let's be candid with each other.”

Baiorix nodded slightly. “Go on...”

“Gallia Tribe is not the only Tribe suffering from this dishonest form of manufacture. You might recall Himalcar brought a court case a couple of months ago. He claimed that certain art works being produced in Sicily featured patterns that were traditional to ancient Berber culture. He tried to make the case that copying these patterns by non-Berbers was equivalent to forging a signature.”

“Yes, I recall that,” Baiorix agreed. “I must confess I was disappointed by that decision. The court ruled that individuals had signatures but that anything common to two or more people was common to all. No one person had title, therefore no one person could bring a suit.”

“Yes. I thought it a rather pedantic decision too, and so did many others.”

“I think I see where you're going with this line of thought, Pandites,” Baiorix leapt ahead. “You're drawing a parallel with my goldsmiths' claim, aren't you?”

“Indeed so. And not only your claim but also that of my own Babylonian glassworkers. I've also spoken along these lines with Lysander from Asia. His Phrygian steelworkers are also angry about sub-standard tools being produced, but in the Phrygian style. I am sure there are others with similar complaints.”

“But what can be done about it, Pandites?” Baiorix was now fully seized by the argument, Pandites thought to himself. This is going well.

We have laws all over the statute books protecting wealth and property as commonly understood,” Pandites contextualised what he was about to say, “but these laws don't recognise the most valuable property of all; the property of the mind! All these counterfeit products are a theft of ideas, of skills, of techniques, of the customs that are integral to the self-identity of each Tribe. What these rogue manufacturers are doing is worse than pillaging a city; they are pillaging

the very minds and souls of their fellow-citizens!” Pandites spread his arms and let them fall to his side again, as if in despair.

“We need a statute that recognises the property of the mind,” he went on. “This must come in two forms; one that recognises ownership of a new idea or technique, so the individual artisan can be guaranteed a fair return for the time, effort and expense he must put in to develop an improved technique; and another that recognises prior rights to cultural treasures arising from a particular Tribe.”

Baiorix stopped in his stride. “You're right, Pandites,” he agreed. “I'd never thought of it in exactly those terms, but once it's said it becomes obvious. That which a man produces with his own mind is just as much his possession as that which he produces with his own hands!”

“Oh, Baiorix, you have no idea how pleased I am to hear you say that! Because Sandos and I would like to work with you and Lysander to put together a Law to establish that principle. We need your skill as a legislator to ensure that what we put before the Senate will be properly phrased. Would you lend us your skills?”

“I'll talk to Perax first. Gallia Tribe requires its Praetors to always act jointly. But I have no doubt he'll support the idea.”

Diomedes, the second Praetor for Asia, felt obliged to act as Devil's Advocate in the drafting of this Law. He could see the need for this new law as well as the pressure from his own Tribe to protect the reputation of Phrygian steel, and he sympathised with the outer Tribes whose traditional styles were being bastardised by the mass production of counterfeits by the Roman manufactories staffed by thousands of slaves. No free artisan could compete against those terms. But this proposed law was attempting too much.

“Gentlemen, I understand the justice in what you propose,” he pleaded. “But I ask that you also see the practicalities. You can't simply ban anyone else taking advantage of some-one else's ideas. The idea itself might be private property, but the value of that idea springs entirely from the demand created by the Republic as a whole. What value would a better loom have unless there were people out there prepared to buy the cloth it produces?”

“So to insist that others may use his new idea only under licence is to hold the world to ransom, and that is not in the Common Good. Others must have a right to take up that idea but should also be obliged to pay a fair fee for its use. That's the only practical way forward.”

The other five looked at him, uncomfortable that his point was valid. At length Pandites answered. “I think you deserve your name, Diomedes, much as I hate to admit it. There's no point in being pure. We need something that the other Tribes will accept. If we try to lock everything up they won't agree. But if we can show them that this will promote research into better ways of production for everyone's benefit, then they will be prepared to pay a small fee to the inventor for his troubles.”

“What sort of fee do you have in mind?” Sandos asked.

“It can’t be too much or it will rob us of our support in the Senate, as well as making it more profitable to continue counterfeiting. I suggest five per cent of the value of the goods produced, with the provision that the inventor can apply to the Senate if he can justify a claim for a higher fee. But let the penalty for avoidance be set high.” Diomedes looked around the group.

“Let me clarify one point, Diomedes,” Baiorix asked. “If someone invents, say, a new loom to take an earlier example; would the inventor be entitled to five percent of the cost of each new loom manufactured, or to five per cent of all cloth produced on it?”

“Both,” Diomedes answered. “Everything downstream of an invention will depend on that invention, and therefore owe the inventor a licence fee. In the example you cited, the loom inventor might even claim to be entitled to five percent of the value of all finished garments made from that cloth made on that loom, as well; but I would think that one step too far. The fee would apply at every step that fundamentally changes the product until the product is indistinguishable from the same product made by other means. After that step the contribution from the loom inventor becomes irrelevant. That is why I suggest that the fee be set so low, to be insignificant at any one step but will accumulate in a way that would richly reward the inventor. We can expect to see great improvements in the way anything is made, lowering the end prices in spite of this small extra fee. Everyone will be a winner!”

There was a pause as the five took in this line of thought.

“You have convinced me, Diomedes,” Perax said at last. “But we need to be very certain about what is covered here. I want this to be extended not only to new inventions but also to old traditions. And I expect existing manufacturers will also want it to cover any new designs that they develop, even if the fundamental techniques stay the same. For instance, if one of our goldsmiths produces a unique pattern that marks his work out from his competitors, will that unique pattern be protected as though it were his signature? Or will anyone be permitted to copy it for a piddling five percent?”

“Excellent point, Perax,” Diomedes conceded. “I was thinking of applying this ‘freedom to copy at a fee’ principle to materials and techniques that affect the method of production. That would protect our steelmakers. But new designs that don’t significantly affect the method of production but which tend to identify the manufacturer should be treated as if personal identifiers or signatures. In the case of Mesopotamia this might be applied to a specific shape of handle or spout by their glassworkers to identify their quality glassware from inferior copies. Your goldsmiths would be free to do the same so as to identify genuine Gallic jewellery from the fakes. Copying of such individualised features should be totally banned as a form of forgery.”

“I think works of art and new books should be fully covered as well,” Pandites added.

“A good point, Pandites,” Diomedes agreed. “You don’t get any more the work of a mind than in art or literature. That has to be fully protected against copying.”

Perax nodded. “Then I think we are all agreed, gentlemen. New inventions or techniques are to be in the public domain but subject to a five percent licence fee for all significant downstream processes, while works of art and literature are to be fully protected,” he summarised. “For individual works the right will vest in the artisan. For cultural or traditional styles the right will vest in the Tribe concerned. Are we agreed?” There was a general nodding of heads. “Thank you for your wisdom, Diomedes. You have quite properly tempered our indignation against counterfeiters into a sensible piece of Public Policy. Baiorix is the best legal draftsman among us and you have the best grasp of the basic concept, so could we ask you two to draft a Bill that casts these points into proper legislation? We can meet again when that is done.”

Diomedes nodded and looked to Baiorix, who smiled. “When are you free to meet with me, Baiorix? I'd like this done as soon as possible.”

Sandos and Pandites went on their way internally rejoicing. The emphasis on artisans' rights and cultural motifs was only a stalking-horse to them, to gain support from the outer Tribes whose cultural styles were fashionable. Roman manufactories were copying these styles using slave labour, rather than importing the real items from their ancestral lands at greater cost. So there was no doubt that these outer Tribes would support this proposal. And it was probable that all except the Roman Tribes would support it as well. Apart from the trivial matter of fashionware, this measure would obviously encourage more improvements in industrial techniques, so even those who will have to pay the licence fees would enjoy much lower production costs. If it didn't then the old methods of production could be retained at no licence fee, so what was there to lose?

But the real aim of the Mesopotamian Praetors was less obvious. It was to gain total copyright over the Museum's navigation charts, astronomical ephemerides and research findings over the whole range of their work. These charts and ephemerides were worth more than their weight in gold to a merchant ship and this measure would prevent unauthorised copying. That meant the Museum could ask whatever price they wanted for no more effort than running the presses for one more crank. And in other areas the advances being made were potentially world-changing. The Engineering Department of the Museum had actually held back publication of several significant advances in metallurgy and glass manufacturing over recent years, waiting for this law to be enacted. That was where the real profits were to be made! The five per cent licence fees from these new techniques cascading up through all finished glassware products and metalwares would make the Museum the richest institution in the world! And the Tribe of Mesopotamia would benefit from those profits.

Babylon – 788 AUC (35 A.D.)

The wealth now flowing into the Museum from their copyrights had been put to good use. Since much of their income was gained by printing navigational aids they had not remained content with the one observatory. A new observatory had been established in Eudaemon with the intention of studying the southern sky not visible from Babylon. Another observatory much further south again would be desirable and the Bantu had offered to provide free land for one as part of their celebrations on being admitted as a Tribe of the Republic, but the skies were too cloudy down there for good viewing and the diseases in that part of the world too dangerous for those without a natural immunity. But perhaps one day...

Close observation and measurement of the gap between the edge of the moon and near-occultation of fixed stars as seen from these two observatories and other field observatories had established the relative size of the Earth and Moon, and by measuring the angular diameter of the moon this gave an accurate estimate of the distance to the Moon. These measurements demonstrated that the Moon is very much further away than had been imagined, very much larger, and travelling around the earth a hundred times faster than any speed in common experience. This had stunned the world. But no-one had managed to measure the distances or sizes of other bodies except to note that they are much more remote than the moon.

Observation and measurement of the moons of Jupiter had long-ago revealed the relationship of orbital radius and period. This had also been found to hold true for Saturn's system. The variation in the extreme elongation of Mercury (due to its rather elliptical orbit) complicated matters, but this same relationship of radius to orbital period was also found to apply to Mercury, Venus and Earth in their orbits around the Sun. This Law was then extended to the outer planets, inferring their orbital radii from their orbital periods and thus gaining an indicative relative scale of the Solar System as a whole, including the size of the Jovian and Saturnian systems. What was needed now was a single measurement as a yardstick to determine the magnitude of that relative scale.

This opportunity finally presented itself with an expected occultation of a fixed star by Mars. Teams were sent out to set up field observatories in Poseidon Bay, Zanzibar, Massalia, Lugdunum, Alexandria and two in the German lands on the Baltic coast as well as Babylon. These were to track and time the occultation and thereby determine the diameter of Mars.

Cloud cover prevented observations from Germania but this proved to be no great loss; glimpses through scattered clouds from Lugdunum established that the star had missed occultation there by the barest sliver, so the Baltic stations further north would have seen no occultation and would have been able to do no more than measure the gap at nearest approach.

The longest recorded duration of occultation was recorded in Eudaemon, which also reported a passage so close to central through Mars that the observers were not certain whether it had been north or south. The observations from Poseidon Bay reported a near miss, with closest approach estimated at one fifth of

the diameter of Mars. The Zanzibar transit times were hampered by scattered cloud and had to be estimated by interpolation from glimpses. The observations from Babylon and Alexandria were clear and mutually consistent.

When the observations and measurements were brought back to the Museum and analysed the findings created one of those moments in history that makes the whole world catch its breath. When all of these observations were plotted against latitude and the spherical geometry had been resolved, all readings were reasonably consistent with one another. Mars was not just a disc in the sky, a few miles across; it was more than half the size of the whole world!

The implications were clear; for Mars to be so large but appear so small, it must be a huge distance away. The scale of the Solar System must be so much larger than anyone expected. And to be on so large a scale yet to go around the Sun in the orbital periods observed, the planets must be travelling at incredible speeds!

When all the checks had been done and all the consequential dimensions and speeds calculated, even the professional astronomers were staggered. The whole Earth was moving around its orbit of the Sun at a speed of more than one hundred thousand miles an hour! The planet Jupiter was more than ten times the diameter of the entire world!

And to think the fixed stars must be unimaginably further away again! How bright must they be, to shine so clearly when seen from Earth? They might even be as bright as the Sun, made fainter only by their enormous distances! Indeed, might they all be other suns, with their own planets around them?

These measurements also provided a rough idea of the speed of light by combining knowledge of the diameter of the earth's orbit with the cyclic delay in the eclipses of the Jovian moons. The diameter of Earth's orbit was estimated at two hundred million Roman miles, and for light to cross this distance took about sixteen minutes. So it was not instantaneous, which might have been considered reasonable; but although not infinitely fast, it still travelled at almost eight hundred million miles an hour. An unimaginably high speed, so fast that to consider it instantaneous would have been easier to accept!

Civilised men never looked at the sky again in quite the same way.

Meanwhile a young Alexandrian student was making a name for himself in the Museum's Department of Engineering. He found himself giving his name to the secretary in the outer office of the Head of Engineering. The secretary stood, crossed to the inner door and knocked. A short exchange and the student was ushered into the Head's inner office.

"You sent for me, lord Teraklos?" he asked as he entered the inner office.

"Yes, Heron," Teraklos answered. "I have heard that you're building and selling wind-powered pumps to some farmers."

"Yes, lord," Heron confessed. "My family isn't wealthy, and that is how I pay for my living and study fees."

“Well, if you would indulge my interest, Heron, I would like you to show me one and explain how you proportion the various parts. Or is the design mere guesswork?”

“I'd be proud to show you one, lord. They're not designed by guesswork, there's a solid mathematical basis to them,” Heron said with a tinge of self-defence creeping into his tone.

“Then if you are free at the moment...?” Teraklos asked.

“Indeed, lord. I will take you to one being installed today.”

Teraklos looked with interest over the windmill then the cogwheel gear that translated the rotation about the vertical axis to the inclined axis of the screw-pump lifting water from the main irrigation channel into the smaller private channel of the farmer.

“Very interesting, Heron,” he summarised. “Now, tell me about the mathematical basis you claim.”

“I started with the windmill, lord,” Heron commenced his explanation. “I measured the speed of the wind every day three times a day for several months. This gave me information on the range of wind speeds I might expect and what wind speed is the most frequent. This was to allow for the most efficient design.

“Then I set a single blade on a vertical rod with a counterweight below it and free to swing. I could measure the movement of the counterweight in two directions; one was across the wind and the other direction was directly into it. Initially I set the face of the blade flat-on to the wind, and measured how far the counterweight was pushed. As you might expect it was mostly along the line of the wind but it tended to flutter sideways a bit, apparently randomly. This fluttering was reduced by putting the counter-weight in a tub of water. Then I progressively turned the blade more and more so it was meeting the wind obliquely, and took new measurements of the movement of the counterweight each time. In this way I graphed the movement in each direction against the angle of attack into the wind. By also knowing the distance from the support to the centre of mass of the system and comparing this to the distance from the support to the centre of the blade I could also calculate the actual force being applied in each direction. These calculations gave me the optimum angle of attack for the blade so it would apply the most force to cause the fan to rotate.”

“Very good work, Heron,” Teraklos said with approval. “But that's for a static blade. Once it starts moving the effective angle of attack changes. Sailors know all about apparent wind direction and this is a similar situation.”

“That's true, lord Teraklos,” Heron agreed. “But by knowing the actual wind speed and the speed of fan rotation, I can adjust for that to calculate the apparent angle of attack for a turning blade. And then using my graphs, I can recalculate the effective turning force for every combination of wind speed and fan rotation speed. And I can do this not only for a single fixed blade angle, but for every blade angle. In this way, I could optimise the blade angle and rotation speed for every possible wind velocity to get the greatest product of turning force and turning speed. And force times speed equals power.”

“I'm very impressed, Heron,” Teraklos marvelled at such insight from a mere student. This youth had an engineer's instincts. “But that would only be optimum for one specific wind speed.”

“Yes, lord Teraklos; but I worked further on that. I found that if the wind was faster than that assumed in the original design calculations, then it would provide more turning force on the fan, and make the fan go faster against the same load. At this faster speed, the effective angle of attack is reduced compared to the nominal design turning speed of the fan, approaching the optimum angle of attack for that higher speed. The end result is that so long as the wind speed is not less than the threshold speed to turn the pump, the performance remains close to optimum; and even as the wind speed rises so far as to be significantly greater than the design speed, it increases the turning speed and thus still tends towards the optimum angle of attack. Thus it pumps water faster than at the design speed. But it's simply not worth it to design the system to permit a change in gearing to get back towards the theoretical optimum for that wind speed; it's more convenient to just accept that it is pumping more than the design flow, even if it's not doing it as efficiently as possible.”

“But if the wind is too slow to provide sufficient force to overcome the load, then the fan won't rotate at all,” Teraklos commented.

“That is true, lord Teraklos; therefore I designed it to perform most efficiently at rather low speeds. Higher winds will pump more water, even if not as much as it could if optimised for that higher speed.”

Teraklos gazed over the structure again. “Very well done,” he muttered with a smile. “So that provides you with your power and close to optimum. Now tell me how you convert that into pumping water.”

“Down here, lord,” Heron directed Teraklos to study the base of the tower. “You see here an Archimedes screw, just like those used by treadmill-powered pumps.”

“Yes, but some screws raise water through a great height and others through a lesser height. Some pump a great deal of water every hour, and others much less,” Teraklos clarified his concerns. “So how can you optimise your windmill for each different lift height and pump rate? Or do you design each windmill and pump combination as an individual project? That would take days to calculate for each installation!”

Heron smiled almost bashfully. “No, lord Teraklos. I'm too lazy for that. I design and build one size windmill for all tasks. But to make it work for all those different pumps is not difficult. I calculate the static force that each pump exerts when it's full. This is simply the weight of water delivered in one complete revolution multiplied by the total lift height, and divided by the pump drive wheel circumference. I multiply that by a factor to allow for friction, and provide a gear ratio to match this to the force provided by the windmill under the design wind conditions. So a high-lift small-flow pump or a low-lift large-flow pump might have the same windmill. The only difference is the gearing that makes the high-lift pump run more slowly than a pump operating over a lower height. If an even higher output is required I can simply supply a second or a third windmill and link

their output power onto a common axle. The key is to size the gearbox accordingly.”

Teraklos appraised the machinery in front of him and then the youth who had designed it. “Heron, I would like you to come onto the Museum staff. Never mind finishing your lecture series, you can sit the examination whenever you want and I'm certain you will pass. Then I'll put you on a salary.”

Babylon – 793 AUC (40 A.D.)

Heron was quite aware of the fact that he could make much more wealth if he resigned from the Museum and kept the five-per-cent rights to his inventions all to himself. But there were more important things in life than being fabulously rich.

Here at the Museum he had reached a very satisfactory arrangement with the Board. In exchange for assigning three-quarters of his copyright income to the Museum for all inventions he made while on staff, the Museum would enforce payment of these rights by all users and he was permitted free use of Museum facilities. He could even order extra equipment to be made in the Museum's own workshops free of charge rather than finding a private fabricator. He was also surrounded by very competent colleagues, in particular the mathematicians whose help was invaluable. Although Heron had no problem with arithmetic and could understand the basics of the New Mathematics such as basic calculus, he was the first to admit that he was an engineer rather than a theoretical mathematician!

So he was getting only a quarter of all the wealth he could have been earning, it seemed at first sight. But that income was more than enough for a very comfortable life indeed and he had no distractions such as needing to build, equip, supply and manage his own facilities or chase down users of his inventions and enforce payments. He was certain that the increased productivity he enjoyed thanks to this arrangement more than made up for the other three-quarters of income it was costing him!

He looked with pride over the culmination of his last three years of work. His first heat engine had paradoxically been driven by cooling rather than heating. Steam from a boiler was introduced into a cylinder, driving a piston up. Then water was sprayed into the brass cylinder, causing the steam inside to condense and drawing the piston back. Some motive force was applied in both strokes, and the piston turned a flywheel via a gearbox. This had been successful enough in its time, mainly for pumping water in circumstances where wind power was insufficient or unreliable. Not only did licence income start rolling in but the Museum itself set up its own factory to build and sell these machines. Even though there were competitors who could supply these machines more cheaply, the Museum's reputation allowed them to sell many units at a considerably higher price.

But there was a limit to how fast this heating/cooling cycle could be carried out, limiting the speed of the machine. The next step had been to operate at much higher pressures, with the upwards stroke contributing much more power and simply allowing the steam to vent to atmosphere at full extension. This lost the efficiency of the return stroke under suction but by avoiding the need to cool the cylinder a much greater speed could be obtained.

But prolonged operation of such a machine caused problems. The first was that the water in the system passed through the machine only once, so it was necessary to continually top up the water. Since the water in the boiler was under considerable pressure, this had to be pumped into the boiler against that pressure.

Indeed, all pipework and vessels needed to be carefully made to avoid high-pressure leaks that could severely scald a worker or even risk explosion. The second problem was that the top-up water carried with it all sorts of dissolved material that even the finest filters couldn't remove. These deposits built up in the boiler and had to be removed. This meant the machine required considerable down-time for this work. Heron had tried to resist pressure from the Board, who wanted to sell these improved high-pressure machines as soon as they were shown to be viable. He had a better idea, one final improvement. But in the meantime the Board published the design and yet more licence income started flowing in.

And here was the final version! Instead of venting to atmosphere, the cylinders in this machine vented to a low-pressure vessel with fine brass fins all over its inside and outside surfaces, to collect and dissipate heat. In effect, it was a combination of the original condensation machine with the more recent high-pressure machine, except that the condensation phase was being carried out in the separate condenser vessel instead of the power cylinder. If the machine was to be used for pumping water the system could be arranged so that the water being pumped could be passed around the condenser to accelerate cooling, but this machine could also be used with only air cooling if circumstances demanded it. Condensate from the low-pressure vessel could then be pumped back into the boiler, eliminating the need to top up the boiler water and thus greatly reducing the build-up of deposits. It also restored the added efficiency of the suction effect on the return stroke.

Heron was convinced that this new high-pressure, closed-cycle steam engine would be the most efficient machine possible. But who knows, he shrugged to himself. Next week I might think of something even better!

Babylon – 800 AUC (47 A.D.)

It was just over one hundred years since Arius Claudius had retired. It would be only fitting for him to be commemorated by this marvellous new scheme. The greatest engineer in history (although Egyptians would probably argue in favour of Imhotep) deserved no less! It would be good if it could be declared open on the centenary of his death. That allowed only two more years and the earthworks for the project were almost completed. But the big problem was yet to be solved. The Department of Engineering at the Museum had tested a few different schemes but all had failed to provide the degree of safety and reliability demanded from so great an investment.

The problem was control. A horse-drawn wagon moving along a road effectively steers itself. The horses can see where they are going and they don't just wander over the edge even if the carter falls asleep. But a machine has no such in-built intelligence. Attempts had been made to mount the front wheels on a turntable arrangement to allow a man to guide the machine but the force required to turn the wheels was so great that the system had to be geared down to be within the strength of a man. Even then it was amazingly tiring work, with adjustments required constantly. Even the strongest of men were able to manage for little more than half an hour before exhaustion. And the slow response because of the gear ratios meant that the machine could not move as quickly as desired. It was limited to little more than the speed of a horse in a canter.

A completely different approach had been tried, inspired by the use of grooves in roads to accommodate wagon wheels. If these grooves could be made deep enough and the front wheels were set in pairs, one behind another, they would capture and automatically align the wheels. No steering necessary!

This was tried with some success at first. But in one trial after a windstorm had covered the test track with sand and dust the filled grooves caused the front wheels to jump out and the machine crashed. In operation such storms could be expected to block the track frequently. This was too dangerous to be acceptable.

Now a variation of that scheme was being tested. Instead of grooves in the pavement, steel rails were being laid and the wheels of the machine were being provided with a prominent ridge on the inside edge. Thus the wheels were to be captured between the two steel rails by these ridges. The risk of wind-blown sand was greatly reduced. The sand would not be trapped in grooves in the road but be blown away as quickly as it was blown onto the path. And in the event of deeper deposits covering the path to a depth sufficient to bury the rails, a steel template was attached to the front of the machine to plough sand aside before the wheels reached it.

The results so far were very promising but that would mean that the track would need to be more than just a pavement. It would demand two continuous ribbons of steel rail to be provided all the way from Babylon Terminus on the Euphrates to the Antioch Terminus at the mouth of the Orontes. More than eight

hundred miles of two steel rails that need to be set and held a precise distance apart for the full distance!

It would be expensive but if it proved to be safe it would allow the journey in less than three days, perhaps only two, and it could carry more goods than a thousand camels could in a month! As well as speed and volume there were the savings in not having to feed the beasts and pay their handlers! It might even be feasible to extend the line down to Charax on the Gulf one day but for the moment the horse-drawn barges were still very cheap. There was no doubt that the future belonged to the Machine. The vast new mines on the boundary of Gaul and Germania would be struggling to supply the steel and coal demanded by this exciting new world. And there was also no doubt that the Museum was Mesopotamia's greatest single asset as it invented the machines that would lead this change.

Developments – 753 AUC (1 B.C.) to 810 AUC (57 A.D.)

1. Pannonia became a Tribe in 28 A.D.
2. After a brief trade war Germania Magna became an Autonomous Province of the Republic in 31 A.D. By the end of this period western Germania was at the start of a boom in mining of coal and iron ore and processing it into steel. The demand for labour to work the mines and also for the demanding and dangerous work in the steel mills started to drive up the cost of slaves. After the entry of Germania into the Republic trade from Germania to the Far north across the Baltic started up in earnest.
3. The petty kingdoms in the west of Britannia had become thoroughly enmeshed in the Republic's trading network. By the end of this period many of their mines had been bought by African merchants, exporting their product to satisfy Republic demand.
4. Many of the rivers in Gaul were being improved to provide for horse-drawn barges, copying the Euphrates Haulway. Cross-linking canals and locks were also being constructed.
5. The Black Sea settlements exploring up the rivers of southern Russia found a mixed reception. Some Samartans were happy to trade, others turned to raiding.
6. The slave trade in the Senegal, which had grown steadily over the last fifty years on the basis of some local kings raiding their neighbours for 'prisoners of war', collapsed in 32 A.D. when the Republic decreed that only convicted criminals may be purchased from foreigners, and only from their own tribes. The only prisoners of war that may be sold as slaves are those enslaved directly by the Republic. The economies of the predatory Senegalese tribes collapsed and their kings had little choice except to allow African investors to buy farmland and set up latifundia using locals as cheap labour. This reduction in the supply of slaves, combined with increased demand from Germania, was a major factor in driving the research of the Babylon Museum for machinery that could act as labour-replacement technology.

Egypt – 810 AUC (57 A.D.)

The Priests of Egypt who effectively controlled Pharaoh and thereby the Tribal Comitia were an intensely conservative group. But they were not fools. They had seen the decline in the fortunes of the Tribe. So far the peasants were still content and were grateful for the rents charged on their fields being lower than their grandfathers said had been the case under the Ptolemies. But could this acquiescence be guaranteed into the future as the typical citizen of the Republic became more and more affluent compared to his Egyptian fellows? The threat was clear. The Egyptian Comitia had to provide even further reduced rents on the lands and even better infrastructure in terms of water supply and access to markets. Otherwise they would risk popular unrest.

How could these services be provided? Cash was scarce and the attempt to print money after the Mesopotamian pattern soon fell into disrepute. The Great Senate insisted that all paper money should have demonstrable silver or gold backing as in Babylon or they would consider charges of Fraud against the Tribal Comitia. Egypt had slowly bled gold for more than fifty years now and could not demonstrate adequate bullion backing. They had to retreat.

But the Claudius Route between Babylon and Antioch provided them with their answer. The greatest single additional cost in transferring goods from the East to the West was the trans-shipment overland. The horse barges up the Euphrates were in themselves rather efficient and the steam railway from Babylon to Antioch was also good in itself. But the sheer length of these routes was considerable and the handling at the transfer points was critical.

The Egyptian Comitia made a bold decision. It would build a railway from the head of the Red Sea to the shores of the Mediterranean! In one stroke it would undercut the effective monopoly held by Mesopotamia Tribe over commercial transport between East and West. But more than that, the Egyptian Comitia approached Heron to be their Chief Designer and Project Manager to ensure the best possible system. What more could be done to achieve maximum efficiency?

Heron had been reluctant at first. The work at the Babylon Museum was engrossing and the Licence Agreement with the Board saved him the trouble and time of enforcing his rights. What would happen to this agreement if he left? A quick visit to a lawyer clarified this point. The Museum had the right to insist the Agreement remain in force even if he left the Staff, in which case they would still be obliged to collect the licence fees and pass on to him his quarter-share. Or they could negotiate some other arrangement with him with the existing arrangement to be the fallback position. Either way he would remain a very wealthy man.

He discussed this with the Head of the Board in Babylon. The Head was reluctant to see him leave but agreed to continue to act as his licence agent. 'After all, we would love to have you return once this Egyptian project is complete.' So the parting was on terms as good as could have been hoped, and Heron didn't

begrudge the three-quarters of his licence fees going to the Museum. He owed his entire fame to their support and this much was fair recompense.

So Heron travelled to Egypt and was given his brief. The Egyptian Comitia wanted this alternative transport route to be so efficient that it would humble the Mesopotamian system. In the pursuit of that operational efficiency nothing was off the table. His budget had no cap provided the results could justify the expense.

Heron was struck most forcefully by one profound difference between the Syrian railway and the Suez Plan. The Suez Plan involved a distance from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean of barely one hundred miles over flat terrain, compared to the eight hundred miles of train track over hills in Syria and the seven hundred miles (at draught horse pace) of canal in Mesopotamia.

So the actual transport from one sea to the other should take no more than three hours. The biggest delay would be in the loading and unloading at each end. The next biggest delay would be in line management, shuffling the trains past each other on sidings. The greatest efficiency increases would arise from making these processes faster. Heron had just the way of doing that.

“Lord Tanisnet, thank you for your time,” Heron said with a smile and a short nod of the head as he entered the office of the Head of the Suez Railway.

“Not at all, lord Heron,” Tanisnet replied. “I should be thanking you for your time. Have you formed an initial concept yet?”

“I have, my lord,” Heron answered as he sat in the chair indicated for him. “To form this concept I have taken very seriously your instruction to make this railway as efficient as humanly possible, even at increased expense.”

“Provided you can justify that expense, lord Heron,” Tanisnet smiled.

“I believe I can. This is what I have in mind. First, the delays incurred in sidings to allow engines to pass each other are going to be considerable for such a short length of track. And the more engines you have on that track, the more passing manoeuvres and the more time lost. So instead of having sidings so the trains can pass each other, I suggest we should have completely separate up and down lines. There would be no delays because of one train having to stop and wait for another to pass from the other direction, only a constant circuit of transport.”

“That would double our construction costs, lord Heron,” Tanisnet objected.

“Not really, lord Tanisnet,” Heron argued. “If we are to provide sidings every ten miles to allow passing, with all the switchgear and signalling to prevent collisions, that in itself would cost almost half as much again as the base track. By my estimates, a complete duplication and separation would cost only 35% more than an array of sidings. And this additional cost will be regained very quickly because each train will be able to travel the full distance at full speed, instead of stopping at sidings four or five times each way. The average travel time from one end to the other would be less than three hours, instead of up to a day if sidings were to be used. It also totally eliminates the risk of collision arising from signalling errors or breakdowns. A collision on a single track would

paralyse the system for several days. And it also reduces the number of staff at sidings and the maintenance and repair of sidings and signals, and it allows the same amount of cargo to be moved from one sea to the other by only a third as many trains.”

“I see you come with your arguments already marshalled, lord Heron,” Tanisnet smiled. “That was a very impressive recital.”

“I owe it to my client to have thought through the consequences of my advice,” Heron answered almost bashfully.

“And you do it well. But you have overlooked one aspect, lord Heron,” Tanisnet pointed out, “You talk as though these trains will be in non-stop motion. I have visited the Antioch Terminus and studied how the Syrian system works. It takes perhaps six hours to load or unload a full train. On the basis of that experience, I would expect that our trains will spend most of their time being loaded and unloaded. Reducing the actual travel time becomes less important once that is taken into account.”

“That's true at the Antioch Terminus,” Heron conceded. “That process occupies so much time and labour that I almost despaired at one stage, and for the Suez route I considered digging a canal instead. Darius the Persian is on record as having done something like that, but via the Nile instead of direct to the Mediterranean. This would allow ships to pass without the need to load and unload. But I abandoned that idea. The sea-going merchant ships today are all square-rigged and would only be able to use such a canal if the winds were favourable. That doesn't happen often and if any vessel were to be caught by a change of wind while in transit it might run aground and block the canal. I could be several days, perhaps months, before conditions would allow it to be salvaged.

“So I decided to work on ways of making loading and unloading faster. Let me demonstrate what I have developed.” Heron stood and walked to Tanisnet's desk. “If you don't mind, my lord, could you please take out one of the drawers from your desk? Preferably one that is empty.”

Tanisnet raised an eyebrow, but complied. He took out one drawer and transferred its few contents onto his desk top.

“Please, place that on the right side of your desktop,” Heron requested. “And now, take out another drawer, this one the fullest you have. Put it on the left side of your desk.” Another drawer appeared. “Not enough,” Heron said. He walked around the office picking up small decorations and placed them in the almost-full drawer.

“Let the left side of your desk be the ship that needs to be unloaded and the right side be the train wagon. Please unload the ship and transfer the goods into the wagon while keeping everything in proper order.” Heron instructed.

Tanisnet started to pick up the items from the left-hand drawer and transfer them across his desk into the right-hand drawer. When he had finished, Heron said “Now you would have to transfer these same goods out of the train wagon and onto another ship at the other end.” Tanisnet started reaching to his right but Heron interrupted him. “But let me show you a much quicker way.” Heron picked up the now-empty left-hand drawer and then moved the entire right-

hand drawer to its place on the left side of the desk. The empty drawer he placed on the right-hand side.

“Wasn't that quicker? And it also reduces the risk of breakage, spoilage and pilfering.” He smiled at Tanisnet.

“I'm sorry, lord Heron,” Tanisnet was perplexed. “What are you driving at? The drawer is still full. Nothing has been loaded or unloaded.”

“Ah, but you are wrong, lord Tanisnet. The whole drawer has been unloaded from the wagon that was carrying it and that whole drawer has now been loaded onto the ship. Not one article at a time but the whole box containing them all!”

Tanisnet was totally confused. “What do you mean?” And then a thought occurred to him. “Do you intend to transport the entire ship by rail? Is that possible?”

“That thought never occurred to me, lord Tanisnet!” Heron replied. “I wonder if that could be managed for some of the smaller vessels. But no, I was not that ambitious. I intended only that ships would carry standard-sized boxes, and pack their cargo into these boxes. Then when they get to port we can unload and load entire boxes rather than single items. The rail wagons wouldn't need to be covered if we adopt this approach; they need only a flat frame that the boxes would fit onto, making these wagons much cheaper to build.”

“But the dock workers would not be able to lift such large boxes.”

“That's true,” Heron agreed. “So we will need to provide steam-powered cranes to do the lifting. By my estimates, we will be able to load or unload an entire wagon in a couple of minutes. A whole cargo ship in only a day, perhaps less if it has been designed with our standard-sized boxes in mind.”

Suddenly Tanisnet saw the whole concept in a flash. Cargo handling will never be the same again! And Egypt would become the cargo-handling centre of the whole world, connecting the Far East and the Bantu lands to the Mediterranean lands so cheaply that Mesopotamia would never be able to compete. “Lord Heron, your brilliance is worth every sestertius of your fee! Do it as you have outlined!”

East Africa – 811 AUC (58 A.D.)

There was gold in the Limpopo! Andreas Psarettes, one of the few traders who had sailed directly from Zanzibar to the Senegal by the southern route, had put into the river's mouth for repairs and to refresh his water. While walking the river's banks he had noticed a gleam in the sand. It was gold! After a few hours digging and sifting he had found only a few small flakes scattered among the deposits at the river's enormous mouth, but enough to suggest that there might be a rich mother lode upstream. And better still, there are no humans in the area to hold a prior claim but only a few scattered clans of the Monkey People. The Bantu were no-where near this far south yet, so inland must be terra nullius!

But to explore inland and trace the source of this gold was going to require a substantial investment. There was no way Psarettes was going to pay for this out of his own purse, only to have a hundred thousand fortune seekers take advantage. He needed to speak to someone important about this! This next trip from Zanzibar was going to be to the north.

“Thank you for your time, Proconsul,” he smiled as he entered the office of Marcos Hagartes.

“Not at all, Andreas,” Hagartes responded as he offered his right arm. “Here, take a seat.” He motioned to a corner by the window with two couches.

“Your message said that you had a proposal that could substantially boost the Republic's revenue. Many tell me that but you have credibility. So let me hear what you have to say.”

“Thank you, Proconsul,” Psarettes sat where indicated. “In summary, I have good reason to believe that I have located a previously-untouched source of gold. If this is true we will not be picking through the left-overs of an ancient mine established in antiquity, but have the virgin mother-lode in front of us.”

Hagartes nodded his understanding. “Sounds good so far,” he replied. “But what do you want me to do? Why not just buy the land and start mining?”

“For several reasons, Proconsul,” Psarettes answered. “First, it will take considerable time and expense to locate its precise position. Second, the land is in the wilderness outside the Republic's borders. So you will understand that I am reluctant to spend perhaps hundreds of talents of gold in exploration, only to find that I don't have any way of establishing title nor the protection of the laws of the Republic.”

Hagartes nodded again. “I can see a few different ways of addressing those issues but no doubt you have your preferred scheme?”

“Yes, my lord. I can also see several different approaches but I would not presume to decide between them. That's within your authority and I would of course abide by your decision.”

“Well, humour me, Andreas; what would you prefer to be done?” Hagartes cut to the issue.

“At present these lands are uninhabited. I suggest that I be granted a commission from the Republic to explore and map these lands at my own expense. When I have done this you are to determine whether or not to claim these lands to the Republic. If these lands are claimed then I am to be granted freehold and absolute title to an area of land of my choosing, up to one tenth of the area mapped. And I would also want one percent of all minerals mined from any deposits in the lands that discover.”

Hagartes frowned. “You say these lands are uninhabited. I've never heard of any lands that were not occupied by someone, even if they might be migratory camel herders! If these lands have anything of value, then why haven't some people already claimed them?”

Psarettes dared to shrug. “As far as I know, no-one has yet discovered them. Or at least, no-one recognised their hidden wealth. As I said, they are currently a wilderness.”

“Will you guarantee that this will not cause friction with the Middle Kingdom?” Hagartes demanded, expecting that these uncharted lands must be somewhere north of the Oxus.

“An absolute guarantee, Proconsul,” Psarettes assured him, “or may I be charged with treason! Nor will I cause any friction with any other state, because there are none in this land I have in mind to settle.”

Hagartes pondered this proposal. “Where are these lands, Andreas? I'm not inclined to make decisions without full information.”

“I would rather not discuss that, Proconsul. At least, not without your assurance that this information will remain my property and I will retain full rights to any benefit arising from it.”

“You have my word on that, Andreas,” Hagartes agreed. “Would you like that in writing, as well?”

“Your word is totally reliable, Proconsul; but just in case your successor might not believe me, I would like a written memo to that effect.”

“Then you shall have it!” Hagartes rose, crossed to his desk, and started writing on a sheet of paper. A few minutes later he crossed back to the couch. He handed the sheet to Psarettes.

I, Marcos Hagartes, Eastern Proconsul of the Republic, confirm that information was provided to me on this day by Andreas Psarettes on the explicit understanding that it shall remain secret until such time as Andreas Psarettes agrees to release it for publication. I also bind the Republic to make no use and take no benefit from this information without the agreement of Andreas Psarettes.

The information in question was about a potential new province of the Republic suspected of including significant gold deposits but which is currently unoccupied, and occupation of which by the Republic Andreas Psarettes swears will cause no difficulties with other States.

In consideration for which, Andreas Psarettes shall be granted upon occupation of this province by the Republic one percent of all minerals to be

mined from this new province in perpetuity, and first choice of one percent of the land area mapped by him at his own expense.

“If you are happy with that, Andreas, I'll have fairhand copies made for us both to sign.”

“Thank you, Proconsul, but I asked for ten per cent of the land area.”

“Yes, and I am prepared to grant one per cent,” Hagartes replied.

Psaretos tilted his head. “That would be excellent.”

“Now, tell me all about it,” Hagartes invited as he sat.

“I am talking about an area in the far south of Greater Africa,” Psaretos revealed. “It is so far south that not even the Bantu have reached it yet. There a major river empties into the sea, with some traces of gold in its silt. I intend to follow this river inland to find the source of this gold. In the process it's possible that other beneficial discoveries might be made, such as other mineral wealth or good farmlands.”

“The Bantu might not be there yet,” Hagartes conceded, “But how do you know there are no other unknown peoples?”

“As far as we know, the area has scattered clans of Monkey People. If there were a civilised race there, or even a barbarian power, these Monkey People would have been eliminated long ago. The Bantu consider them vermin.”

Hagartes nodded again. “Then go, do your exploring, Andreas. But if you give offence to any current occupants, expect to be prosecuted. As for your reward; I will allow you your one percent of the land and metals or other minerals, provided your selection does not impede the proper development of the new province. We will require the right to build roads, aqueducts and sewers, and anything else we might need for infrastructure, even if over or through your selection. Are we agreed?”

“Thank you, Proconsul. Of course I'll fully co-operate in providing whatever public works are required.”

Then let me add that agreement to this memo,” Hagartes said as he picked up the sheet from the table between them.

Egypt – 814 AUC (61 A.D.)

The most complicated aspect of the Suez Railway was not the timetabling of haulage or the loading and unloading operations; it was the sheer complexity of record-keeping. The Syrian Railway didn't have this problem. Cargo was unloaded from ships for storage in warehouses until it could be hauled to the other end of the line and then stored in other warehouses until another ship could take it on board for the next leg of the journey. All this tracking of cargo was in the hands of the individual owners. But the multiple-handling caused delays and additional costs, which Heron was eager to avoid.

Therefore he designed each terminus of the Suez Railway with extensive sidings to park wagons. As each train arrived at a terminus it was diverted into one of four parallel unloading sidings. The prime engine was then unclipped and passed on to the loading area. Here it was reversed into one of four parallel loading sidings in which the train for its return journey had already been marshalled. It clipped on and started the haul back to the other terminus. It was a slick operation with barely enough time to change crews and top up fuel and water if required.

Meanwhile a force of much smaller engines detached the newly-arrived wagons and parked each of them in one of dozens of parallel sidings forming the parking area, careful to place them in the address stipulated on the schedule worked out by the dispatchers. The opposite ends of these parking area sidings were accessible from the port complex, where a similar fleet of small engines could pull out wagons to the ship-loading tracks along the quay. Here a line of fixed steam cranes could lift containers from the wagons and into the ships' holds, and vice-versa for incoming containers. This quick and cheap service was very attractive to the traders eager to get their goods to market as quickly as possible, and demurrage charges on containers left in parking for more than a day also encouraged quick turn-around.

To assist this process a model of the entire terminus was built in the Control Building. This was complete with model wagons and containers bearing the details of ownership, scheduled time of transfer to shipping and the name of the ship intended to receive it. These details were updated as the movements were being made and checked for accuracy by observers in a high Control Tower using telescopes to identify the containers to ensure the model accurately reflected the reality on the ground.

It became a by-word in the Republic; to say something was 'running like Suez' meant that it was operating at perfect efficiency. Heron, now fifty years old, was starting to be regarded throughout the Republic in the same terms as Arius Claudius, the creator of the Euphrates Dams system. In Egypt they preferred to think of him as another Imhotep. Whichever comparison was preferred, he was certainly richer than either.

Which was why Arminius, a delegate from Tribe Germania, approached him with an offer as construction neared completion in 816 AUC, the third year.

“Lord Heron, Tribe Germania is far from the more refined and elegant parts of the Republic,” Arminius conceded in pleasant Latin, “but it can offer you that which you most desire. We can offer you the most satisfying challenge you have yet confronted.”

Heron raised an eyebrow. “I had intended to return to Babylon, which has many good memories for me. I found the development of the Steam Engine very satisfying,” he responded. “Apart from that, the design and construction of the Suez Railway was as big a challenge, and as satisfying, that any engineer could ask for. What do you have in mind that could surpass it?”

“One that would probably take ten years or more to complete but which would thereafter give rise to an endless stream of great engineering works,” Arminius answered. “And without wanting to offend; you are now over fifty years old. If you don't take up this offer now you might well be too old to reconsider in a few years' time.” Arminius could tell from Heron's expression that he was becoming impatient with the sales pitch, so he quickly continued.

“We are asking you to be the Founder and Head of the German Museum. Like the Museum in Babylon, we will be well-funded and research-driven. But unlike Babylon it will concentrate on Engineering and the physical sciences. We intend to become the centre of metallurgical knowledge and the mechanical arts in general.

“You have demonstrated over the last twenty-five years that the future belongs to the Machine; we Germans intend our Museum to be where those machines are invented, designed and made, and we intend to be the discoverers of techniques that will produce the materials needed to make them. And we want you and your prestige to be the means by which we draw to our Museum the best minds in the world to make this happen.

“And lest you think that this would be a boring and tedious administrative job, be assured that there will also be many design-and-construct projects for you. We have extensive coal and iron ore deposits as well as other minerals available. We will need pumps, railways, mining machinery, and many other things that have not yet been invented to make the most of our natural resources. You are just the man to invent these new machines and techniques.” Arminius paused a moment. “You will not just be building a Project; you will be building a Tribe!”

“Hm,” Heron considered the scope of this offer. “This sounds interesting! What sort of budget do you have in mind?”

“For the Museum itself, we were thinking in terms of fifty thousand sestertium milia per annum for recurrent costs over the first ten years, plus whatever establishment costs up front might be required. We know metallurgy workshops don't come cheap. But if you can attract more bright minds than we have assumed we will find the money needed to keep them busy and happy.”

“And what of licence rights? I don't want to bring my colleagues on board if it harms their private income.”

“We had in mind a sharing arrangement,” Arminius answered. “As I said, metallurgy is expensive research. We would like to offer free facilities in exchange for the Museum being granted an eighty-percent share of licence fees in

perpetuity. We are confident that this will permit research that would not be possible to anyone as a private individual.”

Heron nodded slightly to himself. “And where would this new Museum be established? In Colonia, I suppose?”

Arminius spread his open palms. “Wherever you choose, lord Heron, so long as it's in Germania. You will be the founder.”

Babylon – 816 AUC (63 A.D.)

Andreas Psaretos was admitted into the office of the Eastern Proconsul.

“Lord Psaretos, welcome! Your message said you had interesting news about a project initiated by my predecessor.” Quintos Telemachos rose from his chair to speak and gestured towards a couch. He came around from behind his desk to sit with his guest.

“Indeed, Proconsul,” Psaretos remained standing until Telemachos sat himself. “This letter from the previous Proconsul will provide you with sufficient context.” He handed to Telemachos the declaration signed by Hagartes five years earlier. Telemachos read through it quickly.

“Interesting! I gather you must have found something, to bother reporting back,” Telemachos guessed.

“Indeed, Proconsul,” Psaretos answered again. “I have mapped the land in reasonable detail, considering the time available to me. It's dry grazing country, and perhaps could be used for dry-land farming now that the Museum has developed strains of wheat that tolerate such conditions. But most interesting are substantial deposits of gold, iron ore and coal. I didn't have the means to assess the quality or extent of these resources, but I suggest that it would be worth sending some men trained in these specific skills to provide an expert opinion.”

“And is the land unoccupied, as you told lord Hagartes?”

“Except for the Monkey People, yes. But the wildlife is rather fearsome; lions are only one of the beasts in the land.”

“And are you willing to go back to act as guide for my specialists?”

“I am eager to do so, lord Telemachos. I want to stake my claim to my one percent entitlement!” Psaretos smiled. “I've put a lot of my own money into this and I look forward to making it a profitable investment over time.”

Babylon – 817 AUC (64 A.D.)

The sophistication of Mesopotamia, its enormous wealth and the growing influence of its Museum had resulted in Babylon becoming the most prestigious city in Republic. However the character of the Museum had changed since it moved from Alexandria. The schools had a deliberate edge to them in pursuit of observation and experimentation rather than philosophy, and the application of their findings to generate wealth.

These learning institutions, with their brazenly materialist/naturalist ideologies, were seen as a rejection of religion.

Julion Porentes had been one of the young assistants on the expedition to Zanzibar in 785 AUC to observe the occultation by Mars. Now, after more than thirty years of further study and teaching at the Museum, he was Head of Astronomy. He remembered the impression that the southern skies had made in him as a young man and the conversations with his Bantu hosts as they told him about the country they took such pride in. Unlike the experience of the pale men from the north, who merely inherited a land ancient beyond reckoning, these Bantu were proud to be pioneers. Each generation was developing lands that had been wilderness within the memories of their oldest living folk, and sometimes they were themselves the generation that had pushed outwards from their own fathers' lands and rolled back the frontier another twenty miles.

Some of these Bantu had told him about a mountain hundreds of miles inland. This mountain was so high that its top poked through the clouds. And near it were two other peaks, not so high as the big mountain but still above the clouds. "We would not have any trouble watching Mars if we were there!" they joked at the frustration of the interrupted observations of the occultation.

That had planted a seed in Porentes' head all those years ago and now it was time to germinate it. He was waiting in the outer office of the Sanates Nicoletes, the Custodian. He looked up as the door to the inner office swung open and Daries Eutyches, the Head of Mathematics walked out, turned to offer his right arm to the Custodian, and smiled his good-bye.

"Hello, Julion," Eutyches acknowledged him as he passed.

"And you, Daries," Julion answered as he stood in response to the Custodian's gesture to enter his inner office.

"Julion, what's on your mind?" Nicoletes asked as he indicated a chair for Porentes.

"I have in mind the biggest step forward in Astronomy since the invention of the telescope, lord," Porentes answered bluntly.

Nicoletes looked at him and raised an eyebrow. "That sounds impressive, Julion, but I wish you would call me 'Sanates'. We are colleagues now that you're a Department Head."

Porentes smiled sheepishly. "Old habits die hard, Sanates. And you will always be more than my equal."

"Not if you have just come up with the biggest step forward in Astronomy since the telescope," Nicoletes smiled. "Tell me about it."

“Astronomy requires two things above all else,” Porentes wasted no time. “Clear skies and still air. Without these we come up against limits, no matter how good our instruments are. Here in Babylon we have excellent skies, but the wide flat plains around us create too much heat shimmer. It is pointless trying to build better instruments if the unsteady air blurs our images. We need an observatory that sits high above the plain; if possible, high above even the clouds.”

“Are you talking about building a modern-day ziggurat?” Nicoletes asked with a smile.

“Something like that, Sanates,” Porentes smiled back. “But a natural one, not man-made. I want to build the next observatory on a mountain. And preferably a mountain on the Equator, so we can see the whole sky and not just the northern sky. When I was in Zanzibar thirty years ago I was told about such a mountain in Bantuland; I want to go and see for myself if it is suitable.”

Nicoletes sat motionless for a moment. “I gather that if this site is suitable, you will then ask for the biggest and best telescope in history to put there.”

“Yes.”

Nicoletes sat still for another moment. “How much is this going to cost, Julion?”

“The initial expedition to find this mountain, not much at all,” Porentes answered breezily. “And the cost of making and transporting the telescope, of building the observatory and then operating it in a remote location will depend on what we find.”

“You must have in mind at least some idea of the size of telescope you want,” Nicoletes pushed.

“I was hoping that the site would be good enough to justify something about ten feet in diameter,” Porentes replied blandly.

“You must be joking!” Nicoletes exclaimed. “I’m a physician, not an astronomer, but even I know that you would never be able to make a primary lens that size! And even if you could, how long would the entire instrument need to be? There is a limit to the ratio of diameter to focal length you must obey, or the differential diffraction will ruin your image by separating out the colours.”

“That’s right, Sanates. That’s why I intend to make it a reflector.”

Nicoletes was lost. “A what?”

“Lenses are only one way of focussing light. A curved mirror is another way. I intend to use a parabolic mirror instead of a lens as my primary. The mathematics is well known and I have a prototype already designed. This prototype will be two feet in diameter, big enough to show us if the concept is not only theoretically sound but practical as well.”

Nicoletes gaped a few times, trying to take in so radical a new idea. But he wasn’t afraid of the new or he would never have been elected Custodian by his fellows on the Curia. “Well, let’s take this one step at a time, Julion. I would imagine that building this prototype would be the cheapest part?”

“Yes, Sanates.”

“Then let us do that first. If we find that this new design approach won’t work, then we need not go any further. I don’t think building a new observatory in the middle of Greater Africa is worth it if we are still limited by telescope size.” Nicoletes looked at his junior colleague. “But if the conditions in Africa are as you expect, then perhaps it might be worth the cost. Can you build your prototype out of your current budget or will you need a grant?”

“That can be done without a grant, Sanates. But I would appreciate your support if I do need to ask for more funds for the later stages.”

Nicoletes was still cautious. “I understand that this would be a huge advance in our capabilities if it works. But tell me; this new ten-foot telescope would have ten times the light-gathering power of our current largest instrument, and three times the resolving power. That’s a good step up, but nothing like the step from naked eye to the first primitive instrument. What do you expect to be able to do with it that can’t be done now?”

Porentes smiled wistfully. “We won’t know until we do it, Sanates. If Kalothos had been asked that question seventy years ago, before he built his first telescope, how would he have been able to answer it? But look how that one instrument has changed the world!”

Babylon – 819 AUC (66 A.D.)

It had been two years since Porentes had first proposed his Bantu Observatory. In that time the first reflector had been built with surprisingly little difficulty and he had led an expedition to the Great Mountain to find it exceeded all his expectations. So much so that the summit was too high for his proposed observatory. It was covered in snow and bitterly cold even though it was almost exactly on the equator. He now intended to build on a ridge on its western shoulder, about half the elevation of the peak. This was still well above the surrounding plain and clear of the usual cloud level. A further consideration was the elevation of the high plain surrounding the mountain. There was no malaria there.

Thankfully the local Bantu in this region were included in the loose Bantu Nation that had coalesced around the Zanzibar Clans. Although the slow Bantu migration from the west meant that their last common ancestors were probably twenty or more generations removed, their base language was still common to all of them and their minor variations still easily intelligible. And the steel tools now made available by joining the recognised Tribe were very welcome. Civilisation was slowly spreading from the Zanzibar Clans as more and more new settlements were established and older settlements back along the migration path were being contacted and grafted into Bantu Tribe. With only a few exceptions all the Bantu east of the Great Inland Sea were now affiliated into the Tribe, with a Basic Law that had been consciously drafted along the lines of the original Gallic Confederation to provide maximum local autonomy. The locals wanted the Observatory to go ahead as a way of attracting more wealth into their region and were very welcoming.

Yes, the project was feasible from a technical point of view, would be protected from the usual perils of the wilderness by a supportive local population, was in the territory of a recognised Tribe of the Republic so it had full recourse to Law, and presented none of the health risks so common in the malarial lowlands. The only impediment now was the cost. Although the Museum was indeed making much more money from its publications than was even imagined when it had moved to Babylon, much of this had already been allocated to yet more Departments and yet more research, a cycle that snowballed on its own success. What was needed was a substantial capital grant from Mesopotamia Tribe, or at least a long-term loan. That would be the hard bit.

Yacoub ben Mattias stood to speak against Appropriation Bill 819-15. “Brothers, the purpose of this bill is to direct eighty thousand sestertium milia towards the Museum. It is obvious from previous speakers that many of you have no problem with this.

“Let me warn you that such an appropriation will not be welcomed by my fellow-Jews. It is widely known that the Museum teaches that there is no god. Or at least, if there is a god, he does not involve himself in the world. This teaching is highly offensive to all followers of all gods; but it is particularly repugnant to

us Jews, who cling to the one true God of Heaven, who adhere to the Law He has given through His servant Moses, and who has rescued our fathers from slavery in Egypt a thousand years ago and again from exile five hundred years ago.” Yacoub paused as he turned.

“We Jews do indeed resent this sacrilegious attitude by the Museum; but over the generations we have learnt to ignore such abominations when committed by gentiles who know nothing better. We are content to leave the ungodly to their sins, provided we are not obliged to join with them. Let those who would study at the Museum do so, to their own perdition! Let those who would support this seat of sinfulness do so out of their own pockets; but we Jews will not!

“However, this Bill will not allow us to keep our distance from such uncleanness. This Bill will allocate public funds to this institution. Public funds! A part of every denarius of tax paid by every pious Jew in this Tribe will now be turned over to this font of desolation!” Yacoub held his hands out in exasperation.

“This cannot be allowed to happen!” he demanded. “Let those who want to gaze at the stars do so at their own expense or let them pay others to do so out of their own pockets! But do not force loyal, law-abiding and peaceful citizens to taint their consciences by forcing them to be complicit in this sin!”

Babylon – 820 AUC (67 A.D.)

Titus Flavius Vespasianus was a practical, intelligent and methodical man whose family had shown all of these traits for generations as they worked their way up from humble beginnings. He was a good soldier, something that Rome now produced only rarely, as well as a respected Praetor in the Great Senate. And the last thing he needed now was a Babylonian Comitia member looking over his shoulder. This fellow can only bring trouble, but he had no choice but to accept that as yet another fact of life. Vespasianus shrugged. “Show him in,” he commanded his secretary.

Vespasianus stood politely and offered his arm as Marducaï entered the office. The Babylonian smiled and accepted it.

“Thank you for your time and courtesy, General,” he chirped as Vespasianus indicated the couches by the window. “I hope that we can stop this revolt with as little bloodshed as possible.”

“I hope so, lord Marducaï,” Vespasianus agreed, but was cut off before he could continue.

“Please, Praetor; you are a member of the Great Senate. You outrank me! So please simply call me Marducaï. And I would be honoured if I might address you as Titus.”

“Yes, of course, Marducaï,” Vespasianus replied. “And I certainly hope you might have some influence over these rebels. But I have my instructions, and they emphasise the need to have the situation resolved promptly. Peacefully if that is possible, but promptly.”

“I understand,” Marducaï acknowledged. “How do you intend to go about it?”

“I will offer amnesty to all who submit, except perhaps for the very senior ringleaders. If that attitude was good enough for Silo the Great, it will be good enough for me. But those who don't submit will be enslaved. I intend to use two legions at Jotapata in Galilee as a test bed for that policy while my main force marches south to Jerusalem.”

“That's rather generous!” Marducaï commented. “Some of these rebels have taken up arms against the Republic. The penalty for that is death.”

“I read in my briefing notes that the Babylon Comitia was warned that this could happen but they paid no attention,” Vespasianus explained. “If we were going to punish everyone responsible for this fiasco, we should start in Babylon.” Vespasianus held his gaze for a moment to ensure the point had been made. “But so far there have been no battles and little damage. I see no point in making things worse than they need be. I will march on Jotapata in two days' time.”

Vespasianus watched with minimal interest as his officer rode up to the closed gate to announce the terms; surrender immediately and be pardoned, or refuse and be stormed. He looked about him as the artillery was being rolled into position. Nothing like a show of force to provoke a quick response.

He looked back to the gates of the city. No movement there as the herald turned his horse to return to the camp. It looks like we might have to burn them out, Vespasianus mused.

“Don't be a fool!” Yousef ben Matityahu remonstrated with Yudah ben Simon. “You heard the terms! 'Complete pardon', he said. So why sit here to be slaughtered, when we could walk out of here and re-inforce Jerusalem? Doesn't it make more sense to use this pardon to re-deploy and consolidate our forces?” Yousef was exasperated by these thick-skulled rebels. While he could understand their passionate resentment that their money being used to subsidise pagan research at the Museum, he also recognised that these faction-riven rebels were no modern Maccabees. They had no chance of winning against the Republic. But it would cost him his life to suggest that. As the mayor of the city, he had no choice but to appear to support them and try to steer them away from bloodshed.

The Zealot sneered before replying. “On the other hand, we could hold out for days; perhaps even a month. That will give Jerusalem time to get organised and for more men to be recruited, armed and trained.”

“What makes you think this Roman won't send his main force on to Jerusalem immediately, leaving only enough men here to grind us down?” Yousef countered. “He knows as well as we do that Jerusalem is the key. If he can't take it quickly the revolt will grow and we will win, but if he can take the Holy City soon the rest of the revolt will fade away. We need every one of our men there in Jerusalem, not trapped here in Jotapata.”

“You are a coward, Yousef!” Yudah accused him.

“For wanting to defend Jerusalem?” Yousef retorted. “No, I'm no coward, Yudah; but nor am I a fool.”

Yudah sprang to his feet to be restrained by the other rebel leaders in the room.

“Save your insults as well as your energy for the enemy!” Matthias interjected. He looked around the room. “We all know the choices; do we hold out here or use this opportunity to go south?”

Simon and David looked at each other before Simon answered. “Let us go to Jerusalem.” David nodded.

I agree, too,” Matthias said. And then to Yudah “We are going to Jerusalem, Yudah, and that means with all your men as well as our own. Are you with us or not?”

Yudah was well aware of the hint behind that invitation. If he didn't comply, he would not be permitted to sow dissent among the ranks. These men would kill him just as he was prepared to kill them at the first opportunity if they posed a threat to his own agenda. “Of course I'm with you!” he asserted. “We must all work together!”

“Good,” Yousef tried to bring a sense of order to the meeting. “Then I'll go out to the Roman and accept his offer. If you see any treachery, you and your men will still be in possession of the city and can revise your plans accordingly.

But whatever you do, make sure you are all agreed. If you are divided against each other the cause will be lost.”

Yousef was shown into the office and Vespasianus stood to greet him.

“Thank you for your terms, General. I am Yousef ben Matityahu, the mayor of this city. I accept your terms. The gates will be opened immediately upon my personal command provided it is obviously not under duress.”

“That pleases me, Yousef. Let us go now and give that command.”

“Of course, General; but if I might have a few words with you first?”

Vespasianus gestured towards the couches and walked over to sit on one of them. Yousef followed and sat on the other.

“There are about three hundred active rebels in the city, under four Zealot leaders who distrust each other almost as much as they hate the Republic. The general population doesn't support the revolt, but many young men have been pressed into arms. Any sign of reluctance by them is punished brutally. I've persuaded the leaders to accept this amnesty only by suggesting that it will allow them to go to the aid of Jerusalem.”

Why are you telling me this, Yousef?” Vespasianus asked as he leant forward.

“Because I want the people of my city to prosper in peace, under the just and wise governance of the Republic,” Yousef replied smoothly. But then, he would say that, Vespasianus thought to himself. “However, I fear that these rogues will not submit in good faith,” Yousef continued before Vespasianus spoke. “They'll see this as an opportunity to escape from this trap only to re-inforce the centre of the revolt in Jerusalem. And as they do so they will forcibly take with them men of military age conscripted into their militias. Obviously, I don't want this to happen.”

“So you suggest what course of action?” Vespasianus asked.

“I suggest that the manner in which your amnesty is put into force should be aware of these circumstances,” Yousef smiled and bowed obsequiously. “Perhaps if you permitted men to leave the city only one at a time, and required a pledge of allegiance from each? That would allow my citizens to escape their conscription and also reduce the number who will go to defend Jerusalem. Or do you have some better idea?”

Vespasianus thought for a moment as he stared at Yousef. “Thank you for your helpful insights, Yousef. I'll do all within my power to protect your citizens, within my duty to the Republic. In the meantime you may advise these rebel leaders that if they surrender they will be forgiven all their actions against the Republic up to this point. I will honour my offer of terms and you need say no more.”

“You are a most gracious man, General,” Yousef smiled and bowed his head. “If I may, I request that I might be considered your friend in the future; it is prophesied that a man such as you will become the most powerful man in the world in good time, and I would like to be in your favour.”

Vespasianus had listened carefully to Yousef; not only to what he said but also to what had been left unsaid. Orders were issued to demand a pledge of allegiance to the Republic, and each adult male to be forbidden to leave the city without a certificate that witnessed his pledge. The legion's pressing machine started cranking over to prepare certificates and more than a hundred decani were instructed on the procedure.

Silon Trophos was one of these decani. He had been required to read through the pledge as part of his training for this job and was glad that he was not required to take it himself, having become a Christist himself five years ago. But he was not obliged to take the pledge, and whether or not these Jews did so was their own business; nothing to do with him. He took his station in the market place with his two administrative assistants behind him. One was to write in the details of the applicant onto his certificate, the other to list these same details in the official record.

"Welcome, citizen!" he greeted the first man cheerfully as instructed. "Please repeat after me '*I accept and will honour without reservation the sovereignty of the Republic.*' And then throw a pinch of incense into the brazier."

The Jew frowned. But he took a pinch of incense from the bowl. "The words again, please?"

"I accept and will honour without reservation..." Trophos repeated.

"I accept and will honour without reservation..." the Jew repeated.

"The sovereignty of the Republic." Trophos finished.

"The sovereignty of the Republic." The Jew reluctantly tossed the incense into the brazier, and a few small flames responded.

"Thank you. Now give your details to the clerks," Trophos smiled. "Next, please!"

The next two men complied, these without any outward show of reluctance. Then the fourth stood before him.

"I heard the pledge you required of those other men, but I will not take it. I'm not a rebel and I pay my taxes and I obey your Laws. But I will not acknowledge any ruler above God. I stand with the prophet Daniel."

Trophos looked more carefully at this man. He wore the small pouch on the back of his right hand that signified that he was one of the Hasidim, perhaps an Essene. Such were usually pacifist by inclination. "I can see that you are not a rebel, citizen. But I am under orders. If you do not take the pledge, I must arrest you."

"Then draw your sword and cut me down now!" the Jew replied.

"No, citizen. Your rights will be respected. Please, if you will go with this man." Trophos signalled for one of the garrison. Such refusals had been anticipated, and recusants were to be held until it was safe to release them.

The day wore on, with perhaps one in four refusing the pledge and many who took the pledge obviously less than enthusiastic about it. After a couple of hours an old man appeared before him. "I heard the pledge, officer; but I can't take it either. I am a Christist, and my first loyalty is to Yeshua."

Trophos gaped. He had no idea what would happen to those arrested, but he did not expect it would be pleasant.

“Well, what can I do? I am under orders,” he stammered out eventually.

“You can follow your orders, soldier. I would not ask you to do otherwise,” the old man replied evenly.

“The purpose behind my orders is to separate out those who do not submit to the Republic. These orders are not intended to harm the innocent,” Trophos argued.

“Then let me pledge this,” the old man answered. “I will do no harm to the Republic, only good; and I will pray for its good.”

“That will be good enough. Now take a pinch, and throw it on the brazier,” Trophos said hurriedly.

“Thank you, soldier; I will pray for you, too. Would you would be kind enough to allow the fifteen men behind me to make the same pledge? We are all members of the synagogue of Yeshua; we have come together to strengthen each other because we expected to be arrested.”

Yousef finally managed to find Vespasianus just before noon.

“General, you must be very careful! Demanding this pledge might strengthen the very revolt you're trying to dampen!”

“Why do you say that, Yousef? I see nothing objectionable about it.”

“That's because you don't understand our religion. Our prophets often refer to the God of Heaven as ‘Soveriegn Lord’; but you are asking good Jews to apply that title to the Republic. We have a Law from the Lord God Almighty; we can do nothing which is forbidden in that Law and must do all which is demanded by that Law. In particular, the First of our Laws is ‘*You shall have no other gods before me*’. No good Jew can swear obedience to the Republic as soveriegn; he may only swear obedience subject to the Law of Moses.”

Vespasianus waved a hand to dismiss this objection. “This is a purely political oath, Yousef. It's not intended to be a religious statement. Look how many have already taken it! Even the masses can see the difference, so why can't you?”

“I can see the difference, General, and so can many others. But there are also many good pious Jews who opposed the rebels yesterday because they thought the rebels were exaggerating the importance of the tax. But now you are proving these rebels are right! You are driving these men into the rebels' arms!”

Vespasianus thought for a moment. “I take your point, Yousef. I'll do no harm to those who refuse the pledge. Leave it with me.”

The administration of the oaths continued for two days as originally decreed. At the end of that time the numbers were tallied; after allowing for the recusants in custody, it seemed that almost a third of the men in the city had not presented themselves. This was a serious non-compliance rate! Vespasianus thought he knew where to find most of them.

Every synagogue in the city was surrounded by a century of heavy infantry during prayers on the next Sabbath. Each man was permitted to leave only by showing his libellus, the certificate of having taken the oath. Almost half of the men in most congregations had no libellus, and were taken in custody. But there was one synagogue that seemed an outstanding exception. Even the leading rabbi held his libellus!

This in itself aroused suspicion. The rabbi and his assistant were both arrested and taken to Vespasianus.

Vespasianus paced the floor before speaking. "You will understand why I'm suspicious. Most other religious leaders have either refused the pledge or failed to present themselves. Yet you both have your libelli. Why shouldn't I see this as a sign of duplicity, that you would take an oath which you have no intention of honouring?"

"We will honour our pledges, General, because we are Christists. We are prepared to accept the Republic as our ruler here on Earth and will obey in so far as righteousness allows. But if commanded to do anything ungodly we will neither obey nor revolt. We will simply refuse to comply and submit peacefully to whatever the Republic decrees as punishment. Both in obeying good laws and by suffering for refusing to obey bad laws without staining our hands, we will earn the approval of God."

Vespasianus was contemptuous. "What? You would allow yourselves to be killed rather than defending yourselves? Are you a flock of sheep waiting to be slaughtered?"

"You are a man of great insight, General," the rabbi replied. "Our scriptures use those exact words to describe our Lord, Yeshua the Anointed. He was crucified thirty five years ago because he healed men on the Sabbath, the day on which the Jews say no work may be done. And when charged with this crime, he surrendered himself to the Temple Guards, admitted to his actions, and commanded us all to be imitators of him. You may check that what we say is true; refer to the records of Governor Pontius Pilatus."

"It would seem to me," answered Vespasianus, "that your followers would be soon wiped from the face of the Earth!"

"And who would want to wipe us from the face of the Earth?" asked the rabbi. "We pay all our debts, do good to all, cheat no-one, and we harm no-one, not even those who harm us. We are the citizens that every just and wise governor would wish for."

Vespasianus decided to take a more direct line. "Have any of your followers participated in the revolt?"

"We have not lifted a weapon. When the Zealots took control of the town we stayed indoors until the turmoil was past and then resumed our normal business. When our young men were pressed into the revolt they refused to put on their swords. "What use would we be on the walls," they asked, "when we would do nothing except get in your way?"

"The Zealots knew that we spoke the truth. Some wanted to execute our men for refusal. Our young men simply removed their cloaks to allow a cleaner

cut to their necks. But mayor Yousef and the zealot Matthias intervened, arguing that they had as much need for bakers and labourers as for soldiers. Our men were spat on, flogged, and then released.”

“So your men allowed themselves to be flogged, rather than take up a sword one day and desert the next? Then they are fools!”

“No, General; they are men who speak only the truth.” Then, turning to his assistant, “Yacoub, remove your cloak and tunic.”

The young man stripped to the waist and turned. His back carried newly-healed scars.

“You need not fear Christists, General,” the rabbi assured him. “But don’t ask us to raise a weapon on the Republic’s side, either. It would only harm your authority when we refuse.”

Vespasianus felt a flush of anger in his cheeks. Who was this man to tell me what I might or might not command! Both arrogance and idiocy within the one skull! “You will not constrain my authority! You will do as I say or you will be crucified for your refusal!” he threatened.

“Indeed you have spoken truly, General. We await your instructions.”

Vespasianus took a few deep breaths. “You have your libelli so you have committed no crime yet. And crucifixion would be a waste of time and effort. But if you show any sign of treason I will enslave you instead. Go!” He threw out his arm, pointing to the door. The Christists nodded in respect, turned and started walking.

“Wait!” called Vespasianus, as a thought struck him. “What sort of slaves do Christists make? Are you just as stiff-necked when in chains?”

The Christists stopped, and the rabbi turned. “A Christist slave will serve his master honestly and faithfully. He will always serve his master’s best interests, except that he will not lie, steal or harm another. He will be a blessing to an honest master and an exasperation to a dishonest one.”

Vespasianus motioned him to return. “I’m not a fool. In know I have to work with what I’ve got. Will you Christists honour your pledge of loyalty to the Republic?”

“We will honour the pledge we have made, my Lord; but we did not pledge in the words you originally demanded.”

This came as a surprise to Vespasian. “Then what words did you pledge? My demand was that you recite *‘I accept and will honour without reservation the sovereignty of the Republic.’* and then burn the pinch of incense.”

“We pledged with the words, *‘I will do no harm to the Republic, only good; and I will pray for its good.’*”

Again, Vespasianus was angered. Who was the soldier that allowed this non-compliance? “Show me your libelli again!”

The Christists took out their certificates. They a both bore the same mark from the same presiding clerk. Vespasianus didn’t recognise it but there were hundreds of presiding soldiers and clerks appointed for that duty. “This is probably a false mark; no-one would be so stupid as to leave himself open to be traced in this way.”

“You will find the mark is honest. That clerk did no wrong; he simply filled in the papers when the presiding soldier passed us on to him. And the soldier did no wrong either; he understood the purpose of the oath and knew that we were faithful citizens who would do no harm to the Republic.”

“And how could the soldier know that?” Vespasianus challenged.

“Because he is a Christist himself.”

“But you told me a Christist would not take up arms!” Vespasianus objected. “What is a Christist doing in my legions?”

The rabbi shrugged. “I said we would not take up arms; but it is known that Yeshua and his disciples met men who were already in the army. They didn't command these soldiers to resign or desert, only that they do their duty in good conscience in whatever station they are called. This man might have already been a soldier when he turned to Yeshua. Now he is the soldier that has saved you from the guilt of innocent blood and also secured the prayers of many Christists for the Republic. He has served you well. But if you charge him for disobedience, I expect he would accept your judgement just as we would. His life is in your hands, but think carefully before you crush it.”

Vespasianus stood, thinking. “Go now; report back here tomorrow at noon.”

When the Christists had left Vespasianus slowly walked to the door. He called for a guard to fetch Yousef.

Yousef entered soon afterwards, looking worried.

“Yousef; tell me if an oath along the following lines would be lawful for a Jew to make. *I will do no harm to the Republic, only good; and I will pray for its good.*”

Josephus thought for a moment. “There are many who would not make that pledge”.

“I am aware of that!” snorted Vespasianus, “But is it a pledge that is in breach of your Law?”

“Perhaps you should ask a rabbi; but I can see no problem on that score.”

“Good; then tomorrow all the prisoners who had refused the first pledge will be forgiven if they will make the new pledge. Any that refuse will be sold into slavery.” He commanded Yousef to wait, and then had the guard summon Marducai.

The delegate arrived about an hour later, finely toileted and perfectly dressed. Vespasianus was not pleased. “I sent for you an hour ago, Pavo! Why have you taken so long?”

Marducai reddened at the insult of being called a peacock. “One must maintain decorum, or discipline is lost.”

“One must obey promptly, or one's career is lost! But anyway, what do you know about these Jews?”

“There are many Jews still in Babylon, Titus. They have some strange customs and refuse worship to any god except their own, but otherwise they are generally law-abiding. It's only these provincial Jews who are the problem.”

“Yes, but why have these provincial Jews revolted? How do you expect to solve the problem if you don’t know the cause?”

“They revolted because they refused to pay their tax.”

“For more than a hundred years, they have paid their taxes and kept the peace – well, mostly”, Vespasianus waved away the interruption he knew would be coming. “In fact their leaders have been doing their best to root out the discontents. So why the revolt now?”

Marducaï fluttered his hands. “They protested that we were insulting their god. But this tax is nothing to do with any of the gods; that was just an excuse to refuse this year’s tax.”

Vespasianus beckoned Josephus into the conversation. “Yousef, why did the rebels rise up?”

“Lord Marducaï gives the facts correctly, but without understanding. The tax he mentioned was to pay for an expansion of the Museum in Babylon. This is a place where scholars gather to discover the innermost secrets of the world. Our scriptures say ‘The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but what He has revealed is for us and our children forever.’

“This is why the Museum is a blasphemy; it is an attempt to know the Secret Things that God has reserved for Himself. It is an attempt to gain illicit knowledge, just as our first parents fell into sin at the Tree of Knowledge. It is an attempt to gain this knowledge without acknowledging the All-knowing and All-wise. It is a choice to ignore what He has revealed, while prying into things that He has withheld from our minds.

“If the Babylonians want to commit this great blasphemy, then let them go ahead! That city has been accursed ever since God gave it into the hand of Darius the Mede. Let them multiply their sins! But we will not make any contribution to that sin. We will refuse to participate in it.”

Yousef steadied himself, and smiled warmly. “At least, that is the argument that has been put by the leaders of the revolt.” He bowed politely.

Vespasianus looked from one to the other. After a time Marducaï spoke.

“But Titus, ever since the times of Darius, as mentioned by Yousef, Babylon has been supportive of the Jerusalem Temple and its cult. For hundreds of years the Persians paid for daily sacrifices, a custom that continued under the Greeks until Epiphanes, and was resumed under Republican patronage. It continued up to the very day before the rebels expelled the Governor. Babylon has never intended any insult to their religion.”

Vespasianus nodded. “So what do we do? Drop the whole idea of paying the Museum out of tax money?”

Marducaï quickly dissented. “No, Titus; if we were to abandon an item of expenditure every time someone said it offended his religion, we would never be able to spend a denarius!” He spread his hands expressively. “And on the other hand, if we waive taxes to any who object to that expenditure we would never be able to collect any tax.”

Vespasianus nodded again. “I agree. A tax cannot be optional. Yousef, what do you suggest?”

“The Jews have paid their taxes, even though a Head Tax falls much more heavily on a poor Jew than it does upon a rich Babylonian merchant. It's the purpose of the tax which is repugnant.”

Vespasianus saw a possible way forward. “Marducaï, what proportion of next year's tax would be raised from Judaea?”

Marducaï thought for a moment. “About one part in a hundred. If you include Babylon Jews, it rises to one part in about thirty.”

“So let us imagine that the other 29 parts go towards the Museum. The contribution from Jews must still be collected to stop frivolous avoidance, but that part collected might be spent on a section of the Museum dedicated to this Jewish god. Would that be a solution?” Vespasianus looked from one to the other.

Yousef was the first to respond. “I'm not sure about that. Most Jews would not like to have any connection at all with the Great Blasphemy.”

Vespasianus looked to Marducaï. “Nor would I be comfortable with that, Titus,” replied Marducaï. “The Museum is to be dedicated to knowledge, not superstition. Dedication of any part of it to one god would taint the whole institution.”

Vespasianus threw his hands up in exasperation. “I'm trying to find a way out of this mess. A mess that your Tribal government created, Marducaï, because it didn't think through what it was doing; and a mess that could take thousands of Jewish lives and enslave the rest of the population, Yousef, if your people are going to be pig-headed! And yes, I do understand how insulting that is!

“Neither of you are going to eat anything except bread and water and you will spend every waking hour together until you come up with something you both think will solve the problem. Meanwhile the cost of policing this Tribal problem is going to be charged to the Mesopotamia Tribe and Jews will continue to be killed or enslaved. You both have a lot to lose by failure, and a lot to gain by agreement. So report to me morning, noon and evening until you have something I can work with. Now, go!”

The two men walked out of Vespasianus' office and headed for Marducaï's suite.

“Marducaï, the Jews will not accept any proposal that makes them contribute to the Museum,” warned Yousef.

“And we cannot allow a solution that makes taxation optional. The Jews must pay the tax,” responded Marducaï.

“Jews have paid their taxes for the last one hundred years; but not for a blasphemy.”

Marducaï pondered a moment. “Then why not pay the tax but apply it to a purpose the Jews will support?”

“Perhaps; what purpose?” Yousef was cautious.

“It has to be something that will benefit the whole Tribe, not just some local public works that only the Jews will enjoy. Otherwise everywhere else will be complaining about preferential treatment for rebels instead of punishment.” Marducaï played with the ringlets of his beard.

“Why not apply the Jewish contribution to a specific section of the Museum that wouldn't offend Jews. Perhaps the Jewish taxes could be applied to the School of Agriculture to develop better farming techniques?”

“And in five years' time some-one will propose that better pig farming should be a study topic! No way!”

“You are not being very helpful, Yousef.” Marducaï said heavily. “What do *you* suggest?”

“Well, what subjects do you expect the Museum to study? Name a few areas.”

Marducaï started to count off his fingers. “Farming is out. How about Astronomy?”

“No; it is too close to Ishtar-worship.”

“Medicine?”

“No; it is too involved with Aesclepian mysteries.”

“Alchemy?”

Yousef snorted. “You mean witchcraft? No thanks!”

“It's not witchcraft, any more than refining metal from ore is magic!”

“We Jews understand metal-working; but potions and fumes are from the Evil One!”

“Then perhaps you should start thinking for yourself!” retorted Marducaï. “It's Jewish blood that will be spilt and Jewish women and children sold into slavery. Why should I care? Solve the problem yourself!” He rose from the couch and started pacing the room in his frustration.

Yousef huffed a sigh and leant forward, elbows on knees.

Then came a knock at the door. A soldier stood in the open doorway with a tray carrying a few loaves, two cups and a pitcher of water.

“Orders from the General, my lords,” their sentry reported. “He has commanded that neither of you are to leave the room except under close escort to wash and toilet. Other than that you will be allowed half an hour each morning and evening to walk on the walls to take fresh air. And no food or drink is to be allowed to you except rations to be delivered by your orderly.” The soldier bowed his head, entered, and set down the tray. “Two soldiers will be posted outside your room.”

Yousef looked up at Marducaï as the soldier withdrew.

“This grant to the Museum, Marducaï,” he asked; “Is it a once-only payment or will it be on-going?”

“The intention is to use the money to set up the extensions to the Museum, equip them, and thereafter the Museum is to pay for itself as it has always done. It should be able to do this by charging tuition fees and by selling the results of its work.”

“That's a good thing,” responded Yousef. “If it were year after year we'd be forever worried about how the next year's tax would be spent. But if it's once-only then the issue can be settled once and cause no future problem.

“If it can be established that no general revenue money will go into the Museum then paying the Jewish levy into General Revenue would seem the

easiest answer. But if it happens that the Museum needs more money than that will have to be found by some way other than general funds.”

Marducai nodded agreement. “Better, but I doubt it will be enough to end the Revolt.”

The next evening during their walk Yousef was using a military telescope to look out over the surrounding hills. It was turning to twilight.

“Try looking at a couple of stars, Yousef,” Marducai suggested. Yousef shrugged and found a star, just becoming visible in the darkening sky.

“Hey, there's not just one star there! There are three smaller stars beside it,” Yousef observed.

“Yes; you're looking at Jupiter. And if you look closely you will see it is not just a point of light, either, but actually a small disc,” Marducai explained. “Through larger telescopes back in Babylon Jupiter can be seen to be shaped like a slightly flattened ball with lines across it. And although you can only see three stars there now, there are actually four stars that go around Jupiter as if Jupiter is swinging them in a sling.”

Yousef was fascinated. He looked at other stars. “Most are just points of light; one or two seem a bit fuzzy. Some appear double. But what surprises me most is that there are a lot more than I can see with the naked eye. What's the point of all those stars if they are too faint to see without a telescope?”

“Yes,” agreed Marducai, “the big telescopes show that the stars vary from each other very much. Venus actually changes shape from day to day. Sometimes it's small and round, other times it is stretched out into a long, thin bow like a new moon. Some of our scholars have ideas about why that happens; they think that Venus is like our moon, but going around the sun instead of the world. That would explain the apparent changes in shape and size. When it's on the opposite side of the sun we see the whole face but it is further away but when it comes between us and the sun it's much closer and therefore appears larger, but most of what we see is the side that the sun does not shine on so it is dark.”

Yousef looked back to Jupiter. “There are four stars there now!” he exclaimed. “Just like you said! How do they appear and disappear like that?”

“That is because they go around Jupiter,” Marducai explained. “At some times they are in front of the planet and we can't see them against the bright face of Jupiter; other times they are hidden behind it. What's most surprising is that sometimes one of the stars will disappear as you watch, even when it is separated by some distance from the face. Other times it will first appear already remote from the face.”

Yousef is perplexed. “But how can that be?”

“The scholars have some ideas about that, too. They suggest that the four stars are not stars at all; they only look like stars when the sun is shining on them. They also suggest that Jupiter itself only shines because the sun is shining on it, and that behind Jupiter is a long shadow. When one of the little stars goes into Jupiter's shadow, it becomes dark. But if we are off to one side of the line drawn from the sun to Jupiter we can see around Jupiter's side just a little bit, into the

edge of the shadow. So we see the little stars disappear and re-appear as they enter and leave the shadow. Some scholars say that the biggest telescopes allow you to see little round black spots on the face of Jupiter itself as the little stars pass in front. They say these spots are shadows cast onto the face of Jupiter by the little stars.”

Yousef looks up at the evening sky with a new wonder. “So all these stars can only be seen because the sun is shining on them! Just as there is only one God who gives light to all and reveals mysteries!”

“We don’t know that for sure,” cautioned Marducal. “It seems that the wandering stars are like that, but we still don’t know if the fixed stars make their own light or not. But what’s very interesting is that each of the four stars going around Jupiter always takes exactly the same time for each circuit. Our scholars have written calendars based on their observations, and can predict the appearing and disappearing of each star. Our sailors use these calendars to find where they are on the face of the earth.”

“How can a calendar tell you where you are?” asked Yousef.

“It’s difficult and requires great skill with mathematics. But the basics are easy to imagine. First, you measure the height to the stars near the north pole. This can be compared to the height of these stars as seen from Babylon, and this tells you how far north or south you are. Next, let’s suppose the scholar’s calendar says one of the minor stars around Jupiter will disappear at the third hour after sunset, at a time when Jupiter is 20 degrees above the horizon. The observer watches Jupiter, keeping it in the centre of the telescope, and when the little star appears or disappears, he stops moving the telescope. He reads how high above the horizon Jupiter was when the little star appeared or disappeared. By comparing these readings with what they would have been in Babylon, and how far north or south of Babylon he is, he can determine how far east or west of Babylon he is as well. The scholars in the Museum have books full of tables and charts to simplify the calculations.”

“So these stars can tell you not only what the time is, but where you are as well?” Yousef was fascinated. “This is amazing! In the Torah, Moses wrote that God created the stars ‘for times and seasons’. David wrote in the Psalms ‘the heavens declare the greatness of God’. I never realised that your Babylonian scholars would make use of these truths for the benefit of sailors.

“Marducal, I have an idea. Perhaps it would be a good thing to suggest to the Jews that their share in the Museum Grant would be paid into the Department of Astronomy. This will help us to study how the stars created by the God of Heaven can be used ‘for measuring times and seasons’ just as it says in our sacred writings. That would appeal to them as a sacred study.”

“And no hint of Ishtar-worship, either,” smiled Marducal.

China – 820 AUC (67 A.D.)

“This is absurd!” Parethes exclaimed as he looked around. For half a mile in every direction there were perfectly manicured gardens and lawns with a majestic building at the end of a superbly-kept avenue directly in front of them. “What’s the point of spending so much money and then locking everyone out?”

“You forget, Parethes; this is the private garden of a Governor in a Kingdom; this is no Republic here!” his friend Arshach explained. “No public accountability.” Apilessara simply grunted.

Their guide smiled artificially and gestured along the avenue. “Please, honourable sirs; this way.” He set off at a slow dawdle, to lend dignity to the journey.

It took almost a quarter of an hour for the three traders to walk the distance to the building. It grew more impressive the closer they came.

“Look; eight steps up from the ground to the entrance!” Parethes muttered. “Who is he trying to fool?” All China traders knew the symbolic significance of the number eight. Once inside the hallway there was gold and ivory everywhere and silk drapes in abundance.

“He wouldn’t need to raise the tax rate if he didn’t waste so much on ostentation,” Parethes observed dryly. “But I suppose it might not be wise to say that to him,” he added. Eventually they reached the entrance to the audience hall. At the far end was an elaborate chair, almost a throne, again elevated eight steps above the floor level. On it was a corpulent middle-aged man in resplendent finery, reading a sheet of paper and sipping tea.

“Looks like we are the first in the queue,” Parethes commented. “We should be in and out pretty quickly.”

More than an hour later the three men were still standing just outside the entrance.

“Why are we waiting?” Arshach asked their usher.

The young Chinese man looked at him as if he was asking the silliest question possible. “Because you have not yet been called forward,” he answered.

“Yes, but why have we not been called forward yet?” Arshach persisted.

“Because making people wait is an exercise of power,” Parethes broke in while the usher struggled to understand the question. “Any office-bearer in the Republic would be voted out of office if he were so arrogant back home. But these guys do it deliberately, just to remind people who is in charge.”

“Next time we need to deliver a message we should send in a few slaves,” Apiliessara commented. Then turning to their usher and switching to Mandarin, “Please, if we are going to be standing around all day could you find us three chairs?”

“Oh no, honourable sirs; that would be a grievous insult to the Governor!” There was no mistaking the look of horror on the man’s face. “You must stand in line abreast, facing the Governor. You should not even be talking among yourselves but awaiting his pleasure in silence.”

A few minutes later the Governor rose from his chair and left the Audience Room.

“Well, that does it!” Parethes said in exasperation. “We’ll go back now and send a few slaves to relay the message. I’ve got better things to do than standing around here!” He turned away from the entrance to walk back out of the hallway. Their usher was shocked.

The response was immediate. The captain of the sentries lining the hall shouted an order and twenty pikemen stepped forward, halberds gleaming, to block their path. “Why do you insult the Governor?” the Captain demanded.

“We do not insult the Governor,” Parethes answered. “It is obvious that he does not wish to hear from us, so we are politely complying with his wishes.”

The Captain was not convinced. “You will return to the entrance and wait respectfully until you are either summoned or dismissed. It is a heavy thing to seek an audience with the Governor, and an even heavier thing to spurn it.”

Those halberds were quite convincing. Parethes gave a short bow and turned back to the audience hall.

“You would all do well to stand to attention and not say a word,” their usher advised. “And when you are summoned, remember to kow-tow and stay on your knees.”

The Governor returned and cast a quick glance towards the door as he did so. Only that bunch of round-eyes, he thought to himself. He went back to reading through the reports on his side table, and occasionally making a note in the margins. Another hour passed before he became weary of so much reading. The round-eyes; let’s hear what they have to say! He beckoned them forward.

The three men walked to the half-way point in the Audience Hall, knelt, and touched their foreheads to the floor three times.

Then, still on their knees and hands clasped together in front of their chests, they waited for a signal to speak. The Governor nodded slightly.

“Most honourable lord,” Parethes declaimed, “The taxes imposed on our trade by the Middle Kingdom have increased again this last month. They are now more than four times the rate originally decreed. We ask that you restore them to the level first agreed.”

“The Middle Kingdom permits you to trade in our cities,” the Governor answered. “You should be thankful that we extend this privilege to you, whatever the price.”

“But most honourable lord,” Parethes continued, “The tax rate was agreed. It is unjust for one party to alter an agreement unilaterally.”

“The Middle Kingdom does not make agreements, you half-sized pig’s turd!” the Governor thundered. “The Middle Kingdom grants favour to whom it will and retracts that favour whenever it will! And lest you forget that... Seize these men!” he ordered his sentries.

It was another month before the three traders were taken back to their ships. Each had both arms amputated above the elbow and both eyes gouged out.

The other traders in the port were horrified. Word was carried back to Babylon on every ship as it returned to Charax.

Six months later, taking advantage of the return monsoon, a convoy of thirty-four large square-rigged merchantmen appeared off the port. One of them separated out from the fleet and docked. Its master, dressed in his finest, went ashore and reported to the harbourmaster's office.

"Honourable Ho, my name is Hector. My fleet seeks permission to tie up at the River Docks and carry on trade." The customary gift, in this case a golden figure of a prancing horse, was placed reverently on the office table. Ho looked at it approvingly; the workmanship was excellent.

"Honourable Hector, permission granted."

Hector bowed deeply and Ho responded with a shallow bend of the neck, little more than a nod.

Once back on board his ship Hector ran up signal flags ordering the rest of the fleet to tie up along the river front. Meanwhile Ho sent a message to the Governor; the Greeks had returned for more trade. What would be the tax rate this year?

This was the most unlikely mission imaginable, Andreas Rhodanes thought to himself as he followed a merchant through the streets of a Chinese city. But it had to be this way; only the China traders knew their way around this city and it would be only too easy to become confused in the dark. He gave a thought to the main forces, broken into bodies of about a thousand men each and each on its own mission this night. Most of them would be converging on the barracks to neutralise the city garrison before they could be roused and deployed. But his mission was to break into the palace and capture the Governor if he were home. Another two cohorts, under the command of Stefanos Pandares, would simultaneously take the administrative complex in case the Governor was there.

But it was good to be out of those cramped holds! Rhodanes knew that there were special cadres of soldiers who were specially trained to not just be transported by sea but even fight on ships. He did not envy them.

"This is the gate into the palace grounds, sir," the merchant advised him as they came to a stone wall over twelve feet high with a heavy timber gate set into it.

"Excellent!" he acknowledged. "Karpos, Timotheos; you know your mission!" The contubernia commanded by these two men had been specially selected and instructed for this part of the attack. They had studied maps showing the layout of the palace grounds so thoroughly that they could draw them from memory. These sixteen soldiers were not armoured tonight, but wore only dark blue chitons and carried only legionary daggers in leather sheaths. Their faces and exposed flesh had been smeared with ash mixed with oil to allow them as much stealth as possible. Each group disappeared silently in either direction along the wall to find a suitable place to scale it without being detected. They were determined to do well; success on this specialist role would mean admission

to the Caretus Cohort, the cream of the Republic's Army for more than a hundred years and very rewarding financially as well.

It seemed to take forever, but it would have been less than ten minutes before the heavy gate swung open.

"Good work, men! Quicker than expected; the others are not here yet." Then, even as he finished speaking, he caught a hint of some movement down the street. His main force, one hundred and forty men strong, had arrived. He stepped through the gate and looked around. A half-dozen bodies were scattered on the ground.

"Right! Off you go! Karpos, you to the left, Timotheos to the right!" The two contubernia moved out silently to take out any other boundary guards before they could raise the alarm when the main body of troops entered the grounds.

Rhodanes fretted nervously as he waited. If the men under his command were noticed standing outside the walls it could alert the city, but if he brought them inside and closed the door there was the risk of his quarry being alerted and escaping. He made his decision; he ushered the men through the gate and into the moon-shade of the trees. After another ten minutes he signalled for the century designated as perimeter guards to move slowly and quietly around the wall. He must completely surround the palace before his attack and all his men knew their specific roles in this operation. Those designated as the attack century sat under the trees to conserve their energy. Now it was a waiting game. He had his victim trapped but he needed to wait for the city garrison to be neutralised before risking any premature warning.

Half an hour passed and the east was starting lighten with the dawn before he heard a dull roar from the direction of the barracks. The garrison was under attack. He hoped that as many of the Chinese soldiers as possible had been killed in the initial surprise but apparently not all of them had died before raising the alarm. Well, now was the time to act!

"Right! Let's go, men!" he said firmly, and the men rose to their feet from their rest on the lawns, drawing their swords. It seemed strange, legionaries with their gladii and body armour, but no large tower shields. The usual shield had been left behind for this mission because they would be too cumbersome in close quarters such as a building. Instead they had a small shield similar to a buckler strapped to the back of the left forearm. This allowed the left hand to grip a dagger for two-handed fighting.

'Those merchants had better be right!' Rhodanes muttered to himself. 'They say that the House Guard have only swords; but if they have archers as well we might be in a bit of trouble without our large shields.'

There was a shout of alarm from the palace as they drew near. Someone had seen them. This had been anticipated. Rhodanes nodded to the merchant.

"Surrender and no harm will come to you!" the trader shouted in Mandarin. "Our quarrel is with the Governor and no-one else! But if we have to come in for you expect the worst!"

There was the hint of a face at a window in the strengthening morning light, but it disappeared quickly. Rhodanes stood, waiting patiently. His men

didn't know the layout of the palace. There was no sense going in there until there was plenty of light for his men to see by. The minutes passed.

“Sir!” a puffing young soldier said to him urgently. “We believe we have the Governor. He was trying to sneak out the rear gate with a half-dozen bodyguards.”

“Silon,” Rhodanes said to the trader standing beside him, “You know what the Governor looks like. Go with this man and come back to me when you have identified the prisoner.”

It was close to noon by the time the Governor and his family were taken to the large open square by the River Docks. General Loukas had already set eight poles in the ground ready for use. The Governor and his family were herded into the square, each with a cross-beam strapped to his wrists and around the upper arms. One of the leading traders was beside him to act as translator. A sizeable crowd had gathered and was growing.

“Governor Zhou, the Republic does not view you favourably. You have appropriated more tax from our merchants than was agreed and you have mutilated three of our citizens. What do you say in your defence?” The trader translated this into Mandarin, shouting at the top of his voice to ensure all in the crowd would hear.

Zhou looked terrified. Understandably so, because were the tables reversed the future of the captive in such a situation would be most unpleasant. Not to mention the humiliation of being treated in this way by round-eyes in the full view of the public!

“I am only the servant of the Son of Heaven!” he pleaded. “I do not set the tax rates; I only act on my instructions!”

“We had an agreement,” Loukas repeated. “Any instruction in breach of that agreement would be an illegal instruction, and should not be obeyed.”

“The Son of Heaven would say otherwise, honourable General. He is sovereign over all under heaven and it is for him to say what is legal and what is not.”

“The Son of Heaven is not ruler of all under heaven. The Republic is sovereign and the Republic expects its neighbours to abide by treaties. The Republic despises men who dishonour themselves by breaking their promises.” As soon as this was translated Loukas continued. “So are you telling me that the Son of Heaven is such a man? One whose word cannot be trusted?”

“The favour of the Son of Heaven cannot be presumed,” Zhou answered. “His favour is for him to grant for as long as he grants it.”

“Then the Republic asserts that same level of sovereignty,” Loukas responded. “Yet, if the money stolen from its citizens by these excessive taxes is returned we might yet show mercy.”

“That is not possible, honourable General,” Zhou pleaded. “That money is not kept here but is sent to the Dragon Throne promptly.”

“Then bring what you have,” Loukas demanded.

Zhou bowed his head. “I will do that.”

“And you will do it quickly,” Loukas told him. “Because until that money is all repaid, your family will be very uncomfortable.” Then, turning to the soldiers, “Hang them up!”

Two young men, a young woman and a very old woman were shoved towards the stakes and preparations made to hoist their cross-beams. “No, not the hag! Let her be for the moment.” The old woman was left standing, while the other three were hoisted off the ground. Even so, it appeared that the weight of the cross-beam itself was as much as she could bear. “In fact, let her lie down on her back. We are not barbarians!” Loukas turned back to Zhou. “Take me to the money!” Loukas demanded.

In less than an hour Zhou had ordered the city treasury to be cleaned out. The gold and silver had been weighed out and the coin counted.

“That's little more than half the amount you have plundered from our citizens, Zhou! We want the full amount!” Loukas demanded.

“That is all there is, honourable General. I told you that we send our taxes to the Dragon Throne promptly.”

“Then you will have to lend some of your personal fortune to the City, just on a temporary basis,” Loukas demanded. “Let's see what you have tucked away. And do it quickly; your sons and daughter must be getting tired by now.”

Zhou, with the cross-beam still strapped to his arms and back, was pushed and driven back to his residence. His treasure room was cleaned out. Loukas was very disappointed with the trivial wealth obtained.

“You have more wealth than that, Zhou! Where is it?”

“That is all I have, honourable General.”

“Need I remind you that your children are already half-way to heaven?” Loukas asked. “If you don't refund all that is due they will stay on those stakes until they die. Then we will hang your mother there. And when she is dead, you will be next.”

Zhou looked sick. “I have hidden some away, in case of burglary or fire. It is buried in the mud in my fish pond.”

“Then let's get it out.”

The soldiers used a javelin as a probe to find the buried chest. It was full of bullion and coin. Loukas instructed the gold to be weighed.

“Not bad, Zhou; two more like that and the debt is paid.”

“There is another chest, at the far end of the pond,” Zhou volunteered. “But that is all I have.”

“Then let us retrieve it.”

This chest was considerably smaller and Loukas was disappointed. But when it was opened it contained pearls, not bullion. “Very nice, Zhou!” Then, turning to the trader, “What are pearls worth, relative to gold?”

“That depends on their quality; their size, colour, shape, and clarity. Do you want me to value these for you?”

“If you would, please,” Loukas responded. “But I should warn you; if your valuations are out by more than twenty percent, I will be asking serious

questions. So be fair to both the Republic and the Governor; we don't want our integrity to be questioned in the future.”

Five minutes later the valuations were completed and totalled.

“Excellent, Zhou! We're almost there! Another three talents, and then you can start paying off the cost of this police action. That would be another fifteen talents of gold.”

Zhou despaired. After being so close, this perfidious round-eye had just increased his claims. But he had no choice but to comply. So long as he kept his life more treasure could be accumulated.

“Then I must do what I must do,” he conceded. “Come with me.”

Zhou led them to a small private garden surrounded with willows. In the middle of the ring was a headstone.

“Two paces to the east of my father’s headstone is his funerary chest. It has nothing of great value to others but it is important for family reasons. He instructed me to retain this throughout generations. I would be most grateful if you would be kind enough to not sell this, but keep it as security for future payment.”

The distance was paced out, the ground probed with a legionary dagger, and the chest located. It was dug up, wrapped in an oilskin.

“I am not heartless, Zhou. This may be redeemed for twenty talents of gold.”

“Thank you, honourable General. Now you will release me and my family?”

Not quite yet,” responded Loukas. You have paid the money but there is still the matter of the three Roman citizens you mutilated. And by chance, you have three children.”

“No! You cannot do that to my children! They have paid you no insult!”

“Let's go back to the square now and take your children down from their stakes. We can discuss this while they are on the ground.”

The whole party walked back to the square and the three youths were taken down from their crosses. The girl in particular was very distressed and had soiled herself.

“You mutilated three Republic citizens and that must be avenged. But we in the Republic don't mutilate people, no matter their crime. Such barbarism helps no-one. We either execute or enslave instead.” Loukas gestured that the nearest son be brought forward and a soldier pushed a young man towards them. “Shall this lad be one of them?” asks the Lukas.

“No! Not my eldest son!” The next child was pushed forward, and then the next, and then the mother. All were refused.

“This seems to be a difficult decision for you” announced Loukas. “Which three out of these four? Let me make it easier; I will kill one, and that will leave you with only three; no choice to be made then!”

“You are a savage!” shouts Zhou. “You would take four lives, because I refuse to select which three?” Zhou was furious. His mouth worked soundlessly

for a moment, and eventually he bleated out “The mutilations were on my orders alone. Therefore I alone should bear responsibility.”

Loukas nodded towards Zhou with a show of respect. “Spoken like a true man.” He turned to the translator. “Announce this; Zhou alone will be executed. But such courage deserves a cleaner death than crucifixion. One clean strike will be delivered and I will honour the man by striking myself!” He waited for the announcement to be made, and then drew his own gladius. He took his stand behind Zhou and cut the cross-beam free. As he did so, two soldiers took its weight and carried it away. “When you are ready, honourable Zhou, clap your hands together.”

The trader translated this, taking the liberty to change the honorific to ‘most honourable’. Zhou nodded his gratitude for this respect and took a deep breath. Then, spreading his arms wide, he clapped his hands as powerfully as he could. The blow was immediate, and contacted from slightly in front to ensure that the spine did not interfere with the cut. The head was all but severed.

Loukas bowed deeply towards the corpse. He bellowed in Greek, “All honour this man!” and the other soldiers in the immediate vicinity turned and bowed.

After a moment of respect, Loukas indicated the man identified as Zhou’s eldest son. “Cut him free of the cross-beam!” he orders his soldiers. The man stumbled to him, and then knelt and kow-towed.

“I speak to you assuming you will be the new Governor in place of your father. We have our money back now, except for twenty talents of gold. Until you pay that we will hold your grandfather’s funerary chest. But if you deal arrogantly with us you will never see it.

“We do not wish to harm this city. We seek only to trade, without taxes and without danger to our people. If you say we are welcome to trade, you must also guarantee that you will not touch either our people or our wealth, now or any time in the future. You may tax your own citizens, not ours.

“If you or any of your people have a complaint against one of our people, you must not touch a citizen of the Republic. Instead you will notify the Republic Agent. He will judge your case and he will deliver a fair judgement. We do not want your people to be reluctant to deal with us.

“But if you welcome us to trade under these conditions and then fail to honour your word to us, then be assured that the next time we come we will not be as gentle as this. Instead of demanding talent for talent, life for life, we will demand sevenfold.

“Tomorrow you will come out in a boat to meet me again. You will tell me if we are welcome to trade here in the future or whether we should go elsewhere. I look forward to speaking with you again at noon tomorrow. Make sure you appear before me at that time. I do not want to have to come here again to look for you, because that would make me angry.”

Southern Greater Africa – 821 AUC (68 A.D.)

It had been worth it, Psaretos comforted himself. Of course he had pushed the boundaries and the Proconsul had pushed back, but all in good humour. His original claim of one percent of the land had been plotted out to include virtually all the best water-supply points, even to the extent of winding sinuously along the river valleys in strips barely twenty feet wide in places. Telemachos has simply laughed at him.

“Not a problem, Andreas,” he chuckled, now using the familiar name from long association. “If you really want to do that, I’ll grant it. And then I’ll issue a decree that all private lands must be fenced within two years or revert to the Province as Republic Estate. And then, when you have spent hundreds of talents fencing in these tiny ribbons that stretch for hundreds of miles, I’ll then issue a proclamation resuming all private land within fifty paces of a watercourse. You’ll be compensated according to law, of course; but we both know that your claim in itself is of little value. It only gains value by denying all other lands access to water. And in the meantime you will have spent so much money on fencing!

“So how about you think again, my friend,” Telemachos urged. “Make a claim for a sensibly-sized and shaped grant and be content with that.”

Psaretos agreed, reluctantly. What else could he do? But it soon became apparent that farming and grazing for shipping back to civilisation would not be the way to outrageous wealth, even with the enhanced strains of wheat now available from the Museum.

It would be the mineral wealth that would make the Limpopo Province a literal gold mine. His contracted one percent of all minerals would make his fortune by itself; but it would also attract a huge population that would need to be fed from herds and farmlands much closer to them than the established farms in the Bantu lands. This is what would make would make farming and grazing on the high plains profitable!

Telemachos had been stunned by his experts when they returned from their survey. They reported that this new land probably had more gold in it than all the rest of the known world added together. And there were large deposits of coal nearby to serve as fuel for refining the ore, and also high-quality iron ore deposits that would allow steel to be made locally.

Telemachos hurried to Rome to consult with the College of Consulars, that body which had emerged as a quasi-legal advisory council, often consulted by the incumbent Consuls or the Senate as a whole on major matters of public policy. Wealth on this scale was power; power that had to be retained in the hands of the Republic itself. The decision was made. No private mining would be permitted in Limpopo Province. All mining would be carried out by the Republic itself. This prevented the enormous influx of treasure-seekers that would otherwise have flocked to the Province, a population explosion that could not be supported by the non-existent infrastructure and would have destroyed the scarce water supply

available. Aqueducts, sewers, drains and roads were being built as quickly as possible while plans were being made for the measured and orderly extraction of the Province's resources. The intention was orderly development and a population controlled by limiting the release of land and the scale of mining operations and therefore employment. In this way Limpopo Province would be planned and managed strategically to become the core of the Republic's finances in future years.

Germania – 827AUC (74 A.D.)

Heron was smiling and gracious, but inwardly he was disappointed. He should never have been so quick to threaten his resignation from the German Museum! He should have realised that Friedrich, that Saxon from the barely-civilised far north, was not a man to be bluffed. At least, not by a man he saw as an aging, balding Greek. As soon as Heron had uttered that threat in the Museum Board meeting, Friedrich has seen it as a matter of pride to refuse. Yes, Heron thought wistfully, it would have been smarter to ask than to demand.

But the last ten years had been good ones, he comforted himself. The Museum was now running on three Departments; Metallurgy had been the first, mainly at the urging of the Comitia but also thanks to his long-time colleague Kasparos writing to him in indignation that the Babylon Museum was ignoring his own research into refining techniques. Yes, Kasparos had been eager to let Babylon know that they were no longer the only Museum in the world!

Bellai had been his second recruit, to head the Mechanics Department which dealt in investigating the properties of materials. Bellai had done some excellent research into fluid dynamics at Babylon, helping him to quantify what he quaintly called 'fluid friction losses' (as though a fluid could suffer from friction! Heron had thought at the time). This had resulted in improved steam flow through his machines, which had convinced Heron of his worth. But Babylon had refused to promote him.

And Bellai's understanding of fluid dynamics had also helped to optimise the design of the paddle-wheels that now drove a fleet of steamships up and down the Rhine, and were now being built even in Babylon to serve up and down the Euphrates. Danubia and Egypt were also placing orders. These big new ships, really floating barges with superstructure and a steam engine to drive a pair of paddle-wheels, one on each side, were not reliant on wind power, and therefore excellent for confined waters such as rivers.

And finally, mainly due to his reluctance to let go of it himself, the Engineering Department. The charter of this Department was to take the theoretical and experimental results from the other two Departments and use them to invent and improve machines. It was only the availability of Sarios after a personal scandal in Babylon that had forced his hand on this point. Sarios was just too good an engineer to let him slip through when the opportunity came.

His biggest regret was that he would not be given any say in the appointment of his successor. He could only hope that Sarios would be given the Chair to ensure the Museum retained its focus on end applications. But as the most junior Head, this was unlikely. Perhaps a private word with the three Heads might incline them that way but they could only advise. But if they did perhaps the Board would listen.

Through these thoughts he heard his own name called. There was polite applause and he realised it was time for his speech. He stood, smiling warmly.

“Consul Friedrich, Members of the Comitia, my colleagues, and honoured guests,” he started. “I have enjoyed a rather full life. I cannot remember a bad

year in it, which is surely a blessing from the gods. In that time I have enjoyed some success. Some rather glib people tell me I will be remembered, but I suspect that they mean only by historians researching into the more obscure episodes in history. But what does that matter, so long as I myself have been satisfied in my dabblings?

“And that is the spirit in which I leave the Museum today; one of deep and enduring satisfaction. Each successive stage in my life has brought me more joy than the previous. I remember a dozen years ago, when I felt absolutely on top of the world after the completion of the Suez Railway, Arminius told me about an opportunity that would make everything else seem pale. I confess that I thought he was rather over-selling what would be just another project. But I must admit here and now that he told me only the half of it!

“Watching and guiding the German Museum from its conception, through its infancy, and now into the first flushes of its power has been an unalloyed joy. Already we are earning licence income from our discoveries and advances in every one of our Departments! It took the Babylonian Museum fifty years from its establishment to its first licence fee! Yet every one of our Departments has done that in less than ten! That shows the calibre of our staff, our facilities, and above all our focus on teamwork.

“So let me address those three headings in turn. First, our staff. I need not tell anyone here that the three Department Heads did not simply inherit their Chairs by mere seniority or default. Every one of them was hand-picked, almost physically abducted, to his task. I deliberately and consciously did not set up all of the Departments in my first year and then look around for someone who happened to be available. No! I took great care to ensure that only the best would be invited to join us; and I refused to establish any Chair until *exactly* the right man could be installed in it. It is a policy I urge my colleagues and successor to retain. We must not have simply the best available; we must have the best and make him become available! And it goes without saying that this same mindset goes all the way down the line. Not only the Heads, but also our researchers, lecturers and tutors are the cream of their peers and we are prepared to pay them accordingly to retain them.

“The second factor in our success is our facilities. When I was first approached by Arminius, he assured me that whatever I required in the way of facilities would be provided. And they would be provided as a grant, not needing to be paid for out of our recurrent budget. He was fully aware that we were not talking about pure mathematics, where all that is needed is a quiet room, a stack of paper and a supply of pencils. He knew that metallurgy was very expensive in terms of fuel and equipment. Materials testing laboratories and fluid mechanics equipment are also expensive. And the labour, materials and time required by the Engineering workshop for prototype manufacturing beggars belief. I can tell you now that I thought I was being indulged in Babylon; but the facilities we have here leave Babylon back in the distance behind us.

And there is only one reason for that; the continued support of the Tribal Comitia. They have a vision for Germania that is inspiring! And I have no doubt

that Germania can achieve all that can be dreamt about it, so long as the Tribe has the tools to achieve these goals. This Museum will always be one of those critical tools, and I urge the Comitia to continue supporting the Museum as the leading component in this Tribal Vision.

And finally, the focus on teamwork. This is not simply a personal choice by me, Bellai, Kasparos and Sarios to work together because we like each other! But we do, let me assure you all!" Heron paused to allow the chuckles to fade. "It is also a conscious and deliberate policy. The days of the brilliant individual are gone. In fact, they are long gone! Even my early steam engines were not mine alone; Bellai's work with gas flow was essential to that development. In our most recent invention, the collinear gearbox, the work by Kasparos in case-hardening new alloys of steel was essential in the development of bearings and gear teeth so small, yet strong enough to withstand the loads transmitted through them while retaining the toughness to tolerate impacts without shattering. All advances in the future will rely on such inter-disciplinary work. And we have structured the Museum to reflect that. In effect, we have one Department under Bellai to investigate the properties of materials, whether they be solid, liquid or gas; a second Department under Kasparos to develop new materials with new properties demanded by our increasingly powerful and diverse inventions; and we have a third department under Sarios to pull together the input from the first two, and to relay back to them what further work needs to be undertaken.

"This is a simple but efficient division of labour, deliberately designed to keep our work directed towards practical applications and thereby best support Germania Tribe. And I beg of my successor, whoever he might be, to respect, maintain and support this understanding of the place of the Museum within the greater context of the Tribe as a whole.

"Thank you for your attention, my lords."

Limpopo – 835AUC (82 A.D.)

Quintos Kupriotes was one more example of what had become typical in Babylon's entrepreneurial society; the son of a well-to-do Mesopotamian trader of Greek parentage and a high-status but relatively impoverished Roman mother. Even the fashion of a hellenised Latin familiar name had become widespread. But unlike so many of his peers, he had not followed his father into business. His passion was with the law, and then politics.

With a wry smile he pondered where this had led him. Now he was a Provincial Governor, a quite respectable office; but of a province with little more than ten thousand population in the middle of the wilderness! Yet it was the fastest-growing Province in the Republic and it took no small amount of work to keep this runaway growth under control. Now the problem was a shortage of labour. He needed more slaves, or even free men as labourers, to build the housing and water supply to serve the population already here! Which would mean more money would be required to pay for all this, which meant that he would need more miners to extract the gold to pay for it, which would create an even greater demand for housing and water.... He was constantly chasing his tail. And of all these, water was the most critical. This was a dry land at the top of the river systems, not in the lowlands where cities could be built in a desert if sited beside a good-sized river with a huge upstream catchment.

The rapid growth in Limpopo Province demanded water supplies, drainage, sewer systems, roads, and all the infrastructure of a civilised society. The only way to pay for these trappings was by mining the rich gold reserves on what was known as 'the Ridge', on the watershed between the Limpopo in the north, draining to the Southern Ocean, and the Namib River in the south, running off to the west. But refining that gold required fuel, and in this open grassland area there was little wood to be had. Instead, the coal deposits nearby were used for fuel and this also had to be mined. There was just not enough labour to go around! But as Governor he was ultimately responsible for Republic-owned projects within his Province, and the Senate had long ago decided that the mineral deposits in this area were simply too rich to allow private mining. That would have created a gold rush that would have devastated the land and caused a complete collapse of law and order, and possibly destroyed the Republic's economy if too much gold flooded into the system all at once. So Kupriotes was also responsible for the mines as well as the administration of the Province.

He had taken major steps to minimise the labour required. He had engaged a senior member of staff from the Babylon Museum as an advisor. Naturally, the advisor suggested ever more machinery should be bought from Babylon to reduce the labour demand in the mines, allowing these hands to be put to work on civil infrastructure.

Kupriotes had to concede that most of the consultant's suggestions had been sound. As well as steam-driven pumps, the mines now had steam-driven conveyor belts instead of wagons drawn by oxen, (what a simple idea! Why had no-one thought of that before?) and the gold mines had steam-driven batteries to crush

the ore. And all transport to and from the coast was by a steam railway down the escarpment to Port Limpopo, through which came most supplies and all immigrants. Limpopo Province was without a doubt the most mechanised part of the entire Republic.

But it also had problems. One attempt to use a steam-driven excavator to lay water supply pipes had caused a devastating grass fire. Such uses were now banned. Steam-powered machines were now restricted, with a requirement that the ground for thirty paces all round them must be completely cleared before any furnace is ignited. Sometimes muscle power was the only safe way.

There was a knock at his door. "Come!" he called. As he expected it was Sithekes, his secretary. "Lord Timocles is here, Governor," he announced quietly.

"Please," Kupriotes answered, which Sithekes knew meant to send him in. Kupriotes stood and walked around from behind his desk to greet his Chief Administrator.

Timocles entered offering his arm and the two men smiled to each other. They enjoyed a good working relationship. Kupriotes walked over to the less formal couches rather than returning to his desk. "How goes it, Andreas?" he asked as he sat.

"I've just come from a chat with Eusebios," he opened. Timotheos Eusebios was the Province's Chief Engineer. "He tells me that simply draining the sewage away into the river is causing problems."

"Oh? But that is what happens everywhere in the civilised world. Why are we having problems here?"

"He gave me this summary, to explain it better." Sithekes handed over two sheets of paper. "He obviously doesn't trust me to understand or pass on engineering details," he added with a grin.

Kupriotes read through the summary. "So the problem is that we don't provide enough overflow from our fresh water supply to act as a flushing mechanism for the sewers. If we did so we would not have enough water, unless we diverted significant money and manpower to build a substantial additional supply. Even if we did, the river itself has insufficient flow in the dry season to push it down to the confluence with the Elephant River. So we would end up accumulating a puddle of putrid sewage in the valley downstream. And then, when the rains come, that accumulated sewage would flush through in one huge dose, and poison everything downstream. That will prevent any future development downstream. He proposes to collect our sewage in a different system from stormwater, direct it to a separate holding pond, and then pump it to an evaporation basin." He looked up from the sheets. "That sounds like it will be expensive, perhaps as expensive as the aqueducts to get the water here in the first place."

"He seems to think it might be slightly cheaper. There will be less length of pipe involved and therefore fewer pumps required," Sithekes commented. "But being a cautious type he didn't want to put that into writing. He suggests that we authorise him to spend some money to work up a proposal in enough detail to be costed."

"How much?"

“He says ten sestertium milia should be enough to arrive at a budget for the whole scheme. If we decide to go ahead that will go some way towards the detailed design, so it will not be money wasted.”

“Well, we already know that we might have problems if we do nothing,” Kupriotes summarised. “But how severe will those problems be? Let’s get him in for a meeting.”

“The first question, Timotheos; what will happen if we do nothing? Business as usual,” Kupriotes asked.

“That depends on many things, Governor,” the engineer prefaced his answer. “If the town stays the same size, it will mean that the river downstream of the discharge point will not be fit for anything at least as far as the junction with the Elephant River. Below that junction the Elephant River has enough flow to bring the water quality up to standard for animal drinking water. But if the town continues to grow then even the Elephant River will not be enough. It could render the water unfit all the way until it meets the Limpopo, or even further eventually.”

“Would bore water be affected?” Kupriotes asked. “What I am trying to get is an idea of the cost of doing nothing,” he explained. “If we can still use the land and water it from bores, that might be cheaper than your proposed separate system.”

“I would expect that bore water would be unaffected,” Eusebios answered, “but we can’t be sure of that. Much depends on whether or not any particular piece of land is suitable for bores; the bedrock around here is often shallow and very hard. I don’t expect much water could be gained from bores.”

“So you’re telling me that the most likely cost of inaction is that several thousand square miles of grassland will become economically useless.”

“That is probable, Governor,” Eusebios agreed.

“Is this separation of sewer from stormwater the only solution?” Kupriotes asked.

“It is an essential part of a few different options,” Eusebios answered. “One solution is to pump this sewage to evaporation basins as I commented in my letter. I expect this to be the best option, but I won’t know for sure until we have done our study. Another possibility is that we pipe the whole flow down to the Elephant River, where the flow in that river will be enough to dilute it to a reasonable standard. But that is a long pipe, and will need a few pumping stations along the way. And as the town gets bigger, the pipe and pumps will need to be duplicated, and eventually the Elephant River might not be big enough.”

Kupriotes nodded. “Tell me; what’s to stop these evaporation basins from overflowing when it rains?”

“We will design the basins as bunds on reasonably level ground, so no stormwater runs into them but instead goes around them. And we will provide enough freeboard to take whatever falls in direct from the sky. If we get really heavy rain over an extended time, then the overflow will be dilute enough for the already-swollen rivers to take it without any problem.”

“So how do you intend to separate the sewage from the stormwater here in town?”

“I expect that the best way will be to provide public latrines in each neighbourhood, with separate wastewater pipes that will be regularly flushed by running water or tipping buckets. The discharge from the local latrines will be gathered in neighbourhood tanks and pumped to a central pumping station. Then to the basins. This approach will allow the system to be extended as the need arises, without the sudden shock of needing to duplicate.”

“And how much do you expect this to cost?” Kupriotes came to the bottom line.

“Without a proper study, I wouldn't like to guess,” the engineer replied cautiously.

“Well, I'm telling you to have a guess, Timotheos, whether you like it or not,” Kupriotes demanded. “Are we talking about a hundred sestertium milia? A thousand?”

“Oh, not a thousand, Governor!” Eusebios protested. “Perhaps a hundred, perhaps two hundred or a bit more. And it will probably require some augmentation of the clean water supply to provide for flushing but expanding the clean water supply as the town grows is a routine task. Supplying the sewer system as well might add ten percent to what our demand might have been without it.”

“I look forward to your report and costings,” Kupriotes said, making up his mind that it would be better to consider this issue now rather than when the town had grown even larger. “Do your study, Timotheos, but as you do that I want you to talk to Darius, my advisor from the Museum. His background is Engineering and he might be able to help. Or at least he might be able to tell you who in the Museum might be able to give you some words of wisdom.”

The Report was tabled three months later. Darius sat in on the meeting.

“Tell me the good news, Timotheos,” Kupriotes said briskly.

“Actually, it is good news, Governor,” the Chief Engineer replied. “The separation phase is based on public latrines spaced at about a hundred paces throughout the town, and these are to have facilities for disposal of private waste as well. The expected cost of this, including laying of pipes to local pumping stations, comes in at forty five sestertium milia.

“The construction of the local pumping stations, including the pumps and the rising mains to the Central Pumping Station, will cost about twenty sestertium milia. The main station and its risers to the disposal points will cost about twelve sestertium milia. All these components, totalling seventy three sestertium milia, are roughly as I expected and foreshadowed in our earlier talks.

“But the big difference is in the plans for disposal and I have to thank Darius for his insights here. I had expected to build bund walls to enclose evaporation basins, the walls serving to not only retain the waste but also to prevent flushing by overland flow. However, Darius suggested that we instead simply build dams across suitable minor streams, reducing the amount of earthworks enormously. And immediately upstream of the waste storage, we build another dam with by-pass channels to just below the waste dam, so the upstream catchment can't cause the waste storage to overflow. And then he suggested yet another measure to further

reduce the required waste storage. That we allow some of the waste to be released at a controlled rate depending on the outflow from the clean water storage, to a dilution level that would not be harmful. Thus, we get reduction of the stored waste volume by evaporation in fine weather, and by release and dilution in wet weather.”

Kupriotes turned to the Museum Advisor. “Thank you, Darius. You have certainly earned your fee over the last two years. I’ll make a point of writing to the Head of Engineering, informing him of your excellent work for us.” Then, back to Eusebios, “What’s the cost of this storage component now, and how much money have we saved?”

“That will cost about eight sestertium milia to build; the original scheme would have been over thirty.”

“So the total cost you of your proposal would be just over eighty sestertium milia,” Kupriotes summarised. “And how long will this be adequate to serve the town?”

We have based our plans on waste from the town for a population of up to fifty thousand; we don’t expect to reach that number for another five years yet. Once we exceed that population we will need to build another pair of disposal dams; the second site we have earmarked will cost about fifteen sestertium milia to develop and will serve an additional forty thousand people. All costs apart from the disposal will be roughly proportional to population.”

“So the cost of this full treatment system will cost about two sesterces per head of population to build.” Kupriotes tapped the tabletop with his right index finger a few times. “I think we can afford that. But what about the operating costs? We will need fuel for the pumps and maintenance and we need to keep in mind replacement as the pipes and machinery grow old. These are all costs that we don’t have if we retain business as usual, and simply use the stormwater system.”

“Assuming an economic working life of fifty years for the pumps and eighty years for the pipes and our initial installation for a population of fifty thousand, operating and depreciation costs will be in the order of six sestertium milia per annum.”

“About a tenth of a sestertius per head,” Kupriotes made the calculation. He looked across to Sithekes, who had not spoken yet. “How do the finances stack up, Andreas? Can we afford to pay twenty sestertium milia per annum for the next five years, by which time we will need to keep spending at that rate for the expansion to serve the increasing population?”

Sithekes grimaced slightly. “If we have to, we can. It might mean we just have to grow a bit more slowly. But remember, Governor; as the population increases so will our revenue.”

Kupriotes frowned. “I don’t like to spend money, and nor do I want to divert the manpower away from other infrastructure work,” he grumbled. “Do we really need to do this, Timotheos? What do you say, Darius?”

Darius answered quickly. “You can either spend money on this sanitation system or you can spend twice as much on hospitals and crematoria,” he answered. “The latest research back in the Museum suggests that human filth is not just unpleasant; it actually harbours tiny animals that cause disease. So long as ordure is

simply dumped into the drains until the next storm washes it away, rats will walk in it and then walk through houses, spreading these diseases. So yes, you do need to do this, and the same should happen in every city unless they can afford the water to continually flush their drains.”

Kupriotes was taken aback by such definite advice, verging on a demand. But Darius knew what he was talking about. That was why he had been engaged. “Then build it,” he said with a shrug. “I’ll allocate 20 sestertium milia per annum to you for the work. Tell Andreas how many more slaves you need to do the work and I will approve their shipment as soon as possible.”

Developments – 810 AUC (57 A.D. to 863 AUC 110 A.D.)

1. Germania Magna became a full Tribe in 57 A.D.
2. Danubia and Pannonia continued to experience rapid population increases and more land was cleared for farming and livestock.
3. The colonies along the northern and eastern shores of the black Sea were separated from Armenia Tribe and consolidated into Samartia Province in 60 A.D. Peaceable Samartan locals were offered citizenship in this new province and raiders were suppressed.
4. Some Senegalese chiefs attempted to win back their power by enticing their people to refuse labour on Republic-owned latifundia. They did this by setting up their own latifundia and offering smallholdings and citizenship to all who would work for the native farms for a set period of time. Those remaining with the Republic farms were ostracised. Some Republic operations attempted to import their own labour, but found themselves boycotted. Eventually the last of the Republic operators sold out to the Chiefs in 72 A.D. The Senegal had achieved economic autonomy, becoming a mix of tens of thousands of smallholders and a couple of dozen Royal plantations. There was no great appetite among Senegalese to become part of the Republic, but a formal treaty between a rapidly-formed Council of Kings and the Republic was established to provide legal clarity.
5. British chiefs in the western lands attempted to impose taxes on the mines in their territories, most of these mines being owned by African investors. This eventually provoked a military reaction from the Republic and western Britannia became a Province in 75 A.D.
6. Samartia was accepted as a full Tribe in 94 A.D.
7. In 97 A.D. Germania became the largest producer of ships, due to its extensive forests in the Baltic. It also started to experiment with steel-framed ships with timber hulls. In 105 A.D. it surpassed Mesopotamia in terms of horsepower of steam engines produced. Research commenced on a viable screw propeller form of propulsion for ships.
8. The governor of Republican Britannia went fishing in British politics. The end result was that all Britannia south of the Humber became part of Britannia Province in 110 A.D.

China – 863AUC (110 A.D.)

“Mucius, the bleeding of our trade with China has to be stopped.” Abdishtar was the Eastern Proconsul who had done what had previously been considered impossible. He had won from the Great Senate a Law which would permit regulation of foreign trade. And in particular, a law that would allow him to regulate trade in the East.

He intended to use it! Since the Treaty of 820, which had established the right of Republic traders to trade in the Middle Kingdom tax-free, the terms of trade had gradually declined. This had developed to the point that some traders were dropping out of the market, moving their ships to other routes such as the Limpopo Province, the Sugar Trade in Further India, or the various Spice Islands. The remaining China Traders were still making profits and this was still providing a tax base for the Republic but the glory days of forty years ago had faded.

“Yes Proconsul,” Mucius Lentulus agreed. That's what you do when a Proconsul tells you something.

“You used to trade out of Suzhou, I understand. And I'm told that all Chinese trade ports use the same language...?”

“Yes, Proconsul. And yes, there's an official language that all of the Middle Kingdom uses for major business and government, regardless of the local dialect. Just like Greek is used throughout the Republic.”

“Tell me, Mucius; why did you leave the China Trade?” Abdishtar leant back in his chair and steeped his hands.

Mucius smiled. “I am sure you already know, Proconsul. None of the Chinese wholesalers would trade with me any more.”

“And why was that?”

“Because the Chinese Governor found me trading on a beach to avoid Middle Kingdom taxes. He couldn't touch me, under the Treaty terms; but he destroyed all the Chinese who traded with me. He confiscated their entire holdings, and then executed them. He proclaimed that the same would happen to any others who might trade with me in the future.”

“Do other Republic traders do the same; smuggle to avoid Chinese taxes?”

“I can't say for certain, Proconsul, but I find it difficult to believe that anyone could turn a profit purely from the legitimate trade. I would say that everyone uses the cantonment trade as cover for smuggling.”

“As I expected,” Abdishtar agreed curtly and rocked forward to place his elbows on his desk. “Well, we now have the authority to regulate the trade from our side. You're experienced enough as a merchant to know how the market works. I expect you to go to Guangzhou as head of the China Trading Authority. Once there you will take whatever measures you consider appropriate to drive the terms of trade in our direction. If this can be done legally, well and good. But if you decide that more questionable arrangements are required, let me know and I'll

consider your suggestions. If I agree I'll formulate regulations to support your advice.

“And lastly,” Abdishtar said grimly, “if the Middle Kingdom raises objections, remember that we have the navy and they don't. But I would prefer that fact to be used as a threat, not a tool.” He reached into a drawer. “Here's your letter of appointment. You'll find in it the limits to your authority but you will also find these are quite broad. Enjoy your new job!”

Lentulus made his own main office in Guangzhou, the busiest of the four trading cantons permitted by the Middle Kingdom. The fact that he was personally unknown there was also a factor in his choice. He immediately set up subordinates in each of the other three cantons. His first decree was to require that all trade with between Chinese and Republic merchants must occur within the Authority Trading Hall in each canton as a central clearing house and be recorded. He also put in place a system of materials-handling processes to ensure that all goods entering or leaving must pass through various checkpoints. The volumes and terms of trade by each merchant, both Republic and Chinese, were carefully noted.

The next step took everyone by surprise. It set minimum prices, below which a Republic trader may not sell various classes of goods. It also established maximum prices which he may pay for Chinese goods. As a result trading ceased immediately. No Chinese trader could afford to trade on these terms and still have sufficient margin to meet the Chinese taxes.

This achieved precisely what was intended. The biggest loser in this was the Chinese governor. Of the total profits being made by Chinese traders in these transactions, he had been skimming more than 80% as tax. His Chief Official in the port was ordered to visit the Authority offices immediately.

Lentulus was not surprised to see Xu arrive. He welcomed him into his office and offered tea. Xu accepted as he lowered his enormous bulk onto a couch. Xu's entourage stood in line abreast behind him.

“I must apologise that I was not able to welcome you when you first arrived,” opened Xu pleasantly. “I was still in the period of mourning for my oldest uncle. That period ended last night.”

“It is very right and proper that you observed the mourning period,” agreed Lentulus. “One must respect one's ancestors and senior kin, or what would happen to the Order of Things?” Lentulus knew the Chinese ways well. “I am therefore extremely honoured by your attentions so early in the first morning afterwards.”

Xu nodded his acknowledgement. Of course this barbarian would be honoured; Xu had managed to ignore him these last three weeks, and was irked that he was obliged to observe any courtesy whatsoever towards this smelly round-eye.

“It would have been inappropriate for me to inquire about you and your work during of my mourning period. Could you please explain to me now your task and authority?”

Lentulus hid his shock at such directness. Either Xu was a stunningly rude and arrogant man or he was on the point of panic.

“I am a humble servant of the Republic and have been charged with observing and protecting the Republic’s trading interests in the Middle Kingdom,” Lentulus started on his rehearsed introductory speech. “To this purpose I have been given certain authority. Over the last twenty days I have seen some things that have disturbed me. I have seen Republic goods being sold for little more than their cost price and I have seen Chinese goods bought at prices that leave no room for profit back in Babylon. Thus our merchants are fighting among themselves, cutting each other’s profits in an attempt to gain enough volume to justify their voyage.

“This is not a good thing for the Republic. As you would know yourself, honourable Xu, a poor merchant is a poor source of tax. Therefore I have decided to change the way in which we tax our merchants.

“Until now we have charged them a share of their profits. But as they have cut each other’s profits this has had the effect of cutting the Republic’s tax. But starting this morning I have ordered that a fixed amount of tax must be paid on each item. I have set this tax amount on the basis of how much tax a commodity might ordinarily be expected to attract and then I have added that to the basic cost price of the commodity itself, reasonable profit, and transport costs.

“In this way, even if a merchant sells for the minimum price, I can be confident that he will be able to pay his supplier whom we will tax back in Babylon, plus the tax due to his own activity.

“Similarly, I have seen Chinese goods bought at prices that leave no room for profit by retail sellers back in Babylon, thus weakening their capacity to pay taxes. Therefore I have set a maximum price that a merchant may pay for these goods. This allows them to be sold at a price that allows the Republic to extract a tax from them without forcing them to increase their prices to their own customers.”

Lentulus bowed his head politely as he concluded.

Xu sipped his tea, establishing that this barbarian’s place was to await the pleasure of his superior.

“You are new to this place so you may be forgiven for your ignorance in this regard. But I have been told that your commendable enthusiasm has simply made trade of any sort totally impossible.” He paused for another sip, which drained the cup. Lentulus was stunned again by the provocative rudeness of this reply. Yet he lowered his head slightly and waited attentively; if this fellow wants to play high-and-mighty then I will provide him with all the altitude he needs! All the harder will he hit the ground.

Xu glanced irritably towards the house servant, who hastened to re-fill the cup. Xu lifted the cup again for another sip.

“And of course, if trade is stopped completely that will mean no taxes at all for your masters. I think they will be most displeased with your mis-handling of this matter.” This time Xu looked towards him patronisingly, as if giving him

permission to repent of his errors. It was all Lentulus could do to not laugh out loud, so pompous was this last pronouncement.

“Honourable Xu; I do not understand how my price limits have prevented trade.”

Xu affected a pained expression, as though explaining something obvious to a poor student for the tenth time. “Is it not obvious? The Chinese merchants cannot pay the prices you demand for your Republic's goods and they cannot provide Chinese goods for the pitiful prices you will allow your merchants to offer to them. How is it that your masters would send you to such a position when you do not understand even the most basic principles of the task ahead of you?”

Lentulus decided he would continue as if the inferior in this interview. This would deepen the pleasure of seeing Xu's embarrassment.

“Then I must apologise, most honourable Xu. I thought I had taken due care in all these matters. For example, I am informed that tea on the Chinese side of the cantonment wall sells for only three copper coins per pound, so my maximum price of five copper coins would allow ample profit for your merchants. I am also told that Babylonian glassware is sold to your wealthy men for ten times the price paid to our merchants before I set a minimum. I cannot understand how your merchants could fail to make very handsome profits.”

Xu looked at him wearily, hiding his surprise that this round-eye was so well informed. “It would seem that there is much you do not understand,” Xu commented, idly flapping a hand. “But there is one thing that surely even you would understand; that if you continue to prevent trade your masters will not be happy.” Xu stood.

“I must be about the Governor's business now. I am one who appreciates initiative and enthusiasm in a subordinate so I wish you well. Please feel free to seek advice from my officials as to what you might need to do to secure your future.” Acknowledging Lentulus' elegant bow with the tiniest bend himself, Xu left the office, three of his flunkies preceding him and the other three following.

As soon and as gently as possible, Lentulus closed the door after them. Placing one hand across his mouth to stop himself howling with laughter, he looked over to the door leading to his Assistant's office. Marius had been explicitly instructed to listen in on all his conversations with Chinese officials and record relevant details. “I've seen some pompous bastards in my time in China, but that guy is the bull's balls!”

“So what do you do from here, Mucius? This guy is determined to bluff you out of your pricing policy.”

Lentulus shrugged. “I don't know about ‘determined’. I'd say just bereft of any other tactic. I know the real prices in China, but this guy has to guess the prices in Babylon. In fact, it's a pity that we let our margins fall so far before acting; that gives him at least an idea of how far we can be pushed. But I'll continue to play the naive, respectful babe in the woods for the moment. I want to make sure that when I move I catch him confused.”

Lentulus allowed three days before he presented himself at the gates of the canton. There had been no trade for those three days. He asked the Chinese guards to send a message. Honourable Xu had offered to provide an official to advise him on pricing policy, so could a message please be sent asking for an official to attend as soon as possible? Lentulus expected that it would take several days before this was answered. He was certain that Xu would want to pretend he was under no pressure.

In fact it was only four days later that an official arrived but with an escort of only two. Lentulus nodded in appreciation. This was a reasonably prompt response but only by a very junior member of staff so as not to create the impression that this was important to Xu. This guy might be an arrogant prick, but he knows how to move quickly without appearing desperate.

“Most honourable Li,” Mucius greeted him as he entered. “Thank you so much for responding so quickly. I know you must have many important duties, so I will try to take as little of your time as possible.”

Li was a contrast to Xu. He was a thin, young man with an air of energy and intelligence. He smiled in response to the greeting. “Honourable Xu only appointed me as your liaison last night. He has been very busy with much more important matters lately. But I am a very junior member of staff and my time is not valuable. I will attempt to respond to your requests as promptly as I am able.” Yet this very junior member of staff did not bow. He was making it clear that, junior as he might claim to be, he still considered himself superior to Lentulus.

“Please, be seated,” Lentulus offered the couch. Tea arrived as he took a chair. “It worries me that there has been no action in the Clearing House this last week. I’ve done my research and I’m convinced that the prices I have set still allow ample scope for profit. What am I to do?”

Li acknowledged the question with a curt nod. “It remains largely a matter of price. I would suggest that the prices your informants have told you are exceptional and do not genuinely indicate the reality in China. Although there might appear to you to be adequate margins, the reality is that these margins are less than the variation that often occurs so the hoped-for profit is by no means certain.

“You have also failed to take into account the costs of transport and handling. I am not aware of how Republic merchants do business in this regard, but Chinese merchants make great use of independent carters. It is a notoriously corrupt trade and pilfering can often result in substantial losses.

“Thirdly, there is the matter of honour. Your policy of setting minimum prices for Republic goods dishonours your traders by not allowing them to be masters of their own business. Chinese merchants do not like to deal with dishonoured men, because it brings their own honour into question. In the same way, setting the maximum prices your traders may offer for Chinese goods is an insult. It implies that these goods are inferior and that the Chinese traders offering them are dishonest. No trader will trade with you under those conditions. His honour means more to him than his profit because his honour is what underpins his dealings in the future.

“And finally, the whole idea of having to do business in the Clearing House is an insult to all concerned. It implies that all merchants are dishonest and they need to be watched every moment. I am surprised that even the Republic traders would tolerate that but I suppose different peoples have different customs.”

Lentulus sat silently for a while. At length he nodded. “Thank you, honourable Li, for sharing your wisdom with me.” He stood and bowed. Li stood and bowed in acknowledgement. One of his escorts lead the way out through the door, Li followed and the second escort took station at the rear. Lentulus waited for almost a minute before speaking to Marius. “So far so good. Did I look daunted enough?”

Marius chuckled. “You sounded like a dog who knew he was going to be whipped! I could almost cry for you!”

“Good. Now a few more days and we will start the next phase.”

It was another three days after the meeting with Li before Lentulus moved. He called in one of the more important merchants for a private meeting.

“Moretes, thank you for your time,” Lentulus greeted him. “How is business?”

Moretes snorted. “What business? The Chinese come in each day, look at the prices and walk out. They’re not merchants any more, they’re market reporters for the Governor.”

“Have you heard of any clandestine sales being made outside the Clearing House, ignoring my prices?”

Moretes looked across sharply. “No. And I don’t see how it would be possible. Everyone knows you have our warehouses watched as well as the gates. How could anyone get the goods in or out of their houses? And even if they did, you would be told by the gate spies.”

“Everyone knows that, Moretes? Even the Chinese?”

“You can count on it! Contraband is usually the first choice of method to get around taxes. And there are none more devious than the Chinese! They’d be able to organise it much better than we Republic traders.”

“So no Chinese have come to you with a plan?”

Moretes was starting to look very uncomfortable. “I’m not a criminal, lord Lentulus.”

“That was not the question, Moretes; have you been approached with any schemes?”

Moretes hesitated for a few moments, his mouth working as he wondered how much of the truth Lentulus knew and how much false information might have been mixed in with it. He decided on playing it straight. He would not lie but he would volunteer as little as possible.

“Not so much with a scheme, lord Lentulus. Just a question that perhaps, if a scheme could be arranged, would I be interested.”

“And you said...?”

“I said, ‘perhaps’.”

Lentulus leant forward. "I am very pleased you said that, Moretes. Very pleased!"

"I have done nothing wrong, lord Lentulus! As you know, it is merely a matter of courtesy to not refuse when a vague answer can save face. That's very important to these Chinese." Moretes was starting to worry.

"You tell me that you have done nothing wrong, Moretes. Not yet! But you'll do something wrong soon enough." Lentulus was warming to his topic. "In a few days' time you will ask this mystery Chinese merchant if he has come up with a scheme. You will imply your willingness to participate. You will conspire with this man and make arrangements.

"And each morning, when you hand your stock report and the previous day's trading journal to the front office, you will include your report to me about what is afoot."

It was clear that Moretes was not happy with this situation. "If I do that, lord Lentulus, I will have no future in this city. I will never be able to trade again. No-one will deal with me!"

Lentulus stared at him for a moment. He dropped his voice back to a flat and ominous tone. "Let me explain something, Moretes. If you don't do as I ask you will have no future trading anywhere in China. In fact, depending on how your trial goes, you might have no future at all. This is your chance to have your unofficial exploits considered part of your clandestine work for me."

Moretes was shocked. For the first time, he saw the eyes of a viper in the face of one he had come to think of as a bureaucrat. This guy was not the buffoon he put himself out to be! And he knew something. Moretes could only guess how much and from where, but he must know something to threaten me like that. He swallowed. "But lord Lentulus; I have done nothing wrong!"

"Oh, really, Moretes? I happen to know for a fact how much you have traded through the Clearing House. It has all been recorded. I also know that this record will not match what will be aboard your ship that left five days ago when it arrives at Suez. That's because it has done a little more trading on the way."

Moretes swallowed. How can he slip out of this net?

"I'm sorry, lord Lentulus, but I thought you assumed I was cheating. Now I realise that you just wanted a secret set of eyes and ears. Of course I'll help in any way you require."

Lentulus smiled but the viper eyes remained. "You're a wise man, Moretes. By sunset tomorrow I want a full report on your unofficial trading, just so I know how much I can trust you. Anything you report will be forgiven, but if you hold back on anything I'll know. But the first you will know of it will be after your usefulness to me is ended so I suggest you be very, very thorough! All the names, all the places, all the times! Full details! Omit nothing unless you want to be prosecuted for it."

Lentulus stood and offered his right hand. Moretes stood and took it.

"Until tomorrow, Moretes!"

Moretes mumbled a response, and left the office.

Marius entered from the attached office. “So what do you know about him that I don’t?” he asked.

“Nothing yet,” replied Lentulus. “But I know from my own experience that there wouldn’t be a trader anywhere along the coast who isn’t involved in smuggling to some degree. These absurdly high taxes imposed by the Governor have given his own merchants no other option and that means that our men have no other option either. In fact, it’s barely possible that I might have done the same thing myself, once, a long time ago,” he smiled.

The report from Moretes was interesting reading. For a few years now he had been trading clandestinely, meeting with a merchant in a secluded cove several miles south of the city. There had been nothing illegal about this under Republic law; it had been arranged so the Chinese merchant avoided the Chinese taxes payable in the port. Sufficient volume had been traded through the port despite the high Chinese taxes to provide cover for the real trade on the beaches.

There was little doubt that most, if not all, of the other merchants had similar arrangements with their own favourite trading partners. Lentulus himself had maintained similar arrangements in his own days as a trader. But it was reassuring to know that the practice was continuing even though it had now become illegal, his own decree requiring all trade to be through the Clearing Houses where the price constraints were in force.

This confirmed Lentulus’ belief why the Republic and Chinese merchants had been so quiet, despite the complete breakdown in official trade. The official trade was not profitable in any case! So long as the beach trade continued both would be content.

Moretes’ report also claimed that the actual profits from his trading had been properly declared and taxed at the Babylonian end. This was probably close to the truth, Lentulus mused. Why risk a profitable business, completely legal under Republic law, just for a small extra margin? It was the Chinese merchant who carried the personal risk under this smuggling arrangement.

“Well, Marius; what options do we have?”

Marius leant back in his chair. “To me, the first option is ‘Do nothing!’. In this case it means allowing the smuggling to continue. That way our traders are still making profits and all goes well back home.

“The second option is to prosecute any Romans trading outside your instructions. I don’t see this as a way of increasing the profitability of trade.

“A third option is to inform the Chinese governor. Again, I see no benefit if this trade gets closed down from the Chinese side.” Marius shrugged. “So I suggest Option One; just let it continue.”

Lentulus cradled his chin in his right hand. “A fourth option is an exemplary trial. But anyway, perhaps closing down both the official trade and the smuggling is what we need to do. So long as we trade in the ports, the Chinese are gouging our profits. But so long as the trade happens on the beaches, I will guarantee that the Governor knows about these and is gouging corrupt payments in that way, too. I would like to avoid both these costs to trade.”

“But are we capable of closing down the trade, even if we try?”

“You’re right on that point,” agreed Lentulus. “We don’t have the patrol craft. Even if we did, why waste the resources simply to stop our own people from making money?” he went on. “The problem is that our people could make a lot more money if these Chinese costs were not being carried. And to get those Chinese costs taken off the table we need to convince the Chinese governor that they are hurting him more than us.”

“I think the only way you will do that is to turn off the trade completely. And I don’t see how we can stop the smuggling to do that.”

“There is one way,” said Lentulus. “Prevent any vessels from coming anywhere near China. Stop them at the Babylon end of the voyage.”

“No way, Mucius! The traders would never wear that! They went to the Tribal Governor to improve their trade, not to stop it!”

Lentulus held his hand up and smiled faintly. “Not even if the traders stopped their ships under their own volition?”

Marius looked perplexed. “But why would they do that?”

“Tell me, Marius; how did they come to be driven to such poor terms of trade in the first place that they would ask for the Republic to set up this China Trading Authority?”

“That’s obvious; because they were getting screwed into the ground by the Chinese taxes.”

“Not the whole story, Marius! They were also being screwed into the ground by each other. Tell me Marius, what would a Chinese merchant pay for a set of fine Babylonian glassware, if it was the only set left in the world?”

Marius stared at Lentulus, and then nodded. “Yes, our merchants are in a race to the bottom, under-cutting each other for the sale. And nothing is being sold through the Clearing House because the smuggled stuff is providing enough supply for Chinese demand, at least for the moment.”

“So we tell the merchants that!” Lentulus urged. “We need to do something very un-Republic. We need to set up a Cartel. That way we don’t need to do any policing; the traders will do it themselves. Then, when they’re not competing against each other, they’ll be in a position to set whatever prices they want.”

“But Mucius, that just won’t work. How are we going to stop one merchant from selling as much as he can?”

“I think it would be a good thing if the China Trading Authority imposed a quota system. We would ensure that each merchant loaded no more than his allowance back in Babylon. When it arrives here, he will be free to sell it for whatever price he can get; but with a limited supply, a smart merchant will wait for the Chinese offers to creep up in desperation before he sells. In the same way, he will be permitted to buy only a limited amount for shipment back; let the Chinese make their offers, and gouge each other! And if the prices are still higher than we want, we just walk away from that year’s sales. That will put the Chinese in the right frame of mind for the next year.” Mucius spread his hands. “If we

deal in smaller volumes, we create a seller's market for our goods, and a buyer's market for theirs. We'll be able to dictate our own prices."

Marius stared at Lentulus. "I can see problems back home. It will take only one merchant to complain that he's getting a short quota and the whole system will unravel," he said moodily.

Not so, Marius. I know how to allocate the quota in a perfectly fair and open way, so no-one will have a right to complain. Let the merchants bid for their shares."

Marius thought for a moment. "But if they have to pay for the right to trade, then that will put all that much more pressure on them to close their deals. That will be counter-productive."

Lentulus paused a moment and then nodded. "You're right, Marius. We should make it clear that a merchant who doesn't buy or sell his full quota will be refunded his quota fee pro-rata. By not trading and therefore reducing the volume of trade, he will actually be helping the others to secure best prices but without hurting himself."

Marius nodded in response. "How are you going to set this system in place? What about the goods already on hand?"

"I'm still thinking about that. Let me bounce a few ideas off you. I think a good start would be to embargo any more shipments in or out to send a message to the Chinese."

"What about incoming material en route? What about material already purchased but not yet shipped out?"

"Good questions, Marius. My first thought is to allow new goods to be landed, but on the understanding that this will count against future quotas. This will make our goods scarce almost immediately and push up prices pretty quickly. Chinese goods already purchased may be sent out, but count towards future quotas; this will mean that demand for more of these Chinese goods will drop immediately, and push prices down. What do you say?"

"But if a trader doesn't buy a quota in the future?" Marius asked. "You can't force him to buy a quota next year, because the quota system will make future terms of trade much better than he has already traded for, so the price of the next year's quota will rise. He might be buying a quota but not be able to use it for its full value."

"Good point! Goods not yet bought or sold can count against a future quota, because he will be in a position to hold them until the quota is fixed, and set his prices accordingly; goods already bought are to be embargoed, and released on an equal-value basis in conjunction with future quota goods. This will be a one-off windfall profit for him so he can't complain; but to realise this profit he'll need to buy a future quota or sell them to another merchant with a quota."

Marius nodded. "Sounds good. But let's sleep on it and see if it needs a bit of fine-tuning before we let anyone know."

Lentulus stood to signify the close of the discussion. "Yes, let's think about it and finalise tomorrow evening. In the meantime, let the smuggling continue. It does us no harm for the moment."

Having confirmed this policy the following evening, the next step was deciding how to carry it out. The biggest single problem was that such an “interference in trade” would be very tricky to enforce. Although appointed by the Republic and given this authority, his reach was limited by practical considerations. The decision was sent back to Babylon on the first available ship. But his intention was to announce and enact these changes before a reply could be formulated. The situation would not allow the delay.

The final wording of the decree was finalised and copies made for each canton along the Chinese coast. This was accompanied by a list of expected questions and the answers to be given to those questions. Staff members were sent out with these sealed documents with instructions to call public meetings for the announcements and to post the new Regulations. A common date was set to ensure all cantons were informed at the same time.

Li called on Lentulus in the morning three days after the new regulations were announced. He was welcomed with great courtesy. Tea was poured.

“Your new trading regulations have come to the notice of Governor and my master the honourable Xu,” Li commented.

“Oh? And what is the honourable Governor’s opinion on them?” Lentulus inquired.

“Honourable Xu tells me the Governor is disappointed. Honourable Xu mentioned several reasons.”

Lentulus bowed his head slightly, then asked “Please elucidate the reasons. I do not wish to disappoint honourable Xu.”

“The first reason is about international relationships,” began Li. “Peaceful trade flows over into peace in general. The more peaceful trade, the more peace. By reducing trade you have signalled a cooling of relationships between the Republic and the Middle Kingdom. This is regrettable.

“The second reason is similar. Trade is of material benefit to both sides, otherwise there would be none. Both the Republic and the Middle Kingdom prospered by it. Your actions have reduced prosperity for all.

“Thirdly, it compounds the insult you have already placed on the merchants involved, as I explained to you earlier. An official who continually insults his merchants will soon find the insult repaid.

“Fourthly, you have made this decision without consultation with me, although Honourable Xu placed me at your service. This is a rejection of the help offered to you by honourable Xu, and thereby an insult to honourable Xu himself.

“Finally, you have ignored the advice already offered at our previous meeting. This is an additional insult.”

Lentulus bowed his head slightly, acknowledging Li’s explanation. This guy has a sharp mind! thought Mucius. Such clarity and organisation!

“Thank you for expressing honourable Xu’s assessment so clearly and candidly, honourable Li.”

Li acknowledged Lentulus’ response and took another sip of tea.

Lentulus waited. Li obviously wanted to relay a message from Xu, but was unwilling to volunteer it. He preferred Lentulus to ask as a supplicant what he should do to correct this situation. Li had as good as told him that he saw this as a trade embargo, tantamount to declaring a trade war. It was clear that Li was waiting for an apology and a backdown.

Lentulus decided that this time he would be a little less convenient. Let Li spit it out!

The men sat in silence as they sipped their tea. Time stretched. Li realised that he had painted himself into a corner; Lentulus was not going to ask for 'advice'. He took finishing his tea as a face-saving opportunity to speak again.

“What message should I take back to Honourable Xu?”

“In regards to which specific point of concern, honourable Li?” Lentulus asked blandly.

Li kept his composure. “In regards to the points I have just mentioned to you. Do you intend this trade restriction to be taken as a sign of an unfriendly disposition towards the Middle Kingdom? Do you intend to persist on this mutually unprofitable course? Do you intend to continue to act unilaterally, spurning consultation with your partners in this trade?”

“Whether or not it is an unprofitable course and whether or not I shall persist in it will depend on the information available to me from time to time. I will ultimately be judged by my superiors, however much I am indebted to you and honourable Xu for sharing your wisdom with me.

“But I must say that I have not acted unilaterally, spurning consultation. In our previous meeting you advised me that setting prices was a false step and I should not have done that. I have heeded your wise advice. These new regulations have removed the previous price controls so merchants are now free to buy and sell at whatever prices they might find acceptable. I have adopted your advice, for which I am thankful.”

Lentulus paused slightly for emphasis. “Naturally, I would like to set the trading quota as high as possible. As you said, more trade means more peace. However, I will only be able to do that if it does no damage to profits and therefore the Republic's revenue. And I am reliably informed about the prices for various goods in Chinese markets, where Republic traders are not permitted to deal. Is there any way in which your merchants could be encouraged to offer Chinese goods to our merchants for prices comparable to those in your own internal Chinese markets? Or to offer prices for our wares that reflect their value to the end purchaser?”

“Because the greater the profits that can be made, the greater the volume that will be permitted. But if the profit continues to be negligible, the volume of trade will be further restricted.

“Personally, I would expect that the best way to maximise trade, and thereby maximise peace and mutual prosperity, would be to permit the Republic free access to all markets in the Middle Kingdom. It seems strange to me that you advised me to abolish the Clearing House because requiring all merchants to trade under one roof was an insult, yet you require of both our merchants and your own

that they trade only within the canton. I lack the wit to see how there is any difference.

“So I must ask for enlightenment on this point. If honourable Xu would like to maximise trade between the Republic and the Middle Kingdom, then why does he restrict our traders to the cantons?”

Li did not move. The cheek of this round-eye! Demanding the right to go wherever his traders might want to drag their foul bodies! And the insult to himself and Xu!

Eventually Li regained his calm. “Honourable Xu is not answerable to you, Mucius,” Lentulus noted the failure to use the courteous form of address “and the regulation of markets in the Middle Kingdom is none of your concern.”

“Just as the regulation of Republic traders is none of yours,” Mucius stood abruptly and walked to the door. Opening the door, he said “Thank you for your time, honourable Li. I am sure honourable Xu will want your report as soon as possible.”

Li stood, his face rigid to control his rage. One escort took his cue and walked solemnly through the door, followed by Li, and then by the second escort. Lentulus closed the door after him.

Marius walked out of the office and grinned. “That should get a result! I think you should have the garrison called out on parade, just in case they try to abduct you.”

“Indeed; I’ll have a squad placed in the parade ground.”

“Perhaps a few up here, too, in the room” Marius added. “You can’t be too sure that Li won’t resort to assassination. You really rubbed his nose in the shit, and he doesn’t strike me as a man who likes to be humiliated.” Marius ran out the door towards the barracks.

Li vowed he would never forget nor forgive the humiliation. Being thrown out of the office of a smelly round-eye! And with his two escorts watching! His white-hot anger was matched only by his sense of foreboding as he walked as deliberately and as proudly as possible back to the gate in the canton wall. How was he going to explain this to Xu? And the sheer effrontery of that Roman demanding free access to Chinese markets! It was obvious that he knew why the prices were not the same as in the canton. In effect, he had all but demanded that Chinese taxes be dropped! No matter how it might be explained, the result was clear; not only had he failed to have the quota scheme cancelled, but instead he had been given a list of round-eye demands for the reform of Chinese practices! Xu was not going to praise him for this day’s work. He might even make an example of him.

Thankfully Xu’s arrogance kept Li waiting for most of the afternoon, which gave him time to think through a presentation that minimised his own exposure. Eventually he was ushered into Xu’s office.

“Honourable Xu, the impudence of that round-eye is beyond belief. He asks for access to our internal markets rather than being restricted to the canton.”

Xu eyed him disdainfully. "Of course that is impossible. Collecting the taxes would be made so much more difficult if we were to allow that."

"I think that is precisely why he is asking. He is hoping to avoid the tax in this way."

"Why are you wasting my time, Li? You don't need me to tell you to go back and politely decline. But what about the reduction in volumes? Have you told him that this is not acceptable?"

Li bowed deferentially. "Yes, honourable Xu. But I sense that he will not comply."

Xu looked at him sharply. "Not comply? Who does he think he is? Tell him it is not a request but a condition of his trade being permitted to continue! Remind him of what his superiors will think if he is sent home with our ports closed to his goods. They will not thank him for destroying such a great source of wealth!"

Li bowed again, worried. "I have indeed let him know the consequences, honourable Xu; but either he is too foolish to understand, or perhaps we have made too much of the point that I am not a senior official. It seems he doubts that I speak with authority on that point."

Xu scowled. "Then perhaps I might need to go down and remind him who is in charge here, and who is the guest who is expected to know his manners!" Xu hauled himself off his couch. "Get my escorts together; we are on our way now!"

By the time Xu had made his preparations it was well into the afternoon. Thirty-six men were drawn up in formation in front of Lentulus' building, three rows of six either side of the entrance in a deep V-shape as if a funnel. It looked like a battle-line for an encirclement and it was meant to intimidate on that basis.

Xu moved at a dead march, with all the majesty and dignity he could muster, with Li preceding him by a dozen paces as if a herald. Both had their escorts in front and behind.

Lentulus had been given the usual warning by a runner from the gate. They knew that they would have at least a quarter of an hour before Xu arrived, travelling as he always did with his measured majestic pace to display that he hurried for nothing.

"I think we have their attention, Marius; they're both on their way."

"Looking for a psychological advantage in numbers, eh? Should I get into dress uniform and stand with you to balance that?"

Lentulus thought for the slightest moment. "Yes, full dress uniform and I will be togate. But you are not to be my legate! You shall be a Proconsul, out from Babylon to assess progress. It's about time we tried to out-senior him! See if you can be as arrogant as Xu! Go right over the top!"

Both men grinned like schoolboys for a moment and then Marius raced to his private quarters to get ready. Lentulus pushed his head into the outer office to speak to his secretary.

"Livius; when Xu gets here, tell him I'm not available. I'll be meeting with a very important person – that person will be Marius, but don't let on." Lentulus winked. "If Xu gets impatient and tries to barge through don't try to

stop him, just stand and look horrified. And when Marius returns, treat him as if he is Jupiter come down to Earth.”

Lentulus barely had time to get into his ceremonial toga and take his place on the simple but elegant timber chair. The couch remained vacant. Then he heard the door to the outer office swing open. There was some time and considerable movement as the two officials and their eight escorts paraded into the outer office. He heard the scrape of Livius’ chair as he stood deferentially.

“Honourable Xu is here to discuss matters of importance with the Trade Envoy.” That was Li at his most formal.

Livius took a few moments to respond. Mucius could almost imagine him gaping soundlessly as he considered what to say. “Honourable Li, this unworthy servant must advise you that the Trade Envoy is not able to meet with the honourable Xu right now. He has a meeting with a very important person scheduled at the moment.”

Lentulus grinned as he imagined Xu’s expression. Not even a Consul is more important than Xu in his own estimation!

But Li recovered quickly and smoothly. “Then tell the Trade Envoy that his very important person will have to wait. Honourable Xu is here.”

“I.. I.. I’m sorry, honourable Li, but...” Livius stammered out, to be interrupted by the door opening again.

“My apologies, Livius, for keeping lord Lentulus waiting.” That was Marius’ voice, speaking in Greek which the Chinese couldn’t understand and louder than usual as he projected his presence. “I really don’t know how a Roman gentleman can survive in these primitive conditions. Is Mucius ready?”

“Yes, my lord,” Livius responded in Greek. “He is waiting for you.”

The door to the outer office swung open and Marius stood in the doorway. He was resplendent in his full dress uniform, with his crested helmet under his left arm. He smiled broadly and spread his right arm in welcome. “Mucius, my old friend! How good it is to see you again!” Past Marius’ shoulder Mucius could see the stunned disbelief on Xu’s face, but he didn’t let this distract him. Lentulus dropped immediately to one knee and bowed his head before Marius.

Marius entered the room and flicked the door to close behind him as he strode towards Lentulus. As the door swung there was the glimpse of Xu motioning to his escorts. No sooner had the door closed behind Marius than it was opened again by a Chinese escort. Both Romans looked over sharply. The escort stood his ground.

“The Honourable Xu will speak with you now,” he announced in Mandarin.

Lentulus regained his feet, showing anger. “Get out of my office, you pig-turd dripping with the semen of a beggar! Tell honourable Xu that he must take his rightful place.”

“And his rightful place is to command!” bellowed Xu as he swept into the office past his escort. He stopped speaking as he heard the sound of four gladii being drawn by the guards in each corner of the office. He looked around the room, finally noticing that the office had teeth.

Lentulus spoke to Marius deferentially but in Mandarin this time. “I must apologise for the bad manners of this man, Proconsul; he is the Chief Official in this port, answerable directly to the governor. He is accustomed to being surrounded by lesser men and does not recognise quality when he sees it.”

Marius smiled and placed a hand on Lentulus' shoulder. He responded in Mandarin. “That's not a problem, Mucius. I'm here to establish proper relations at governmental level to match your work at trade level, so his presence at this moment is most convenient.”

Marius strode over to the elegant couch of honour and sat. He looked up at Xu and gestured towards the timber bench by one wall. “Take a seat, honourable... honourable Xu, is it? I'm glad to meet you.”

Xu looked to the bench with horror. The couch of honour was rightfully his and the round-eyes should be on the lesser couches. But here, with even the lesser couches vacant, he was being offered a wooden bench!

Lentulus stepped in quickly. “Please Proconsul, it is customary to observe seating protocol. Perhaps this couch would be more appropriate?” He indicated one of the lesser couches.

“Yes, you're right, Mucius. That wooden bench wouldn't be able to take his weight. Here, Xu, have a couch.” Xu's eyes flared at the omission of the honorific. This was one insult after another!

“Chief Official, eh?” Marius looked him up and down. “I'd prefer to talk to the Governor but you'll do for the moment.” And then Marius seemed to realise that the office door was still open. “Who are the other Chinese out there? I didn't really notice on the way through. Hey, sit down, Xu!” he urged cheerfully.

Xu was quivering with rage. He was being treated in the same manner as a family friend would humour a child. In the hearing of his subordinates!

He gaped for a moment, unable to speak smoothly.

Lentulus came to his rescue. “One of them is a minor official appointed as liaison officer on trade matters; the others are ceremonial escorts.”

“Then invite the trade liaison fellow in; and this one...” waving a hand at the escort still in the room, “get him out of here. He looks out of place.”

Lentulus was inwardly rolling on the floor with laughter. He had told Marius to let Xu know who was top dog, and he was doing it with a vengeance! But he was doing it not with even greater arrogance, but by an informality that tore this man's pomposity to pieces. Even the small touches, such as offering the bench instead of the couch and dismissing the escort so that Xu now stood ceremonially naked... It was all just so good!

“Excuse me, Proconsul; honourable Xu was obviously not expecting to meet you today. Perhaps he would prefer to return to his quarters. You could summon him when you have had time to become more acquainted with the situation here.”

“No, no, not at all!” Marius waved that suggestion away as though he were being offered a formal courtesy but didn't want to trouble anyone. “I wouldn't want to keep Xu waiting for my pleasure! He's obviously an important

man and his time is valuable! Now that he's here we should talk. After all, he wouldn't have bothered coming here if he had nothing to say!" Marius smiled across to the seething Chief Official. "Anyway, let's get that other fellow in here. I don't want him to feel as if we don't respect him!" Again, Lentulus was staggered at the skill with which that extra little twist was delivered. After treating Xu as if a menial, he expresses care not to offend Li! Marius shouted in the direction of the outer office. "Livius; send in that other Chinese guy, the official one!"

Unseen by the men in the office, Livius motioned Li towards the door. Marius saw the first escort move towards the inner office. "No, not the supporting cast! Just the Trade guy!" Then he pointed to the escort still standing in the office. "And you can go now, too!"

The escort looked to Xu, who nodded almost imperceptibly. Li entered and the escort left. Marius waved Li vaguely towards another couch. "Guards; leave us!" The four infantrymen left the office.

"Well, Xu, what is it? Spit it out!"

Li knew his role well and recovered quickly. "The honourable Xu has not been informed of the name of the honoured guest, nor his official authority."

"Oh, my sincere apologies, honourable Xu," Lentulus acknowledged. "The manner of the first meeting was quite unorthodox and didn't allow the proper formalities. Proconsul, this is the honourable Xu, Chief Official to the Governor; Honourable Xu, this is Marius Romulus Drusus, Praetor of the Tribe of Mesopotamia and appointed with proconsular powers as Ambassador to the Middle Kingdom. If I may explain the significance of that title in the context of the Republic's political structures; that means that he is one of our foremost governors and has the full authority of the State in all matters involving the Middle Kingdom. He is as close to an Emperor as our system allows."

Xu blanched. Now he knew why Mucius had knelt before him. He should not have presumed to break into this meeting! "You speak excellent Mandarin, honourable Marius," Xu offered.

"Thank you, Xu; I take my authority and responsibility very seriously, so I made a point of learning it as thoroughly as I could. Do you know any Greek? Or perhaps Latin?"

"I regret that I do not, honourable Marius."

Marius sighed. "Then we will record all agreements in Mandarin to avoid confusion. But tell me, what brings you into the canton today?"

"The trading situation has been stable and profitable for many years now. Both the Republic and the Middle Kingdom have benefited enormously. But the reforms proposed by honourable Lentulus, although well-intentioned, have caused some uncertainty. I thought it would be good for both sides to clarify the situation."

"Excellent, Xu!" proclaimed Marius, slapping his hands on his thighs. "It's always good to discuss any problems and work things out peacefully. We wouldn't want to repeat the unfortunate events of 820, would we? More than forty years ago and it's still burnt into the memory of all China traders!"

Xu didn't like the sound of that. It implied that the Republic saw the problem as being sufficiently serious to perhaps warrant another invasion and the butchery of the governor. And he had thought that the problem was only an over-zealous but naive functionary! Marius was obviously waiting for him to continue.

"At first, honourable Lentulus set price limits for goods. Unfortunately these prices made it impossible for trade to be carried out profitably. As a result trade stopped completely. After real..." Marius held up a hand to stop Xu.

"This is what you put into your report, Mucius?"

"Yes, Proconsul. I set prices that were based on those in the markets outside the cantonment. As I said in my report, these still allowed for profits in the order of 40%. It is my belief that the trading stopped because the Chinese authorities were applying taxes that seriously distorted the market."

"Yes, so you wrote," replied Marius thoughtfully. "Xu, what level of taxation are you applying to goods entering or leaving the canton?"

"That is an internal matter. It does not concern the Republic and the Treaty of 820 allows the Middle Kingdom to tax its own merchants as it considers appropriate."

"Oh, I am not arguing your rights, Xu! I'm only asking you what you have done in accordance with them."

"Honourable Marius; taxes in the Middle Kingdom are an internal matter."

Marius stared at him briefly. "Thank you, Xu." Then he turned to Mucius. "Do you know what the tax rates are?"

"Yes, Proconsul. For example, the typical price for tea outside the canton is three copper coins per pound. The tax on tea as it enters the canton is eighty copper coins per pound. The typical selling price when I arrived was eighty five copper coins per pound. That leaves little margin for profit, and even less for tax for the Republic."

"And what price did you set?" Marius asked.

"I set a maximum of five coppers per pound. In effect, I removed the additional tax component while allowing the Chinese government the same tax as for domestic sales and Chinese merchants 40% profit. I thought that was generous, if anything.

Marius nodded. "Yes, quite generous." He turned back to Xu. "Now, Xu; will you answer my questions or do I need to rely totally on Mucius?"

Xu inwardly bristled but remained silent.

Marius relented. "Very well, Xu; you were explaining what came next after the market stopped."

Xu took a deep breath. "After the price-fixing plan failed, honourable Lentulus abandoned that approach. Instead he proposed a quota system which would severely limit the volumes that could be traded. Honourable Li discussed this matter with him, advising that this would bring harm to all concerned and eventually could interfere with the friendly relationship between the Republic and the Middle Kingdom."

Marius held up a hand again. "Mucius?"

“Yes, Proconsul. I advised honourable Li that the volume of trade to be permitted would depend on the profitability of that trade. For example, if the profit per pound of tea doubled, then the number of pounds permitted to be purchased would also be doubled. In this way, the Middle Kingdom would be rewarded for reducing their taxes by collecting tax on a greater volume.”

Marius nodded to Xu again. “Please go on.”

“Honourable Li informed honourable Lentulus that such a policy amounted to interference with the Middle Kingdom’s right to tax as it saw fit and was therefore in breach of the 820 Treaty. Honourable Lentulus responded to this in a most aggressive manner. When honourable Li reported this to me I decided that the matter required my attention.”

“Mucius, were you aggressive?” asked Marius. “That doesn't sound very friendly!”

“I understand that honourable Li might have reached that conclusion, Proconsul. I suggested to him that the whole structure of our trading relationship might be better served if our traders were permitted to go outside the canton and deal directly in the Chinese markets. I then asked him to report that suggestion to honourable Xu for his further consideration. In hindsight, I see that my enthusiasm might have been mistaken for rudeness.”

“Then I think you should apologise to ... ah... Li, isn't it? Yes, apologise to this gentleman.”

Lentulus stood square on to Li and bowed deeply. “Honourable Li, I most sincerely regret my poorly-measured words and actions. I beg that your generosity of spirit will prompt you to forgive me.”

Li paused for the merest moment before responding with a barely minimal bow. “Of course there is no bitterness, honourable Mucius. I must apologise to you for mis-interpreting your words and actions.”

Marius clapped his hands together and rubbed them. “Excellent! All good friends again!” He turned back to Xu.

“Well, we have heard Mucius suggest how our trade arrangements should be reformed. What do you suggest, Xu?”

Xu responded flatly. “The Middle Kingdom sees no need for reform. We believe that the market is best served by allowing the merchants themselves to determine volumes and prices.”

Marius sighed deeply. “I was afraid you were going to say that, Xu.” He held up a hand as it appeared Xu was about to speak again. “And you are entirely within your rights to do so, under the Treaty of 820.”

Marius stood up and started pacing. “The Republic has no right to interfere with Chinese sovereign decisions such as taxation of Chinese traders. However we do have the right to tax our own traders.

“I note that the Middle Kingdom’s contribution to this trade consists of making this small parcel of land available to us as a trading canton. But the contribution by the Republic to the trade is the construction and maintenance of all the buildings, the wharves, everything! And similar facilities back home as

well, not to mention the construction, maintenance and administration of the merchant fleet that carries the goods.

“It seems to me that the contribution by the Republic to this trade is at least ten times the value of the Middle Kingdom’s contribution. Therefore the Republic should be entitled to charge ten times the tax rate.”

Mucius saw where his legate was leading. “But Proconsul! That would kill the trade stone dead! There is no way the traders would be able to cover such a high tax! To take the example of tea that we have already mentioned; a tax of 800 coppers per pound!”

“I am not suggesting a tax of 800 coppers, Mucius; I am suggesting a tax ten times that which the Middle Kingdom exacts. If, perhaps, the Middle Kingdom decided to reduce its tax rate, then we would also reduce ours to be only ten times that new rate.”

Xu was the first to speak. “Honourable Proconsul Marius, I am afraid that is impossible.”

“I’m sorry, Xu; what part of that is impossible? The Republic also taxing the trade?”

“No, honourable Proconsul; the Republic is free to do whatever it decides to do. But it is impossible that our tax rate can be lowered.”

Marius sat again and leaned towards Xu with his elbows on his knees. “You know, Xu; I could grow to like you! You know how to negotiate!” He smiled broadly. Then the smile evaporated and a frown filled that space.

“But I’m wondering how well you know how to wage war. I am sure you are familiar with the story of what happened in 820; and remember that the Middle Kingdom has no ships better than small coasters and river craft. What is to prevent the Republic from cruising up and down your coast, torching one city after another, until you agree to a revision of the 820 Treaty? If the Republic were to do that, then how would the Middle Kingdom respond? Throw rocks from the shore as we sailed past?”

“You would be able to do nothing! Nothing!” Marius emphasised through gritted teeth, clenching his right fist and raising it in front of his face for effect. He stood again, pacing as he spoke. “Except perhaps you could raise a garrison of ten thousand men in every town along the coast. Just think; ten thousand men in each of a thousand towns! Think of the cost! And not a copper of trade to help pay for it! While our costs would be more than recouped by the plunder we would take from each undefended town, or the slaves we would gain by capturing your garrisons by stealth, as we did in 820.

“The Republic knows how to earn a profit from trade but we are equally skilled in earning a profit from war if we need to!” Marius stopped abruptly and turned full-face to Xu. “Not that I would actually conduct my campaign that way, of course. I would show much more wisdom than simple rape, sack and burn. But I mean only to show who has the upper hand if it comes to conflict.” Marius smiled broadly.

“Meanwhile, I need to inspect the other ports and discuss matters with our harbourmasters. I’ll be back in perhaps fifteen days, perhaps twenty. You can

give me your answer then. No haggling, no bargaining, you can do your negotiations with Mucius, whom I trust. But I will have your final answer when I return. Then I will decide. You would be wise to make sure I decide for trading, not raiding.” Marius returned to his couch, all bonhomie again. “Any questions before you leave?”

Xu sat impassive for a moment. Then he stood. “Honourable Li, I think we have heard enough.” He walked to the door, Li following.

Marius and Lentulus stood in silence until they were sure the Chinese were well clear of the building. Then Lentulus called Livius in to make sure he knew his role.

“Remember, Livius; whenever you see Marius in dress armour you are to treat him as though he is a god! If anyone asks, he is Proconsul Marius, visiting from Babylon. But when he's in civilian dress he is my legate. But generally, the less you say about him the better.”

Livius knew better than to ask too many questions. He nodded and went back to his desk.

Only then did Marius roar with laughter. “Marius Romulus Drusus! How did you come up with a name like that?”

“I had to come up with something that sounded important! At least, I’m not likely to forget it next time we wheel you out!”

“Seriously, though,” Marius said more calmly, “You told me to go over the top. Was that too far, not far enough, or just right?”

“Better than I could have scripted for you,” Lentulus affirmed. “You must spend too much time in the theatre. Let’s just see what the next couple of weeks bring us. Now put that uniform somewhere safe. You’re supposed to be out of town!”

Xu was back in Lentulus’ office four days later. Xu noted that the four guards had become part of the office furniture. “The honourable Proconsul is a most interesting man,” Xu opened cautiously. He wanted to know how seriously to take what he had heard.

“Yes, he is. In the Republic high rank is not inherited but goes to the most capable. Marius is a man who has great respect.”

“He does not conduct himself in the same way as an official of the Middle Kingdom,” Xu continued.

“No, he doesn’t. Your people value formality and control very highly; but we Romans consider the individual’s personality an important part of a negotiation. We like to see the person as well as hear the words.”

“So what sort of a person is the honourable Proconsul?”

Lentulus paused for a moment to think. “We have a word that is hard to describe in Mandarin. In Latin it is “dignitas”. It means a man’s inherent worth, without any external things like wealth or titles or family connections. It’s this “dignitas”, this worthiness within, which causes him to be given trust and authority because he is a man who will use these things wisely. Marius is recognised to have immense dignitas, so much that even when he treats you as if

an equal you know that you are not. It's only his generosity of spirit that he accords you that respect.”

“So he is given great respect and authority because he uses it wisely?”

“Yes. He's not an old man, indeed he is still in his full vigour as you saw; but he has already proven himself in many ways.”

“Please tell me about his fame, honourable Mucius.”

Lentulus noted the use of the honorific before his name. It was the first time Xu had used it towards him. He leant back and signalled to the house servant for more tea.

“When he was a young man, perhaps not even twenty, he was leading a small group of soldiers through the desert in Persia. He found a caravan of traders who had been butchered by a band of outlaws. He followed the tracks of this band, catching up with it after a couple of days' hard march, and found this bandit force was much greater than his own.

“He watched carefully and waited for the right time. Eventually he managed to destroy them all and not one of his own men died. He and his men gained great treasure from the bandits' hoard. All his men became wealthy. But Marius didn't retire to a life of ease. He made some careful investments but continued to serve in the army.

“Because of his great skills in pacifying bandits and raiders he was given charge of a section of the inland trading route. Within four years he was in command of the whole army in that province. And not only the army; the governor relied heavily on him for the civil administration. Under Marius water supplies were improved, roads were built and irrigation was increased. The wealth of the province blossomed.

“When that governor's term was finished, Marius was made governor in his place to continue the work. I think that's where he started to learn Mandarin, because of all the Chinese traders that passed through. But I'm not sure.

“His time as governor was very successful and the province became prosperous under his care. But our system makes it illegal for a governor to remain in a province for more than five years; that's intended to reduce the risk of corruption. The Houses remembered his brilliance as a military commander and when his term as governor was complete he was asked to command a fleet to stamp out piracy. Pirates were doing considerable damage to our merchant fleets. They had eluded all our efforts and even inflicted some serious defeats on our patrols.

“Within two years piracy had been eradicated. Marius had shown he was as brilliant at sea as he had been on land. He continued in that command for another three years, bringing civilisation to the pirate coasts and making them part of the Republic. Once again everything he did prospered and those former pirate towns are now his greatest supporters. They and their children now enjoy a much better life than their fathers could ever have achieved as pirates.

“After completing this work Marius went back home and entered politics. He was elected as Tribune at his first attempt and did much to improve the working of our cities. Because of this he was elected to successively higher

offices. He is now in his third year as Praetor. Because of his familiarity with trade matters and his ability to speak Mandari, he was asked to take this special mission; to correct the problems our traders were having in the Middle Kingdom. His first act was to create the China Trading Authority.

“He appointed me to take control of this end of the trade route. He gave me authority to do whatever I thought was needed and instructions to report every three days, and more often if required. He is a man who prefers to inspire his subordinates rather than terrify them.”

Xu sat in silence for a long moment. “Honourable Marius is a most impressive man,” he said at length. “To be a great conqueror in war is one thing, but to bring prosperity in time of peace is another. Very rare is the man who can do both.”

Lentulus nodded. “Very rare indeed.”

Another pause followed. At length Xu spoke again.

“Tell me, honourable Mucius; why have you not informed him of the military strength of the Middle Kingdom? He spoke of ten thousand soldiers in each of a thousand cities as though that were an impossible thing; but the Middle Kingdom commands more than enough to garrison these cities.”

Lentulus nodded to acknowledge the question. “Lord Marius is entirely aware of the strength of the Army the Middle Kingdom can raise. And I must add, you have provided a somewhat optimistic reply. Our information is that a garrison force of ten million troops along the coast is indeed possible but it would require measures usually undertaken only for a major campaign. It would strip your land frontiers, allowing the northern barbarians to raid at will. And it would need to be maintained on a permanent basis, not simply for a campaigning season. Such an effort would be within the power of the Emperor for a season or two, but it would destroy his finances if maintained for years. And for what purpose?”

Xu could not prevent his eyes from widening with shock; this round-eye knew the strength of the Middle Kingdom’s entire Army! Lentulus saw this, but took it as a sign that Xu was about to argue. He raised a hand.

“But let us not quibble. Even if you placed these garrisons, Marius would overcome them. He faced the same problem when subduing the pirates to the south. Those that surrendered to him now bless his name for the prosperity he has brought them and their children and those who didn’t surrender he made slaves.”

“Surely the deeds of honourable Marius have grown over time,” suggested Xu. “He cannot have taken a thousand pirate cities defended by ten thousand men in each?”

Lentulus shrugged. “I know only what I have heard. And I know that where there were once pirates there is now a peaceful part of the Republic. How many cities do you want lord Marius to capture before you are persuaded?”

“So he would go to war? That would seem a rather impatient thing for so great a man to do.”

“Lord Marius is a man of great dignitas, as I have told you. Now that he has given you an ultimatum he cannot fail to act on it if you do not satisfy his

demands. Such a failure would destroy his name. A man who makes a threat but lacks the courage to carry it out is held in contempt, not honour.”

Xu nodded. Then he stood. “It is great good fortune that a man of the stature of Honourable Marius is on hand at this time. Because of this we can have complete confidence that the agreement we make will be observed by all. Honourable Li will meet with you tomorrow at noon to discuss matters in detail.”

Lentulus, recognising a closing statement, bowed deeply. Xu responded with a more generous bow than Mucius had ever seen from him before; his shoulders actually moved!

Li arrived at noon as promised, with four escorts instead of his usual two. Lentulus bowed to greet him. “Honourable Li, I congratulate you on your promotion as shown by your increased retinue.”

“Thank you, honourable Mucius. Honourable Xu desires that these discussions be carried out by a man of middle rank, but also desired that they should not suffer by a change of personnel. My promotion is one act that solved this riddle.”

Mucius indicated the couch of honour. “Let us talk as though honourable Xu and Lord Marius are with us today, and treat this couch as theirs. Let us sit on the secondary couches.”

Li held back a sneer. He had intended the increased retinue to impress Mucius and thereby gain an advantage, but instead his customary place of greater honour was being pulled out from under him! But Li refused to show frustration. He accepted the situation in apparent good grace and sat, his escorts in line abreast behind him.

Lentulus sat on the couch opposite, and clapped. The four guards stood at “present arms” behind him, two to each side, with right hand on gladius hilt. The intimidatory effect of Li’s increased retinue had been cancelled

He then looked to the house-servant. “Tea, please!”

After the formalities of the tea being poured Li opened the conversation. “We have considered your proposal to limit the volume of trade. We do not dispute your right to limit the activities of your own merchants, but we suggest that such an arrangement might not be easily enforceable. Smuggling will undercut any such efforts, to the harm of us both.”

Lentulus nodded. “Yes; indeed. Smuggling is already happening on a large scale. We have been aware of this for some time. And with knowledge comes the power to turn it to profit. We know which merchants smuggle, how much, to whom, and where. We permit this to happen because it is not Republic revenue that is suffering. We are inclined to allow this to continue but simply charge these merchants a fee for trading outside the canton. Thus we have turned smuggling to our profit at your loss.”

This is not what Li wanted to hear. “Any smugglers caught by our guards will be executed.”

“Yes, I expect the Chinese smugglers would be if you managed to catch them. But Republic citizens are protected by the Treaty.”

“Would the Republic be prepared to take action against such smugglers,” Li asked, “if a new tax regime were to be agreed?”

Lentulus sipped his tea, to gain a moment to think. “We would certainly take action, honourable Li, if you touch one of our merchants. Any action against a Republic citizen by the officials of the Middle Kingdom is expressly forbidden by the terms of the 820 Treaty. Our response would be a punitive reprisal against the Middle Kingdom.”

Li saw a possibility. “What would be required to remove so unequal a provision? Surely you would recognise our right to punish those criminals who transgress what has been agreed by both of us?”

Lentulus waved away this diversion from his own planned path. “I would expect that such matters as smuggling would become only a minor annoyance once a new agreement is in place. Smuggling will disappear because it will no longer be profitable!”

Li paused a moment. “I do not understand you, honourable Mucius. If you are actively supporting smuggling and we are forbidden to arrest the criminals, then how is it to become unprofitable?”

“Surely that is not too difficult for a man of your insight, honourable Li! Smuggling is only profitable because it avoids paying the foreign trade taxes. Once these taxes are abolished there will be no incentive to smuggle.”

Li paused again. “I regret that abolition of these taxes is not possible. Therefore, some agreement must be made on the matter of smuggling.”

Lentulus leant back in his couch. “Lord Marius made his position very plain. He recognises that the Middle Kingdom has a right to tax. And he also said that whatever the Middle Kingdom sets as its tax rate, the Republic will set a tax rate ten times that of the Middle Kingdom.

“Therefore it is within your power to eliminate smuggling if you see it as a problem. Simply abolish the taxes! But if you decide to leave these taxes in place then we will set our own taxes on that basis. In conjunction, we will continue to support smuggling, and charge our merchants for our support. If the Middle Kingdom takes any action against a Republic citizen for smuggling, then the Treaty of 820 permits us to respond with force.”

Li decided a change of direction was required. “In which case the Middle Kingdom might decide to take no action against Roman smugglers either. We will simply impose penalties on the Chinese parties involved. Since these are penalties, not taxes, the formula laid down by honourable Marius is irrelevant. In this way, the legal trade between the Middle Kingdom and the Republic will simply fade away, to be replaced by state-sponsored smuggling.”

Lentulus shrugged. “If you can find the smugglers and if they find it profitable to pay your penalties after the Roman merchants have added their allowance for our fees.”

Li nodded. “Indeed, honourable Mucius; but I would expect that the Middle Kingdom would be able to trace the bulk of the trade; we might even allocate a two-level fee structure; payment in cash for those who freely declare

their transactions, but total confiscation and death for those who do not. In this way, the market would find its own levels again.”

“Not quite accurate, honourable Li; the fees the Republic would charge would be based on the present taxes imposed by the Middle Kingdom. That would leave no margin for the Middle Kingdom to levy a “penalty” worth the effort to collect it. But if you tried to impose a greater penalty, the trade would become unprofitable, and simply die.”

Li waited a moment. “That would be to the harm of both sides.”

“Indeed so, honourable Li,” Mucius agreed.

Li waited a while longer. “What do you suggest, honourable Mucius?”

“I have already made my suggestion, honourable Li; that Roman traders be offered access to the domestic markets. In this way the Middle Kingdom will still be collecting their normal taxes. It is the additional tax that Lord Marius interprets as a tax on the Republic.”

Li shook his head immediately. “I regret that such a proposal is not possible. I have already made that point.”

“Why is it not possible, honourable Li? What ill-effects would it have? Perhaps we can design a way of avoiding any unwanted consequences.”

Li sipped his tea, to cover his annoyance. This round-eye has no right to demand that I explain my position! “Because honourable Xu says it is not possible, honourable Mucius. We must both take that as a basic limitation on our negotiations.”

Lentulus stared stonily at Li for more than a minute. When he was certain he had gained the required effect, he stood. “Then in that case we cannot negotiate. I refuse to accept any pre-conditions. I suggest you report back to honourable Xu and return when you are able to remove this obstacle to further progress.”

Li flared with anger but suppressed it heroically. For the second time in two meetings this round-eye had dared to dismiss him as a menial! He stood and for a moment waited for the courteous bow due from a lesser to a greater so he could respond. Lentulus made no movement to bow, just like last time. Li was not going to be the first to bow, acknowledging his inferior status, but it was clear that waiting longer was merely giving Lentulus more time to make his refusal plain. He turned to the door. Two escorts took their cue and preceded him with full formality.

Li returned three days later. As he entered the office he noted that Lentulus was seated on the couch of honour, with his four guards to either side. Li’s escorts parted, to stand either side of Li as he stood before Lentulus, waiting for the Roman to stand in greeting.

Lentulus remained seated, and gestured towards one of the secondary couches. “It is good to see you again, honourable Li. Please take a seat.”

Affecting indifference at this opening insult, Li sat on the couch indicated. His escorts took up station behind him. Li had very clear instructions from Xu that he must let these insults wash over him as the posings of an upstart child,

retaining his own poise at all times. His explanation for any prying into Middle Kingdom policies is to be simple. Any sudden changes would throw the smooth operation of domestic markets into shock. Any changes must be gradual. To that end he may make whatever long-term concessions that might be required to recommence trade but these concessions must be aspirational for some time in the vague future and not to be implemented immediately. Having gained agreement, the implementation could be delayed indefinitely.

“Honourable Mucius, I have discussed the progress of our negotiations with honourable Xu. I am able to clarify certain points and continue towards a resolution.”

“Thank you, honourable Li. That is excellent. I have also had time to report to Lord Marius about our last discussion and have received instruction from him. Do you wish to clarify honourable Xu’s points now, or do you prefer that I first clarify to you my instructions from Lord Marius?”

Li was always eager to gather information from the other side before revealing his own position. “I would be most eager to hear from honourable Marius.”

“Lord Marius has instructed me that any fee, penalty, tax, surcharge or any other payment applying to persons trading with Republic traders; any such charge in addition to those charges applying to trade between Chinese is to be considered an indirect tax on Republic traders and therefore subject to his ten-fold tax in response. The only exception allowable is if these additional charges can be demonstrated to be justifiable as means of recovering additional costs incurred by the Middle Kingdom as a direct result of facilitating or administering trade with the Republic. As examples, he suggests that the cost of interpreters or the verification of converting from Republic measures to Chinese measures might be grounds for a small additional charge. But the amount recovered would need to be shown to be proportionate to the cost.”

Lentulus beamed a smile. “This is a good thing, honourable Li! It means that any limitations or other difficulties honourable Xu might have in mind can be discussed, quantified, and appropriate recompense made!”

“It certainly indicates openness to resolving the difficulties faced by the Middle Kingdom,” agreed Li, hoping to bend it to his advantage. “It is an appropriate basis for discussing those difficulties which honourable Xu has instructed me to discuss candidly with you.”

“And those difficulties, honourable Li?”

“The greatest difficulty, honourable Lentulus, is the need to maintain a smoothly-operating market. As any experienced trader would know, an unpredictable market creates a measure of risk that can cause great harm and its effects can be long-lasting. This is why honourable Xu, in his wisdom, required a separation between the foreign market and the domestic market, so any disturbance in the foreign market would not adversely affect the domestic supply and demand levels.”

Lentulus nodded. "I understand honourable Xu's concerns. Tell me; since trade ceased in the Clearing House what has become of the domestic market in those goods commonly traded with the Republic?"

Li had no idea of how to answer this question. He had no knowledge of the domestic market and cared even less. But there seemed to be an answer that was compatible with his bargaining position. "There has been absolutely no effect on domestic markets, honourable Lentulus. That is surely a tribute to the wisdom of honourable Xu's policy."

"That pleases me greatly," Lentulus smiled broadly. "It demonstrates that the volume of Chinese goods not being bought by the Republic must be very small compared to domestic market volumes, or else the over-supply would have forced prices down. It also suggests that the price of our goods no longer available must be insensitive to the volume of supply available. In other words, the experience of this last month or so has demonstrated that even a total disruption of the foreign market has, as you say 'absolutely no effect' on the domestic markets so close to honourable Xu's concerns. There can be no greater demonstration that even the most extreme changes in Republic supply and demand cannot adversely affect your domestic markets!"

Li realised he had walked into a trap with his first answer. "But honourable Xu is concerned that this most amenable outcome has occurred only because the markets see this disruption as a temporary thing; merchants believe that a prompt resolution will allow business as usual to re-commence very shortly. But if this interruption continues over the longer term, great disruption is expected."

"I agree with you, honourable Li," Lentulus assured him, "that the merchants are expecting the markets to re-open. We must make sure we do not disappoint them, or it is possible that some disruption might arise. What do you propose to ensure that there is not a delay that might give rise to apprehension?"

Li was much more comfortable now and hoped that his mis-step would not affect the flow of the talks. "Honourable Xu suggests that the existing taxes can be scaled back gradually over time. Any sudden changes would be counter-productive, but a gradual adjustment over time is certainly possible."

"So over time, the taxes imposed by the Middle Kingdom can be reduced? Let us say they can be reduced by ten percent each year, so as to abolish them over ten years?" Lentulus offered as a concrete example.

"Honourable Xu had a longer period in mind," responded Li. "A ten percent change each year is sufficiently high that some traders will withhold goods, to benefit from the better terms in the following year. The rate of change in the taxes must be lower than the holding costs, or trade will stall in anticipation."

Lentulus nodded as he considered this. "Honourable Xu is most astute. Perhaps a fifty-year period would be better; a two per cent per annum rate of change would hardly be noticed."

Li could not believe his ears. It was all going so smoothly, Lentulus himself suggesting a length of transition that he had not dared to hope for. Surely

there would be no more trouble from these foreigners, for the sake of a paltry two percent difference next year! And the same the year after that...

“Yes, perhaps a transition period of that length or more would be wise,” agreed Li.

“Then it is agreed,” shrugged Lentulus. No changes to the pre-existing system this year. In each future year, there shall be a reduction of two percent in the additional tax levied on Republic trade. It is so simple!”

Li rejoiced. He felt he could turn into a swallow and fly around the office! “Yes, it is agreed,” he repeated solemnly.

“And in accordance with Lord Marius’ instructions,” continued Lentulus, “this tax shall be divided so that the share going to the Republic is ten times greater than the share going to the Middle Kingdom.”

Li felt like a swallow that had flown into an unseen brick wall. After gaping for a moment he recovered. “I am afraid that cannot be done, honourable Mucius.”

“Why not?” asked Lentulus.

“It is most improper for taxes raised by the Middle Kingdom to be paid to foreigners.”

“But the Republic wants no share of Middle Kingdom taxes!” protested Lentulus. “It is simply a matter of the Middle Kingdom dropping its rate to nine-point-one percent of its current value, while the Federation imposes a ninety-point-nine percent rate to stabilise the markets in accordance with your explicit requirements.”

Lentulus looked perplexed. “What is the problem, honourable Li? You want the rate change to be gradual and you agreed that the Republic had a right to impose taxes on its traders just as the Middle Kingdom has a right to tax its own traders. Where have I misunderstood you?”

Li attempted to look as though he were explaining the obvious to a simpleton. “We agreed to reduce our taxes at a rate of 2 percent per annum. In this way, we meet your requirement for a tax-free regime to be established over time, and our concerns about market stability will also be satisfied. That is the agreement.”

Lentulus frowned. “You have forgotten Lord Marius’ pledge; that whatever rate is collected by the Middle Kingdom, the Republic rate would be ten times that. The only way that our agreement can be adopted while respecting Lord Marius’ requirement is by dividing the total tax charge in a one-to-ten split. After all, you reported to me that honourable Xu’s primary concern is market stability. The total amount of the tax is the only relevant matter in so far as it ensures a stable market; who collects it is beside the point.”

Lentulus spread his hands, frowning deeply. “The Republic would like the tax to be abolished immediately, but out of deference to honourable Xu we are prepared to make this gradual. But if honourable Xu is more concerned about revenue than he is about the health of the markets, then let us be sincere with each other and simply say so.”

Li looked frostily at Lentulus. “Honourable Xu is a man with great and many concerns. His primary concern should not be used to annul any of the lesser but still important other matters under his care.”

Li decided that he was not going to be dismissed like a servant for a third time. He stood. “We have offered to reduce our taxes gradually to achieve the outcome you requested. That was not your chief request it was your only one! And we are granting it to you, over time. You may report to honourable Marius that his mission has been totally successful.”

Lentulus deliberately fought the urge to stand as well. He did not want to seem to confer that much respect. Instead, he waved a hand as he spoke. “There is one point you have overlooked, honourable Li. The Republic is a sovereign power. A sovereign power always retains the right to renounce a treaty and to wage war in the attempt to impose a better treaty. You have our terms for a compromise. Reject them at your peril!”

Li affected to not hear as he nodded to the escorts and the party walked out.

Li had never seen Xu like this before. Xu was both angry and afraid, pacing with an energy that was obviously causing his bulky body some distress. “I cannot abolish the taxes! The governor would not allow it! It would mean my head!” The pacing continued. “What are our options?”

Li stirred uneasily. “Option 1 is to do nothing. We have not been able to agree, so let’s see what the other side will do in the face of the status quo.

“Option 2 is to leave our current offer on the table and trust that Marius will accept it and present it as a victory. Of course, next year we will decide whether or not to honour it as circumstances suggest at that time. Perhaps Marius will be too busy with other matters and no-one else in the Republic will have the personal incentive to enforce so trivial an issue for the benefit of some-one else’s reputation.

“Option 3 is to offer to shorten the transition time as a sweetener. Again, we will decide in later years whether or not to honour it.

“Option 4 is to capitulate in words, but not actually comply.

“Option 5 is to strike first. If we do this, we will need to be ready for retribution. But without land bases in the cantons the power of the Republic will be limited.”

Xu glowered at Li. “I like none of those options, Li! The first four would risk war, and the fifth would not only guarantee it, but also stop the trade dead! Give me a sixth!”

“The sixth is to agree with Lentulus and split the tax.”

The pacing stopped. Xu turned to face Li. He motioned to his escorts. “Take him out, strip him and beat him!”

An hour later Li was in front of Xu again, barely strong enough to kneel. His light linen shirt was starting to stain red from the weeping welts across his back.

Xu spoke softly. “You will spend the night tied to a stake in my garden. Perhaps you will have come up with a better plan by sunrise.”

Li was certainly a valuable asset, Xu mused to himself. He had indeed come up with a better plan by sunrise! Or at least by mid-afternoon, having spent the morning having his wounds bathed and catching a bit of sleep.

And it was all so delightfully profitable as well! There were yet at least six days before Marius was expected back; he would grant Li those days to rest and then they would ask to be informed of the Proconsul's return.

Marius sat in the couch of honour. Lentulus went to the office door to admit Xu and Li. It was only yesterday evening that he had sent message that "Proconsul Marius" was free to meet them at noon today but the abruptly short notice had obviously had its effect. The two Chinese officials had arrived early, a sure sign that they were prepared to swallow their pride and didn't want to offend.

Lentulus and Marius had already made arrangements on how Lentulus would guide the discussion while appearing to defer to the "Proconsul". Anything prefaced with "perhaps", Marius would support; if Mucius started with anything else, Marius was to over-rule or question.

Marius stood as they entered, a modest gesture of respect; but he was careful not to be the first to bow. He was not going to concede seniority. Li and Xu stood before him and bowed formally. Only then did Marius respond and with some generosity. He also wanted to appear courteous provided it was acknowledged that he was the superior.

"Please, Xu, take this couch closest to me; Li, would you sit on the next?" Marius smiled as he indicated the couches. As the other three took their appointed seats, Lentulus sat in his office chair, to Marius' side away from the Chinese.

Marius opened the conversation. "Mucius tells me that the last meeting with you, Li, was inconclusive, and there has been a delay of over a week since then. We were concerned for your health!"

Li bowed slightly. "Thank you, honourable Marius. I have indeed been indisposed. But my health has recovered, thank you."

"I am glad to hear that, Li. It would have been most difficult to change negotiation partners in so short a time. What news do you have for us?"

Xu took over the discussion. "We have carefully considered your words to us and the discussions with honourable Mucius allowed us to form a clear understanding of what might be possible. We have been able to reach a decision which complies with all of your requirements while still retaining the Middle Kingdom's rights.

"We have decided that half-measures and intricate arrangements would not be practical. It is best to have a solution which is simple, to avoid confusion and reduce the scope for cheating by unscrupulous merchants. Therefore, we have decided to completely do away with all taxes and charges imposed specifically on Chinese merchants dealing with Republic merchants. And as a token of goodwill, these measures will be proclaimed later today to become effective at dawn tomorrow. Furthermore, Republic traders will be permitted to

trade in markets outside the canton if they choose to do so;. Bt since there will be no differential in taxes, there will be no obvious benefit in doing so.”

Xu fell silent. Marius looked over to Lentulus. “I understood from your reports that Li was adamant that the tax could not be dropped immediately. How do you explain this, Mucius?”

Lentulus paused, trying to appear calm. “I am surprised, Proconsul. Perhaps honourable Xu could provide further details?”

“Yes, Xu; why have you had this change of heart?” Marius asked.

“Honourable Li is a man of considerable insight. I must thank him for proposing a way in which your requirements for the removal of the Foreign Trading Tax Schedule could be achieved while also maintaining a strong revenue base for the Middle Kingdom and at the same time providing stability in the marketplace. He proposed that this be seen not as a problem but an opportunity; an opportunity to re-codify all of the taxation arrangements, both foreign and domestic. Henceforth, the one tax rate will apply to all transactions, regardless of the nationality of those involved.”

“This is an excellent outcome, honourable Xu!” Lentulus exclaimed. Turning to Li, he added “And my immense respect for your brilliance, honourable Li.”

Marius picked up on the lack of the “perhaps” in this comment. “I am not so sure of that, Mucius. I would like to hear more about exactly what this single tax rate will be and how it will be levied.”

“Of course, honourable Marius,” responded Xu. “The tax schedule formerly applying to foreign trade will be applied to the domestic markets. In this way Republic merchants will have the same conditions of trade as our domestic merchants.” Xu beamed a broad smile. “There shall be complete parity between the markets, as you requested.” He omitted to mention that there would be a separate subsidy of the domestic market to compensate for this otherwise unupportable tax increase; but that was a different matter.

Marius steepled his hands in front of his mouth for a moment as he thought. He waited for some lead from Lentulus, but nothing was forthcoming. At length he put his forearms to his thighs as he leant forward. “I see. And I must say, this is a very bold move by you, Xu! You have kept the foreign market stable, but in the process I think you might throw the domestic market into uproar.”

“That is a domestic issue, honourable Marius. I thank you for your concern but the Middle Kingdom is able to keep peace and order within its realm.”

After another slight pause, Marius looked to Lentulus. He did not want to commit any more words without knowing Lentulus would agree.

“Perhaps honourable Xu could also explain how such an arrangement will prevent smuggling,” Lentulus offered.

Xu looked to Li.

Li looked pained, as though the victim of a petty misunderstanding. “Honourable Mucius, in our discussions I asked if the Republic would take action

against smugglers rather than supporting them. You assured me that smuggling would not be a problem if the foreign trade tax were eliminated. We have taken your words at their plain meaning; that the Republic would not support smugglers if we removed the foreign trade tax. Therefore we expect the Republic will suppress smugglers and those who engage in such practices will be provided with no protection against the just penalties imposed by the Middle Kingdom if caught.”

“Perhaps there is a misunderstanding here. What you are proposing,” responded Lentulus, “is not the removal of the foreign trade tax, but its extension and re-naming. If our merchants wish to continue smuggling, we will accord them all the support and protection we can under the Treaty of 820. The end of smuggling was always going to be the result not of Republic suppression, but of Middle Kingdom policies to make tax avoidance unprofitable.”

Marius had picked up the 'perhaps'. He stood at this point. He felt he needed to assert authority now that he understood Lentulus' attitude.

“You honourable gentlemen might not have read about the extension of the Republic's authority in Tamilia, but it might be instructive for you to hear about it now,” Marius started, as he paced.

“In the beginning only one independent city traded with the Republic. Other Tamil cities attacked it, so this friendly city called upon the Republic to help their defence. Of course, the Republic came to the help of its friend. Once the attacks had been pushed back we placed ambassadors in the formerly hostile cities so each prince could communicate clearly with the Republic.

“These ambassadors soon became advisors, as the princes took advantage of the Republic's trade opportunities. We also helped them build better roads, water supplies, drains, irrigation systems; in short, even though they were independent of the Republic, we helped them prosper!

“But their people came to realise that the taxes that were being imposed upon them were much heavier than the taxes in cities belonging to the Republic. Some of them revolted against their princes and begged to be added to the Republic. To protect our trade as well as out of friendship for these peoples, the Republic accepted them. When other nearby cities saw this, they also turned against their princes and begged to be joined to the Republic. Within a period of less than two years, all the cities of Tamilia were part of the Republic.

“They are now more prosperous than their grandfathers could have dreamed! But their princes are dead.

“I took this example to heart when I was commissioned to destroy the pirates in the Spice Islands, and deliberately based my policy on it. I didn't raid their towns and devastate them as others had before me. I captured their towns with as little bloodshed as possible, relying on deception to lure their defenders out of position rather than using brute assault. When my soldiers entered they didn't rape or pillage or burn but established and kept order. While these cities were occupied I encouraged trade with the outside world. In short, I brought them justice and peace. No longer did mothers lose husbands and sons in fighting on the high seas and no longer were they and their daughters always at risk of rape,

slaughter or enslavement during a punitive raid. It might be immodest of me to say so, but it is widely reported that these former pirates now hail me as a liberator. They name their sons after me!

“So before you raise domestic taxes, think about those long-dead princes of Tamilia. Because if the common people along the coast rise in revolt against you, then the Republic will hear them and help them. We will not rape, pillage and burn our way along the coast of the Middle Kingdom. We will come as liberators from the likes of you and the people will welcome us as we do so!

“And when the people further inland see how much better the lives of their coastal cousins are under the Republic than under the Middle Kingdom, then they will rise in revolt as well, just as happened in Tamilia! It will spread faster than your horsemen can bring you the news!

“Because in the Republic you will see something that has never happened before anywhere in the world. You will see an Empire where the common people themselves rejoice to be within its boundaries! Where they do not need to be pressed into the army to defend it but swarm to volunteer, to protect the way of life they love! Armies sent by enemies to attack us often do not fight against us. Instead they beg that they might be permitted to surrender and fight on the Republic side, for the reward of becoming its citizens.

“All this happens in the Republic because our rulers are not cruel tyrants who impose their will by force, who impoverish the common people to enrich themselves. Our leaders are men who are loved and respected by all. They are men of... of... Mucius, what is the Mandarin word for “dignitas”? I can’t think of it. Do they even understand the concept?”

“I know of no fit translation either, Proconsul,” Mucius agreed.

Marius threw up his hands as if in exasperation. “Anyway, Xu. If you try to fight the Republic then be warned; you will find your own army fighting on our side. The more troops you levy, the more you will be recruiting for us.” Marius sat.

Xu and Li sat silently for a considerable time. At last, Xu spoke. “Honourable Marius; I regret that our proposed tax reforms do not meet with your approval. We sincerely thought our plan would be exactly in accordance with your wishes. Now that we have been further advised, we seek time to re-consider our proposal.” Xu stood, followed by Li. Both men bowed formally.

Marius stood and bowed in response, but added “I must leave by tomorrow evening. Please return as soon as possible and I will be available to you at a moment’s notice.”

Xu and Li bowed again, Marius responded again, and the two officials left the office.

Marius and Lentulus waited until the Chinese officials were well clear of the building before moving. This time there were no smiles or laughs. They sat.

“Thanks for the lead, Mucius,” Marius said at length. “I was wondering how you wanted me to go.”

“That was excellent, Marius. Even to corroborating my fake history of your exploits!” Lentulus affirmed. “You have seamless credibility now.”

Marius remained solemn. “Well, the die is cast now. We have given them only three options to choose between. If they keep their nerve they'll retain the status quo and see if we blink first. Otherwise they will either cave in, or they'll attack us to deprive us of bases.”

“They won't attack, Marius. They might perhaps promise submission and then delay delivery but they will not attack. They still remember the events of 820 and will not risk a repeat. And even if we don't respond with force but simply go away, that would destroy their revenue base and cost them their heads. My guess is that they'll come back with a proposal to remove the taxes gradually and then drag their feet, waiting for circumstances that will allow them to be lifted again.”

“But Mucius, you've already told Li that we want the lion's share of that tax. They're not going to accept that!”

“No, they won't. But they'll try to convince you that their proposal is the only option, perhaps tapered down at a faster rate than Li suggested.”

The two men sat silently again, each in his own thoughts. “So what will be our position?” asked Marius.

“I don't think we can back off from what we have already said,” answered Lentulus flatly. “If any taxes remain, then we continue to support smuggling. Anything else means that we either close up shop or go to war.”

“If we tell them it's war, then they'll certainly seize the cantons. We can't defend them against a serious assault.”

“Whether they attack us or if we close up shop, either will be as good as a death sentence to Xu,” protested Marius. “Closing down trade will be a big bite out of their revenue, and Xu knows he will be held responsible for it.”

“Yes, you are right,” Lentulus acknowledged. “But we can't just back down now. If we do then we will never have the credibility to be able to get rid of these charges and they will continue to creep up. So if we don't get a satisfactory answer then Proconsul Marius will simply say he needs to report back to Babylon. In the meantime, we might suspend our plans and permit business – and smuggling – as usual.”

Marius nodded. “I'll be listening for your 'perhaps' tomorrow!”

Xu and Li returned the next day shortly after noon. They had done much talking and little sleeping in the past 24 hours. Eventually, Xu had been forced to admit that Li was indeed a genius. He had devised the only possible way for them to escape the wrath of the Governor.

This time the escorts were not left in the front office as had become the normal practice when meeting with Marius. They were ordered to wait outside the building. Xu and Li did not want the risk of them overhearing the conversation. Marius was again on the couch of honour and rose to his feet in greeting. But his face was stern, not smiling. Xu and Li bowed deeply, so deep as to surprise Marius and Lentulus. Marius responded and in a flash of generosity invited them to sit before resuming his own place.

Xu opened the discussion. “Honourable Marius, we believe we have a solution to the problem. However, there are many implications that will need to be addressed before it can be put into place. Would it be possible for you to delay your departure for a few days while we resolve these consequential issues?”

Marius frowned. “It's possible for me to delay my departure but I'll need the most powerful reasons to do so. Can you provide me with such reasons? Why would Mucius not be able to resolve these matters in my absence?”

Xu paused. He was about to commit himself irrevocably. “My reasons for asking for you to delay your departure are the most powerful possible. We intend to revolt against the Middle Kingdom, taking with us all the cities under my authority. The means and timing of this process will need your detailed concurrence.”

Marius was frozen, speechless. Lentulus was also stunned.

Xu became unsettled by the pause. To break the tension, he continued. “I propose to arrest the Governor and release a simultaneous proclamation throughout all the cities in the province. It will state that the Emperor has demanded a substantial increase in taxation and a general corvee in preparation for war. It will go on to say that the Governor has directed me to make arrangements to satisfy these Imperial demands but that I refuse to subject the people of the province to such hardship. Instead, I will call on our garrison troops to support our independence from the Emperor. Taxes will be reduced rather than increased because we will no longer be bled white by the Emperor and we have the Republic trade to obtain all that we need to resist any Imperial attack.”

“You are talking about a revolt,” said Marius solemnly.

“Yes, honourable Marius, a revolt. There is no other way to remove the Foreign Trading Tax Schedule. Even if I were to agree to do so, I would be overruled. The only way this sovereign decision can be changed is to change the sovereign.”

“This is a huge risk, Xu”, Marius warned.

“A risk is better than a certain death, honourable Marius. You have put me in an intolerable position. If I try to abolish the tax it will be not only futile, but also fatal to me. But if the tax remains and Roman trade turns to smuggling instead that will destroy our revenue stream and also cost me my head. I have no other choice.”

Marius nodded. “So you intend to revolt and seize power as a breakaway kingdom. Will you be able to resist the Imperial Army?”

“That is the big question, honourable Marius. If the Imperial Army comes we will be fighting a defensive war from well-fortified positions. We will not be an easy nut to crack. But we will need supplies to resist siege and mobility to cut off the besiegers' supply lines and to harry their operations. We need to know that we will have control of the sea and the rivers. Will the Republic provide those supply lines and that mobility to us?”

Marius seemed to drop into thought as he waited for a lead from Lentulus.

At length, Lentulus offered “We came to the rescue of the first Tamil princes, Proconsul.”

Marius noted the absence of the ‘perhaps’, and concluded that he was intended to reject or question this advice. But at a time like this he needed to be sure.

“Oh, sorry, Mucius; I was distracted. Exactly what did you say?”

“I said, ‘we came to the rescue of the first Tamil princes,’ Proconsul.”

That was clear enough for Marius. “Yes, but they were already independent cities and trading partners, not rebels. And their enemies were a loose confederacy of minor city-states, not the Middle Kingdom!”

Xu tried to play the Pride card. “We will be an independent kingdom after we make the proclamation. Can the Republic only be relied upon for assistance against weak enemies? Will it hide from stronger opponents?”

Marius looked sharply at Xu. “You would do well to not question the courage or reliability of the Republic, Xu! My comment was not a show of cowardice but a reflection on the size of the forces that would be required; forces that are not on hand to us at the moment, like they were in Tamilia.”

In a gentler manner, he added “Do not confuse patience with cowardice, Xu. Throughout my entire career, Patience has been my most potent weapon.”

Xu bowed his head slightly. “Sun Tzu said something similar; ‘The good general can wait a thousand years for the right moment, and then strike without hesitation’.”

Lentulus saw his opportunity. “Then perhaps we need to show that patience now, honourable Xu. Do you have all the details worked through? Whom you can trust to rally the garrisons in each city, whom to render harmless, what arrangements need to be made as you prepare for an Imperial assault? How to ensure the populace supports you? And all this for each city? Perhaps you need to provide more information before the Republic can decide how to react.”

Marius seized on this opportunity to buy some time to hear how Lentulus wanted him to guide this most unexpected turn. “Yes, Xu; when would you be able to provide these details? I need hard facts, not vague promises. And that will include numbers; how many troops you have in each place just in case our spies are inaccurate. And what sort of naval transport capacity you might need for your sorties. Then we will be able to say what is possible.”

Marius stood, wanting to close the interview now. “Please come back tomorrow with as much detail as you can; I will delay for a day, perhaps more if your plan has merit.”

Xu and Li stood and bowed. Marius returned the bow. The officials filed out. Marius and Lentulus stood staring at each other for some time afterwards.

At length, Marius took a deep breath. “We need to get someone with real authority here as soon as possible. We are way out of our depth!”

“You’re right of course, but that’s not an option. We just don’t have the time. And even if we did, Xu thinks you are as high as it gets. To bring in someone else would destroy our whole fabrication.”

“Shit!” Marius exploded. “If Xu can pull this off it will be the greatest single coup for the last fifty years! But if he fails then we will be at war with the biggest military power in the world; way bigger than our own forces.”

“Yes, but they have no reach. If it all unravels, all we need to do is get back in our ships and sail away. My guess is that even if Xu fails, the Middle Kingdom will still want to carry on business as usual.

“I suggest that we have a look at what he comes up with tomorrow”, Lentulus continued. “If it has a chance, let’s give him the nod. If it falls apart, then we just stand back and look surprised.”

“I would like us to have at least some backup here, both military and political.” Marius started pacing. “Let’s get word back to Babylon as soon as we know enough to make a recommendation. In the meantime, see if we can spend the next few months making preparations that give us the best chance of success. We have to keep Xu calm.”

“Keeping Xu calm is the key for another reason,” added Lentulus. “If he thinks we are going to leave him out to dry, then I wouldn’t put it past him to take out his anger on us. He is holding us hostage as much as we are doing it to him.”

Marius nodded. “Yes, you’re right. We are stuck with agreeing to support him, no matter what, or we are as dead as he will be. But we need to play for time. We need to emphasise patience, care in getting the right people in the right positions, but not so fast as to attract attention. And we need to get naval backup but not so suddenly as to cause alarm.”

Xu’s presentation the next day was quite impressive, considering that only he and Li were able to work on it. His descriptions of the fortification of the various ports in the province were consistent with Republic intelligence reports. The numbers of troops in those cities was substantially greater than Mucius expected, but such intelligence was always more difficult to obtain and would be expected to be an under-estimate; word-of-mouth reports naturally didn’t include troops that were out of sight. Also of interest were his descriptions of the garrisons at various strategically important locations; mountain passes, river gorges and bridges. If these garrisons could be turned as Xu expected, then they would be able to hold out against very large forces for a very long time; forces so large as to make a protracted siege very difficult to supply.

But that was the question. Could these forces be relied upon to support Xu?

Xu was very confident on that point. “Discipline in the armies of the Middle Kingdom is hard. The Republic’s standards are luxurious in comparison. I have heard reports of how your own military are treated and so have our own troops. They are seething with discontent even now, with jealousy.

“Over the next two months I will replace the current garrison commanders with men loyal to me personally. They will announce and put into practice a less vicious regime including taking disciplinary action against the most hated of their subordinate officers, those most accustomed to order the heaviest of punishments for the smallest infractions. In this way they will ensure the personal loyalty of their soldiers who will come to fear a return to the old ways. In this way they will be willing to fight against the Imperial forces when the time comes to retain the more humane order that I will bring in.

“I will also increase their pay, with promises of more to come. If the governor asks about this, I will tell him that it is necessary because of the existing discontent which could trigger a mutiny. I will say that we will need to keep the troops happy in case the Republic attempts to impose a new Treaty by force. I will suggest that the extra money can be paid out of reserves and the pay reduced again when the tensions with the Republic are resolved.

“The common people will not be a problem. Popular revolts simply do not happen in the Middle Kingdom. The people are too cowed by the army. But when the time comes I will announce that the revolt is in part due to my refusal to increase taxation. I will argue that the Emperor has been bleeding us and I will tolerate that no more. Again, reserves will see us through the riskiest times and after that I am sure our trade arrangements with the Republic will be able to finance our public needs if it is not being skimmed by the Imperial rake.

“Finally, I would not be surprised to see other provinces move to rebel as well once we are seen to have been successful. The defection of this province by itself would be a major blow to the Emperor because it raises so much of the Middle Kingdom’s revenue. That will make any action against other breakaway provinces that much less affordable. The process you described in Tamilya will be repeated.”

Marius looked at the crude map Xu had unrolled on the office table and the numbers on the sheet of paper placed on one corner. He nodded. “I am pleased, Xu” he commented. “You’re taking the time to prepare the battlefield and not just rushing in!”

Xu inclined his head. “Sun Tzu said ‘The good general does not fight a battle unless he has already won it’.”

“The more you tell me about this Sun Tzu, the more I like him,” replied Marius. “He sounds like my kind of general,” Marius beamed.

“In particular, you’re not wasting effort and resources in trying to defend the open countryside where you would be outnumbered and surrounded.” Marius continued. “Concentrate your forces to defend the important points, but you need to leave enough mobile reserves to defeat the enemy in detail, cut off or destroy supplies, and even prompt desertion or defection.

“These mobile reserves must be light, very well trained, and their missions must be carefully designed. We have an excellent tradition of such Special Forces, going back through the Caretus Cohort almost two hundred years. These men must be the cream of your forces, specially selected for intelligence as well as courage and strength. Only one soldier in a hundred is good enough for this role and he must be paid, trained and honoured accordingly. Use your larger Regular forces to immobilise the enemy and then send in these small, mobile forces for the death blows.”

Xu nodded again. “Everything you say reminds me of Sun Tzu. He said, ‘Hold the enemy with your strong arm, and stab him with your weak arm.’”

Lentulus felt he needed to provide Marius with a firm direction at this point. “Perhaps the critical point of assistance we can provide is a fleet of fast raiding craft. Proconsul, perhaps the former pirates you liberated can be

persuaded to construct such craft; they were certainly expert in that field. The cargo ships we have here are not suitable.”

Marius stepped back from the table. “What you propose is sound, Xu, if you can execute it properly. I suggest you start choosing and training your mobile forces immediately. Make anti-smuggling work the pretext if you need one. Meanwhile I’ll arrange for the construction of your raider fleet.

“While you’re making these preparations, I’ll go back to Babylon to report the situation. Mucius, I give you full authority to act in my name while I am absent. Keep me informed of progress but use code in case of interception.”

Marius turned back to Xu. “Continue with this plan and polish it as you go. I’ll be back in a few months and then we can put it into action. But one last word before I go, Xu; when this is finished and you are a prince in your own right, do not try to cheat us on trade taxes. That would be most unwise!”

Then with a smile, he added, “And let me bow to you, the future Prince of Guangzhou!” Marius bowed first, to be acknowledged by the deepest bow anyone had ever seen from Xu. Marius turned and left the inner office by the back door to go to his apartment.

Lentulus moved into the place just vacated by Marius. “I can add nothing to what the Proconsul has said. But I suggest you leave these documents here rather than risk a cleaner or a snoop finding them back in your quarters. Meanwhile I will send orders to the lands to the south, where Proconsul Marius brought peace to the pirate kingdoms. We will start building your raiding craft immediately while we wait for you to make your preparations.”

“An excellent idea, honourable Mucius,” replied Xu. He turned and nodded to Li. The two officials left through the front office.

To say that Marius was gripped by a sense of urgency would be an understatement. He stayed that night only long enough for Lentulus to give him four copies of a letter of introduction, to be placed in several different places on board his ship. They simply said “This is Marius, my legate, acting with my full authority. Listen to this man and obey!” with Lentulus’ seal beneath the text.

Marius commandeered the fastest ship he could find on the docks, thankfully already unladen. He ensured it was equipped with stores, crew and material for a non-stop trip direct to the mouth of the Euphrates and then ordered it to sail.

The early spring trade winds were fair, and it took only 40 days for him to reach Babylon. The China Trade Authority was nominally under the authority of the Proconsul’s office, so Marius was able to report directly to the Proconsul’s secretary on his arrival and request an urgent interview. He met the Proconsul Abdishtar the next day.

“Lord Abdishtar, I must first apologise that Mucius Lentulus is not here to make this report himself; but the situation in China is too critical for him to leave. The situation there and our dealings are also much too sensitive to commit to paper, so I will need to provide a spoken report. I have here Mucius’ letter

authorising this unusual arrangement.” Marius handed over one of the letters from Lentulus.

Abdishtar glanced at it and put it to one side. “Go on.”

“Our negotiations with the Chinese officials have been robust. Indeed, Mucius has pushed the Chief Official to the point where he is totally intimidated. This Chief Official now fears that anything less than agreement to Mucius’ demands will result in complete collapse of the trade, for which he will be held responsible and therefore punished with the most painful of deaths. Yet he also fears that compliance with Mucius’ demands will be so disadvantageous to his masters that he will face the same fate.

“In his desperation he has sounded us out to see what support we might provide if he were to rebel against the Emperor. He has outlined to us his plans to ensure the loyalty of the garrisons throughout the province and we are convinced he will succeed in the short term. However, to hold his positions against the Imperial army he will need control of the sea and the major rivers. Perhaps I should explain that the rivers in that region are so wide as to be almost inland seas and to control them is to control everything that wants to move. This will guarantee that he will be able to land behind any forces sent to re-take his province and secure his position permanently.

“He does not require any troops from us, only the means to transport them as the military situation requires. In exchange he has pledged that trade with his province will become tax-free. We know he will keep this pledge because without our support he would not be able to maintain his hold.

“There is also the attractive possibility that his success will lead to an unravelling of the Middle Kingdom as a whole. We will then be free of any restrictions as the various independent provinces compete for our trade. Given this situation, Mucius urges you to provide a substantial squadron of fast transport ships suitable for river navigation in support of this rebellion. A small naval fighting force and a detachment of marines to protect this fleet would also be required but this need not be very powerful; the Middle Kingdom has no effective navy of its own. We need only fear boarding parties in small vessels.”

Abdishtar rocked back in his chair. “You seem very confident in this man’s abilities,” he commented.

“Yes, Proconsul. He has explained how he would put his supporters in all key positions and how he would retain their loyalty under pressure. And more importantly, he has explained how he would have the troops not only compliant, but eager to stay by his side. The Middle Kingdom has a harsh and brutal military discipline, with smouldering resentment always under the surface. He proposes to model his forces more on Republic lines where the men are well paid, well fed, treated justly, and respected for their professionalism. There would not be a soldier in China who would desert such a regime to go back to the Imperial ways. We are confident he will succeed and he is already commencing these reforms even as we sit here, under the pretext of the need to stamp out smuggling. Mucius and his garrison commander are providing his men with expert advice and training.”

“Thank you, Marius; please report back here tomorrow, three hours after sunrise.”

Marius stood, nodded his respect and left the office.

When Marius reported back the next day there was another man already with Abdishtar.

“Marius, please meet Henon, my naval advisor. Henon, this is Marius Ormanus, legate to Mucius Lentulus, head of the China Trading Authority.” Abdishtar motioned the men to sit. “Please Marius, refresh my mind and inform Henon about the situation.”

Marius ran through the situation as he had explained it the previous day. When he had finished, Henon hummed to himself for a moment.

“Marius, how many troops does this Xu hope to control?”

“According to his numbers, which seem reasonable in the light of our own secret sources, the garrisons under his command will total almost three-quarters of a million men. Most are conscripts but permanently enrolled.”

Henon pursed his lips in surprise. “That is a lot of manpower!”

Marius explained. “The Middle Kingdom has a similar number on its western frontiers, combating the steppes raiders. We have similar problems ourselves on our frontier, but the Chinese have always relied on numbers and terror rather than initiative and flexibility.”

“Xu’s intention is to choose the best of these men to act as a mobile and well-trained strike force to be used as raiders while the rest are to be used in a primarily defensive role. His strategy is to engage any Imperial forces sent against him on a defensive stance and then use these special forces to disrupt supplies, spread panic and prompt desertions from the enemy.”

Henon nodded. “How big does he expect this strike force to be?”

“He is currently selecting and training the first batch, with Republic instructors. That will be some two thousand strong, and we hope it will be ready in about two months from now. He will use that cadre to train two more batches of two thousand each, taking three months each.”

“So he is asking us to provide enough transport for six thousand men?” Heron rolled his eyes.

“No, lord Henon; it is expected that the strike force will be used in small groups, usually a few dozen, sometimes a few hundred. Their entire purpose is mobility and surprise. However, it would be good to have the capacity to launch several strikes at a time in a co-ordinated fashion. I would expect that the maximum he would ever need to transport at any one time would be a couple of thousand.”

“So a flotilla of, say, fifty river craft, each capable of carrying fifty men, would be sufficient?” asked Abdishtar.

“Yes, and the crews to handle them expertly,” agreed Marius.

“How do we get them built and to China in time?” asked Henon. “Trusting such small craft to the seas between here and China would be a risky business.”

“With respect, my lords, Mucius has already commissioned the building of this fifty, using the design of the former pirate raiders in Malaya. He has done this from his own pocket, in anticipation, employing the towns that were subdued by Tryphon in the last Pirate War ten years ago. I suggest that we extend this initial order; they are cheap, suitable, and already three-quarters the way there. They can also provide the crews who are most familiar with this class of vessel.”

“Excellent, Marius,” agreed Abdishtar. “We can then arrange for this Xu to employ them directly as mercenaries, rather than us being seen to be complicit; just in case it turns egg-shaped.”

Abdishtar looked across to Henon again. “Any more questions?”

“Yes. Who is to be in command of this expeditionary force?” asked Henon.

“I was going to ask for an expert naval commander to be attached to lord Mucius’ post,” Marius answered, “but if these craft are to be engaged directly by Xu, that becomes less important.” Then he added, “But even so, I think an expert advisor would still be a good idea.”

“Yes, so do I,” Abdishtar jumped in. “Mainly because I want a fresh man’s eyes there on the spot and not have to rely on Mucius or you. Make no mistake; I think you have handled the negotiations poorly to be forced to such desperate measures. But what is done can’t be undone. We have to go forward from where we are.”

Abdishtar stood to signify the end of the meeting. “Be assured, Marius, that I do not approve of the way Mucius has handled this assignment. But I now have no choice but to go along with this outrageous scheme for the moment. If it unravels you can expect to be called to account!”

He walked to the door of his office and opened it. “I will discuss the details with Henon now. I expect you here in four hours’ time.”

The next morning Marius was on the river leaving Babylon. Also aboard with him was Demetrios, a high-ranking officer in the Republic Navy. Abdishtar had made it very clear that Demetrios was to be the supreme authority in China, even over Lentulus.

Demetrios was all business. As soon as the two men were settled in their cabin he asked Marius to tell him the whole history of the matter. Marius suggested that this story should be told where they could not be overheard. They resorted to a rowboat towed along behind the paddle-steamer that served as the express transport between Babylon and the Gulf. It would have been impossible for anyone on the boat to hear them over the thrashing of the paddles.

Demetrios found the start of the story boring to the limit. Being a military man he had no time for the complexities of market analysis, taxes or negotiations. But as soon as the false proconsul was introduced, he was scandalised.

“You must be mad!” Demetrios exploded. “‘Impersonating a Senior Officer’ is the least charge that could be levelled against you!”

“No, it couldn’t, because I did it on Chinese soil in the trading canton where Mucius Lentulus is the supreme authority. I was obeying the orders of my Governor.”

“Then Mucius should be careful. He can’t go around pretending to be a Proconsul!”

“He didn’t pretend he was a Proconsul,” Marius responded tersely. “He just ordered me to pretend.”

Demetrios shook his head in amazement. “Well, surely there must be something in the lawbooks about that!”

There might well be,” continued Marius, “But that’s beside the point. Right now we have what could be a major crisis or a major opportunity. Let’s turn it to the Republic’s advantage and we can worry about the finer points later. And that means that when we get to China you are to treat me as a Proconsul with a stunning record as a military genius. So the question you have to answer is simple. Will you act as if my subordinate, my equal, or my senior?” A questioning eyebrow was raised.

Demetrios had no doubts. “Abdishtar made it clear that you were to be under my authority. I am your senior, and don’t you forget it!”

“Very well, then,” Marius accepted this with a shrug. “I will be a Proconsul, and you will be ... What? The Senior Consul himself? And you were just telling me that you consider that a chargeable offence!”

Demetrios was stuck. “Then we shall be equals in public, but you will always agree with what I say. Always remember the reality. You will do as I command.”

“Excellent! So you shall also impersonate a Proconsul! And you will be doing it off your own initiative, so that must make it legal for me to do it under your orders!” Marius brightened visibly. “And I’m only too glad that you will be responsible! Now, shall I continue the story?”

Demetrios shook his head in annoyance. “What a mess you have made of things!”

“Yes,” replied Marius. “And now you’re trapped in this mess no less than I. Such a mess can only be forgiven if successful, so let’s do whatever it takes to drag a success out of it. Just remember, although you have authority over me you must never appear to over-rule me in the eyes of the Chinese; that will completely blow the whole exercise.”

The journey from the head of the Gulf to China was swift, now that the monsoon winds were on their starboard beam across the Indian Ocean. Demetrios and Marius arrived only 85 days after Marius’ departure.

“You are back earlier than I expected, honourable Proconsul”, Xu bowed in greeting. “I thought Babylon was a great distance away.”

“Thank you, Xu,” replied Marius, bowing in acknowledgement. “Babylon is indeed a great distance, more than six thousand miles; but the winds were favourable and Republic vessels are swift.”

Swift indeed! Xu thought to himself. Or are these round-eyes stretching the truth a bit?

Marius gestured towards Demetrios. “This man is lord Demetrios, one of our finest naval officers, here to assist and advise. Unfortunately he does not understand Mandarin, but that can be overcome. We will appoint a translator for him.”

“But honourable Marius; are you not yourself a great naval commander? Why do we need a lesser man and one who cannot speak to us more conveniently?”

“Because I have other duties and cares that will occupy my time. Demetrios is an excellent man and well suited for this role,” Marius replied emphatically. He did not want to have to argue. He was on safer ground controlling the agenda himself.

“Mucius tells me that the first fifty raider craft are expected here in another month, complete with crews. You shall personally engage them as mercenaries, and if you need an excuse you are to say they are to suppress smuggling once they are familiar with the local waters. For this reason you will send them on training and familiarisation missions. It will just be co-incidental that these training missions will be to places where they are to be used later if Imperial troops march against you.

“Mucius also tells me he has permitted trading to resume on the same basis as before he arrived. I trust this has won you great face within the Governor’s Court?”

Xu bowed again in acknowledgement. “Yes indeed, honourable Marius. This apparent surrender by honourable Mucius has given me great authority and I have been able to place trusted men in all key positions. It will also give me both the income and the credibility to pay for this new anti-smuggling fleet. Thanks to honourable Mucius, all is going well.”

Marius stood looking to Xu for a moment. Xu must really be committed to this coup now and aware of his need for Republic support to be so full of praise for Mucius. It was less than six months ago that Xu was treating him like an imbecile. How times change!

“I am pleased that Mucius has used his initiative so well,” Marius said at last.

Demetrios was made uneasy by the pause before Marius had responded. He asked in Greek, “What is happening? Have our plans gone astray at some point?”

Marius turned to him and responded in Greek as if annoyed. “There is no problem, Demetrios; in fact things are looking better than expected. But please, if you are to say something you must appear to be offering your opinion to a senior partner, not demanding an explanation from a junior. Everything here depends on me being held in great respect so please act accordingly. So now you will simply bow your head slightly as if in submission and henceforth be quiet unless spoken to.”

Demetrios reddened with anger, but dipped his head. Marius could only hope that Xu saw the reddening as a sign of embarrassment rather than anger.

Marius turned back to Xu. "Thank you for your welcome, Xu. Things are all going as planned and we will speak further as the need arises."

Xu bowed, Marius bowed in return, and the two Chinese left the building.

Once the Chinese were out of earshot, Marius addressed Demetrios.

"My sincere apologies for speaking so harshly, Demetrios, but everything we do in the hearing or sight of these Chinese is play-acting. We must be careful!"

"I understand that, Marius; but don't let too much go by without informing me."

"Nothing had been said that would have seemed to Xu to be appropriate for reference to you as a naval advisor. But be assured that I will take every opportunity to do so as it arises." Marius then filled in the points of the conversation for Demetrios.

The raider craft arrived slightly ahead of the expected time. Each came with a crew of eight men and was capable of transporting another forty armed men as commandos with all their gear. The second batch of another fifty craft, ordered by Marius and Demetrios on their way back to China, would be arriving in another three months. By that time the captains of the first batch should be familiar with the local waters.

When the second flotilla arrived just at the start of winter Xu decided it was time to act. The snow inland and to the north would prevent any serious intervention by the Imperial forces during winter. He would use this time to consolidate his hold.

As expected the meticulous preparations resulted in an almost-bloodless coup. Almost bloodless because the Governor was arraigned for largely imaginary crimes and beheaded. Some of the more notoriously corrupt officials were also executed, particularly those most closely associated with the former Governor.

Morale within the garrisons around the province lifted immediately as Xu's cover-story was widely accepted at face value. The opportunity to consolidate this moment of goodwill was not allowed to pass. Rations were improved, pay was increased and discipline, although still very tight, was freed from the arbitrariness of an officer's whim. A Code of Military Justice was instituted, inspired by the Republic standard and written in the security of the trading compound. These measures ensured that Xu's army would fight for what they saw as the good life rather than defect when under pressure. After all, the best a defector could hope for was enrolment into the Imperial Army among the criminal cohorts. These were usually the first to be fed into an impossible assault.

At the same time the Foreign Trading Tax Schedule was abolished. This resulted in every Republic merchant in China moving his trading base to Guangzhou, ripping the heart out of the Imperial trading revenue in the other provinces. The increased volume of trade, although only at domestic tax levels rather than the old foreign rates, was a helpful boost to the provincial coffers.

The broad mass of people also welcomed promises of lower taxes and abolition of the corvee, and an on-going campaign to reduce corruption by local officials.

Not so obvious to the casual eye were the preparations for war. The roads leading into the province had already been surveyed by Xu's most trusted commanders before the coup and in many cases work had already commenced to fortify those positions most suitable for delaying actions. This defensive work was now pushed ahead with eagerness despite the cold weather inland making this laborious. These defensive positions were enhanced in many ways. Steep rocky slopes were set up as avalanche zones to crush the attacking army as it was being delayed bridges were identified for demolition behind the advancing Imperial forces to cut supplies, and supplies of oil were secreted away as fuel to turn ravines into firetraps.

The personnel side was not ignored either. The Select Forces were set several practice exercises, rehearsing demolition and counter-supply missions. Even the bulk forces were allocated specific posts and roles and worked through practice drills modelled on Republic methods to ensure they wouldn't shatter under the pressure of a battle.

Republic military technology was widely adopted and adapted, most notably the onager. These were placed behind concealing fortifications and aligned to cover approach roads. On flat ground these approach roads were flanked on either side by flooded ground set with sharpened stakes and then sown with rice or other concealing vegetation to ensure all assaults had to be either by the road or at a crawl through these traps. In mountainous terrain those roads most tightly hemmed in by natural landforms were selected. A large supply of oil-filled bombs was manufactured, so that these congested roads could be turned into fire-traps by these pre-aligned onagers.

Finally the psychological was not ignored. Approaches everywhere were filled with signs; cliff faces were painted with slogans such as "Surrender and live!" and "We are well-fed; join us!"

The Imperial troops came in late spring. They were cut to ribbons. In summer another larger force came, more methodically and cautiously. They were isolated and defeated in detail, often by loss of supplies resulting in desertion. These victories were celebrated across his entire principedom and sincerely so. Xu's domestic reforms had been very popular, securing his throne from internal threats as much as his military reforms had secured him against the Emperor. At long last Proconsul Marius was allowed to disappear from history.

Xu had won. The following winter was spent reviewing the various engagements in his war of secession, analysing them to understand what had worked, what had gone wrong, and how to improve their strategy and tactics in the next year. Additional strong points were identified and fortified and additional trap points were prepared. It would be foolish to retain the same strong points from the previous season now that the enemy knew about them.

At the same time whenever weather prevented his soldiers from working in the mountains he commenced some substantial public works. Rather than a new and more opulent palace, as was the customary way for a prince to spend the taxes of his subjects, Xu commenced work on sewer systems to reduce disease in the cities under his control. Although the work was slow and only carried forward when the workforce could not be profitably employed on military infrastructure, the mere fact of doing anything of this nature was revolutionary.

Under the constant urging of Lentulus Xu deliberately adopted a facade of personal restraint, at least by Chinese standards that usually emphasised conspicuous consumption. He even took serious efforts to shed some of his weight. Being over-weight was a traditional indicator of wealth and influence, so this sent out a very strong message of a Prince who was one with his People. Over the new year Xu shed almost half his weight, slimming down to become no more than respectably sleek. In turn, he demanded austerity from his officials and continued to stamp on corruption.

The populace was at first stunned; never before had their State taken care for their welfare. Xu was not only popular, he was revered. The Dragon Throne took note of the depth of support for this rebel prince and didn't come back after that first year.

The greatest revelation was Xu himself. Once freed from the formalism that required him to affect pomposity and arrogance he rapidly developed into a wise and prudent ruler. Thus his realm became a most interesting society. Its core of Confucianism required all officials to act with integrity, but its inherently hierarchical world-view and respect for authority meant that officials who didn't act with integrity could easily avoid being held to account. But the influence of Republicanism and accountability soon influenced this social model.

Xu was shrewd enough to respond positively to this influence; better to control it than be trampled by it! Although retaining sovereign power for himself, he permitted the election of two People's Tribunes each year. These Tribunes were provided with funds and facilities to investigate allegations of corruption or incompetence by officials and were instructed to report publicly on their findings. Having reported they had no power to prosecute, but Xu made a point of at least dismissing the incompetent and often took punitive measures against the corrupt; at least, often enough to ensure he retained popular support and discouraged the dishonest. Thus he also minimised any losses to State revenue.

Li was appointed his Chief Official. In part this was because Li had proven himself to be both shrewd and trustworthy which was a rare combination in Chinese officialdom, in part because Li knew too much to allow him to become resentful, and in part because he was too valuable to execute.

In his third regnal year, once he was confident that his grip was secure and also in part to ensure Li was not in a position to plot against him, Xu sent Li on a mission to the Republic. The aim was to gather information, particularly trade information, and to exploit any opportunities that might be open

to his new realm. Lentulus was asked to accompany him as guide, friend and interpreter.

Li was awed by the distances involved. Although he had been told that Babylon was some six thousand miles from China, he had always been convinced in his own mind that this was a gross exaggeration meant to intimidate Middle Kingdom traders. He had expected the real distances to be perhaps a quarter of that.

On his arrival at Babylon he thought to pay his respects to the Proconsul who had triggered this turn of fortunes. He urged that a meeting with Marius Romulus Drusus should be arranged as a State Dinner to show the high regard in which Xu held this noble man. Lentulus agreed to arrange such a dinner if it was at all possible. He reported this request to Abdishtar. The Proconsul thought about it briefly and then made an alternative suggestion. Li should be invited to a State Dinner hosted by the Proconsul himself. Could it be arranged that Marius could attend? Marius would then reveal that the Proconsul role was a charade, born in an attempt to force some respect and continued out of desperation. It would be better for Li to find out this way, by open and frank disclosure, than perhaps later discover that he had been fooled.

Li took it in good spirits. He accepted Marius' apology with a laugh and revealed his own oath to destroy Lentulus for the measured insults during the negotiations. "But that was in a former life! The men who did and said those things are no longer with us and we are only what we are today because those others learnt to work with each other instead of against each other!"

The greatest impression made on Li was the use of machinery, starting with the paddle-wheelers on the Euphrates. He was amazed to see the moon, planets and stars through the museum's telescope, the primary lens two feet in diameter and magnifying four hundred times. He toured the Museum, impressed by the careful and scientific approach to crop and animal breeding and he marvelled at the strange creatures that the microscope revealed living in his own spittle.

The train trip to Antioch on the Mediterranean coast stunned him. Such speed in such comfort maintained for so long! Then to Rome by sea.

After Babylon, Li found Rome disappointing. He had expected vast and portentous buildings surrounded by huge parklands as in China, on the assumption that if Babylon was a provincial capital then the main city in the Republic would need to be so much grander.

"One thing you must never forget, honourable Li," Mucius explained to him. "The Republic is not a place. It is a way of life. Wherever men from different places, languages, skin colours and religions come together to work in peace, there is the Republic. Wherever the Rulers however great their dignitas, must give an account to each citizen however humble, there is the Republic."

Another train journey took them from Rome to Colonia on the Rhine. The German Museum was inspected and a tour of a mine was arranged. From there a paddle-wheeler took them down the Rhine to the coast. The shipyards were now

building a substantial number of steel-framed ships, mainly for the Atlantic and Mediterranean trade, although some had been ordered by Babylonian traders. Some experimental models using submerged propellers driven by a steam engine were also being constructed.

Li was curious about the screw-drive system; it seemed so small compared to the large paddles on the river craft. How could such a small component provide any significant power?

It was explained to him that the small size was in fact its greatest asset. It was too easy for paddle-drives to be damaged in ocean storms. The screw propeller was much more robust, and by revolving faster than the paddle-wheel, it could achieve very respectable speeds.

From there Li was put on board a ship and taken to the Senegal. The black-skinned people there amazed him, totally unlike the Indians he knew from the traders in China. Then around southern Africa and into the Limpopo. Once again a train journey took him up to the High Country. The vast gold and coal mines stunned him and he was amazed at the scale of the water supply and sewage disposal systems needed in this dry land. Then back down the Limpopo and aboard their ship.

Li then noted that the journey so far had been to the west to Rome, then to the North Sea, and then followed a great arc sweeping south-west, then south, then south-east, and now they were heading back to the north-east. He traced out their travels on a map in the ship's cabin. "What is further to the west? Is it just one vast ocean out there?"

Lentulus was surprised by this question. Having lived all his life in Babylon or further east, he really hadn't bothered thinking too much about this issue. He called for the ship's captain who had spent most of his career on Atlantic traders.

"Basically, no-one knows," he shrugged.

Lentulus found this a surprising answer. "You mean no-body has bothered to go and find out?"

"Oh, plenty have bothered, and plenty have sailed out to the west," the captain assured them. "But a lot of them have never come back. Those that do come back report finding nothing. Some who have sailed in summer hoping for good weather come back to talk about the most ferocious storms imaginable."

Lentulus was fascinated. "Then why not build more robust ships to weather the storms?"

The captain looked at him strangely. "One African trader did exactly that. He built a fleet of huge triremes, with reinforced hulls and able to be sealed against any water coming in even if a wave washed right over them. No-one knows any of these details for sure because these were built in the East German Sea, away from prying eyes and sent direct to the Canary Islands. These triremes were last seen under sail heading west from the Canaries and never sighted again."

"But why triremes?" asked Mucius. "Why not proper ocean ships?"

The captain shrugged again. "It's only my speculation; but I would be thinking that he wanted a fighting ship in case he ran into someone hostile. Well, if he did not even his triremes saved him. Since then no-one has deliberately risked his wealth or his crews to go west. There's enough money to be made trading along the coast anyway, so why bother? The only sailors who go west of the Canaries these days are those who get blown out to sea accidentally."

Mucius nodded. "Thank you, captain." The captain took his leave.

Li studied the map more closely. "What do these lines mean?" he asked, indicating the latitude and longitude.

"They show position on the world," Lentulus explained. "These here show how far north or south of the equator, and these others show how far east or west of Babylon."

"Equator?" asked Li.

"Oh, let me explain. The world is shaped like a large spinning ball. The top and bottom points that it spins around are called 'Poles', and the Equator is the line around the world half-way between them. "

Li thought for a moment, turning over a mental picture of what this could mean. Then an idea struck him. Those ferocious storms out to the west the captain had talked about sounded like the same sort of storms that blew in from the east onto the coast of China every summer. If the world were a big round ball, that would mean that these were the same storms in the same great ocean. Could that mean a shorter journey direct to the Republic? But first the Chinese would have to build ocean-going ships. "Thank you, honourable Mucius." The idea would be best kept to himself until he was back reporting to Xu.

The tour did not enter the Red Sea to inspect the Suez Railway; the Mesopotamians had no desire to provide Egypt with any more recognition than the barest minimum demanded by the inevitabilities of business. The next stop on the way was the mouth of the Ganges and a paddle-wheel trip up and back. These were among the cities that "Proconsul" Marius had boasted about in that critical interview that had forced Xu to turn to rebellion. These were the cities that he had claimed so convincingly would risk all to be part of the Republic rather than independent. After the surprise revelation of Marius' true authority, Li wondered whether this boast was as much a fabrication as everything else he had been told.

He came away convinced that this boast, at least, had been true. In fact, in every place he had visited he had been struck by the general optimism and happiness of all whom he had met, even the lowliest of the free citizens. There was a message here for Xu; his policy of enlightened and benevolent rule was the greatest security that any ruler could follow. It not only maximised his chances of hanging on to power but also made sure he would remain wealthy, free and honoured even if deposed.

It further convinced him of another thing. That any plans he personally might have to depose Xu and take his throne would best be forgotten. The story of the cities in Tamilia and Further India convinced him that a sovereign's life would always be at risk unless he has the support of his people. Deposing Xu would be most unpopular. Much better and safer to remain the trusted servant!

Li arrived back more than a year after setting out on this great voyage. He had chests full of notes, samples and memorabilia. However, in a pre-meditated moment of sincerity, he insisted that the first de-briefing talk with Xu had to be about political structures.

He commended Xu for the manner in which his realm was governed, in particular the Tribunes which gave the people a feeling that wrongs would be redressed without the need to resort to insurrection. Indeed, the whole structure of the Republic's political structures was intended and effective in making the common people fear insurrection rather than craving it! Thus those with authority also felt secure. But it also meant that having authority was not in itself as attractive as in a despotism. Personal aggrandisement and vengeance against personal enemies was difficult to achieve and only at great risk, while those who use power wisely were honoured and prospered.

Thus Xu's policies should be continued as the best way to protect his life and his authority. In particular he should not punish dissent but actively encourage constructive suggestions. Insults to his majesty obviously need to be punished but the Republic prospered because it recognises a 'loyal opposition'. The advantages of supporting someone not afraid to share an alternate opinion, provided it is done without malice, were considerable.

By encouraging his subjects to air their own views Xu would be able to hear and adopt those new ideas which had popular appeal. This would defuse any tendency for opponents to resort to more dangerous plots and further promote his image as a wise and benevolent Prince. Therefore Xu should give careful consideration to forming an Advisory Council along the lines of the Tribal System. Members should be appointed at first, and not only from among sycophants but to include men of known intelligence and courage. A proportion of them might be drawn from the various classes and guilds within his realm. Xu must aim to continue showing himself to be not only a Wise Prince but a loving and caring Father to his people.

Li also brought back interesting information about the trade with Babylon. The Republic traders were making huge profits, much more than they could have imagined.

This made Xu start to think. If he could set up his own trading company the revenue would allow him to reduce taxes or expand public works, both of which would be to his benefit. The problem here was the Republic's cabotage laws. Li explained that all trade with the Republic had to be carried out through Republic traders and they would fight hard to keep their virtual monopoly of the China Trade.

But perhaps if Xu were to employ Republic traders as a front? 'Forget it,' Li dismissed the plan; as soon as these front-men tried to return any profits back to Xu they would be found out and prosecuted by the Republic. Why would they risk that when they can make safer and greater profits by trading in their own names?

Eventually Xu thought it better to accept Republic cabotage as a fact of life he would need to continue living with. But now that Li had been able to

determine the prices of the various Chinese exports when they arrived back in Babylon he was able to assess more reliably what tax rates he might be able to apply at his own end of the supply chain. The end result was a substantial increase in taxes. Of course these taxes were applied domestically as well, but popular resentment was avoided by the accompanying establishment of the citizens' Free Ration. This provided a solid boost to the kingdom's income.

With this increased income the rate of public works construction could be increased. Xu started to provide free basic schooling for all male children aged five to eight. The aim was to provide basic literacy and numeracy, and to pick out the more able students so they could be groomed for the Civil Service. This was a major reform. Until now the Service had been accessible only those children whose families could afford a full Confucian education for their sons in hope of gaining an official position when they reached their 20's. But this reform meant that even a labourer's son could now rise to the top if he proved himself a capable student.

However the traditional Chinese script made trying to achieve basic literacy in a four-year curriculum span a very difficult task. Xu appointed a committee with the task of assessing whether an alphabetic system such as used by Greek or Latin would be helpful.

Meanwhile, the Dragon Throne was struggling against a series of revolts as its economic base collapsed. Particularly hard hit were the other trading ports as the traders had moved to Guangdong.

Xu's Literacy Committee reported back on the feasibility of a Mandarin alphabet. This Report took five years to compose. Much of that time was taken by the Committee members learning the basics of Greek and Latin. The Committee reported back that the sounds of Mandarin were not easily reproduced by either Greek or Latin alphabets and the tonal system was an added complication. However, they did agree that an alphabet that had specifically Mandarin sounds associated with each letter would be an advance and that diacritical markings could be used to indicate tones. A Mandarin alphabet was proposed and adopted, generally using Greek letters, but with modifications to their phonetic value.

This revolution was formally introduced in Xu's tenth regnal year. It was decreed that all government business and all public notices must now be recorded in both old and alphabetic scripts for a period of ten years as a transition. However only the new script would be taught in Xu's new schools.

Xu had surprised everyone by becoming an Enlightened Prince. He provided genuine support for the Peoples' Tribunes to redress grievances and stomp hard on corruption and continued to grow in the reverence of his people. He continued to support a sizeable army in case of attack from the Emperor but the army was modelled on Republic standards of military justice, food, pay and professionalism. Conditions become good enough for it to become what would previously have been unimaginable in China; an all-volunteer, career-oriented

force. Within ten years the last of the conscripts were dismissed with honour and a lump sum payment.

Training exercises on the actual lands to be defended became routine and specialisation of skills was encouraged. Fortifications were built and progressively strengthened.

The largest problem he faced was the imbalance in his own economy caused by the demand by the Republic traders for specific commodities. This Republic demand caused greatly inflated prices for some goods previously considered staples by Chinese. He would have liked to place an export tax on these, but was totally alert to the need to maintain a “free market” lest the Republic take action. Not military action, of course; when Li had recounted his introduction to “Proconsul Marius” in Babylon and how the whole charade had been an exercise in desperation, Xu laughed to the point of collapse. But he was aware that a Republic embargo, if only for a year, would destroy his new state. So instead he placed a uniformly higher tax on all goods, whether in foreign or domestic markets, but gave subsidies and relief to households and businesses. Here was another thing previously unimaginable in China; a Prince paying subsidies instead of demanding ever-higher taxes! In consideration of this the Republic respected these modest taxes, and suppressed smuggling. This was a small price to pay for a stable, reliable and profitable trading partner.

Xu was taken seriously ill in his 14th regnal year and nominated Li as his vice-regent and eventually his successor. This worried Li who had intended to remain a power below the throne, not to be the vulnerable one sitting on it. He paid handsomely for a suite of Babylon’s finest medical minds to attend to Xu, who eventually recovered. Xu was rather surprised. He had resigned himself and expected Li to simply let him die and thus secure the throne for himself. This made Xu think more carefully about the long-term direction of his kingdom.

Formally joining the Republic was out of the question. That would involve the surrender of sovereignty and if this went then the protective taxation system that subsidised his public works would also be destroyed. But if continued sovereignty was demanded, what form should it take?

The adoption of the Advisory Council ten years ago after Li’s fact-finding tour had been a success in terms of ensuring popular appreciation of his rule. In fact, Xu was spontaneously adored by his people without any officially-supported Cult of the King. His Advisory Council had developed since then as a genuinely frank and fearless body. While it was sometimes used as a forum to air views critical of Xu’s policies, at the same time it provided an excellent opportunity to defend them if the criticisms could be shown to be flawed and also to amend policy in the light of fair criticism. If anything it strengthened Xu’s image as a wise and benevolent ruler.

But to extend this to a full democracy as in the Republic would not succeed. There was no culture of responsible government in China; to attempt a pure democracy would only encourage opportunists and scare-mongers, ending in violence and panic. Perhaps an oligarchic arrangement might work. Could he

devolve more power to the Council, which had come to include representatives from all of the educated and wealthy sections of society, and leave them to understand the importance of keeping the disenfranchised masses happy? Not really; such arrangements always ended with soaring corruption and consequent popular discontent.

The two men despaired. There seemed no way to ensure good government and in particular a peaceful transition in government except in the person of the Sovereign himself. To this end they agreed that there must be a Nominated Heir to minimise the risk of civil war between rival claimants. This person must have the ability to take up power without missing a step. In effect, he must become a junior partner to the Prince long before the need arises. Li reluctantly agreed to become the Nominated Heir.

Politics in China had always been a brutal game, as Xu's own rise typified. There could be no guarantee of civil peace until a couple of generations had passed and the Republican concept of public duty rather than personal gain had managed to embed itself into the culture. The best way to promote this, they decided, was to continue to support the role of the Peoples' Tribunes and severely punish any found corrupt or incompetent. Let officials develop an automatic dread of any adverse findings and know that they can only succeed if they continue to follow the Way of Heaven. But corrupt officials can be so cunning in covering their tracks! One might suspect corruption, but as the penalties increased in severity so did the risk of a miscarriage of justice unless the evidence was sound.

To this end they agreed that the Tribunes would now be granted the authority to entrap. There would now be regular efforts to deliberately subvert officials and any taking the bait would be prosecuted. The offices of the Tribunes would be subject to strict oversight requiring meticulous records and prosecutions would demand hard, objective evidence. This aspect of the Tribunes role would be responsible to the Nominated Heir. Naturally, this provided scope for the Nominated Heir to deliberately target and incriminate any personal enemies but that was not a bad thing. Up until now a Prince had the power to simply kill any who offended him anyway! One or two possible rivals out of the way before they could challenge was just common-sense statecraft.

But much more serious was the opportunity for low-level agents within the Tribunes offices to fabricate evidence against their own personal enemies. The two agreed that they would need to talk to the Tribunes about this. They must lay down procedures to ensure that no-one was targeted without authorisation by one or other of the Tribunes himself. To do this he can act only on the basis of either a credible complaint or by direction from the Nominated Heir, and agents would not be assigned to investigate persons already known to them. Reports and evidence supporting those reports must be prompt, lodged in a separate secure storage and subject to close supervision.

An additional point was added. It would henceforth become an offence for an official to fail to report an attempt to subvert him. Let corrupt officials report each other!

Of course such a programme is only effective as a deterrent if it is not secret. Xu proclaimed this new policy throughout the realm, offering amnesty to any who confessed to any corrupt activity. This amnesty would protect their persons against any punishment, but would not protect them against demotion, dismissal or fines; but even these penalties once imposed could be reduced or entirely waived if the Tribunes agreed that the confessor showed true contrition and would be unlikely to re-offend. Even so, they were also advised that they would be more likely to be subjected to entrapment in the future and any leniency for their confessed crimes could be revoked.

The Tribunes were suspicious of this programme at first. They were distrustful of any requirement that their work might be subject to oversight by the Prince, since it was his own officials that they would be investigating. They much preferred the existing system by which they reported a complaint and their investigation of it publicly after the event. They were soon mollified by assurances that they would continue to be supported; the welfare of the Kingdom and the reputation of the King as being incorruptible were much more important than an occasional favourite.

Their first victim was reported to Li eight months later. A contractor in one of the outlying villages had complained about missing Public Works contracts because he would not pay the mayor a bribe. He agreed to be bait in a trap. Next time he tendered for a project he asked the mayor what 'additional fees' would be required. He paid these fees and was awarded the contract. When the Mayor's financial report was submitted these fees were not declared as 'fee income' and could not be shown to have been allowed for in any other part of the financial statement.

Li offered the mayor a choice; execution for his crime or his co-operation in obtaining proof of similar corruption by others within his administration.

The mayor continued to charge 'additional fees' for the next year, handing these sums over to the Tribunes complete with details of their sources and purposes. The contractors paying these bribes were then approached and required to report any other payments made to lower-placed officials. Soon almost the entire town administration was found to be in a thick web of corrupt payments.

The whole complex investigation was made public eighteen months after the first complaint by the contractor. Most offenders had co-operated or confessed. They had been fined and some had been demoted or dismissed. Those guilty of an offence significant enough to be punishable by death had been granted life and liberty but been subjected to dismissal and total confiscation of all property.

A list of the offenders, their offences, their initial penalties (often death), and their actual punishments after reductions was posted in every town in the realm. With it was published advice that more towns were being similarly investigated at that very moment and all towns would be swept within the next ten years. It would go better for any corrupt official to approach the Tribunes of his own initiative rather than being discovered.

A flood of confessions was received by the Tribunes, almost all of them from minor officials admitting to trivial offences. Each was noted, the official contacted, and most told to continue as before but to forward any payments and details to the Tribunes while the situation could be assessed and proper entrapment planned.

The various persons making these corrupt payments were then contacted. The tribunes' agents didn't disclose their sources, but merely stated "We have evidence that you have been making corrupt payments. Will you co-operate with our investigations, or would you rather be prosecuted?". Usually they agreed to co-operate, the first step of which was to continue business as usual while reporting all payments and the recipients. This led to an expanding list of corrupt officials and their paymasters in almost every town in the realm. Further fines, demotions and confiscations followed.

This process worked its way through the towns of Xu's kingdom over the next seven years and had some very significant collateral victims. In one case, one of the corrupt mayors who rolled over claimed that he always understated the amount of rice that was collected in tax and sent to the regional Governor. This was because the Governor had instructed him to do so, in exchange for which the mayor was paid a small gift for his efficiency. The difference was some ten per cent of the total rice tax, an amount of substantial value. It seemed that the Governor was pocketing this margin.

The mayor was told to continue as usual while reporting back. The next shipment of rice tax was sewn into bags which were sealed with an inconspicuously different thread to assist in later identification and tracking and conveyed by Tribune agents dressed as carters. The amount nominated on the documents was tallied and deposited in the Provincial storages and the additional ten per cent was directed to another storage outside the city. The details of this second storage were noted, including the name of the owner, Dong Na.

Meanwhile, the Governor's report was received by Xu's court officials. It stated the amount of rice received to be the same as on the mayor's false documents, not the actual amount delivered.

Another agent from the Tribunes office called into town the next morning. He claimed to be a water supply contractor and he let it be known that he intended to buy a large amount of rice for a construction force that would be working on a canal project nearby. The Governor's officials offered him some of the stored tax rice but he said he wanted to shop around for a better price and quality. He started to do the rounds of the local wholesalers, buying a single bag from each to assess quality and having each merchant put his personal chop on the bag for later reference.

That was the last anyone saw of the canal contractor. But Dong was visited by another Tribune agent the next morning. This agent didn't go through the usual pleasantries. His first question was "Are you aware of the penalties for theft of Government property?"

"No, not really," responded Dong, taken totally by surprise. "Why would I need to know such things? I don't deal in stolen property."

“If you don’t already know, the penalty is death by beheading and confiscation of all assets. To steal from the Prince is a form of treason and is punished as such. As for dealing in stolen property, I believe you do and I have witnesses to prove it.”

“This is nonsense, good sir! Who are these witnesses? They have been paid by my competitors to make false statements!”

“They have not been paid by your enemies; they are Tribune agents. And more to the point, they have in their possession some physical evidence that is effectively your confession.”

Dong was stunned. He groped for words for a moment. “This is nonsense, good sir! There has been a mistake! I have never dealt with stolen goods and I certainly have never confessed to such a ludicrous allegation!”

“Please bear with me for a moment,” the Tribune agent continued. “Do you recall that you sold a single bag of rice to an engineering contractor yesterday, as a sample for his workforce rations?”

Dong lost all colour. The world started to wobble in front of his eyes and he gasped for breath.

“I see that you recall that incident,” the agent continued. “That bag was secretly marked as being part of the rice tax. It now bears your personal chop as well. Conclusive evidence that you sold rice that was properly part of the Provincial Rice Tax. Yet we have documents recording that the full amount of the Rice Tax dispatched was stored in the Provincial storage and none had been sold out of that storage until the day after you sold that bag to the Tribune agent. Therefore the only explanation for you having that bag was that it had been stolen from the Provincial storage.”

Dong gaped for a few breaths. “No, no! I did indeed buy a quantity of rice from the governor and it was delivered direct to my warehouse.”

“I am sorry, but we know that is not true. We have the delivery papers that show the full amount of the shipment was delivered to the Provincial storages. If any had been delivered direct to your warehouse then the Provincial storage records would show a corresponding shortfall. We also have the Governor’s accounts, which show you made no payment for any rice prior to the date you sold the bag to our agent.” The Tribune agent shook his head sympathetically. “I am afraid that the only way you can save your head is by convincing us that you came into possession of that rice other than by stealing it from the Provincial storage.”

“I swear to you, good sir;” Dong spoke quietly and slowly, “I did not steal it. I have a standing arrangement with the Governor; I purchase one-tenth of the rice tax each delivery, to be delivered direct to my warehouse. This saves the time and labour of double-handling. I pay him for it the following day once the quantity is accurately known. Come with me and I will show you the entry in my books!” The merchant hauled himself to his feet and walked to the door of his office. He told his secretary to bring the journal to him. He then returned to his chair and sat heavily.

“You said earlier that the Governor’s accounts don't show this sale. Perhaps it had not been entered because the final journal might not be written up until the evening, after you left his accountants. But my payment made yesterday is in my journal; you will see it for yourself! Perhaps if you go back to the governor’s offices today you will see it has been entered into his accounts late yesterday evening.”

The journal arrived and the entry for the payment was listed. It was also clear that it had not been added in haste while they had been waiting; there were two more entries for that day below it and the ink on all was dry.

“Thank you, good sir,” the tribune agent acknowledged. “Now, you told me that this is a standing arrangement; so please may I see your journals for the last three or four Rice Tax deliveries?”

It took almost an hour to find these journals, but they all showed the same pattern.

“Thank you again, good sir,” the Tribune agent again acknowledged. “Tell me, how do you make these payments? In cash, or by note? And is there any particular person to whom you must deliver this payment?”

“By cash; he will not accept anything else. And all payments in cash must go to the governor’s personal secretary. He doesn't trust his other staff with cash, only with notes.”

“That is good. You will say nothing or do nothing unusual. You will continue with business as usual in this matter, except that we will be back just before the next Rice Tax delivery is made. We will provide you with the cash for the next payment. Until then we wish you good health and prosperity.” The Tribune agent smile broadly and bowed. Then he left.

Before leaving the city the agent made one last check on the governor’s accounts. The journal had no entry matching the merchant’s. Again the agent smiled broadly to the clerk who had brought him the journal and apologised for the distraction from other duties.

Dong Na was visited two days before the next Rice Tax delivery by the agent dressed as a prosperous trader. This 'prosperous trader' bought a large quantity of rice, paying for it in cash. All gold coins, each one of which had an inconspicuous but identical mark. The merchant was told privately that these coins were to be included in his next Rice Tax payment when he took delivery. He was also provided with half-dozen cloth money-bags with a distinctive chord to tie the mouth closed and told to make the payment by using these bags. There was also a small amount of powder added to each bag. He was given instructions about what to do.

The payment was made late in the afternoon. The merchant returned to narrate the procedure. Early the next morning the Governor’s journals were examined and no record of the payment was found listed.

“Please, may we speak to the Governor’s personal secretary?” the captain of the Tribune agents asked politely. “Now!” he added, to make sure the official understood that it was more than a request.

The agents were shown into a large office with an imperious man working at a large ornate desk. The minor official withdrew. They bowed politely to the personal secretary. The secretary stood and returned the bow. "What can I do for you gentlemen, please?"

"You can tell us why the journals do not include the payment from Dong Na for a consignment of rice, honourable sir."

The secretary affected a look of confusion. "Off-hand, I know of no such payment. When did it arrive and which clerk processed it?"

"The payment arrived yesterday afternoon and you received it yourself. It was for a total of one hundred and twenty gold pieces."

Again the secretary affected confusion. "I know of no such payment and surely I would recall so large an amount if I had received it myself. I think you gentlemen have been misinformed; if it's not in the journal then it was not paid."

"Do you mind if we look around your office?"

The secretary bowed. "I have no right to prevent you. Look all you like, but please put things back where you found them when you finish." He sat down at his desk and pointedly resumed his work.

The Tribune agent now set the trap. "We believe that Dong Na entered your office late yesterday by a private door to avoid being seen by your front-office staff and emptied three bags of gold coins onto your table." He raised an interrogative eyebrow.

Again the secretary made a show of trying to recall. "No, I don't think so."

"There was some powder in the bags, which spilt onto your table," the agent continued.

The secretary gestured to his table-top. "Then look! No powder! You have been misinformed."

"Please, honourable secretary, remove everything from your table and its draws."

The secretary started to comply. "This is a terrible waste of my valuable time! You will find nothing because there is nothing to find!" At length the table-top was clear. His papers, inkwell and instruments rested on a smaller side table.

"And the drawers, too, please," the agent requested.

The Secretary growled in annoyance and took out the drawers entire rather than unpack them.

"Thank you. Now, after pouring out the coins, Dong Na then touched his fingers to the powder, and then smeared one finger in each of the following places..." The agent stopped, staring at the secretary, who was suddenly aware that he had not been careful enough.

"Please, honourable secretary, if you would be kind enough to stand by your door to the front office..."

The secretary walked unsteadily across the room as requested.

"First, he used one finger to draw a line on the underside of your table," the agent resumed his story. "Please, men, turn over the Secretary's table." His

assistants did so, and a faint white line could be seen near the edge of the underside.

“If this is the powder that was in Dong Na’s bags, it will turn red when a drop of this water touches it.” The agent took a small flask from his robes, and sprinkled a few drops of water over the smear. It turned red.

“Then on the way out of your office, he stopped in the open private doorway to talk to you. While chatting, he ran his fingers down the door frame, in the part that is covered when the door is closed.” The agent walked to the private door, and opened it. There was a white smear on the frame and on the edge of the door near the top hinge. Some of the special water was sprinkled on this and the smear turned red.

“So, honourable secretary, we now have proof that Dong Na was in this room, that he emptied bags containing the gold coins and the powder, and that he left through the private door; yet you say that you know nothing about this? Will you maintain this lie and lose your head or would you rather assist us in our enquiries and live?”

The secretary knew he was trapped. He nodded his head jerkily, and whispered hoarsely, “I will tell you everything.”

“Yes, you will,” echoed the agent.

The agents visited the governor later that morning. The bags with the distinctive ties were found in the rubbish waiting to be burned and the marked coins were found on the top layer of coins in his money-chest. Thus the first of five corrupt governors came to be charged. He lost his head later that year, the last execution authorised by Xu before his own death in his 17th regnal year.

Prince Li ascended the throne in 881 AUC. His first action was to appoint Zheng Ho, the highly-respected senior People’s Tribune for the previous eight years, as his Designated Heir.

ROME - 883 A.U.C. (130 A.D.)

Baturix strode the floor thoughtfully for a moment before speaking. “Conscript Fathers, I know that you all feel both the honour and the burden of governing the whole world. Although we are elected from our Tribes and are duty-bound to protect the interests of our Tribes, yet it is clear to all of us that the interests of our own individual Tribes is bound up with the Common Good. How could it be otherwise?” he asked rhetorically.

“You all know that I am a Gaul. And I would be the first to concede that Gallia was originally formed as a means of *defence against* the Republic! But that was five generations ago. Since then we have grown so that we are now no less sincere in our defence of the Republic than any Tribe here today! The power of the *Mos Majorum* to win hearts, minds and souls must never be underestimated! And how has the power of this seminal concept grown and blossomed! Not only we Gauls, but also Celtiberians from Spain, Berbers from Africa, Britons, Germans, Greeks, Egyptians, Babylonians, Indians, Tamils and Bantu; we all are brothers in this declaration of our dedication to the Republic and the values embedded in that founding concept, the *Mos Majorum*! Not to mention those core Tribes such as Rome itself and Italy, which gave birth and health to us all!” He strode a few paces more.

“As Sulla the Great would have said, the outward appearance of the Republic must not be restricted to one particular form. Just as a youth must be allowed to become a man by outgrowing the constraints of his childhood, so must our own structures continue to be adjusted as the Republic continues to mature. I believe we have now come up against such a constraint. Not a constraint imposed by the *Mos Majorum* itself, of course! That seminal concept must continue to be honoured! But a constraint imposed by the circumstances of our Republic’s childhood; a constraint that we have now outgrown.” He continued to pace, to build tension.

“We have now reached that stage which Sulla the Great prophesied. We have now become a Republic that includes men of many tongues and many races. No longer does the Republic consist only of Romans and their Italian allies; we now have citizens of Berber decent, Egyptians, Gauls, Germans, Parthians, Tamils, Bantu, Greeks... Every nation in the whole world except the Chinese, and even Prince Li of Guangzhou is adopting more of our ways each year. Do not be surprised if Guangzhou joins the Republic within a generation!” Baturix paced a few moments before resuming.

“So the Republic is now on the cusp of fulfilling Sulla’s vision. The *Mos Majorum* is no longer the exclusive property of one race, but has now been extended to every nation on earth! The Republic is no longer an alliance of local tribes; we are a community of nations. The most telling indication of that is right

here in this Great Senate. Where Latin was the only recognised language we now have Senators routinely speaking Greek! We should now consider anew what structures would best serve so widespread and mature a Republic.

“The first step in this reform has to be the consolidation of all Roman Tribes into a single entity. It is absurd that one city has as many representatives as Egypt, Mesopotamia, Asia, Germania and Further India combined! That cannot be justified! The half-hearted reform more than a hundred years ago, that which created Rustica out of the old Rural Tribes, should have been carried through to its logical conclusion long ago. So we should do it now. Almost as obvious is the consolidation of the seventeen Italian Tribes to form ‘Italia’.

“Therefore I propose the Baturan Law Concerning Recognition of Tribes, in the form circulated to all members. Since this proposed Law involves a change to the Basic Law of the Republic and therefore requires at least three months’ notice, I advise that I will be bringing it forward for consideration in the May session of this house.”

Baturix slowly ran his gaze around the chamber as he strolled back to his seat. It was obvious that the Roman and Italian senators would not allow these measures to pass. It was also obvious that they were not in the least bit perturbed by the proposal. To consolidate these Tribes would require an alteration to the Republic’s Basic Law, and that could only be achieved if more than two-thirds of all eligible Senators actively supported it. Ever since the consolidation of the Roman Rural tribes under the Sopatan Law more than a hundred years ago the Italian Tribes in particular had been careful to accumulate as many three-time Praetors as possible, who would thus be granted life membership. Although very few ex-Praetors exercised this right, it remained latent. The Italians now had sufficient numbers technically eligible to vote in the Senate that any proposal to change the Basic Law to limit their power could be defeated simply by these Life Members staying at home.

Three months later Baturix finished his very brief address proposing his new law and resumed his seat. He knew that there was no point wasting any more time than required by the formal processes of Standing Orders. Herius Asinius, the Marrucini consular and current Censor, stood to speak against and received the call.

“Thank you, Lucius,” he acknowledged the Consul before addressing the chamber. “Conscript Fathers, allow me to refer you to the paper circulated in my name. I listed there the names of one hundred and forty three Life Senators who are not present in the Chamber today. By law they are assumed to be voting against any amendment to the Basic Law. Therefore for this proposal to succeed requires at least two hundred and eighty seven votes in support. I am advised by my assistant that we have only one hundred and two members present.” He ran his gaze around the chamber, his hands held slightly out from his sides. “Therefore it is mathematically impossible for this proposal to succeed. Let us not waste time debating and voting on this proposal. Let us put the question

immediately on voices, and then accept a Ruling from the chair that the Question has been lost.” He sat.

Marius looked to Baturix. “What do you say, Baturix? It's your Proposal.”

Baturix stood. “I accept that the Question be put immediately.”

“Then those in favour?” Marius asked. Most of the Senate called their support.

“Those against?” a much lighter scattering of voices rose. Most of those against did not even bother to open their mouths.

“The Proposal is lost,” Marius reported, following the script.

“I call for a division,” Baturix stood.

“But Baturix,” Marius replied in his confusion, “Did you not agree to the process outlined by Herius?”

“I agreed to putting the Question immediately, Lucius; nothing more.”

Marius shrugged. “Then let the Senate divide. Those in favour of the Question to my right, those against to my left.”

This forced the Italian and Roman Senators to rise from their seats, all of them present walking to the Consul's left. They were joined by the Praetors from Italian Gaul, Sicily and Sardinia-Corsica. Everyone else stood to the Consul's right.

“I will count those in favour first,” Marius announced, and the Senators in that group started to walk in single file to the end of the chamber. Marius counted forty two Senators. The process was repeated for those against, and the count was fifty eight against.

“I declare the Question lost,” Marius declared.

Baturix was neither surprised nor disappointed. The point had been made and now he could step aside to let the real prime movers take the running. He glanced across to Silon Kalothos, who smiled and nodded back to him.

The Senate customarily sat every second morning. Standing Orders for the Senate provided for the Chamber to rise at noon and the Daily Papers for the next sitting day to be handed to Senators as they left. This allowed time for them to be read during the afternoon and evening, and for meetings and discussion on the notionally free day between sitting days. As Senators left through the lobby after voting down the Baturan Law their Daily Papers included an unexpected document.

The next sitting day started with Marius making a statement from the curule chair.

“Conscript Fathers,” he started sombrely. “I am sure you all know about the proposed 'Kalothan Law' included in the Daily Papers. Personally, I am appalled that such a Law could be entertained by a Praetor of this Republic, much less be proposed! I have discussed it with my colleagues on the Consular Council, and we are all appalled.” Marius fixed Kalothos with a stare. “I demand that the man who proposed this abomination apologise unreservedly and withdraw it immediately. Otherwise I will charge him with sedition.”

Kalothos stood, and walked to the focus of the chamber. He looked around all the terraces before speaking. "The proposal I have put forward is titled "The Kalothan Law Concerning the Reformation of the Republic". It has been drafted by some of the finest legal minds in the Republic. I can assure everyone that neither proposing this Law nor supporting it is seditious. It is no more and no less than a proposal to amend the Basic Law by the usual entirely legal process. It can be considered 'seditious' only by those who believe it is sedition to work within the law to improve our current broken political structures." He turned to face Marius directly. "Would you try to tell me that the twenty-two tribes of Rome and Italy, supported by their satellite tribes of Italian Gaul, Sicily and Sardinia, do not use their position of dominance to direct Republic funds preferentially to their own benefit? Look at our income and expenditure statements over the last ten years and you will find that less than two percent of Republic income comes from those twenty-five tribes, but more than a quarter of Republic subsidies are directed towards them! Meanwhile the other eighteen tribes are powerless to prevent your rapacity! How does this little 'Latin League' get away with what can be best described as legalised corruption? I will say how; I will tell you what everyone knows but no-body dares to mention. You manage this routine theft because four percent of the Republic's citizens return almost sixty percent of the Senators and Comitia Representatives! You Italians are now treating the rest of the Republic with the same arrogant cupidity that the Romans once adopted when dealing with you!" Kalothos finally took his stare off the Consul and addressed the chamber as a whole.

"Yet there is one difference between the circumstances of more than two hundred years ago and those that apply now. In Drusus' time there were just a handful of honourable Romans, enough to achieve peaceful change. Men like Drusus the Great, Sulla the Great, Gaius Marius and Marcus Aemilius Scaurus managed to bring Rome to its senses. Had it not been for their efforts the Republic probably would have dissolved into civil war.

"Yes, Conscript Fathers, it took only a handful of honourable men to save the Republic at that time. Only a handful! But today we have so few honourable Italians! Not even a handful! I see no Italian now taking the role of Drusus, standing courageously for Justice towards the oppressed! I see no Italian playing the part of Scaurus, urging that corruption must be ripped out, root and branch! I see no Italian emulating Sulla by honouring the spirit of the *Mos Majorum* over and above the stale, out-dated and counter-productive customs that have encrusted and obscured it! And most worryingly, I see no Italian with the wisdom of Gaius Marius, warning that if the Senate will not choose peaceful change it might yet be forced to accept violent change."

Marius leapt to his feet. "Sedition!" he shouted, pointing at Kalothos. "You all heard it, conscript Fathers! That man threatened to raise a revolt!"

"I did nothing of the sort, Lucius Marius! You are at risk of provoking a revolt and I am doing all within my power to pull you back from that brink! You are playing the part of Caesar the Shameful!"

“Lictors! Seize that man! He is charged with sedition!” The lictors moved towards Kalothos who simply held out his hands, wrists crossed, as if expecting to be bound. Artaxes, his colleague from Mesopotamia Tribe, sprang from his seat to stand beside him, wrists also crossed. Senkhmet, one of the Egyptian Praetors, also jumped out of his chair. Within a moment almost half of the Senate was on the floor, wrists crossed.

Marius realised he had lost control. “This meeting is now adjourned,” he called and rose from his curule chair. One of the lictors ran over to him.

“Which of these should we arrest?” he asked.

“Just Kalothos for the moment; the others can wait until I’ve spoken to the Consular Council.”

The lictor trotted back to the crowd in the middle of the Senate floor. “Please, my lords; the Senate meeting is now ended. Please leave peacefully,” he urged the protesters.

“I will not leave unless Praetor Kalothos leaves with me,” Artaxes insisted. “I am a Senator of the Republic; I have a right to remain in this chamber so long as I want to. And if you take my colleague away, I have a right to accompany him.”

Marius noticed Herius Asinius approaching him. “I suggest you leave immediately, Lucius,” Asinius urged in a tense whisper. “Say nothing, do nothing, except walk out of here and go home. I will call the Consular Council together to your house.”

Marius simply nodded and turned for the door.

Twenty seven men arrived at Marius’ house just before sunset that evening. Almost all of them were Italians with a couple of Romans. All were grim-faced. Asinius was the man who had called this meeting so from long custom he acted as chairman and leader.

“When we met two days ago we all agreed that the proposed Kalothan Law would undermine the Republic and must not be accepted.” He turned to face Marius directly. “However, we did *not* agree that it was illegal. *Nor* did we agree to demand an apology from Kalothos, and that he retract the proposal! What came over you, Lucius, to do anything that stupid? All we had to do was handle it in exactly the same way as the proposal from Baturix; let it simply die from lack of support!

“But you had to make it the centrepiece of attention throughout the whole world! Because that is what you did today, Lucius! You have ordered the arrest of a Republican Praetor and have charged him with Sedition! And why? Because he proposed an amendment to the Basic Law, using absolutely correct procedures to do so! And not just any Praetor; you had to pick one from Mesopotamia, the richest Tribe in the whole world!”

Asinius shook his head in exasperation as he paced. “Don’t you have any intelligence at all?” Asinius paced for another moment. “Did you notice how Kalothos responded? Did you notice that Artaxes was at his side doing exactly the same thing before you could draw another breath? It’s bleeding obvious that

they anticipated you might do something this stupid and had planned their response. And from the way that Egyptian joined them so quickly, I wouldn't be surprised if this planning involved Praetors from a dozen Tribes!

“Make no mistake. They didn't want this Kalothan Law to die quietly! They wanted to make sure that everyone in the world was made aware that the Italian Tribes were holding onto control of the Republic and were prepared to commit atrocities in the process if they had to! You played right into their hands!” Asinius looked around the room. It was obvious that most of the men there agreed with him.

“So what are we going to do, my lords?” Asinius asked the assembly, totally ignoring Marius.

Eight of them stood at the invitation. Quintus Varro, a Censor, was most senior and was given the call.

“I agree with you entirely, Herius. What could have been left alone to die of neglect has now been turned into a beast that could devour the Republic. We must find a way of pulling the teeth from this catastrophe as soon as possible, before it spreads. Personally, I think the best way of doing this is for Lucius to release Kalothan and resign his Consulship immediately. In fact, he shouldn't even attend Senate meetings until the whole question is resolved. Let him claim illness or something, because his absence is as good as a vote against anyway. I don't care. But only the most radical surgery will save the situation. Then we can do what we intended all along; just let the proposal die from lack of support.”

As Varro sat five other men rose. “Yes, Marcus?” Asinius indicated the most senior.

“I think that requiring Lucius to resign is rather harsh, but I agree that so long as he is visible he will focus a great deal of unrest. On balance I think that his humiliation is necessary, at least in the short term. And it's not entirely unjust; it was his own over-reaction to the proposal that has caused this problem so it's fitting that he should make good the damage.”

Four men rose as Marcus Valerius sat. “Gaius Aurelius?” Asinius made the call.

“I think we are being much too timid here,” he commenced. “I see a pattern arising lately. Some of these new Tribes have too exalted an opinion of themselves. They seem to think that we are under obligation to grant whatever they ask. Well might you ask, ‘How did they manage to place notice of this proposed Kalothan Law into the next Daily Papers during the very session in which the Baturan proposal was defeated?’ It seems to me that they expected Baturix to fail, but he was only a Gaul. So perhaps an even more radical proposal from Mighty Mesopotamia was needed to remind us of our place! Babylon is altogether too presumptuous and Egypt has always been a Tribe apart, embracing the form of the Republic but still effectively a Kingdom under Pharaoh and administered by his appointees.

“So my answer to Mesopotamia would be this; ‘Stop making demands of your betters! You owe everything to us Italians and Romans, particularly Silo the Great and Sertorius. So show some gratitude! You made one attempt through

Baturix and your proposal simply didn't measure up. So don't ask for even more through Kalothos! You're acting like spoilt children!' They should recognise that all they have is a gift from us. They need to be reminded of their proper place."

There was scattered applause as Aurelius sat but the overwhelming response was frowning. A dozen men stood. "Quintus, you have already spoken; I should pass over you. Titus, you are next."

"Actually, I yield to Quintus," Titus Lafrenius said, and sat.

"Thank you, Titus. You do me an honour," Varro acknowledged. Then he addressed the gathering as a whole. "There is a very famous episode in our history that closely parallels what we are seeing here today. An episode in which a Governor recklessly provoked a war, mostly out of hubris but partly just to 'put these people in their place'. I refer to Caesar the Shameful. And as I heard Gaius speak, I was reminded that Caesar was half-Aurelian through his mother's side. Not that I impugn Gaius; his noble ancestor and uncle to Caesar had the dignitas and the intelligence to completely shun his disgraceful nephew. I would urge him to follow that example today. We must not provoke a war that would be not only unwarranted, but completely disastrous. Give Babylon no pretext to stoke discontent. Let us deal with this proposal in the usual way; moderately, respectfully, and completely legally. Let it die, and if they try to revive it again every month, then so what? So long as we continue to operate on Due Process, we can't lose and they will eventually tire of this little bit of irrelevant theatre. Either that, or become a laughing-stock through repeated failure."

Pontius Pellius was first to his feet as Varro sat and two others cut short their own rise from their chairs. Pellius looked around, saw he was alone and started speaking without the formal call.

"These repeated calls to castrate the Italian Tribes, and Rome as well, are a running sore. Certainly we can continue to ignore them and let them fail, but every time we do that we are sending a message to these malcontents. That message is that they may continue to create dissatisfaction with impunity. They stand to lose nothing as a result of continually stirring up unrest. That's a most unhelpful message to send. I think it should be discouraged. How should we discourage it? Perhaps some-one will come up with a better answer, but for the moment I support charging Kalothos with Sedition. This Question has already been addressed and resolved this year in the rejection of the Baturan Proposal; to keep it alive is nothing less than contempt of the Senate."

Asinius took the initiative as two more men stood. "Colleagues, are we of the opinion that the main points of this question have been covered adequately?"

"If I may, Herius," Valerius called out, "This is a question that can't be answered by a simple 'yes or no' process. I suggest that we list alternatives, and then choose from them." There seemed to be support for this suggestion so Asinius nodded.

"Very well," Asinius replied. "So far I see the following distinct alternatives. The first is to stand by the actions of Lucius today. The second is to invite Lucius to resign and apologise. The third is to drop the charge against Kalothos, and revert to stonewalling. Is there a fourth?"

Marcus Porcius Cato stood. "I suggest that we drop the charge against Kalothos, but introduce a Standing Order that prevents essentially the same Question to be put twice in the same year; the Consul with the fasces to make that judgement." There were murmurs of approval.

"Good idea, Marcus," Asinius agreed. "Any others?" There was silence. Very well; I propose to move the following way. I will put each alternative in turn as a for-or-against vote. All of you may vote for or against each possible response. If you would accept two or three of them, vote 'yes' for those two or three, to keep them alive while you vote 'no' to eliminate your least preferred option. Having done that, the least acceptable choice will be struck out and then another series of votes taken for the remaining options. This way we should reach the best consensus. Are we all happy with that?" There was a general murmur of agreement.

"Right. I will put them in order of what I see to be least assertive to most assertive. First, who would demand Lucius apologise and resign?" Five hands went up. Asinius then raised his own. "That is six votes in favour. Those against?" Fifteen hands were raised. "It seems we have six who are abstaining. Should I call that six in favour, or fifteen against, or perhaps a net nine against? Or should I put the question again?"

"I would call it fifteen against," Varro offered.

"Then fifteen against it is," Asinius decided smoothly. No objections were raised. Now those who would drop the charge against Kalothos, and stonewall. In favour?" Fifteen hands were raised. "Now against?" Ten hands went up. "Ten against," Asinius summarised.

"Now those in favour of dropping the charges, but introducing a new Standing Order?" Twelve declared in favour, twelve against.

"And finally, those in favour of prosecuting Kalothos for Sedition." Only five were in favour, with twenty against.

"That means that Kalothos should not be prosecuted. So does Lucius resign, or do we simply stonewall, or do we bring in the new Standing Order to gag any more attempts to revive this issue?"

"First, in favour of Lucius' resignation?" Still only five in favour, and fifteen against.

"Next, in favour of stonewalling and nothing else?" Eighteen hands in favour, nine against.

"Finally, in favour of the new Standing Order?" Twenty in favour, seven against.

"So we do not require Lucius to resign. We are now down to the final decision, colleagues," Asinius moved into the final round. "Do we introduce the new Standing Order, or do we not. Only one question now, and it comes down to for or against. Now that we have a precise Question, does anyone feel we need to debate it further?" There was no movement; everyone knew that minds were already made up. "First, those in favour of the Standing Order?" Fifteen voted in favour. "Those against?" Twelve hands rose.

“This Council recommends a new Standing Order to prevent a Question already resolved from being raised a second time during the same term of the Senate,” Asinius declared. “Marcus Porcius, this was your idea so you have carriage of it. Let it be done at our next sitting day so we can rule this Kalothan Proposal out of order as soon as it's presented in the chamber.”

Kalothos made a point of being magnanimous the next morning when word came to release him. He gave a gold mina to each of the guards for their respectful attitude and farewelled them cheerfully. As they thanked him he replied with a smile “I would be a fool to not befriend you. I have no doubt I'll be back soon enough!”

He was more businesslike back in the Senate the following morning. General Business was called as usual, during which items on the Daily Papers were mentioned to put them on the Agenda for future debate. Kalothos stood to mention his Proposal only to have Cato stand on a procedural point. Procedural points had priority so he sat to permit Cato to speak.

“Thank you Lucius,” Cato acknowledged the Consul. “Conscript Fathers, I propose a new Standing Order. The purpose of this Standing Order is to prevent time being wasted by repeatedly debating substantially the same Question after it has already been dealt with. The Standing Order I propose is as follows:-

No Question shall be considered by the Senate if, in the judgement of the Consul holding the fasces, it is substantially the same as a Question already resolved in that term of the Senate; except that the Consul may, on his own initiative, permit such consideration if he considers it warranted.

“I advise that this new Standing Order is commended to the Senate by the Consular Council as a necessary measure to improve the working of this Chamber.” That last sentence was well-known code for ‘Do not oppose this measure unless you want a very short career in politics’.”

Kalothos stood with a wry smile on his face. “I would have expected such a move from a descendant of Cato the Great, the man who opposed Italian Citizenship and thereby brought the Republic to the brink of self-destruction. But I'm very surprised that the Italians don't see the parallel themselves! Surely you must realise that you have only two choices open to you by now; you can treat the nations of the rest of the world outside Italy as your partners, or you can treat them as your enemies. I pray to all the gods, and I beg of you Italians, that you will find it in yourselves to avoid a catastrophic civil war; one which you will lose no less surely than Rome would have lost a war against Italy in the days of Silo the Great.”

“That is the second time you have threatened a revolt against the Republic, Kalothos!” Marius bellowed from the curule chair.

“I am not threatening a revolt, any more than Caius Marius did in his time. I am warning that the veniality, the corruption, the hubris of the Latin Tribes will provoke a revolt unless they grant justice to the other Tribes. Do you wish to

demonstrate this hubris by having me arrested again?” Marius fumed as Kalothos sat. But he knew that he dare not go over the top again.

“Are there any other speakers?” Marius looked around, but no-one stirred.

“Then I put the question, all those...”

Kalothos stood and interjected “I call for a division!”

“I have not yet put the Question, Kalothos!”

“The whole purpose of this new Standing Order is to prevent time-wasting; so let’s not waste time.” Kalothos and Artaxes rose and walked to stand to the left of the Consul, the traditional place to be counted as a ‘no’ vote. The Egyptian Praetors joined them as soon as they realised what was happening, and soon all of the non-Latin Praetors were on the floor.

Marius once again realised that he had lost control. But this time he was not going to shut up the shop until this new Standing Order was on the books. “Those in favour to my right, those against to my left.” The remaining Praetors rose from their seats to stand to the right.

“Praetors will now pair off.” The traditional pairing started, and spent votes walked to the end of the chamber. At length there was a surplus on the right-hand side. “I declare the new Standing Order carried. Senators will now resume their seats.”

Those on the right walked back to their places. Those on the left, following the example of Kalothos, walked through the entry doors into the Senators’ Lobby. The Latin Senators merely looked to each other and shrugged. There were enough of them for a quorum so they had no concerns. Let the others sulk all they wanted to!

Once in the Senators’ Lobby Kalothos turned to face those who had followed him. “Gentlemen!” he bellowed. “I am asking you to take me on trust on this one. I recommend that you start packing up your records and clearing your offices. And when you get back to your offices, you will find a message that my staff have delivered to your staff while we were in the Chamber. For the sake of the Republic, I beg you to heed it!”

Only the Praetors from Mesopotamia, Gallia and Egypt were central to this plan and only they knew what was intended to happen past this point. But resentment against the Latin Tribes was so widespread and deep that the other Tribal Representatives in both Senate and Comitia were prepared to support them on trust.

So now they were playing along with the last step; they were going home, with an invitation for two delegates to meet together in Syrian Antioch on the first day of May. These delegates were to have plenary power and should be supported by expert legal advisors; these negotiations would be serious! But the six ringleaders had all given their assurances that nothing illegal would be proposed.

“Thank you for both your trust and your attendance here today,” Kalothos addressed the gathered delegates on the first day of May. “Let me assure you yet

again that our plans are well-developed and involve nothing illegal. It might demand a bit of personal courage from time to time, but if everyone keeps his nerve and stays on script it's most unlikely that any harm will arise. I offer the example of my treatment in Rome; the Latins might try to intimidate but they will not dare to follow through so long as we act within the law." He paced the floor for a moment to break the tension.

"Our full plans are not public knowledge at this time. At this point Artaxes and I, with our Tribal Consul Silon Pericles, are acting under delegated authority. Not even our own Tribal Comitia knows the full details but they have given us plenary authority on trust. Similarly only the Praetors within the Egyptian Comitia are fully involved officially, but those of you who understand the Egyptian way of doing things will realise that they will have informed Pharaoh and are acting under his authority. Baturix and Vergetes have delegated authority subject only to the veto of Parometix, the Gallic Tribal Chief Magistrate. So you will understand that if not even the whole of our own Comitiae are privy to the details but are taking us on trust, we must also expect and require of you a similar degree of confidentiality." Kalothos looked around the assembly. "Of course you are free to dissent or even to withdraw entirely from any partnership in our actions; but we would be most disappointed if word got back to the Latins. If anyone is not willing to pledge secrecy provided that we stay within the law, then I must ask him to leave now." There was a pause but no one in the room made a move to stand.

"Thank you for the trust you are placing in us," Kalothos said after a pause. "By now you must be growing weary of my voice so I will ask Senkhmet to outline our proposed next steps."

The Egyptian Senior Praetor took his place smoothly.

"My lords, our proposal is to press ahead with urging the acceptance of the aborted Kalothan Law, or something very much like it. Step one is to debate an entirely new Republic Basic Law that embodies the principles so much feared by the Latins as a threat to their stranglehold on the Republic. During this complete re-write of the Basic Law, there will be opportunity to suggest, debate and include any other points which are supported by a majority of delegates. Our slaves will now distribute the text that we suggest as a starting position. Please read it through, discuss it informally, and then come back to a more formal meeting to work through it in detail." A handful of slaves started passing packets of pages along the rows of seats. Senkhmet paused until this distribution was complete.

The Basic Law of the Federation

- 1. This Basic Law shall come into effect on the day of the Proclamation of the Federation. Such Proclamation may be made by a resolution to that effect endorsed by the Comitiae of not less than fifteen subscribing Tribes.*
- 2. The Founding Tribes of the Federation shall consist of so many of the following Tribes of the Republic as subscribe to it within one calendar year of its Proclamation and endorse the Proclamation of the Federation:-*

*Achaia
Africa
Armenia
Asia Major
Bantuland
Danubia
Egypt
Further India
Gallia
Germania
Hispania
India
Mesopotamia
Pannonia
Persia
Samartia
Sardinia and Corsica
Sicilia
Tamilia
Thracia*

A single Tribe consisting of so many of the pre-existing Tribes of Italia, Italian Gaul and Rome as come together for this purpose shall also be entitled to be admitted upon subscription within one year of Proclamation.

- 3. Additional Tribes may be admitted if supported by a vote of not less than two-thirds of all Senators entitled to vote, and also a majority of the Comitia of the Federation present and voting.*
- 4. A Tribe may be expelled from the Federation by a vote of not less than two-thirds of all Senators entitled to vote, and also a majority of the Comitia of the Federation present and voting, provided that Expulsion shall not take effect unless and until a second Expulsion vote is carried not less than one year and not more than two years after the original resolution supporting that Expulsion.*
- 5. The Senate of the Federation shall consist of equal numbers of Senators from each constituent Tribe, with the total number of Senators as great as possible without exceeding two hundred. At the first sitting day after the first day of January each year each Tribe shall nominate its Senators for the year.*
- 6. The Comitia of the Federation shall consist of members nominated by the constituent Tribes on the first sitting day after the first of January each year. The number of Comitia Representatives from each tribe for the following year*

shall set by the Censors no later than the last day of Sextilis, and the number of Comitia Representatives shall be distributed to be as near as possible in proportion to the number of electors in each Tribe at the most recent Federal Census. For the purposes determining this number the same criteria for eligibility shall be applied throughout all Tribes of the Federation but the method of selection of Comitia Representatives shall be determined by each Tribe.

- 7. The Federation is authorised to administer and govern lands outside of the territories of its constituent Tribes in its own right. The Federation may levy taxes, fees or charges of any kind within territories under its administration, and may expend moneys in those territories, all charges or expenditures to be subject to the consent of the Senate.*
- 8. The Federation may levy taxes or charges on the constituent Tribes, but only as explicitly authorised by a resolution supported in both the Senate and the Comitia under identical terms. No tax or charge may be imposed except upon all Tribes in proportion to the number of eligible electors in each Tribe as recorded in the most recent Federal Census. The Federation may not levy taxes or any other charges within the territory of a constituent Tribe, except as permitted by a specific law supported by two-thirds of all Senators entitled to vote and also a majority of the Comitia of the Federation present and voting.*
- 9. No Tribe may levy import or export duties or charges other than to recover costs in providing facilities for handling those imports or exports. The Federation alone shall be authorised to impose import or export duties or charges, and only in trade involving trade with a party outside the Federation.*
- 10. Property rights recognised by the Senate and Comitia of the Federation shall be recognised by all constituent Tribes.*
- 11. A citizen of any Tribe of the Federation may not be prevented from moving to the territory of any other Tribe of the Federation, nor may any Tribal Law discriminate between citizens of the Federation on the basis of Tribal registration. Any citizen who has been resident in the territory of any one Tribe other than his registered Tribe for ten years or more shall have the right to transfer his registration to the Tribe of his residency.*
- 12. This Basic Law may be amended only by a resolution supported by not less than two-thirds of all Senators entitled to vote, and also a majority of the Comitia of the Federation present and voting.*

“In summary, our proposed structure is to continue the current overall arrangement but to import some details of the old Gallic Confederation to better

reflect the demographics of the Republic. Overall these changes will also provide each Tribe with slightly more autonomy. Please, my lords; feel free to read through these few pages and discuss them with whomever you will, subject to your confidentiality pledge. There will be light refreshments in the adjacent large hall and lunch will be served at noon. Then I will invite you back into this room to share preliminary comments. Tomorrow we will be open for formal amendments unless more time is required for informal discussions. Thank you again for your participation.”

The thirty-four delegates from the seventeen guest tribes rose from their seats as slaves opened the doors onto the Banqueting Hall of what had once been the Seleucid Palace. There were perhaps a dozen clusters of a dozen chairs each to facilitate informal talks, with eight small rooms for private discussions off the sides of the main hall. The centre of the hall was occupied by a line of tables with an assortment of fruits, pastries and bowls of various sauces, with jugs of water, fruit juice, watered wine and small loaves beside each. The guest delegates straggled out and the six prime movers followed.

The delegates returned to the meeting room an hour after noon. Kalothos waited until it was clear that most were ready and called for comments. More than a dozen men stood.

“Aristenes, I think you were first,” Kalothos smiled. The Armenian looked worried.

“We were assured that you would propose nothing illegal,” he blurted out. “But this proposal amounts to a rebellion against the Republic!” There were a few murmurs of agreement from the other delegates.

“Not at all, Aristenes,” Kalothos replied. “This has been very carefully drafted to avoid that charge. For example, where does it suggest that a subscribing Tribe is withdrawing from the Republic? Where does it suggest that Republic Law should not be obeyed, or Republic sovereignty is in the least bit impugned? There is no hint of anything here except a voluntary association of Tribes within the on-going Republic! It is identical in structure to the old Gallic Confederation, which was accepted by all as a completely legitimate association of the Gallic Tribes. It was even commended to the Senate by Silo the Great, Cato the Great, and Gaius Aurelius Cotta, as solidly Republican as any three men in history!”

“But it is the framework for a new Republic,” Aristenes persisted. “It would be so easy for it to be the first step towards a renunciation of the existing Republic by the subscribing Tribes, and the remaining Republic Tribes would be powerless to do anything about it, short of war.”

“Yes, it would be easy, wouldn’t it?” Kalothos agreed. “But no one is suggesting that. We are just inviting the Latin Tribes to join it as three Tribes, not as the twenty five Tribes they are in the Republic as a whole.”

“It is clearly a threat, Kalothos!”

Kalothos shrugged. “I see it as an offer, nothing more. But if the Latin Tribes *mistakenly* see it as a threat, then how do you think they might respond?”

As you say yourself, there is nothing they could do short of war. And since all the legions and the Navy are manned overwhelmingly by the non-Latin Tribes, officered by non-Latins, and stationed in the lands of non-Latin Tribes, I can't see any scope for such a war being successful. So there will be no war started by the Latins, and I certainly have no intention of raising a revolt against the Republic. So what do *you* expect to happen next?"

Aristenes groped for words. "Why, nothing, I suppose. But what would be the point of this Federation, in that case? We would end up with no change, just another association of Tribes within the Republic, as you said. Nothing would be gained."

Kalothos smiled. "So you agree with me, Aristenes; what I am proposing is indeed 'Just another association of Tribes within the Republic'. No hint of rebellion! Are there any other comments?" He looked around the room.

Statheos Polites from Thracia stood. "As you say, Kalothos, it is just a voluntary association of Tribes. But as Aristenes says, it is the framework for a sovereign State, just waiting for the flag to go down. I have no doubt at all that this was specifically designed to make the Latins see it as a threat, without actually crossing that line. Very cleverly crafted indeed! You are clearly aiming to intimidate the Latins into accepting it rather than risking war, and it becoming the new Basic Law with their consent.

"But what if they don't bite? What if they set their jaws and decide to fight it out? Will you drop the flag then? Because that would certainly be rebellion."

"Be assured that we have no intention at all of rebelling against the Republic, Statheos," Kalothos assured the Thracian. "But there are many ways of applying pressure without it being military or illegal in any other way. Let me give you an example; where do the Italians and Rome get their wheat? And what if Africa and Egypt simply refuse to allow wheat to be exported?"

The room was hushed. Eventually someone strangled out "You would starve Rome?"

Kalothos shrugged again. "That would be Rome's decision to make. I just want to negotiate a couple of long-overdue adjustments to the Basic Law, to take away the stranglehold that a mere four percent of the Republic's population has over the other ninety-six percent. Rome can have all the wheat it wants if it's prepared to recognise the justice of that proposal. Or Rome can continue to be part of this current tyranny and find food for itself."

Suddenly everyone in the room realised that this was indeed serious. If push came to shove, Rome and the Italians were very weak and vulnerable. Their only strength was their ruthless use of legal technicalities. But if legal technicalities couldn't save them, would they cave in or would they go down fighting?

"If you try to starve Rome and the Italians, they are arrogant enough to respond ruthlessly."

"By doing what, Roland?" he asked the German who had spoken.

"Perhaps even by invading Utica and seizing their wheat."

“In which case, they will be raising weapons against an autonomous Tribe of the Republic, and *they* will therefore be the rebels,” Kalothos answered. “But don’t get too worried! That won’t happen. Before we get to that point we will have already deprived them of shipping, so they won’t be able to invade even if they want to,” Kalothos assured them. “We Leading Six, if I may assume that title, have all the plans worked through and all the options in place. But we would rather not list them now in case someone passes on the information. Just be assured that we will be acting legally at all times, and we ask you to have enough faith in us to comply with our requests. We are still hopeful that we can set things up so the Latins will realise they have no choice, but whatever they do we have them covered. Trust us!” He smiled re-assuringly as he looked around. “Now, are there any more comments on the proposed Draft Law?”

Marcos Ballites from Africa stood, and received a nod.

“Two points; first, I notice that your version of the Senate implicitly abolishes the concept of Life Membership; I agree with that. Second, your proposed Comitia will give more Representatives to the larger Tribes; I’m not so sure about that.”

“Quite right, Marcos,” Kalothos agreed. “The proposal allows larger Tribes more Comitia Representatives to protect them against precisely the same sort of ‘Little Tribe Alliance’ abuse that the Latin Tribes are engaged in right now. But on the other hand, the larger Tribes will also be paying more in the way of taxes as well so we will be paying for this protection. But the real decisions will be made in the Senate as they are now and all Tribes are equal there. This will give the smaller Tribes adequate protection against any abuse by the larger Tribes. And when you consider that any major decisions will require the usual two-to-one majority, the smaller Tribes can be doubly-sure of their rights.”

Aristenes rose again. “There is nothing here about foreign policy. Will that be a Federation monopoly or will it be left to the individual tribes?”

Kalothos grinned. “Why, Aristenes! Everyone knows that the Republic is sovereign! Such matters should not be the concern of any association within the Republic, or it could be construed as a declaration of sovereignty!” But having made that point and drawn an ironic chuckle from a few delegates, Kalothos became more businesslike. “There are many considerations not included in this Proposal for precisely that reason. However, should the Republic itself adopt this as its new Basic Law then such additional issues can be addressed in good time.”

The delegates from Pannonia, a Tribe that directly adjoined Italian Gaul by virtue of its administration of Dalmatia, were worried about the possibility of a land invasion. Persia gave undertakings that three of the veteran legions allocated to it to defend the barbarian frontier along the Silk Road would be transferred to Dalmatia to ensure that there would not be a threat. Gallia, equally exposed, was also promised a few legions by Africa as well a division of the naval forces currently on pirate-suppression duties. Italy and Rome could be not only starved but also blockaded and raided if they wanted to take the military route.

By the end of that first day there was no doubt that the Federation would be formed. The key to it happening peacefully depended upon absolute unity and

unshakeable resolution. If the Latins picked up any hint at all that there were waverers then they just might chance their arm.

There was no doubting the personal courage of Kalothos and Senkhmet. They were the only two Praetors from the non-Latin Tribes to attend the last sitting day in Quinctilis. They had included in the Daily Papers a notice that all of the non-Latin Comitiae had subscribed to the Federation and a proposal that the Republic should adopt the Federation Basic Law in toto as the Republic Basic Law. Once again Marius had the fasces. He was totally out of his depth in this crisis. But after a brief chat with Varro he decided that the best approach would be to tempt these snakes to come out into the open so they could be cut down.

“Conscript Fathers, allow me to make an opening statement from the Chair.” He pivoted to take in a depleted Senate. “I propose that Praetor Kalothos be invited to explain to the Senate the import of this ‘Federation’ that has been formed by a number of our constituent Tribes. Many of which seem to be absent today,” he added.

Kalothos rose from his seat. “I thank the Consul for his invitation. I announce to the Senate of the Republic this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Here is an initiative that could renew the Republic just as the Catonian Reforms renewed the Republic in their own times.” He strode the floor to add anticipation. “The subscribing Tribes have opened the door to a new age in the maturation of our Republic. They have offered a new paradigm for the good governance of the entire world! The subscribing Tribes now invite the Latin Tribes to join them by subscribing to this new concept of a Basic Law! Renew the Republic and reshape it so it can continue its mission ordained by all the gods; to fulfil the vision of Sulla the Great, to become the centre of loyalty for the whole world!” He paused and took a few steps.

“My brothers in this place, do not hesitate in fulfilling all that the gods have demanded! Do not commit the Great Impiety, to reject their manifest will! I urge all Senators to take back to their own Comitiae this one message; to subscribe to the Federation!” Kalothos turned towards his seat only to be interrupted by Marius.

“If I may interject, Kalothos; you have not answered my question. What is the import of this ‘Federation’?”

“With respect, Consul; I believe I have answered your question. To quote a desert prophet from Judaea who lived a hundred years ago, ‘He who has ears to hear, may he hear!’ I am confident that the Conscript Fathers will understand.”

Marius would not let go of this point. “Please, Praetor; what can we expect if other Tribes do not subscribe?”

“Non-subscribing Tribes can expect subscribing Tribes to comply scrupulously with the laws of the Republic as they stood at the date of our last sitting in February. But any Republic laws since that date might require some time before these subscribing Tribes can adjust their own laws and procedures to any more recent changes.” Kalothos smiled. “Indeed, such adjustments might take years.”

“Am I to take that as a refusal to comply with Republic laws?” Marius challenged.

“Not at all, Consul,” Kalothos replied as he sat.

“What do you mean by that?” Marius demanded. Kalothos simply waved the question away.

The first meeting of the Republic Senate in Sextilis started on a bad note. Again, Marius was in the Chair, his colleague being ill.

“Consul, Rome is running short of grain. We request immediate relief.” That was Sextus Quirinius, the Senior Praetor from Subura.

“What relief do you seek?” Marius asked.

“We request that sufficient grain be delivered to feed our people,” Quirinius replied.

“Surely that's a matter for the Roman tribes to organise,” Marius replied. “Why can't you buy grain and have it shipped to Ostia, as usual?”

“Because every shipper we have approached has refused our contract for transport, claiming to be already under hire,” Quirinius answered. “We suspect that there is a conspiracy to deprive Rome of shipping capacity.”

Marius was again caught short. “Then build your own ships!”

“That would take too long,” Quirinius replied.

Kalothos stood.

Marius looked to Quirinius. An interjection like this was most unusual.

“I yield the floor to Praetor Kalothos,” Quirinius said and sat.

“I believe that I might have a solution to the problems facing Subura Tribe,” Kalothos started. “And also the same problem that will be faced shortly by the other four Roman Tribes, and eventually by Italia as a whole. I invite the Praetors of these tribes to meet with me informally this evening to work through these problems.”

The evening started on a rather aggressive note.

“Why are you starving my people?” Quirinius demanded.

“I'm not. Why do you think I am?” Kalothos replied. “And while you're at it, why are you Latins milking Mesopotamia Tribe?”

“We are not milking Mesopotamia,” Quirinius replied heatedly. “We are only administering the Republic for the Common Good.”

“I'm willing to debate your answer to the second question later. Now I would be pleased if you would answer the first question,” Kalothos smiled.

“And what was that?” Quirinius was caught off guard.

“I said to your question, 'Why do you think I'm starving your people?' Can't you remember your own question?”

“Well, it's obvious,” Quirinius replied. “You are trying to overthrow the Republic!”

“I am getting sick of saying this, while everyone ignores me! So for one more time, I am not trying to overthrow the Republic but to save it. Go back more than two hundred years and you will find people who accused Drusus the

Great of exactly that same crime; but because he prospered, you Italians are now full Tribes! So if you will forgive my boasting, think of me as the Drusus for the non-Latin Tribes. We demand that the grip of the Latin Tribes be released, just as he demanded that the grip of the Roman Tribes be released. I'm a son of the Republic no less than Silo the Great! If only you Italians were." Kalothos caught himself. "But that doesn't answer the immediate question. How is Rome to be fed?"

"Yes," agreed Quirinius with a scowl, "How is Rome to be fed?"

"The answer to that is obvious," Kalothos replied. "Rome needs to do no more than organise itself into a single Tribe Roma and subscribe to the Federation. Once that is done I am sure we will be able to find sufficient vessels to supply your needs."

"But the Federation Treaty doesn't allow Rome to be recognised!" Quirinius objected.

"You're mistaken there, my friend," Kalothos replied. "It specifically says '*A single Tribe consisting of so many of the pre-existing Tribes of Italia, Italian Gaul and Rome as come together for this purpose shall also be entitled to be admitted upon subscription*'. If only Subura Tribe subscribes, they will become the core around which all other Roman and Italian Tribes must associate. Those other Tribes will have to do whatever you require, because if Subura is a subscribing Tribe they will need to join with you and on your terms! Think of the power this will give your Tribe!"

The Senior Praetors from the other Urban Tribes interrupted him. "Please, lord Kalothos, that will take time. In the meanwhile what can be done to feed our people? We have only a month of grain in storage."

"It's a simple thing; get the Roman Comitia to subscribe to the Federation, preferably as a combined entity, and I am confident this problem can be averted. Perhaps you should all get your heads together right now. You might even persuade Rustica to join with you."

"Don't you realise what you are doing, Kalothos?" Titus Galba, the other Suburan Praetor, demanded. "In effect, you are blockading Rome. That's an act of war, an act of war against the Republic!"

Kalothos raised an eyebrow. "Calm yourself, Titus. I know of no warships standing off Ostia! This isn't a blockade; it's just an unfortunate freak of commerce that all ships capable of transporting grain just happen to have been chartered by other parties for other purposes at the same time. But I'm sure that at least some of these other parties would be prepared to release their vessels to you for an appropriate price."

"We have already tried that, Kalothos, as you well know!" Galba responded angrily. "And as you also know, these 'other parties' just happen to be Egypt Tribe. Nobody else, just Egypt Tribe, renting every grain ship between Mauritania and Suez all at the same time! And most of them are just sitting in Alexandria harbour doing nothing! But even so, the current hirers still will not release them even at five times the usual rate."

“Yes, not a very profitable exercise for these Egyptians, is it?” Kalothos agreed. “You wonder what they had in mind, don’t you? Perhaps if you subscribed to the Federation they might change their minds.”

Lucius Pellius, a Praetor from Picenum and younger brother of Pontius Pellius the consular, joined the argument at this stage. “You are playing a very dangerous game, Kalothos. Remember that we have the numbers in the Senate to declare any Tribe to be in revolt. What is to stop us from taking that Gordian option? We could declare Africa Tribe in revolt and then send a dozen legions to subdue it!”

“Nothing at all prevents you from declaring Africa in revolt, Lucius,” Kalothos agreed. “After all, you’ve been using your numbers in the Senate to pillage the non-Latin Tribes for most of my lifetime already so what difference would one more abuse of power make?” Kalothos spread his hands as if in submission. “But before you actually do that, perhaps you should ask how you hope to raise these dozen legions. Very few Latins enlist in the Army these days; it’s too easy for them to live off Republic subsidies paid for by us non-Latins. So it would take months to recruit them and to train them. Then you have to find a way of transporting them to Africa. And you would also need to find even more recruits to defend Italy against a possible attack by the veteran legions currently stationed in Dalmatia and southern Gallia. And finally, remember that the grain ships Egypt has under charter are also very serviceable as troop carriers. They could land a few more veteran legions anywhere; you have no ships to intercept them. Even if you did have a flotilla of warships, there’s a large and well-trained fleet currently on anti-pirate duty based in Africa that could be used to escort any non-Latin landing force. So, Lucius; you would be playing a very dangerous game. The danger is that you Latins might prefer to destroy the Republic in your hubris rather than agree to a more just political structure.”

“That does it!” Pellius almost shouted in his anger. “You have just explicitly threatened to send legions into Italy! That is Sedition, pure and simple!”

Clean the shit out of your ears, Pellius, even if it goes all the way through to the opposite side!” Kalothos responded bluntly. “I did NOT threaten to send troops into Italy; only that you would have to find recruits to defend against that possibility if you Latins decide to take the military option and Gallia and Pannonia decided to send them in. I am neither a Gaul nor a Pannonian, so how could I possibly even threaten to order such a thing? I was only alerting you to a possible threat by others, not making one myself.”

“You are very sly with what you say, Kalothos,” Galba said through clenched teeth. “Everyone can read what you mean, even if your exact words stay just the right side of the law.”

Kalothos smiled. “Thank you, Titus. And thank you also for confirming that my exact words are on the right side of the law.”

Marius stood to address the Senate as soon as it was called to order. “Conscript Fathers, the Republic is under attack. The actions of Egypt Tribe,

tacitly supported by other traitors spread across the Roman world, might or might not be barely within the letter of the law. I leave that to the jurists among you. But whether strictly legal or not, these actions are no less an attack than an invasion by a hundred legions.” There was a murmur of approval from the terraces. “There can be only one response to this direct and devastating attack on the Republic. We must demand that Egypt Tribe release the grain ships it has so maliciously taken out of general service and send at least two hundred of these ships to Rome with their holds full of Egyptian wheat. Naturally the Roman Comitia will pay fair market rates for both hire of the ships and their cargoes, but they must be despatched without delay.” He paused for a moment before continuing. “This must be voted and supported as an Emergency Measure if it is to be binding upon Egypt Tribe. I remind Conscript Fathers that an Emergency Measure requires a two-thirds majority of Senators present and voting to have the full force of law.” He glared at Kalothos. “Are there any speakers against?”

Senkhmet stood.

“Yes, Praetor Senkhmet? Would you speak against this proposal?”

“Of course I would, Consul,” Senkhmet replied. “How could anyone who upholds the Rule of Law do anything but speak against it?” Senkhmet strolled to the focus of the chamber. “Please, could someone explain to me why Rome should be pandered to while Egypt is made to suffer? The Roman Comitia has no-one to blame but itself for this sad state of affairs. They could have engaged as many ships as they needed months in advance! They could have already purchased all the grain they needed months in advance! But no! Instead of being prudent they engaged in their usual bullying. They customarily wait until the last minute, playing one shipping contractor against the others, forcing them to cut their fees to the bone or miss out on the contract! Just as they invariably wait for the harvests to come in and use their overwhelming market power to drive prices down on commodities that honest but poor farmers in Egypt and Africa have already paid to sow, tend, harvest and transport to port!

“Rome has always used this overwhelming market power to become a price-setter, leaving their suppliers and contractors to become price-takers or to be left out completely. This Roman arrogance, this hubris, this habitual rapacity, is now receiving its proper reward.

“But has Rome learnt its lesson from this? Not at all! It has done the only thing it knows how to do; it has become even more a bully, it has shown even greater arrogance, it has compounded its hubris! Having failed to establish contracts of its own, it now demands that others break their own legally-binding contracts! Having failed to buy its own wheat prudently ahead of time, it now demands the right to pillage Egypt!

“Oh, I recognise that the Consul said that ‘fair market rates’ will be paid; but who is to determine what these ‘fair market rates’ will be? And on what basis? I have no doubt at all in my own mind how those questions will be answered. ‘Fair market rates’ will be based on the abysmally low rates paid last year under threat from the one player in the market powerful enough to make or break any who oppose her! Once again Rome will set the prices, thank you; but

this time the decreed prices won't be delivered with the ultimatum 'take it or leave it'. This time the ultimatum will be 'take it or else!', under the Emergency Measure legislation now proposed by the Spokesman for All Bullies!" Senkhmet paced the floor for a moment.

"Now, I am a realist," he continued at length. "I know with absolute certainty that this Emergency Measure legislation will be passed. But I invite you all, Conscript Fathers, to be no less realistic than I. I invite you to know with no less certainty that in passing this Emergency Measure you will be doing exactly what is the surest way to destroy this Republic. The great men who established our present Republic, men like Drusus, Sulla and Silo, all of them worthily cognomened 'the Great'; these men would weep in despair at what you are doing with the heritage they bequeathed you!"

Senkhmet shook his head in grief. "Well, if this is what has become of the Republic, then perhaps the gods are indeed just. Rather than destroy our Republic in their wrath, they have appointed you to destroy it by your folly!" Senkhmet then walked across to the Chief Lictor, and held out his arms in front of him, with his wrists crossed. "You may arrest me now, Chief Lictor, for that is the penalty for speaking the truth in this chamber."

Marius was not impressed. "Please address the Senate, Praetor, not the staff. And if you have finished addressing the Senate, then please resume your seat." Senkhmet turned back towards his seat. "Is there a speaker in favour?" Marius asked. No-one moved. All were under instruction; waste no time and give the enemy no basis for an appeal.

"There being no speaker in favour, is there another speaker against?" All eyes were on Kalothos. He rose and was given the call.

"Conscript Fathers; why do you think that only Senkhmet and I, of all the non-Latin Senators, are here today? Why do you think that all others are back in their home Tribes? Why do you think that not even one non-Latin Comitia Representative is in that House, but only Latins?"

"Let me tell you in case you haven't already guessed. It is because we all knew exactly how this Senate would act and how the Comitia would approve your actions." Kalothos smiled as he turned. "Truly, if this Senate were a General in charge of an army, the enemy would be able to predict your tactics with word-perfect accuracy! Because that is what happens to the arrogant; they become lazy!"

"Do you think that this Emergency Measure legislation comes as a surprise to us? Not at all! It has already been entered into the calculations of the non-Latin Tribes and measures have already been put in place. You will take note that I didn't say 'put in place to thwart it', which might be taken to mean that these Tribes are planning to disobey the law! I said no more than 'measures have already been put in place'.

"So there; I have warned you yet again of the foolishness you are about to commit and I urge you now to pull back from it. But like Cassandra, I know that you will not. Your hubris will prevent that!" Kalothos then looked straight at Lucius Marius. "There was another Marius more than two hundred years ago

who was a Consul. A Consul seven times, in fact. He was hailed in his own lifetime as the Third Founder of Rome. Yet many years later, when the memoirs of Silo the Great were published, everyone discovered that he died en route to taking over an army of twelve legions. It was revealed that he intended to march on Rome and slaughter all who opposed him. That would have destroyed the Republic! The only thing that saved the name of Caius Marius from everlasting contempt was a timely death. A timely death which Silo the Great admits to have caused by his own hand, to save both Rome and also the fame of a man whom he loved.” Kalothos measured his words precisely at this point.

“Now we have another Consul Marius, whose actions are also fated to destroy the Republic. Tell me, Consul; do you have any friends who love you as deeply as Silo the Great loved Caius Marius?”

Marius jumped to his feet. “Lictors! Arrest that man! He has urged that I be murdered! That is Treason!”

Kalothos remained standing, crossing his wrists as the lictor approached him. Senkhmet stood and without waiting for recognition shouted, “If you arrest Kalothos, you will absolutely ensure that your last hope for peace will be lost!”

Then Varro stood as well. “Consul; I urge moderation.” Other consulars also stood. Marius took the hint.

“Release him,” he brusquely ordered the lictor. The Senators all resumed their seats. It was obvious that this sitting would be a defining moment in the history of the Republic. Marius was acutely aware of his limitations and looked to Varro, silently pleading for the Censor to guide him. Varro understood what was being asked of him. He stood.

“Yes, Quintus?” Marius asked.

“Consul, I suggest that the Question be put.”

Marius looked around the chamber. “Is there any objection to the Question being put?” There was no response. “Then I put the Question; does this Senate approve of the Emergency Measures? First, those in favour?” There was a call of ‘yes’. “Those against?” Only Senkhmet and Kalothos called ‘no’. “Then I think it is carried. Is there a call for a division?” Neither Senkhmet nor Kalothos bothered to call. “There being no call for a division, I declare the Emergency Measures have been passed.”

Varro stood again. A nod from Marius was sufficient.

“Conscript Fathers, we are now in a state of Emergency. It is conceivable that the Emergency Measures we have just passed might be resisted. In that case it is lawful for them to be enforced by arms. Therefore I propose that we authorise the immediate recruitment of forty legions, the purchase of their equipping, and their training. This is so because I can foresee the possibility – only a possibility, but we must allow for that! – of the need to enforce these Emergency Measures by sending an armed force to Egypt. There is also the possibility of an invasion by substantial hostile forces from the north, and we will also need to build up garrisons around the coast of Italy in case of a seaborne invasion.

“I also propose that this Senate authorise the construction of a thousand triremes to defend our coasts against invasion, and of a thousand transport vessels in case we need to deploy forces overseas and supply them once there. We must make it clear to any who would oppose the Republic that such resistance would not only be futile, but also severely punished.” Varro looked around the terraces. “This will be expensive, I know; but anything less would not show the determination of our Republic to defend itself. I commend these measures to you all. And I also call upon the Consul to permit a full debate on this proposal, so all will know who is for the Republic and who is against it.” That last sentence was all Marius needed to hear.

“Is there a speaker against this proposal?” Marius asked. Senkhmet stood, and a gesture from Marius invited him to speak.

“I can understand the prudence of the Censor in proposing these actions. If the Roman Comitia had shown the same forethought we would not be in this position,” he said with a wry grin. “But I wonder if this is the best way to employ the limited resources available to the Republic. Let me list the difficulties that spring to mind immediately; doubtless there will be more that will become apparent as time rolls on.

“The first difficulty is to find forty legions. That is two hundred thousand men of military age! And given the circumstances, I would expect that few volunteers outside the Latin Tribes might enrol. Do you really expect to attract two hundred thousand young men from the Latin Tribes for a task which is no more glorious than covering Rome’s failure to plan ahead? I also allude to the time taken to train these men. Rome has only a month, perhaps two at the most, to find a source of grain. Can men be trained in this time? Not to mention the time taken to deploy them, complete their missions, and supply the city.”

“Then we have to consider how these men are to be fed while in training. Where will this food come from? Does Rome intend to open its reserves and risk riots as the Head Count find their families are doomed to starvation?

“Then we have to consider the construction of a thousand triremes and a thousand transports. Where will these vessels be built? To the best of my knowledge the critical resource is timber. That is why most vessels these days are built in Germania, with its extensive forests. The alternative of steel-framed vessels as recently developed in Germania is not an answer, because both options are dependent upon co-operation from Germania Tribe. How sad that Germania is one of the Tribes subscribing to the Federation! While I would expect that Germania would indeed comply with any law from this Senate to provide these vessels, it is possible that unforeseen delays might arise.

“Next we have to recruit and train sailors and marines to man these ships. Anyone who is familiar with these matters will realise that training the officers for a flotilla takes years, not days. Quite apart from training the seamen themselves! And not to mention the need to train the marines, as specialised an armed force as any.

“Then there is the question of cost. How much does it cost to train a legionary from raw recruit status to a presentable soldier? Adding in the cost of

his equipment and food while training, I believe it comes out at more than half a sestertium milia per man just to have him stand in the line. That means forty legions will cost us a hundred thousand sestertium milia. Meanwhile, we are also building two thousand ships, either triremes or transports. Typically, each ship will cost in the order of twenty sestertium milia each, so a total cost of forty thousand sestertium milia can be expected. Then we will have to train the crews and the marines; assuming one hundred men per trireme and twenty per transport, that will be another sixty thousand sestertium milia!” Senkhmet paced the floor for a moment. “In total, it requires perhaps three hundred thousand men of military age, just to train them to raw novice standard. This is well short of what is needed to match the veteran legions of this putative enemy, and the provision of more shipping than has been built in Italy in the last hundred years. At a cost of at least two hundred thousand sestertium milia!

“So what Quintus Varro proposes is a brilliant plan! The only problem is that it demands more manpower than the Republic has available, will cost more than the Republic can afford, will be insufficient anyway against the putative enemy’s veteran forces, and will not be available until well after it is too late to be effective anyway. And even then, it will fail because this putative enemy will not be sitting and waiting but will be making its own arrangements in the meantime.” Senkhmet turned to look at Varro. “Good plan, Quintus!” Senkhmet gave the thumbs-up across the chamber, with a broad grin to match. “So let me foreshadow an alternative response. I suggest that the Latin Tribes subscribe to the Federation Charter and adopt it as the new Basic Law for the Republic as a whole.”

There was clearly some discomfort in the Senate as Senkhmet sat. Some Praetors were coming face-to-face with reality.

“Is there a speaker in favour?” Marius asked. Lucius Pellius jumped to his feet. No one senior to him matched his urgency. Marius nodded to him.

“Conscript Fathers; this is nothing new to the Republic. And it is nothing new to Italians. We either fight or we die.” He sat.

“Is there a speaker against?” Marius asked. Kalothos stood.

“I have great respect for Pontius. But I think he has mis-read the situation. It is not a choice between fight or die. It is a choice between ‘fight and die’ on one hand, or ‘peace, life and justice’ on the other.” Kalothos paced to floor. “Make no mistake, Conscript Fathers; I love the Republic! I love the Republic so much that I am prepared to put myself here in Rome among men who would gladly crucify me, all for the sake of the Republic! Why do I put myself at such personal risk? Why does Senkhmet also imperil his life? It is because we have both been captivated by the vision of Sulla the Great! And yet so many small minds will not rise to his challenge; to make the Republic all that the gods intend for it, to become the Mother of the whole world! Instead, these small minds and timid hearts retreat back into being a King!” He strode for a few steps. “Yes that is right! The Latin Tribes have made themselves a King! And as a Republican, as a true heir of Sulla the Great, I can do nothing except stand against this degeneration. The question confronting all of you here today is obvious; are you

the heirs of Lucius Cornelius Sulla, or are you the heirs of Lucius Tarquinius Superbus?"

As Kalothos sat, he sensed that there were some who were starting to waver. Whether it was on principle or out of pure self-interest because of the excruciatingly weak position of the Latin Tribes, he didn't know. Nor did he care. There were still too few of them to make any difference and they deserved all that was coming to them because of the decades of Latin abuse anyway. Sometimes a change of heart can come too late. But the more it weakened their resolve, the better.

"Is there a speaker in favour?" Marius observed the formalities. Nobody stirred. "There being no speakers in favour, is there another speaker against?" Again, no movement. "Then I will put the question. Those in favour?" There was a low chorus of 'yes'. Those against?" Only Kalothos and Senkhmet called 'no'. "I believe the Question has been supported. Is there a call for a division?" Marius looked to Kalothos, who simply waved the question away. "There being no call for a division, the proposal is agreed to." He looked to Kalothos and Senkhmet. "And what do you two intend, now that this has been resolved?"

"We will serve the Republic to the best of our ability," Senkhmet replied. "To suggest that we would do otherwise would be an insult."

"Then I urge you to take news of these Resolutions to your Tribes as quickly as possible. Let them know that to refuse to comply with this Emergency Measure constitutes a revolt against the Republic."

Senkhmet smiled thinly. "Yes Consul. I will swim as fast as I can, there being no ships available."

"Hire a fishing vessel from Tarentum to Dyrrhachium, and go overland from there!" Marius started to show his impatience.

"Yes, Consul. I will comply."

Marius turned his gaze to Kalothos next. "And you, Praetor Kalothos; please go to Babylon and inform your Comitia of the resolve of the Republic. We will not be held hostage like this!"

Kalothos stood. "Yes, Consul. I will spend the rest of the day packing and leave first thing tomorrow."

Varro stood. "Consul, might I suggest that it might be dangerous for two such dedicated servants of the Republic to travel through potentially hostile territory." A murmur of chuckling rose at this irony. "I suggest that we send an escort with them to remind all who see them of the authority of the Republic."

"An excellent idea, Quintus!" Marius picked up his intention immediately. "I will release four of my own lictors, two for Praetor Kalothos and two for Praetor Senkhmet, to demonstrate that they travel under Consular protection!" He turned to the Chief Lictor and ordered him to detach four men for this duty. "And I want these men to note every word they say, every person they meet, everything they do, and report back to me continually."

Kalothos looked to Senkhmet and raised an eyebrow. Senkhmet replied with a shrug.

The two Praetors made a point of being pleasant towards their unwanted minders. Nothing would be gained by resentment. On landing in Dyrrhachium they bought a carriage large enough to hold all six of them in comfort so they could chat along the way, another two for their slaves, and two large wagons for their baggage. At Thessalonika the senior Lictor went down to the harbour to enquire about a sea passage to Alexandria. Yes, there was a ship available which would depart in two days. It was only a small ship, under contract to carry mail but able to transport six passengers as well. He reported this back to Senkhmet.

“That's very interesting, Sextus,” Senkhmet said breezily, “but we won't take it.”

“Why not, lord? The Consul requires you to go to Egypt as quickly as possible.”

“Yes, Sextus; but he also told me to sail to Dyrrhachium, and then travel overland from there. Didn't you hear him yourself? So I take it to mean that he wants me to travel overland as quickly as possible.”

Sextus saw through this thin excuse. “That might be what he said, lord, but it is obvious what he meant. His comment about travelling overland was in the context of you saying that there are no ships available.”

“Perhaps you're right, Sextus, but it's not for me to second-guess the Consul. I will follow his instructions to the letter. But thank you for letting me know about this postal service. I'll let Kalothos know as well and we'll send word ahead of ourselves. Is that not what the Consul would want?” Senkhmet sent one of his men to inform Kalothos. The instructions were quite detailed, but Sextus couldn't understand what was being said in Demotic.

Senkhmet reached for his quills, ink and paper. He started thinking how to phrase his letter. After half an hour he had a draft in front of him. He considered it carefully, made a few adjustments and then started with his fairhand copy to be sent.

“Please, lord; I have been ordered to report back every word you say. I must ask to see your letter before you seal it.” Sextus was determined to do his job properly.

“Of course, Sextus. I have no intention of compromising your integrity. Here, read it yourself as many times as you like.” He passed the page across.

Sextus looked to the page and was immediately confused. “What language is this?” he protested. “I thought you Egyptians used Greek!”

“Yes, we do. But we also use Demotic.”

“Well, I don't understand Demotic. What does this letter say? Who is it meant for?”

“Ah, Sextus; your job is to report back every word I say. It's not my job to translate for you!”

Sextus thought through his options. Should he forbid the sending of this letter? Did he have the authority to do that? Even if he did stop these letters, authority or not, how would things go for him if Senkhmet reported back that he had been delayed from his appointed task of sending a Report promptly to Alexandria? And how effective would that be, anyway? All Senkhmet had to do

was find an Egyptian, talk to him in Demotic and ask for the message to be passed on by this intermediary. Even one of his slaves could serve that purpose. The safest course was to let it go.

Kalothos knocked on the door of Senkhmet's inn room. "I have a letter to be taken to the Mayor of Antioch; the postal vessel pulls in there on the way. I also have one for the chair of the Egyptian Comitia. Please take these down to the harbour with yours." He held out two folded and sealed sheets.

"Sextus believes it's his duty to read all our mail," Senkhmet answered lightly. "Could you please allow him to read it and then re-seal it?"

"Oh, no problem." Kalothos handed one sheet to Sextus, who cracked the seal and opened the letter. Sextus was relieved to see it was written in Greek.

*Praetor Kalothos,
To Ariston Polykarpos, Mayor of Antioch,*

Greetings!

It is of utmost importance that you or your fully-empowered delegate travel to Egypt as quickly as possible. Catch the postal boat if you are quick enough, or perhaps go by Rail! You will need to make certain arrangements. The precise nature of these will become apparent in good time.

Make haste!

The second sheet was handed over and the seal cracked. This one was also written in Greek.

*Kalothos, Senior Praetor of Mesopotamia,
To Tapris, Chairman of the Comitia of Egypt Tribe,*

Long life and the favour of all the gods!

Either Ariston Mayor of Antioch or his delegate will present himself to you as soon as possible. Be assured that this man will act with my plenary authority.

May you continue to serve your Tribe and the Republic with all wisdom!

Sextus was confused by the vagueness of these two letters. "Tell me, lord Kalothos; how will these men know what you are talking about?"

"Because both men are very wise, Sextus," Kalothos assured him.

"What do you expect them to do?"

"Act wisely, as demanded by the situation they find themselves in."

Sextus gave up. The three letters were sealed and handed to Senkhmet's slave for delivery to the ship.

The party continued along the Via Egnatia to the Bosphorus and then crossed by ferry to continue through Nicomedia and then to Ephesus to catch the new Asian Railway to Antioch. They arrived in Antioch on the last day of

Sextilis. The Deputy Mayor greeted them, advising that Polykarpos had left for Egypt five days earlier.

“I’m under orders from the Consul to report to my Comitia,” Kalothos said to Senkhmet. “I would prefer to go to Egypt with you, but duty must come first. May things go well with you, my friend!” He embraced the Egyptian and then offered his arm to Sextus. “May you and your family be kept safe through these troubled times,” he said to the senior Lictor. Then, to the more senior of the two men assigned to him, he said “Now, Caius, write your report up to date to be sent back to the Consul. We have until the third hour tomorrow before the train leaves for Babylon.”

Senkhmet’s party took the new Coastal Railway from Antioch to Suez, and then on to the Nile Railway which ran the length of the river from Suez as far as Thebes. They were only going as far as Heliopolis and arrived on the fifth day of September. A meeting of the Comitia was called for the next morning.

The Egyptian Comitia chamber was unlike most others which had been modelled on the open Great Senate layout. This chamber had fixed but adjustable seats with a generous table top for each so Members could make notes as they listened and shuffle through their papers more conveniently. Senkhmet had already made sure that thirty-five copies of all the relevant papers had been made and distributed by his slaves, but he addressed the Comitia at length to ensure all was understood.

“And finally, brothers; you will notice that I have with me two of the Consul's personal lictors. They have been placed under orders to be spies. Everything we say or do and everyone that I meet will be reported back to the Great Senate. So I should remind you that we are a lawful Tribe of the Republic, abiding by all Laws as promptly and fully as possible. Now, if I may presume upon Tapris and take questions and comments directly...” Tapris nodded his approval.

Several members rose for the call; Senkhmet indicated the most senior.

“This Emergency Measure, demanding that we release the ships and send wheat to Rome; this is binding on the Tribe. If we refuse to comply we are technically in revolt. What do you suggest we do?”

Senkhmet indicated towards Tapris, who stood to speak.

“We must comply in so far as we are able to. That is the law! Therefore I intend to not even put that issue to the vote here but to write to the harbourmaster at Alexandria. He will be commanded to load the required number of grain ships with wheat and despatch them to Rome as soon as possible. The other ships shall be released from their contracts and permitted to seek other work.” Then Tapris smiled broadly.

“But I don’t know if that will make any difference to Rome. Four days ago I sent a letter telling the Harbourmaster to release all grain ships from our hire. I am informed that these ships have already found alternative work and are no longer in port. So I expect that it will be physically impossible for the

Harbourmaster to carry out this new order. Meanwhile, Rome had only a month of grain left on the first of Sextilis, which was some thirty-five days ago.”

Another member stood and was recognised. “If Rome doesn’t get its food we will be declared in revolt, regardless of the reasons. They will think that we are refusing to comply.”

“Not at all, brother!” Senkhmet replied. “We will tell them the truth immediately. It’s our duty to the Republic to inform the Great Senate as soon as possible that we are unable to send them any grain at the moment. In fact my two spies can do that for us,” he explained, indicating the two lictors. “In the meantime, Rome should continue to try to engage ships and send them to us as soon as they become available.”

There was one shipping service between Rome and Suez that had continued operating smoothly. The small but heavily-armed squadron of triremes that transported the Limpopo gold to the Republic Treasury every second month was part of the Republic Navy and not subject to commercial constraints. Sextus caught the first train back to Suez to meet up with it, leaving his colleague in Heliopolis under orders to send reports daily. He soon discovered that he had missed the Treasury triremes by eighteen days. It would be another thirty days before the flotilla returned.

He hunted around the harbour for a small vessel for hire. As he had discovered in Thessalonika, the shortage of large cargo ships suitable for grain transport had not affected the smaller craft used for personal travel or communications. Within two days he was instructing the Master to make for Alexandria to check the harbour for grain vessels and then on to Rome to report back.

Sextus stood before Marius on the twenty-seventh day of September to report that there would be no grain coming from Egypt unless Rome hired the ships itself. Alexandria Harbour had been bare.

“Where did they all go, Sextus?” Marius asked in exasperation.

“I don’t know, sir. The gossip on the waterfront was that they had been all hired by some African merchant, but I would be surprised if any one man would need that much capacity. I think it more likely that the letters sent from Thessalonika were instructions for someone to take over the hire from Egypt before we got there and the Mayor of Antioch is the obvious answer.”

“But he wouldn’t have done that under his own name or the Tribe’s name. It would be too easy for us to chase him down. My guess is that he has arranged for the hire to be transferred to a private individual acting on behalf of the Tribe,” Marius continued the thought. “So writing more Emergency Measures aimed at the hirer is pointless unless we know who to target. Which means that we need to actually find the ships themselves and then serve a Requisition Order on each Master.”

“Do you have time for that, sir?”

“No, we don’t. Rome is already under rations. The Italian tribes were able to supply barely enough out of their own reserves to keep us going. Now

their harvests are coming in and that should see us through another month, maybe two. That will only take us through to the end of November, perhaps into December. But after that the winter will stop all sea traffic. We have only two months to get four months' worth of wheat to Rome!" Marius paced the floor. "I think I need to call the Consular Council. Someone will have an idea."

Following established custom, Marius as Convenor of this meeting served as chairman. He laid out the information available and asked for ideas. Varro was first to stand.

"Before we discuss our actions, we first need to know our capabilities," he suggested. "How is the recruitment and training coming along? The ship-building? And how are our funds?"

Every eye turned to Marius Egnatius, the only consular with genuine military experience. He had been given the task of pulling together a Home Army. He stood to report.

"In short, poorly," he summarised. "There's no enthusiasm among men of military age to enlist. I've had barely any volunteers except from the urban Head Count and even they are enlisting only to avoid the rationing imposed on the civilian population. They also have no enthusiasm for training. In terms of raw numbers we have enough to fill ten legions, not the forty authorised.

"I have very few competent officers; of the ten legionary commanders, only two have served at that level before, neither of them having seen an active frontier. Four have not even led a cohort. Some at Centurion grade have not even been decanus in active service. So all the way down we lack leadership. That means we can expect them to either break at first contact or be slaughtered if they unexpectedly show courage. I suggest that these legions be considered fit for nothing more than a bluff.

"Now to the Home Fleet," he progressed. "I've managed to enlist enough officers who have served on merchantmen to provide a Captain for a hundred ships if we can build them within the next six months – but more of that later! As for common sailors, I have a good number from fishing vessels in the south of Italy or Sicily. These men are not accustomed to warships but at the lowest levels that's not so great a problem. They can be trained up to standard once we take delivery of the new ships, with raw recruits to fill the lowest ranks.

"Which brings me to the biggest problem in the Home Fleet. There are no ship-builders in Italy or Sicily with experience in producing fighting ships. Most can barely boast having built a merchantman of 200 tons capacity, though several shipyards such as Caralis regularly carry out repairs on larger vessels. In short, I can't see us having any Home Fleet at all before winter and perhaps no more than a dozen triremes can be constructed in time for next Spring. Transports or grain ships might number thirty by next September, in time to capture Africa and take their harvest." He smiled. "Assuming we actually manage to capture Africa, which is extremely doubtful given the quality of our Army and the probability that the Western Command of the Navy under African control will contest our crossing. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if the Africans land on Sardinia and seize Caralis simply to deprive us of our largest base. Then they would be able to

blockade all of Italy unchallenged.” Egnatius smiled again. “Does anyone require more detail?”

Varro stood again. “Let me put this into my own words, Marius, and tell me if I’ve got it wrong. Our forces are useless in battle. Their only value is to try to stare down the rebels until some of them break away from this Federation and the whole movement collapses.”

“Absolutely correct, Quintus. The only way we can win is if the rebels lose their nerve,” Egnatius agreed.

Varro looked around the room. “Does anybody think that’s likely?”

Marcus Valerius rose. “We have only seen Kalothos and Senkhmet since this started getting serious, so we would only be guessing how determined the other Tribes are. But Kalothos made a point of being just the tiniest whisker inside the law at all times. Why would he bother with that unless some of the Tribes are afraid they might lose this little war of nerves? They want to be able to claim complete legality. To my mind that means they’re not full-hearted in their commitment.”

“Perhaps so, Marcus, and perhaps not,” Herius Asinius said as he rose, without waiting for the call. “Or perhaps they are honourable men who don’t want to start a war so long as it can be avoided. We can’t read anything into a negative, or at least not with confidence. However I can point out that the difficulties Marius has just outlined to us are exactly those predicted by Senkhmet. It would appear to me that they were very careful and thorough in assessing our options and capabilities even before they formed this Federation. They have done their homework very carefully, even to anticipating our Emergency Measures and how to side-step them.” Asinius looked around the room. “I have no doubt at all that we have already lost this war even before it starts, and the Federation knows it too. They’re just trying to avoid unnecessary destruction in the process. The sooner we accept their terms, the better we will all be.”

That was it! Someone with recognised authority had finally said what everyone feared was true. Gaius Aurelius stood and gained a nod from Marius.

“Marius Egnatius has already told us that our armed forces are useless except as a bluff. We know that Senkhmet already recognised this even as we were proposing them and gave an on-the-spot critique that has proven to be entirely accurate. So we know they have already seen through our bluff. Anyone who can’t put those two facts together to form a conclusion doesn’t deserve to be in this room.” He sat and silence filled the room. The heaviness ground on until Marius spoke.

“Then will someone propose a course of action?” he asked.

“I suggest we move at the next sitting day the adoption of the Basic Law of the Federation as the new Basic Law of the Republic. Then we send a message to Babylon and Heliopolis advising them of our actions.” That was Herius Asinius.

“We can’t,” Varro answered. “To do that will require two-thirds of all eligible Senators to support it. All of the Federation Tribes who are absent and all

of the Life Members who are not available to vote would count as votes against, so we wouldn't have the numbers. We're trapped by our own strategy!"

"You and Lucius Junius Brutus are the Censors!" Asinius exclaimed. "You have the power to remove members of the Senate. So remove all Life Members except those who can attend and vote for this measure."

"You know that this lustrum is crippled, Herius. Lucius can't even leave his house, he is so ill."

"Then go to his house with a new Senate List, and get his thumb-print on it. Even if you have to press his thumb yourself while he lays unconscious!"

Varro bowed his head. "Very well; I'm sure he would not want his incapacity to harm the Republic. He would see the necessity himself if he were well enough. But even if we expel all life members, we would still fall short of two-thirds support. The Federation Senators themselves are not in attendance and would be considered votes against."

"Then urge as many Life Members as possible to attend, for love of the Republic, and only expel those who are absent." A murmur went around the room as Herius pressed his case. "And then, as a show of sincerity, send a message to the Federation Tribes to meet in Utica so we can do the same thing with them present after dropping the remaining Life Members."

Marius sensed that the meeting had recognised the inevitable. "My colleagues, I will take that as a proposal. Is there a speaker against it?"

Pellius made a strangled sound in his throat. Then he coughed. "Are you all serious?" he asked. "Would you really throw away everything?"

"No, Pontius, I would not throw away everything," Asinius answered. "But it seems you would." The room lapsed into silence. Eventually Marius spoke again.

"Then I will put the Question. Those in favour?" There were reluctant mumbles from most men present. "Those against?" A few defiant 'no's.

"I call for a division myself," Marius declared. "There must be no dispute over this in days to come. Those in favour to my right, those against to my left." It was soon obvious that only three men stood to the left.

"Then the Question is supported. Please, make up a new Senate List Quintus, if you could. I'll send a message to Egypt and Antioch." He looked around the room again, sombrely realising that the world had changed forever. "Thank you, my colleagues. Long live the Reformed Republic!"

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Readers of the first two volumes in this series will know that the admission of the Italian Tribes was a turning point in history. In the twenty-five years following their acceptance the Italians re-invigorated the Republic. Italian dynamism and competence threw back the successive challenges by Mithridates, Tigranes and Sanatruces, and this provided the basis for the stunning expansion of Republic control as far as the Indus.

Readers of this volume will have noted that this dynamism continued into the next generation, with men like Gallienus the Younger and Silo Minor continuing the momentum. But all too quickly this faded. The last significant action taken by the Italians to change the Republic was to support the consolidation of the Roman Rural Tribes; an action motivated by opportunism and the hope to become themselves the dominant political force in the Republic rather than from a sincere desire for an improved political structure. Having secured an unchallengeable grip on the Great Senate the Italians became complacent rentiers, leaving others to take over the constructive role in the Republic's future.

This third volume would appear to place the Greeks of Mesopotamia at the forefront of the Republic's growth. To a large extent that was true. But the assertive and self-confident merchants of Africa Tribe whose actions were necessarily beyond the scope of this volume also played a very large part in their own sphere of influence, as did the struggle against and eventual contribution by the Germans towards the end of the Transition Age. The Republic was moving forward on three fronts throughout this period, with the East merely the most dramatic of them. These Western and Northern fronts will be detailed in a later volume.

So what happened to the Italians? Why did they display such overwhelming dynamism but for so short a time? I think the answer is their very success. It would seem that they are a clear example of a process that is evident in virtually all cultures; as soon as one particular subset in society finds itself in a position that enables it to do whatever it wants, the first generation is filled with optimism and energy. But later generations tend to become parasites rather than leaders. Throughout your own history this has been true. Consider the Nobility in feudal societies, the Priesthood in theocracies, Entrepreneurs in capitalisms, and Party functionaries after successful Socialist revolutions.

Blessed is the society in which those who hold power are under constant challenge!

TIMELINE OF SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENTS

DATE	EVENT	PAGE
55 B.C.	Spice Trade with Indonesia commenced	6
54 B.C.	Arabia subjugated	14
OUTSIDE DEVELOPMENTS		28
42 B.C.	Zanzibar Plantation entrusted to Bantu	28
35 B.C.	Bantu started trading independently	32
24 B.C.	Bantu granted Friend and Ally status	49
23 B.C.	Egypt accepted as a Tribe	53
21 B.C.	Cleopatra lost control of Alexandria	84
19 B.C.	Cleopatra died	101
17 B.C.	Museum moved from Alexandria to Babylon	105
14 B.C.	Greek accepted as equal with Latin	107
7 B.C.	Greater Africa circumnavigated and mapped	114
OUTSIDE DEVELOPMENTS		120
1 B.C.	Telescope, modern Astronomy invented	122
4 A.D.	Binary and Decimal notation developed	129
6 A.D.	Rural Roman Tribes consolidated	133
14 A.D.	Calculus and clocks invented	138
20 A.D.	Tamilia subjugated	142
28 A.D.	The Yeshua Narrative	237
32 A.D.	Intellectual and cultural property recognised	317
35 A.D.	Measurements establish the size of the Solar System	321

35 A.D.	Heron's genius first recognised.	323
40 A.D.	Heron develops Steam Engine – Syrian Railway built	327
OUTSIDE DEVELOPMENTS		330
57 A.D.	Suez Rail Link commenced construction	330
58 A.D.	Gold detected in Limpopo delta	334
61 A.D.	Suez railway becomes operational	338
63 A.D.	Heron founds German Museum	340
67 A.D.	Expansion of Museum and Jewish Revolt	341
67 A.D.	China Treaty imposed	369
68 A.D.	Development of new Limpopo Province planned	378
74 A.D.	Heron retires	380
OUTSIDE DEVELOPMENTS		389
110 A.D.	Revolt in Guangdong	390
130 A.D.	Formation of the Federation	452