

TERRAPULCHRA

Volume Four in the series ‘The Other Rome’

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD AND CONFESSION

Readers of the first three volumes in this series would have grown accustomed to a world that was based on many assumptions quite different from those underlying this present society. To those in the Republic of the Transition Age, a society without slavery was simply unimaginable. At the same time the idea of a woman having any authority was not unimaginable but was actually dreaded as a tendency towards social anarchy. It had to be suppressed at any cost. This was best summed up by one particular inauspicious warning in the Sybilline books; "Women will have more influence than is proper!"

Yet this apparently stable and unchangeable set of societal norms inherited from the Roman Republic was not as impervious to change as it seemed. Book Three has shown how the huge trading market of the Transition Age Republic, together with the stability of the Rule of Law brought about by the Rufan Reforms, guaranteed the security of personal property against arbitrary confiscation. This triggered a flurry of long-term investments. This in turn drove technological advances. The Babylon Museum was at the forefront of this Academic Revolution, and then the German Museum with its sharper focus on engineering brought about what could only be considered an Industrial Revolution. The political and economic stresses caused by these two revolutions culminated in the replacement of the Transition Age Republic by the Federation.

Yet the Class System inherited from the Republic lingered on with the gender-based role modelling linked with it. The resultant society started to look very much like the antebellum Deep South of the United States of America in this timeline.

But this was not the only possible way in which a society might develop. It is one of the ironies of history in my alternative timeline that this slave-trading, sexist, laissez-faire, dog-eat-dog Class-based society gave birth to Terrapulchra. This new body politic formed a society which explicitly legislated State Ownership of all land as well as all other means of production and trade, effectively abolished slavery, gave equal rights to women and instituted a profoundly egalitarian society. No nation today has yet matched what Terrapulchra achieved in less than one hundred years from its founding.

It is also highly debatable whether or not any nation should try.

But I am a Historian and it is not my role to make such value-judgements. It is not for me to argue for or against Terrapulchran social structures, but to describe them and their underpinning. Therefore I have tried to place before you as objectively as I can what the Terrapulchrans of that time were thinking, how they saw themselves and their unique society, what were they trying to achieve, and by implication what other matters they were ignoring or even deliberately despising. By the very nature of this task it will appear that I am endorsing these views; but as I have said in previous notes about institutions such as slavery and mind-sets such as racism, to report and describe is not the same as to endorse. For example, an Engineer who describes the collapse of a bridge is not necessarily endorsing that collapse as a 'good thing' and nor is a medical researcher who describes the progress of a disease actually cheering for its end result. In the same way a Historian who describes the features of a particular society he is analysing should not be understood to be advocating those features.

I also acknowledge that I have been rebuked from several quarters for starting so many sentences with a conjunction and also for using overly long and complicated sentences. I confess that my writing style has been strongly conditioned by my own culture where these stylistic mannerisms were commonplace. One need only read the Classical authors or even the New Testament in their original languages to see the same practices are of ancient lineage. Your own most highly esteemed authors did the same as little as a couple of hundred years ago! Even today your legal documents retain this style, a trait that has continued in popular literature in my own universe even down to my own day. The intention of this style was to maintain the connectedness of the thought or narrative. I am advised that this is no longer fashionable, so in this volume I have tried to reduce this 'vice' for the sake of your modern tastes. Where I fail, Gentle Reader, I beg of you to forgive an author writing in a language and style he has had to learn in his old age. If it is any comfort, I am currently starting to revise and re-write the earlier volumes in this series to reduce this stylistic flaw.

Thank you for completing this journey with me.

Utica – 813 AUC (60 A.D.)

Septimius Pulcher was intrigued. This was the third time he had heard of some strange thing being washed up on the Atlantic coast. The first item had been a branch and seed pod from a tree that no naturalist could identify. The second had been a carved piece of timber, the carvings of a style previously unknown. But both of those had been on the Mauretanian coast, so they might have just been washed down a river and along the shoreline from somewhere poorly explored.

But this was different. It had been found on the Canary Islands, well out to sea. It was most unlikely to have come from coastal drift. Therefore it must have come from somewhere to the west. He examined the artefact more closely, tempted to pick it up but alert to its fragility after being soaked by seawater for so long. It was already in three main pieces and several smaller shards as it rested on the padded tray.

He lifted his line of sight to Caius Tullius Valerianus, his most trusted employee. Valerianus was a very competent, intelligent and steady man. He had been born of a poor family but adopted by their Patron because of his potential, hence the 'Valerianus' cognomen. Unfortunately he had been sold into slavery when his adopted father's speculations proved disastrous and he had been unable to pay his debts. Pulcher had bought him and freed him immediately, winning total loyalty in doing so.

“So what can you tell me for sure, Caius? What do the experts say?” he asked.

“I have had it examined closely by an expert who was trained in Babylon. He used that new magnifying technique. You know, the tube that looks like a miniature telescope? He says the wood is unlike any variety he had seen before, but he stopped short of saying it was completely unknown. The apparently unusual details might be the result of being soaked. But he was confident that the engravings had been made by a sharpened stone rather than a metal tool because they were too uneven for a metal blade.” Valerianus paused. “According to the scholars in Babylon, the known world from the Cape Verde Islands to China is about one hundred and forty five degrees of latitude. That leaves two hundred and fifteen degrees of latitude still unknown. More than half the world! There must be things out there that we could not even imagine! And that means big profits if we can bring them back here.”

Pulcher nodded to himself. He did not become wealthy by missing out on opportunities. Although still well short of being considered one of the wealthiest of the African Traders, he had more than tripled the family business since his father's death twelve years ago.

“I'll let you have three ships, Caius. Small caravel-rigs, I can't afford to pull a full square-rigger off the Senegal Trade,” he decided. “And pick your crews carefully. I would demand a pledge of secrecy from every man on board, under penalty of enslavement of his whole family.”

“We can't make that demand, Septimius. The Republic Law demands that a copy of all charts of new lands must be deposited in the Public Cartography Records Office, open to inspection by all.”

“You heard me the first time, Caius,” Pulcher growled. “I'll set up a completely separate company owned by you and then I'll sell you these three ships on credit. So you will be responsible for complying with the law, not I. And of course I expect you will

deposit a copy of your discoveries with the Records Office, in good time. But let's see if you discover anything first. Then you can act in accordance with the law." He looked Valerianus in the eye. "That is a completely different thing from a commercial-in-confidence arrangement with me, your creditor. And of course, if you find anything out there worth trading you might even decide to stay at the other end of the route. Out of the jurisdiction of the Republic. Do you get my drift?"

The fleet left from the Cape Verde Islands on the fifth day of Quinctilis. Valerianus' instructions were to sail west along the 17th parallel for two months to take full advantage of the easterly winds, then turn north to the 42nd parallel to catch the westerlies back to Spain as efficiently as possible.

Land was sighted after sailing for 22 days, in which time he had travelled 38 degrees to the west.

"And not a moment too soon, either," Valerianus muttered to Demetrios, his captain on the flag vessel. The wind was already gusting strongly from the east and building rapidly. "What do you say we run around that headland to the south-west, and see if we can find shelter in its lee?"

The evening was already dark because of the heavy cloud cover and the wind was screaming through the rigging as the three ships limped under minimal sail around the long thin point of land, a ridge perhaps two hundred feet high. Operating in almost total darkness, anchors were dropped as close to the shore as they dared approach. Then the ships dropped all sail, secured their decks, and allowed the wind to push them another two hundred feet westward before dropping another anchor in case the wind backed around overnight and started to push them onto the rocks.

Thankfully the land to windward protected them from the rising seas and the high ridge took some of the sting out of the wind that peaked the following dawn stronger than any Valerianus had ever seen before. The cables to the secondary anchors had to be slowly lengthened to prevent dragging as the wind came more and more from the south over the night and the following day. The landform protected them well throughout the two nights and a day that the storm raged. By the second dawn the wind strength had dropped enough for the rigging to be inspected. Only minor repairs were required.

By the fourth morning the wind had dropped and returned to the steady easterly that had brought them here. All repairs had been made and a party had been put ashore to climb to the high point in the ridge and scan the horizon to the north for more land. There was a haziness through the telescope that suggested more land to the north-northwest.

During this expedition they noticed a settlement behind the beach where they landed. There were humans here! This is what the expedition was all about. But they found it deserted when they entered it. There was a central fireplace, the ashes still warm, and there were some possessions. The small huts consisted of a timber frame with walls of panels woven from palm branches and staked down into the ground. The wind over the last few days had destroyed these woven panels, but enough remained to indicate their general construction. Most striking were a couple of fired urns with red, white and black decorations. But it was obvious that the locals didn't want to make contact.

Perhaps these are a primitive people, fearing slavers or raiders from a more advanced society. Valerianus hoped to find such an advanced settlement.

Valerianus decided to continue along this coast, regardless of the land sighted to the north. If there were people on this land, then sooner or later he will find a fishing village or a town, and possibly a harbour. What will there be that could be traded? He signalled that the fleet should follow him, keeping a mile off the coast and at one mile spaces for safety.

To avoid shoals the lead vessel travelled at only a few miles per hour, with a lookout up the top of the mast to spot any shallows in their path. This slower speed also allowed them to plot on the run, sketching and noting data to permit rough-and-ready charts to be compiled. By mid-morning this caution was rewarded. They had turned the corner to find a large bay, with a barrier reef a few miles off the shore. They skirted this bay, checking the shoreline in detail by telescope. They saw no structures that could indicate a trading civilisation. By evening they had sailed right across the large bay and turned another corner to start following down the western coast of a particularly rugged land.

It took four days to sail around the whole of the island, or perhaps it was a pair of islands. The saddle between the rugged land to the south-west and the flatter land to the north-east seemed very low and there might be a passage between them. But not an easily navigable passage so what difference did it make? More important they found nothing to indicate a serious town. The land appeared in places to be cultivated, but only sparsely. Had that earlier site been the best that this island could offer?

Whatever might or might not be happening on that island or pair of islands, there was obviously no significant town on the coast. And no significant town on the coast almost certainly means no town inland worth trading with. Time to move on and since the plan was to catch the westerlies around 40 degrees north, exploring north seemed the most obvious next step. And besides, now that they had done the full circuit of this lump of land north was the closest next piece of land.

The next land to the north also proved to be another island, and again devoid of any sign of civilisation. During the circumnavigation it became obvious that this island was no more than a group of volcanoes in the middle of the sea. It was named 'Mons Serrata' because of the jagged appearance of the several peaks. In what was now becoming routine he put a landing party ashore at the four corners of the island with instructions to climb to a good elevation and scan the horizon for yet more land. During one of these landings another settlement was found but this did not consist of the robustly-framed huts seen at the earlier settlement. This was little more than a few panels of matting roughly woven from palm tree leaves, and lashed between flimsy timber sticks. It looked more like a tent than a hut. It had been repaired recently, probably after being torn apart by the storm. The bowls and equipment left lying around also seemed much simpler than that of the first settlement. Were there two different peoples in these islands, each living in fear of the other and therefore suspicious of any third group that was not known to be their own ally? That might explain their shyness. But back to the main business. More land was sighted to the north-west and north-east. The land to the north-west was reached and also mapped and in this way they followed a string of islands to 18 degrees 15 minutes north and 107 degrees 30 minutes west of Babylon. And then the chain stopped.

That was the end of the visible lands so far. It was also the end of Sextilis. What next? Should the expedition continue to the north-west, which appeared to be the alignment of the lands discovered so far? Or should they launch out westwards again as originally intended? Or should they adhere to the original plan, to turn for home on or around the fifth day of September, only five days away? In which case, they should spend the next few days re-stocking, re-watering and making repairs. Valerianus considered his options with Demetrios.

“Although we still have only five days officially allocated for exploring, we could justify more than that because the base instructions had assumed we would be two months' sailing away from home, not less than a month,” Valerianus said, his reluctance to turn back plainly audible. “The plan assumed that we would only turn back on the fifth of September if we had found no land, which means we would be a month further west. What do you say?”

Demetrios had even fewer qualms than Valerianus. “We have three ships still in excellent order,” he summarised. “We could sail for two or three months without landfall if we had to. But now that we know there is land here if we need to find it, I say we go further. The only critical date in my mind is that we should make sure we are back in Olisipo by the end of November to avoid the winter storms in the Atlantic.”

Valerianus looked at the puffy clouds passing by. Apart from that terrible storm, the wind had been constant and reliable out of the east. “Perhaps if we made all our repairs and re-watered right now, we could go further west. Then even if we find nothing more we would still be able to turn north and return in time.”

Demetrios nodded his agreement. “Let's say we continue until the fifteenth of September. That still gives us forty-five days before November even starts. The Atlantic storms don't usually start until late November, so we still have plenty of margin.”

Valerianus decided he would repair and re-stock now in case he made no more landfalls. That should take less than five days. Then he would sail west ten more days, looking for more land. If he found nothing, then he would turn north to catch the return trade winds on September 15. “Yes, let's do that. There must be some-one here fit to trade with! We've seen huts and pottery, so I expect they are peasants supplying a larger town somewhere. Let's give ourselves every chance.”

That was the plan. But the weather had other plans. On the third day the wind started to swing around, coming from the north, and the strength increased alarmingly. The little fleet was anchored in an almost semi-circular bay facing south, with a barrier reef more than three hundred paces offshore. The land to the north was not high, offering little protection. Demetrios did not want his ships being forced onto the reef across the mouth of the bay,

“Caius!” he called to his expedition leader, “I want every ship to be beached! Let's get them up onto the sand as far as possible. Lighten them as much as we can to drag them up there, and then ballast them so they can't be blown off!”

Anchor cables were rowed ashore and tied around the biggest of the trees, and the capstans were manned. Even without any sail up and the gearing in the capstans as high as could be made available, the effort required to drag the vessels into the face of that northerly gale taxed the men to their limit. The additional drag once they started to touch

bottom was too much. The cables were made secure while Demetrios and his fellows considered their options.

“I don't like it, my lord,” Tarenos warned Valerianus. “If we can put them firmly on sand, well and good. But to have them where they can be lifted off by a high wave, and then slammed down onto their keels with every rise and fall in the sea... That treatment will smash their hulls within hours!”

“I agree, Caius,” Demetrios offered, but with the familiarity of higher rank than Tarenos. “The tide is not yet full, so even if we could pull them part-way, within an hour they would be loose.”

“My ship is the lightest, my lords,” Markos commented. He was the most junior of the three captains. “I suggest that we maintain a capstan crew so long as the tide is rising, and I am confident we can get up the beach far enough to be safe. Safer than riding at anchor with that reef behind, anyway,” he added.

Then a light went on in Demetrios' mind. “Mello! The raid on Vanchi, in the Tamilia Campaign!” he exclaimed. Then, looking around his men with urgency in his voice, “All of you, get your ships as far up the sand as you can, and keep pulling until the tide turns. Then, flood your bilges. That should settle you tight on the bottom. No bouncing!”

The sea water could damage anything stored below the waterline,” Tarenos warned. “Everyone, make sure you identify everything vulnerable to water damage, and move it up higher before you open the sea cocks.” Demetrios nodded, and Valerianus gave the order.

“Good idea! Everyone, do it!”

The storm raged into the night, even stronger than the first big blow. At dawn the next day it was impossible to stand on the deck, and the yardarms were flexing and whipping frighteningly even without a stitch of canvas on them, just from the drag on their own frontal areas. And then, over a period of less than two hours, the wind swung away from the north, through to coming from the west, and then settled, as strong as ever, from the south-west.

Demetrios jumped when he realised what could happen as the tide came in again, specially if it had a storm surge behind it. The ships were aground for their full length, thanks to the flooded bilges, but more firmly embedded at the bow. With the wind coming from the rear quarter, and with the seas likely to pick up over the next few hours, the vessels could broach, presenting their beams to the full force of the pounding waves.

“Men! Out of your bunks! We need to re-arrange our cargo!” Soon there were as many men as could move through the confined spaces below deck, carrying anything that could be shifted to the stern of the ship. Water-casks, sacks of grain, spare sailcloth, even the anchors. Anything that could clamp the stern of the hull more firmly against the sand was moved back. Demetrios looked out of a porthole across to the other two ships, barely discernible through the howling wind and lashing rain. Communication was impossible. He just had to rely on them using their own seamanship to save their vessels.

The wind abated over the afternoon and night. The rain eased, from impossible to merely torrential. By the next dawn it was possible to walk on deck safely. Demetrios ordered up a short message by flags; 'Report'.

Tarenos was first to reply. 'Hull good. Rigging minor damage.' Markos responded half an hour later; 'Hull good. main cross-beam damaged.' Well, that cross-beam damage was visible even from the flagship. It would need perhaps one day of good weather to fell the timber and dress it and another to erect it and make good the rigging. They sat out the next evening and night.

The fifth of September dawned with the wind brisk and coming in from the south-east. Almost back to normal conditions! Valerianus called his captains together as the repairs got under way.

"Well, are we still happy to go further west for a few days before turning for home?" He started the meeting. "And if so, when do you expect to be sea-worthy?"

"My men are checking all the rigging now," Demetrios answered first. "It all looks sound from deck level, but I want every pulley to be looked at from arm's length, in case some have started to split under all that flogging. Give me today to check, and perhaps tomorrow to repair."

Tarenos simply nodded. Then, sensing that this might be too informal, "I'm in the same condition, sir."

"I've sent my carpenters ashore for a new cross-beam," Markos reported. "I expect that might take three days to be fit for sea. I would prefer to go west just to trial it before we turn back into the Atlantic."

"Good. Is there anything else that needs to be discussed?" Valerianus looked around the table. No-one made a move. "Then let's get the ships afloat as soon as we can. I don't want their weight to start warping the hull timbers by leaving them on the sand for too long," Valerianus ordered.

The vessels left their bay on the eighth day of September, with a steady easterly breeze on their port stern quarter. After rounding the south-west corner of the island they adopted a course ten degrees north of west, following a compromise course between due west and the apparent alignment of the islands found so far. At dawn next morning they could see more land off to the north-west. Valerianus turned towards it, but it was soon apparent that this was another island a handful of miles long. He had seen enough of these already, so he turned away again towards the west. There were not enough days left to waste them charting useless islands. This westerly course took him through a cluster of three larger islands and a host of smaller ones. None of them showed any sign of settlement through the telescope, despite the southern shore of the northernmost island having a couple of excellent natural harbours. Charting these coasts was carried out as accurately as possible at so great a speed but with little enthusiasm. Valerianus wanted to find the mainland, which surely must be close now! They sailed through the passages between the islands as quickly as safety allowed.

Then just as day was starting to fade and the third major island was falling off their port beam, another peak was seen ahead. The distance was estimated at fifteen miles. The usual night watch took over and speed was reduced to the two miles an hour that had been adopted as a safety measure for night sailing in the vicinity of land. That would be ample to reach the new land by first light.

Dawn revealed another elevated island to the south-west, so the decision was made to pass by the south coast of the small nearer land. As the ship passed two smaller outlying islands off the eastern tip, there seemed to be a fine natural harbour on the main

island. Closer examination revealed it to be an excellent natural cove, a couple of hundred paces wide and more than half a mile long. But still no sign of it being a working port was visible from sea. Then, only a couple of miles further on, was an amazing sight. An opening perhaps a hundred and fifty paces wide between elevated headlands revealed a huge harbour, sheltered from winds by high ridges all around. If ever there was going to be a trading port, this must surely be it!

“Demetrios! Order the fleet to anchor outside those heads. Get a couple of longboats ready for me and a contubernium of marines. I’m going into that harbour. Take over if I’m not back by nightfall.”

Valerianus could scarcely contain his anticipation as the two longboats pulled through the heads. He could already see the harbour was perhaps two miles long with inlets on both sides. What better trading port could there be in these islands so wracked by such fierce storms?

He looked into the inlets as he passed them. He saw nothing. He took out his telescope to examine the furthest reaches. And then in one inlet about half-way down this fine harbour, he saw something that looked artificial. He called to the boatswain to turn towards it as he examined it more carefully. It looked like a woven mat draped over a low, horizontal branch. His heart dropped within him. Just like the Monkey People in southern Greater Africa! Nothing worth trading! But still, we are here now. We should meet them.

The longboats were driven ashore on a slight headland, the head of a bay which itself was an expanse of mangroves. The woven mat he had first seen was draped over a ridge lashed between two poles, not a low branch as he had first thought. Similar to the woven panels and flimsy frames seen earlier. He stepped ashore and called out. There was not a sound in reply. He glanced into the matted shelter and saw a few canoe paddles. Not even oars! With a sigh he called for three men to come with him and followed a worn path that led around the headland and into a small creek.

Some three hundred paces up the path he came to a collection of small shelters, with walls and roof panels made out of the same woven mats tied to poles lashed together to form a frame. There was a dead fire in a clearing in the middle of these huts. The creek itself at this point had been partly blocked by rocks dropped into it, perhaps to act as a dam in dry times, or to prevent high or surge tides from affecting their water supply. So they were definitely a step up from the Monkey People! But even so, this was still not civilisation. Not unless it served only as a summer camp in much the same way as civilised people used tents.

He called again. No reply. He looked into one of the shelters. There were timber bowls, and more woven mats, and a few weapons. One looked like a hardwood club, with a V-shaped leading edge. Good for small-game hunting. There was also a small pile of spears. Some were tipped with bone barbs, others were sharpened to a point and fire-hardened. That convinced Valerianus. Civilised people, even if on a hunting trip for recreation, would not use such primitive implements. What he saw was a camp of hunters and gatherers a bit more advanced than the Monkey People, but not able to supply goods worth buying nor buy goods worth shipping. There would be no trade here!

For the sake of thoroughness he had the boats go to the end of the harbour and then tracked down the south-western shore on the return trip. Such a glorious harbour, and no-

one to trade in it! By the time he returned to the ship the sun was setting. Orders were given and the fleet moved at night speed towards the other land to the south-west.

This next island, sighted off to the south-west, was no less a disappointment. A landing party on the first clear beach discovered a similar cluster of a few huts and some canoes pulled up on the sand and stowed under palm tree leaves but no sign of anything more complex. Valerianus sailed the twenty miles of its northern coast almost impatiently as the navigator, attempting to do cartography on the run, tried to stay out of his way. More land appeared to the north-west, this time apparently extensive rather than just another island. As the coast of this latest island turned away to the south Valerianus ordered the fleet to make for this possible mainland. He had only three more days left before the appointed day of return. He pulled into another good harbour, a circular bay more than a mile in diameter, just as the sun was setting. He ordered anchors down, double protective night guard against night-time boarders and called the captains to his office.

“What condition are your ships in, gentlemen?” he asked as they were each passed a goblet of watered wine by Valerianus' steward.

“We're in very good condition, Caius,” Demetrios replied first, as the senior man.

“As are we,” Tarenos said in turn.

“We're in good order, too,” Markos concluded the reports. “The new cross-beam is performing well. I have no fear of putting out into the deep.”

“Very well,” Valerianus accepted the reports. “I suspect that this could be the mainland at last. But if it is and a good natural harbour like this doesn't have at least a fishing village, then that doesn't bode well for finding any trading opportunities,” he sighed. “Even the islands we've already seen are bigger than most of the Cyclades, so they should have been able to be civilised if they were anywhere near a decent city! But let's press on for another three days. Then we'll water, repair and restock for the return. Does anyone have any other suggestions?”

There was shrugging all round. This was what had been agreed some days ago, and there was no reason to change the plan.

In the first light of dawn there was every reason the change the plan. A single large canoe approached the largest of the caravels, with a drum being beaten in the prow and a feathered man sitting regally in the stern. Valerianus was called onto deck as soon as the canoe had been seen emerging from a creek and pulling into the bay. He arrived on deck barefooted and in only a light chiton.

“What do you think the drum means, Demetrios?” Valerianus asked. “Does it signify someone important, and to get out of his way? Or is it simply to make clear that they're not trying to sneak up on us?”

“Probably both,” Demetrios answered with a shrug. “Should we get a suitable gift for the chief?”

“Yes, I'll get one of my better chitons from my cabin. We will give him the sort of garment I'm wearing as our own chief.” One of the sailors was sent on the errand immediately. Valerianus inspected the approaching canoe closely. It had an ornately-carved prow post, and the men paddling looked dressed ceremonially rather than in battle dress. It was clear that this was an embassy rather than an attack. “Throw out the ladder, Demetrios. We want him to feel welcome.”

The paddlers quickly understood the intent of the rope ladder and changed course to pull up alongside where the ladder fell. A young, finely garbed man climbed the ladder to the caravel's deck. With upper arms by his sides, forearms horizontal, and palms up, he spoke as if making an important announcement. Of course, no-one on board had any clue as to what was being said.

Valerianus adopted the same pose as the youth, assuming it was a pose signifying a formal greeting. He smiled and said 'Welcome to my ship,' finishing with a slight bow of the head.

The youth frowned. He had no idea of Latin. He spoke again, finishing just as the sailor arrived with a silk chiton. Valerianus took the chiton from the man and then draped it over the youth's forearms. Then, stepping to the rail, he gestured with both palms upwards at the chiton and then to the apparent chief. The youth understood the intent. He held the robe up, taking some time to understand how the cloth fell, and then looked back to Valerianus. Then, satisfied that he understood exactly what it was and how it was intended to be worn by comparison to Valerianus' linen chiton, he turned back to the ladder. Wrapping the chiton around his own neck like a scarf, he descended to the canoe. He held it out to the chief and then against his own body to indicate that it was meant to be worn. He presented it to the chief.

The chief looked up to the rail and saw Valerianus smiling and inviting him onto the deck with hand gestures. Then he looked back to the silk chiton and grunted approval. He stood and the youth helped him into the unfamiliar garment. Then he climbed the ladder.

Valerianus stepped back from the rail to give the chief the dignity of a large personal space as he boarded. Then, adopting the fore-arms level and palms up pose, he spoke another sentence of greeting. The chief replied in similar style. Then he uttered another sentence. Valerianus could only guess the meaning, so he gestured to the east, arms straight and above level as though reaching over the horizon, and then mimed as though guiding a bird to land at his feet. The chief grunted and nodded slightly. The meaning had been taken. Valerianus was from the distant east. The chief beat his own chest with his right hand, and said "Ta-Machozapingi!"

Valerianus took this as a self-introduction. He tapped his own chest lightly with his fingertips. He did not want to appear to be out-doing this native in a show of assertiveness, which might be taken as an insult or a challenge. "Val," he said with a smile. Then, gesturing tentatively to the native, he repeated. "Tamachos".

The chief looked uncertain. Was this stranger playing games with him? But no, he doesn't know our language, and it seems from his own name that he was unaccustomed to longer names. He smiled deliberately. "Wal," he repeated gesturing to the stranger, and then "Machos" to himself.

Valerianus smiled again. "Machos" he repeated. The chief smiled. Machozapingi then gestured to Valerianus and swept his hands towards the side rail and the canoe. Valerianus smiled again and stepped towards the ladder.

Valerianus now realised why he had not seen any buildings the previous evening. There was a creek that opened onto the harbour and the canoe went a few hundred paces up this inlet before being tied to a rough landing. The bend in the creek and the mangroves along the shoreline effectively screened the village from sight. The first

paddlers to step out of the canoe tied up to two end posts. Others ran off into the village. Then there was an unmistakable gesture, inviting him to step out of the canoe and onto the timber landing. As he walked along the boards the carved prow post caught his eye. Now, up close, he was shocked to see it resembled the artefact he had shown to Pulcher more than a year ago. One mystery solved!

He lifted his gaze and scanned his surroundings. The village another hundred paces away consisted of more than a dozen of those more robustly-framed circular huts he had seen on other islands, but this was a much more substantial settlement. The village was surrounded by fields being worked for crops. Perhaps not fully civilised, but much more than Monkey People or the rude hunter-fisher-gatherers with their twig-framed walls. Valerianus wondered whether these people were up to comparison with the Bantu when the Republic first met them. Then he remembered that the original artefact had been stone-carved, not metal carved. These Islanders were probably not up to that standard just yet.

Children were gathering around and pointing at him. Then he realised that he must be totally unlike anything they had seen before. He had accepted the round face, high cheekbones and deeper colouration of Machos without a blink. He had expected these natives to look different. But now he realised that these people had probably never seen anyone so different from themselves as he!

At length he was taken into a very large hut with a high pitched roof. Inside there was a circle of ten mats. Several were occupied by men. Valerianus was guided to one mat set just to the left of the largest and most detailed of them. A hand gesture told him to sit. Machozapingi sat on the more prestigious mat beside him as a few more men entered the hut and sat. Soon Machozapingi spoke in a loud voice to the assembly. After almost a minute he stopped, and the man to his right spoke briefly. After that the call progressed to the right, some speaking but most remaining silent. When the last man immediately to Valerianus' left had spoken, eyes moved to him. Valerianus indicated his ears, and then said in Latin "It is good to meet you all. I hope we can become friends." He smiled around the circle. Machozapingi then spoke again. Valerianus gained the impression from the way he seemed to address some of them men in particular at different points, that he was summarising or commenting on their contributions. At the end there was what seemed to be a general grunt of acceptance. Machozapingi then clapped and a woman entered carrying a pottery jug with a motif in that red, white and black colour combination that Valerianus had noticed at a previous stop. In her other hand she carried a pottery cup, or perhaps more accurately a small krater with the same pattern around its lip. She handed to krater to Machozapingi, who held it out for her to fill with a liquid. Machozapingi took a sip, and passed it to his right. The woman followed the krater around the circle, topping it up twice before it reached Valerianus. This was obviously a ceremony to accept a stranger as a new friend. When the krater was passed to him he lifted it slightly towards the centre of the circle in salute and then took a sip himself. He then passed to cup to Machozapingi on his right, who accepted it with a nod and drained the remaining liquid in two gulps. The men then stood and started to wander out of the hut, chatting in small groups as they did so. He was surprised that so little curiosity was shown but perhaps that might have been considered rude. He stood as well and started for the door. Machozapingi walked beside him. He turned towards the

landing again, expecting to be taken back in the ceremonial canoe. This expectation proved accurate. He saw the paddlers waiting on the timber walkway step back into the canoe as they saw him approach. He stopped beside the rear of the canoe, expecting Machozapingi to step on board. But instead the chief adopted the formal arm position, still holding the krater. And then he held the krater out in a stiff right arm for Valerianus to accept. Valerianus smiled, nodded, and took hold of the krater. Apparently this is a token of friendship, for when we meet again. Soon he was back on board his ship. The whole process had taken little more than an hour. The rest of the day was spent charting the bay and taking soundings.

Valerianus was disappointed with his new friend. Machos' behaviour was that of a man who was at least sovereign in his own town, perhaps even dominant over a wider area. But if these people were the dominant body politic in this area and were still so primitive then he could expect little of interest for miles around. Any half-civilised society would have subjugated him long ago.

And the next few days only confirmed this conclusion. The following day the fleet left the bay. Sailing north and then westwards they covered fifty miles and found another substantial harbour almost a mile wide and two miles long. But again nothing of any significance was visible. And although there might be more of what they were starting to call the Krater People on those shores their total lack of metal suggested that they had little to trade. What Valerianus wanted more than anything else was a civilised town, something that could afford to pay the cost of carrying goods the width of the Atlantic! Such people would not be in villages on creeks! They would have substantial buildings, wharves, perhaps sea-walls to further protect their ports.

By the end of the third day a coastline running for a hundred miles east-west had been plotted, however roughly because of the speed of transit, and there was still no sign of civilisation. Even if this was not part of the mainland but only a very large island it was at least comparable in size to Corsica. That made it big enough to support a civilisation in its own right. Then, as the coast took a convincing plunge to the south, the appointed day arrived. Almost in relief from the frustration, Valerianus ordered a final watering stop and repairs. On the morning of 16 September the three ships sailed just east of north from what they suspected was the western end of the largest island yet discovered and headed for Hispania.

Over the next eight days their path turned further to the east as the winds started to come in more and more from the south. By the end of the month they were on the 39th parallel, heading just north of east with a firm wind on their starboard stern. They were making over one hundred and twenty miles per day in perfect conditions, and all ships were reporting no problems.

"Land ahead!" was the cry from the crow's nest. But that was impossible, Demetrios thought to himself. Not only dead reckoning but also the star sightings two days ago told him that he must be a thousand miles from Lusitania.

He reached for his telescope and shouted up to the lookout "What bearing?"

"Straight ahead, captain," was the reply. That sounded reasonable, they were presently at 39 degrees north, running down the line to Olisipo for their landing before the last leg home to Utica. But how did they cover that extra thousand miles so quickly?

He walked to the bow and peered through the telescope. One glance was enough. That was not the coast of Lusitania! It was another of these steep islands in the middle of the sea. Still, it might be worthwhile to know about these islands. If any future voyages ran into trouble these lands could provide a haven for repairs or re-stocking of supplies. He sent for Valerianus, still in his cabin.

“Caius, I think we should take some time to chart this island. It could be a safe haven for future trips.”

Valerianus looked at the horizon. The peak was visible now with the naked eye. “Yes, you’re right Demetrios. This is a long trip home. If a ship were to be struck by any of those big storms soon after leaving the Western Islands it might be thankful for a place to rest and repair. And we’re about ten days ahead of schedule anyway if this wind stays fair, so we can spare the time. Signal to the others.”

It was a sizeable island, some ten miles in diameter and well wooded. There was another smaller island ten miles to the north, but there seemed no point in mapping that. Water barrels were refreshed and the fleet set off to the east at first light on the sixth of October.

At mid-morning on the next day more land was sighted, to the south. Over the next six days five more fair-sized islands had been charted, the last of them as squally weather closed in. Valerianus did not see any point in taking chances with the weather. He ordered the fleet to make for a shallow bay at the eastern end of the easternmost island yet sighted and secure for a storm.

The threat of a storm proved false. The morning of the 14th October dawned clear with a moderate wind from the west. The fleet set out on the third hour and saw no more land until Olisipo on the afternoon of the 21st.

“So it’s both good news and bad news, Septimius,” Valerianus started summarising his report back in Utica. “There is land over there and it’s inhabited. We only had time to chart a string of islands, and possibly part of a mainland. But probably the last land was just a larger island than the others.

“From what we saw there are two different peoples over there. The first are hunter-gatherers, not farming or tending herds but certainly with better weapons than the Monkey People. But there is also a more cultured race, with farming, glazed pottery and reasonable skill in boat-building. But I saw no metalwork. So it’s possible that there’s an even more civilised race further west, if we could find the mainland. Then we could trade for commodities unimagined here, and therefore of great value. But if there are no civilised people that might be even better. We would have a whole new world with all its wealth intact, rather than having to sift through the left-overs from thousands of years of previous generations. We would be like Psaretos, the first man to find the gold deposits in southern Africa. But first we would have to find them.

“I understand that this is an expensive business, Septimius. But I would suggest a second mission, this time for two years. That will give us plenty of time on location. If we find nothing in that time then at least we can be confident that we haven’t missed out on anything obvious.” He stood waiting, as Pulcher thought along his own line of reasoning.

“How secure do you think the crews are? Do you think we might have any who would spread the word?”

“There is really no word to spread, Septimius. Even if someone talks, it will be a story of a long journey over an open sea with nothing at the end except savage people and even more savage storms.”

“Even so, Caius,” Pulcher replied, “if you can see the possibilities, so will someone else.” Pulcher raised a hand almost apologetically. “Perhaps not *everyone* else, but if some sailor wants to spread a story hoping for a reward he will work his way through every trader in Utica, and he will probably make it sound better than it really was.” Pulcher lapsed into thought again.

“Yes, take another expedition next year, Caius. And be thorough,” Pulcher said at last. “Then if we find nothing I don't care who finds out. But if we find something profitable then the whole expedition can stay over there except for you and a chosen few to report back to me. In fact, I'll give you a fourth ship so you'll be able to form two squadrons if you have to, and each ship will have some back-up. How does that sound?”

“As you say, Septimius,” Valerianus agreed. “But I've been thinking about these storms. Demetrios says that they're very much like the storms that the China Traders say affect the China Sea every summer, starting in late Quinctilis. In that case winter would be the best season for sailing, not like in northern waters.”

Pulcher nodded. “I'll leave that up to you and your expert captains, Caius. But remember; if things go well, the men will not be coming back here. So choose your men carefully. Single men or others with no ties back here would be best, or even slaves as common seamen. I'll organise that fourth ship for you now and you should see what you can do about the crews.”

Septimia – March 814 AUC (61 A.D.)

Valerianus looked out to the land ahead. It was the same island they had first sighted on the original voyage. Their charts were reliable. They had not made any serious errors.

“Demetrios, make signals 'all ships to follow at one mile spaces'. Then make for the southern bay as our anchorage. It seemed less treacherous than the northern bay last year. Do you think it might be prudent to send a longboat ahead to check the passage, or will the crows nest lookout be enough?”

“I'll get my best man aloft, Caius. In these conditions that should be enough.” Demetrios went about his business.

All four captains attended the evening meal on the flagship that evening. Tarenos and Markos had also returned with their crews, and Loukas had command of the small fourth caravel, the same size as Markos'.

“Demetrios, Tarenos and Markos have been here before,” Valerianus said as he looked to his new captain. “But now you know, Loukas, what is meant by 'a special voyage'. We've been sent out to find new trading opportunities, new sources for goods, new markets for our goods.” He looked around the group as a whole. “Septimius has promised we will all be richly rewarded if this voyage finds those trading opportunities. So I intend to find them.

“Last year we worked our way to the north-west. We found that the islands were inhabited by savages, with nothing worth buying and nothing of value to buy our goods with. So this time we'll head south. If, as I expect, we find another string of islands, Demetrios and Loukas will sail down the western side and you others will chart them from the eastern side. I want to do this at a good pace, so don't waste time unless you see some sign of a permanent town or city. But even so, be as accurate as you can at that speed.

“If the two pairs get separated so that they don't see each other for more than five days, everyone is to turn back to the last place we set as a rendezvous point. If we're not back together after a day of waiting at that rendezvous, then we carefully follow the route of the missing pair. And I emphasise *carefully*. I don't want the second pair falling into the same difficulties as the first pair!” He looked around for emphasis. “Any questions?”

There was no movement at first, then Loukas sheepishly asked “And if we find a town, what should we do? I know I'll be with you so the question probably won't arise, but just in case?”

“Don't be afraid to ask sensible questions,” Valerianus smiled. “If you see something worth a closer look, then the smaller ship will go into port with a minimum crew while the other stands out to sea. The ship in port is to establish friendly contact if possible and come back out to sea within twenty-four hours or at least signal that all is well. Meanwhile the ship standing offshore must not enter port for any reason at all. If the other vessel doesn't come out or report convincingly that all is well, then the off-shore ship must try to link up with the other two so we can respond in an organised way.” He scanned his audience briefly. “We're not carrying men trained as marines for nothing,” he added, “but the ship that goes into port must not take any of these marines. They might be needed to rescue you.”

Three days later, on the fifth day of March, the flotilla sailed out of the bay and headed south. The chain of islands continued as expected. They were spaced closely enough for each new island further south to be sighted while still mapping the southern point of the previous one.

But twenty-four days later, at about 12 degrees north, the chain stopped abruptly. Landing parties were put ashore to climb the high hills near the southern tip but they returned to report no sign of more land. On a day where visibility was estimated to be in excess of seventy miles, this was not welcome news. Valerianus signalled for the fleet to put into one of the excellent sheltered anchorages on the southern shore of the last island. They were to repair and re-water while he convened another meeting.

"I am asking for your opinions, gentlemen," Valerianus opened the meeting. "We've been told to find either suppliers or markets, preferably both. What do you suggest we do? Loukas, you are the most junior. Here's your chance to shine."

Loukas looked around the tight cabin, barely big enough for the five of them to all fit in. "I haven't seen the other islands to the north that you plotted last year," he opened, "but I gather that they were not promising, either. So it would seem to me that one way is as good as another, except that if we head north we will have to spend a month in waters already travelled. But it does seem that all of these islands are part of one very large curve, an arc. To my mind, the choice is either to follow the arc to the south-west, or to give up on these islands altogether and head due west to try to find the main."

Valerianus nodded his appreciation, and then looked to Markos.

"I agree with Loukas, generally," Markos spoke. "But I see no reason to expect the mainland to be in the west rather than the south, or even in the north, but I take his point about wasting time. I would be inclined to head generally south-west, but spread ourselves as wide as possible, say ten miles apart, so we can see a wider strip of ocean as we go."

Valerianus shifted his eyes to Tarenos.

"Yes, to the south-west would seem most efficient," Tarenos agreed. "But how far should we go before we decide that we might have gone the wrong way? Another month? That would take us a second month to return, and in that time I don't want to face another of those monster storms, especially if we're ten miles apart and therefore out of sight of each other in one of those blows."

"All very good points," Demetrios commented. "I am inclined to take all of them into account. Let us head south-west. If visibility is good, we spread out. If we run into poor weather, we should close up again. And after sailing south-west for ten days, we then turn to the north-west until we regain this latitude. After that we can decide whether to go on or turn back for repairs and re-stocking on the islands we have already discovered."

The other three captains seemed to agree with this general plan, so Valerianus spoke next. "Has anyone a better proposal?" he asked.

"I'm with Demetrios," Tarenos answered. Loukas and Markos simply nodded.

"Then that's what we will do," Valerianus concluded. "Does anyone need more than one full day to prepare?" Heads were shaken. "Then the morning after tomorrow we set out. Thank you, gentlemen."

All that planning seemed like an anti-climax two days later. The ships had barely spread into their wide formation before land was sighted to the south at noon on the first day of sailing. Demetrios in the westernmost ship headed due south while the others continued south-west until they had converged with him. They reached the new coastline at dusk.

“I don't like the look of this coast, Caius,” Demetrios advised. “No inlets fit to take shelter, and no beaches to run up if we meet trouble. And look at the height of that land! I can imagine the wind funnelling along the coast if we get a big storm. And it seems to go on for a good distance, too. It's much bigger than the islands we have seen so far.”

“So you think this is the main?” Valerianus asked. Demetrios just shrugged. “So your suggestion?” Valerianus continued.

“Same as before. Two ships to the east, two to the west, and we might meet on the other side if it is an island. If it is bigger than that, we might decide to do something different.”

“Do you think it safe to anchor here?” Valerianus pressed.

“I would rather not,” Demetrios answered. Let's run to the west until we find somewhere safer and then we can meet and talk.”

“Yes, let's do that. We have a good moon tonight.” He looked out to the gibbous moon low in the east. “Make signals before it's too dark for the others to read them.”

Demetrios ordered the signal 'Follow me' to be made and then ordered the helm to starboard. Then he called for reduced sail. If there was something nasty out there just below the waterline, he didn't want to hit it too hard.

At first light the next morning he saw exactly what he wanted. There was an island some half-mile off the coast connected by a sand bar. There would be shelter in the lee, and a beach to run up on if he needed it. He tucked around to the west of the sandbank and dropped anchor. By the third hour the other ships were also anchored and the captains met again.

“If this is another island it's a big one,” Tarenos commented. “I could see that the coast extended at least fifty miles to the east of our landfall and we have travelled another fifty miles west since then.”

“Yes, at least as big as Crete,” Markos agreed. “But I saw no hint of a town, even though we had a good moon.”

“Who would build a town on a coast like this?” Tarenos asked. “No suitable place for a port, and with those mountains behind no worthwhile farmlands either.” Markos raised his eyebrows and nodded to concede that point. “Then we might still have to go some distance to find civilisation. Every land we see out here is rugged.”

“Gentlemen, what do we do now?” Valerianus called the meeting to order.

Loukas knew the procedure. The most junior was expected to speak first. “I suggest we split into two again, as we did for the run down the islands. If this is just a bigger island than the others we will meet on the other side. If not, we turn back in time to meet in that same anchorage on the southernmost island where we have just come from.” He looked to Markos.

“I agree,” Markos said and looked to Tarenos.

“Yes,” Tarenos said simply. Then he added “But if this is a mainland I think we should aim to return to the inlet in two months' time. That allows a month for rough

mapping before we return, and that should be time enough to cover well over a thousand miles, depending on weather. If we can't find anything in that distance then there is probably nothing to find.”

“Another reason for two months,” Demetrios cut in. “If the terrible storms we found last year are seasonal as you might expect, then I would like to be battered down by Quinctilis. That's when the big storms in the China Sea start up and my guess is that these are the same sort of thing.” There were murmurs of agreement.

Valerianus was not going to oppose anything all four of his captains agreed to. “Very well, that's what we will do. I'll go with Demetrios and Loukas to the west, Tarenos and Markos go east, and we will meet in the anchorage on the first day of Junius. If this is another island and we meet on the other side in a few days' time then we might feel silly to have made all these contingency plans that come to nothing. But better to be prepared!”

The western exploration became more encouraging from the first day. The coast revealed a few bays with sandy beaches that might serve to provide some shelter. Not quite harbours, but better than the barren and rocky coast of their first landfall. On the third day the coast turned suddenly to the south and then they found an opening a couple of miles wide that led into a huge bay. It took a whole day to sail down the northern shore for its length of thirty miles, and the next day to sail back up the southern shore. But still no sign of a town! The following day they found a maze of promontories and inshore islands that would provide shelter against the local storms, but again no civilised settlements.

After that the coast opened up a bit, with broad beaches and a low hinterland before another coastal range appeared. The general trend of the coast ran just north of west, and then changed into a pair of bulges running north at times before rolling away towards the west again.

On the 23 April the coast turned away to the south. After a day of sailing a mouth over a mile wide was seen leading into another large bay. This bay proved to be twenty-five miles long and up to nine miles wide. Another two days were spent investigating this bay but to no avail. This was obviously a mainland of some sort, but where were the people?

Valerianus was on the point of screaming his frustration. Still no sign of a town, even though there had been a couple of inlets very suitable to be used as ports. But now, with only twenty-eight days before the appointed meeting, he was thirteen degrees west of the rendezvous. The wind had been very steady and reliable, but it would still be a beat back into it. Demetrios had told him that they would be doing well to manage three miles an hour of distance made good if the wind stayed constant. That would mean over three hundred hours of sailing at full power. Of course, he could always adopt a policy of sailing at night if he were in clear waters, but that would be dangerous except at very slow speeds.

He dare not go any further, hoping for better winds on the way home. If anything he was already pushing his luck. “Yes, time to go home, Demetrios,” he agreed with his captain. “Take tomorrow to repair and refresh the water, and then make the trip as quickly as you can. If it helps, go well to the north of our charted coast so we can sail at

night. If we sight more land then we won't have time to chart it. We'll just note it for later."

The wind had come in from slightly south of due east over the last eight days, so Demetrios had been able to push slightly more eastwards than expected. He had also ordered Loukas in the smaller vessel to sail one mile ahead of him at night, with lights to show his position. With this way of pressing on he had been confident enough to sail at four miles per hour overnight, while doing eight miles per hour in daylight. Then, about noon on the eighth day, Loukas signalled that his lookout had reported land ahead. Demetrios' man on the crows nest confirmed the sighting. He drew close enough to inspect the land through his telescope. It was of low elevation, a low ridge instead of the mountainous islands he had come to expect. But there was no sign of any town or port, so he ordered a port tack to pull away from any possible shoals.

This long reach, maintained for five nights and days, had fallen well short of The Anchorage. But there were still fifteen days to spare, and the wind had now shifted back to almost dead east. Another island had been sighted to the far north-east in the morning of the fifth day of this leg, but no investigation had been made. It was simply noted on the chart. At dusk Valerianus discussed the options with Demetrios, and the decision was made. They had made good enough distance to pass to the west of the latest island sighting, so they should come around onto a starboard tack, to keep clear of the coast they had already plotted. Another couple of days on a north tack should set them for the final southern run onto the lee shores of the chain of islands already charted.

Valerianus was pleased to slip into The Anchorage on the twenty-second day of May, eight days ahead of the target. Perhaps he could have taken a few more days to chart further along the coast to the west, but that was hindsight speaking. Better to be home early than late! Demetrios set his crew to repairing the myriad of minor problems that develop during fifty days at sea, and the marines were sent out to hunt for some fresh meat. To be able to stretch the legs and climb a hill after all that time at sea!

Demetrios chose to anchor near the inland shore of an island at the mouth of The Anchorage, sheltered from the direct impact of any wind or heavy seas that might come through the entries to the basin. It also offered easy access to a sand beach in case another monster storm hit them.

Tarenos arrived back on the twenty-seventh of May, just as the roof was being placed on the first hut to be constructed on the west side of the Atlantic. "Are you serious?" he asked with a frown. "We would be a lot safer staying on the ships, where we can see the natives coming. If we start living ashore we could wake up one morning to find our throats cut."

"The natives won't come anywhere near us. They run into the forest as soon as we get close. All we find is their camps, sometimes with fish still on the fire," Demetrios answered.

"That might change if they realise we're here to stay," Tarenos warned. "They might be happy to stay out of our way if they think we'll just stay a few days and then go away like last time. But once they realise we're here for the long term they might decide on more active ways to get rid of us invaders."

Valerianus pondered this point. "Perhaps you're right, Tarenos. But we need somewhere as a base port. Here on this separate island rather than the main probably sends a good message to the natives. It shows we have no interest in interfering with them. But I'll start setting stronger guards from among the marines just to be safe. Then we'll play it as it comes."

Tarenos had also found nothing to justify a trading voyage. He had been surprised to pass two huge river deltas, with semi-fresh water well off the coast. These rivers must have huge catchments behind them, even bigger than the Senegal, but with no sign of any towns at their mouths. The caravels were not well-suited to exploring up rivers so no closer examination was made. Instead he decided to loop well out to sea and catch the Easterlies and sail full speed night and day across the open ocean. This had allowed him to explore some fifteen hundred miles, despite the easterlies in his face most of the time.

The first priority was for each of the four ships to have a complete copy of the logs and charts of the other three. Copying of these documents took five days.

While the scribes were busy with the documents another two long huts were completed. Even though the ships' carpenters were not trained as architects or engineers, they knew as sailors how much force a windstorm could exert and had seen for themselves the huge storms of last year. All three huts had been built on posts buried into the sand and with cross-members to prevent uplift during the monster storms. They were sited at least ten feet above wave run-up at high tide, and with their floors three feet above ground level to keep any pests out. The huts were well-braced against horizontal loads, and their roof timbers were tied down to the supporting piles.

In the meantime fishing and hunting for the local giant turtles provided a welcome relief from ship's rations, but there was no convenient source for red meat. The only animals found on the main island were small and generally arboreal, making them difficult to hunt and carrying insufficient meat to make it worth the trouble. Perhaps a few rams and a dozen ewes might be a good idea if ever they found anything to justify a trading post out here.

The weather grew warmer and more humid. By the end of Junius the minor repairs to the ships were complete and all gear had been checked and re-stowed. Five huts had been completed. Tarenos was becoming uneasy.

"Caius, the men are becoming lazy with nothing to do in the way of duties. This is not good for discipline."

"Yes. I've noticed a bit of fighting, too," Valerianus agreed. "They need something to distract them. Any ideas?"

"Perhaps we should take the time to chart this island properly. Even if a bit of a storm comes up, we will still have time to get back safely," Tarenos suggested. "We might even find a better anchorage than this. We were a bit rushed the first time through."

"Let's see what Demetrios says," Valerianus decided. "He might have the same problems with his crews."

Demetrios had already seen the same tendency and had taken his own action to keep the men busy. He had ordered more turtle hunts to provide the men with some sport even though his crews now had ample meat. He had also sent many of his men to a

stream at the head of their anchorage to build a weir that would make re-watering more efficient and convenient. He had not drawn from it yet. He wanted to see if the natives might poison it first. The ship's cats would get first taste, he had decided.

“Excellent idea, Tarenos!” he exclaimed when the idea was put to him. “But I suggest you take out only one ship at a time,” he continued. “Just in case a big storm does blow up, I don't want to risk two ships. Just stay close to the island so you can run up onto a beach if you need to and then walk back to here.”

Tarenos had been away for ten days when the wind started to swing around more from the north and pick up strength. At Demetrios' suggestion Valerianus called the two other captains to a meeting.

Demetrios was sombre. “If this wind stays from the north, then we might be safer to pull into the end of the inlet and anchor in the lee of the high land. The big difficulty will be sailing there into the face of this wind. There's not much room to tack up there, and if this wind continues to strengthen we could be caught half-way.” He looked to his two junior colleagues for a moment. “And we discovered last year that these winds never stay in the same quarter anyway. I suggest we beach the ships again. At least we know now to weight the windward end if the wind swings around.”

“It will give the men something to do as well,” Markos agreed. “Something real, instead of make-work.” Loukas simply nodded.

The beaching was done smoothly and without damage as the wind swung around from north to east and started to weaken. Despite the effort of beaching and then unbeaching the ships over the next couple of days the cheer of the men improved markedly. Far from being a waste of time and effort, the exercise had given them purpose and re-inforced their self-confidence. Four days after the height of the wind Tarenos sailed into The Anchorage in good repair.

“How did you manage in the storm, Tarenos?” Valerianus asked as he welcomed the sailor aboard.

“No problems, Caius,” Tarenos replied with a smile. “We were charting an excellent harbour as the wind started coming from the north so we just stayed there at anchor.” Tarenos looked around the Anchorage. “Probably a better harbour than this one, more sheltered but much smaller. It's just around the south-western corner if you want to have a look at it. Give the boys some exercise.”

“That's not a bad idea, Tarenos,” Valerianus agreed. “In fact, I'm starting to think that shutting down during the storm season might have been a bad decision. The men perked up enormously when they had something to do instead of sitting around bored. Perhaps we should get back to mapping the islands more thoroughly, looking for good storm shelters as we go just in case we need to slip into one quickly.”

The other three captains eagerly endorsed this change of plan. They knew from the previous year that these big storms gave at least a couple of day's warning and that land would never be more than one day away. Time to get busy again!

It took ten days to get back to Septimia, the name they had given to that first island discovered and charted. Four good ports had been found on the way, and plotted in some detail for future reference. Dusk closed in as the extreme northern extension of the southern bay in Septimia was being sounded and plotted, with the wind starting to rise

and veer to the north. The ships were spread and multiple anchors put out to cover for the wind to veer even further. Morning broke to driving rain coming in from the north, but the wind lost strength throughout the day. By evening it had dropped to little more powerful than the usual brisk easterly in strength, although it was coming in from the north-west. By the next evening it had dropped to a gentle easterly.

After checking for damage and a few minor repairs the fleet set out to the north. More safe anchorages were found. These were charted and plotted complete with soundings for refuge in case of storms. Such havens were found regularly with none being more than a hundred miles from the last. That would be only one day's sailing under a rising breeze, even if a ship had to run before the wind to a further anchorage rather than fighting upwind to a nearer one.

“Blast! That looks like the end of our breakfast egg supply!” Valerianus said with chagrin. All six hens which had been brought on board for this voyage had died now. The first had been a few days after they first set out from Septimia, where the cages had been set out on the grass so the hens could eat the fresh vegetation and insects. Then another had died a few days later, and another couple a few more days after that. Eventually the sixth had also died. Although a luxury rather than a staple, the eggs were good for morale among the crew. On each ship each man took his turn at an egg, from Valerianus himself down to the lowest seaman without exception.

“Oh, well, at least I will have my cabin to myself now!” he smiled. The cages for the hens had been stowed in Valerianus' cabin to protect the eggs from pilfering. “But why did they die, Solon? Is there a problem with their feed? If so, then we should keep their grain separate from the men's stores.”

“It doesn't look like poisoning, Caius,” the physician answered. “If it were, they would have all died together, and soon after they were first fed from their own sack. No, it is more likely that one of them came on board with some sickness, and infected the others, one after another. That would fit the timing of their deaths better than poison.”

Valerianus thought for a moment. “If we take two birds from each of the other ships to share the eggs around, do you think the sickness might still be present here?”

“Perhaps, Caius, but it's hard to say. Why risk it?” Solon answered. “Besides, it might not be good for morale on the other ships to cut their egg ration, just because we couldn't take care of our own birds.”

“Yes, you're right,” Valerianus agreed. “If we find anyone worth trading with we will have to set up our own farms over in these islands and breed up a supply of any animals we might want. One more point to keep in mind.”

Demetrios stuck his head into Caius' cabin. “The wind is picking up again, Caius,” he warned, “and the cloud cover is increasing. I'd like to stay in the next half-decent anchorage, just in case.” Valerianus put down his pen and rose from his chair.

“You're the expert, Demetrios,” Valerianus answered agreeably. “I'll come on top anyway, just to stretch the legs. I've been feeling a bit off-colour lately and the air will do me good.”

Valerianus looked out to the east as he reached the top of the flight of steps. Yes, the usual puffy clouds that indicated the easterlies had become a solid blanket. Another big storm was coming.

“Has the wind swung around yet?” he asked.

“Only a point,” Demetrios answered, “but it's gathering strength.” Valerianus looked to the sails. They had been reefed slightly. That’s probably why he hadn't noticed the difference from his cabin. Or maybe it was just the lethargy that he had felt lately. He shrugged.

“We still should have at least a day or two,” he suggested to Demetrios. “The wind always swings to the north before it gets really big. Have you seen any signal from Tarenos?”

“Not yet,” Demetrios answered, slightly annoyed that Valerianus was asking for a second opinion rather than accepting the advice from the Senior Captain. “I'll signal him to ask his opinion.” The flags for 'T to report' rattled up the halyard, and Demetrios barked an order to change heading and de-power the sails to let Tarenos pull alongside. He looked out to the third ship in line for a response.

It took less than a minute. Tarenos signalled “Alongside or anchorage?” Demetrios smiled. Tarenos had guessed his purpose, and was already giving his answer by way of a hint. Demetrios read the flags to Valerianus, and added “I think he agrees already. Should I answer 'Anchorage'?”

“Yes, you’re right,” Valerianus conceded.

Demetrios re-powered the sails and set course for the nearer of two gaps in the shore to the north. The reply to Tarenos was sent.

This bay was one of the better harbours they had found. A narrow passage half a mile long broadened out to provide an anchorage half a mile wide and more than that in length. The headland on the right proved to be an island itself, but it came so close to the mainland that it offered excellent protection. Demetrios turned the slight corner to the right before dropping anchor. From this point land of at least three hundred feet elevation provided shelter against the wind in every direction and the passage out to sea was blocked by the eastern headland. There was a beach to the sheltered eastern end of the bay fit for careening if required.

Tarenos dropped a longboat even as his anchor cable was still running out, so eager was he to report promptly. He was on Demetrios' deck even as his first officer was still securing his ship.

“Greetings, Caius,” Tarenos acknowledged Valerianus first, but his main interest was Demetrios. “You're concerned about the weather, Demetrios?” he asked.

“Right first guess,” Demetrios replied with a smile.

“Then I won't waste time,” Tarenos continued. “I recommend we beach the ships. This wind isn't swinging like the other storms, and in the China Sea that means it'll be very strong, and then change direction suddenly. I don't want to be caught unprepared.”

“You think it's that serious, Tarenos?” Valerianus asked.

“The clouds show that it's a storm coming, not just a stronger-than-usual easterly,” Tarenos was deadly serious. “I think we're in for a pounding, and I'd like my ship on the beach to the east before the wind is too strong to haul it. We'll be pulling against the wind, you know!”

Demetrios looked to Valerianus, who simply nodded. “Then do it!” he said.

Demetrios snapped into action. Rather than wasting time with orders in person, he ordered the flags up the halyard. 'All ships to haul to beach.' His first officer gave orders for a longboat to take a cable ashore and seamen were ordered to man the capstan.

Others were sent below to shift stores from the bow to the stern, to allow a better run up the sand. Yet others were sent to the pumps, to remove as much bilge water as possible so the ship would ride just a little bit higher and therefore be able to be pulled further up the beach.

The other three ships were also bustling with activity. Valerianus guessed that all the captains had been expecting this. He should trust Demetrios' judgement more, he concluded. He walked over to his Chief Captain to apologise.

"Demetrios, I shouldn't try to second-guess you in matters of seamanship. I'm sorry I didn't follow your judgement immediately."

Demetrios took this graciously. "But you did, sir, and I appreciate your trust! From the moment I reported to you, you permitted us to make for harbour." He smiled warmly.

"Thank you, Demetrios," Valerianus responded. "Now if you'll excuse me, I am not feeling well. Take control!"

The tide was still rising. All the captains wanted to take full advantage of this to get their ships as far up the beach as possible before it turned. The wind seemed not as strong as it had on the open waters but that was probably thanks to the high ground behind the beach, Demetrios thought to himself. We will see what tomorrow brings.

Demetrios noted the difficulty the men were having pulling into the wind. Then he recalled Markos damaging a cross-beam during the first expedition. Would it be wise to take down the cross-beams, if this storm is expected to be nasty?

He called across to his first officer, "Get the cross-beams on deck and secured! And if the others don't notice and do the same themselves within the next five minutes, signal them then."

All four ships were on the beach by dusk, with rigging secured on deck and ballast re-arranged as the tide turned. The wind continued to strengthen, but turned only slowly towards the north-east. By morning the wind was so strong that it was dangerous to go onto the deck. Then what Demetrios feared started to happen. He knew from experience that even in sheltered harbours, tides during storms tended to rise higher than during fine weather. This morning high tide had come up higher than the previous evening tide and was starting to lift the hull, bouncing it on the sand below.

He had anticipated this possibility. As in the earlier storms, all perishable material had been placed higher in the hull, out of reach of any bilge water.

"Open the seacocks!" Demetrios ordered. "I want three feet of water in the bilge!"

Water started to fill the hull. The vessel stopped moving under the effect of the wind and waves. Above decks the wind continued to build, shrieking as Demetrios had never heard before. There were banging noises from time to time on the deck overhead, and the constant drumming of rain.

Demetrios checked in on Valerianus. As he opened the cabin door the stink struck him like a hammer in the face. The Expedition Commander was wrapped in blankets, glistening with sweat while shivering and moaning softly, and the bedside pail was full of flux and vomit.

"I'll get the ship's physician here immediately, Caius," he said firmly. "You should have sent for help!"

"You have all been too busy, Demetrios," Valerianus mumbled lowly.

Demetrios turned to leave, closing the door behind him. It took only a shouted call down in the lower deck for the physician to appear beside him. "Tend to Caius, Solon," he ordered. "And take a fresh bucket and plenty of water with you. He looks terrible!"

What Demetrios had thought impossible continued to happen. The wind became even stronger throughout the day. He drained some of the seawater out of the bilge as the tide retreated to reduce the outwards pressure on the hull, and then re-admitted it on the evening tide. But even with three feet of water he sensed that the hull was starting to move again.

"Another foot of bilge water!" he ordered, and the seacocks were opened again. "This time just leave them open!" he roared, afraid that anything less would not be able to resist the force of that wind. Biscuits and fresh water were passed around again. There was no way he would allow cooking in this confined hull. That would risk not only fire, but also suffocation as all the ports were battened tight. Some of the men were starting to fray. He smiled and spoke encouragingly as the wind grew even shriller and the thumping on the deck sounded like the timbers could give way at any time.

And then it stopped! In just a minute the shriek of the wind disappeared completely! The men looked at each other in the light of the three candles Demetrios had allowed to burn. Three just in case one went out, so the second could be used to try to re-light it without risking their only source of light.

"Jason, I'm going to take a look," Demetrios said to his first officer. He climbed the ladder and unfastened the hatch. There was only the sound of the slap of the waves on the hull. There was not even the sound of rain. He lifted the hatch clear, and there was only a gentle breeze. He stepped up the ladder further, and then onto the deck.

There was debris everywhere, branches of trees ripped off the windward land by the wind and caught by the rails and steps in the deck. He scanned the bare masts and then the cross-beams lashed to the deck. Nothing seemed to be damaged in so far as the indirect light from the moon behind the clouds allowed him to judge. Then he looked over to the other ships. The mainmast on the smallest vessel had been brought down, probably by impact from a flying branch. Marcos seems to be a magnet for that sort of thing! Demetrios mused. The other small vessel under Loukas showed just a chink of light. Would that be coming through a gap in the hull, where a plank or two might have sprung? It looked like it had been bounced on the sand a few times at a high tide, until it was damaged and flooded. The larger ship under Tarenos seemed sound. Then Demetrios looked up to study the clouds. What he saw took his breath away.

There was a circle of almost clear sky overhead! Some stars were showing through! But all around that circle was a ring of clouds writhing as if in agony in the pale moonlight shining from behind them.

The circle of clear sky was moving. The southern edge of those tortured clouds was advancing on him. Then within the space of a few heartbeats, the wind started to re-gather its strength. Demetrios quickly dropped back down the hatchway as it started to howl in at him, but this time from the west. Almost the full force of the wind had returned by the time he dogged the hatch above him. The debris on the deck clattered and clunked as it was grabbed by the wind and pushed to the opposite corner of the deck above their heads.

“It's coming from the opposite direction now!” he bellowed, trying to be heard above the din. “But don't worry! The island will protect us from the heavy seas!”

Despite his re-assuring smile to the men below decks with him, Demetrios could not help but be anxious about the strength of the wind screaming across the deck above him. It seemed even stronger than before the interlude! Or was that just because it had built more quickly?

Biscuits and water were passed around again as new candles were lit off the stubs of the old ones. These six-hour candles were the only way of measuring time available to them, confined as they were in the dark of the hull. The wind seemed to be easing ever so slightly. Or were they just growing accustomed to the shriek of it?

By morning the wind was still ferocious, but was dropping noticeably. The open seacocks continued to ensure the ship was grounded at high tide but not liable to explode from the pressure of contained water at low tide. At the next change of candles Demetrios felt the wind had dropped enough to permit a quick glimpse outside. But first he had a rope tied to the inner handle of the hatch and anchored to a rib, in case the wind snatched at it as soon as the catch was let slip.

He eased the hatch up a handspan, to allow a crack of dull grey light in. A torrent of rain also came in, driven horizontally by the wind. That was enough to suggest the wind was now from the south-west. But as his men pulled on the rope to hold it against the wind uplift, it was clear that the deck was still a dangerous place.

The wind continued to moderate through the remainder of the day. Another peek was taken a candle-and-a-half later. The hatch required much less restraint against the wind which was still driving rain in from the south-west.

Another inspection was attempted after lighting what everyone had come to think of as the Morning Candles and distribution of food and water. This revealed a dull grey morning, with the wind strong but not overpowering. The rain had eased. Demetrios ventured out for another inspection.

Apart from the debris all over the deck, there seemed nothing out of order. Tarenos' ship to starboard looked in good order, too. Loukas seemed more side-on than he remembered it. Perhaps it had broached when the reverse wind built so suddenly. Demetrios could not help but remember that chink of light during his earlier inspection. Markos seemed in good condition except for the fallen mast.,

“Right, men! Time for a bit of house cleaning!” he shouted down the hatchway. “Bring up the axes and saws!” The crew climbed out onto the deck, glad to be in fresh air again after three nights and two days below decks.

“Just get the rubbish cleared first,” he ordered. “We might need to wait for the others to repair before we go anywhere.”

Even as he was speaking he saw Marcos come onto his own deck and wave a greeting. Demetrios waved back.

Within an hour there were men clearing debris on the decks of the other two ships as well. Demetrios waited until after noon when the tide had retreated enough to leave the ships high before signalling 'Captains to Report'. He smiled with amusement as he pondered that there would not be many times that order resulted in the officers walking to the meeting rather than using a longboat!

Valerianus was in a very poor state, glistening with sweat even as he shivered. He demanded total darkness to reduce an agonising headache, while coughing constantly and vomiting every time an attempt was made to give him food or water. He was in no condition to leave his bunk.

Demetrios took control of the meeting as senior captain.

“My ship appears in good condition, sir,” Tarenos reported first. “I'd like to slip it back into the bay as soon as we can get the rigging back up, to test for hidden leaks.” He looked to Marcos.

“I need a new mainmast, sir. That will take a few days. Also, we were rocked around a bit when the wind came from the opposite direction. That threw our cargo around and caused some minor internal damage before I flooded the bilge to settle her. I'd like to re-float the ship while waiting for the mast, just to check watertightness.”

“I was taken by surprise by the first morning high tide, sir,” Loukas confessed. “We were lifted and dropped onto the sand a few times and that parted a few of our hull planks. Once we were flooded and settled no further damage was done. But I want to be able to check every plank and every lap in the hull timbers before I re-float. That might need the best part of a month to check and repair.”

“So it looks like Loukas is the critical repair here,” Demetrios summarised. “I'll send my carpenters over to help. Tarenos, if you could spare any help for Marcos, please do so. Now let's talk about that storm before we part. Tarenos, you compared these to the China Sea storms you've experienced. Give us your wisdom.”

Tarenos nodded his appreciation for the introduction. “Yes, these storms are exactly like the China Sea storms, even down to there being a few minutes of utter calm at their very centre. So I suggest that we make our plans on that basis.

“Experience in China is that the very worst of the winds are just before and after the central calm, when the wind then comes in from the exact opposite direction. If you're in a place where the centre of the storm misses you then the winds speeds are slower and the wind changes direction more gradually. By comparing records from different places during these storms it's been found that these storms are huge and circular, going around from right to left as you look out from the centre, and with the strongest winds close to the very centre. It's also been found that tides come up much higher during these storms. Sometimes it's only a foot or so, but sometimes several feet.

“So if you're in the open sea, try to sail as quickly as you can with the wind coming in directly over your starboard beam. That way you will be sailing directly away from the strongest winds.

“If you're in harbour, be aware that the wind will swing around, and the more severe the wind the faster it changes direction. So be prepared to allow your ship to swing at anchor with plenty of sea room around. But we've found over the last couple of years that it's even better still to beach her if you can and flood the bilge to stabilise against high tides. What I do on my ship is get her as far up the beach as possible and then just leave the seacocks open for the bilge level to rise and fall with the tides.

“Most important of all, don't ever try to use the central calm to do anything that will take more than a couple of moments! By the time you get your crew on deck it will be too late! The wind will rise from almost nothing to absolute full force very suddenly. If

you've left yourself half-way through some manoeuvre you will be vulnerable.” Tarenos looked to Demetrios. “Does anything else need to be said?”

“If you think of any more please share it,” Demetrios answered. “I’ve also adopted the practice of leaving seacocks open. It works!”

“Oh, another thing,” Tarenos had a thought. “These storms in China tend to move from east to west, sometimes south-east to north-west, before turning to the north. They never move further south as they travel. So if the wind is coming from the north and you have to run for it, then south-west is probably the best heading. If the wind is coming from the west, then south-east is probably best. But if the wind is from the north-east, then you might be right in its path. Run somewhere between west and south-west as fast as you can.”

There was no more discussion. “Right, men! Let's get to work, and meet two hours before sunset each day, starting tomorrow!”

The report from Loukas was worse than he had expected. The bouncing on the sand had not only sprung a few planks. It had also cracked four of the main ribs in the ships frame. Ironically, if the planking had parted more easily and earlier, that might have saved the ribs! To replace these ribs would be almost as involved as re-building the ship, and to try to merely re-inforce them would leave the ship brittle, vulnerable to catastrophic failure if put under load again. Reluctantly Demetrios agreed to distribute the stores and the men among the remaining three sound hulls. The ships' crews scavenged from the hulk whatever might be useful and could be carried. Then he went down to Valerianus' cabin to report progress.

The cannibalising of Loukas' ship solved the problem of finding a new mainmast for Marcos, whose ship was almost the exact same size, and the cross-beams were also collected and stowed. The rest of the hulk was hauled further up the beach, beyond the tide line, just in case it might be useful one day. By the twelfth day of Sextilis all repairs had been completed and sea-trials had confirmed that Marcos' hull had not been damaged. Plans were made for the reduced fleet to set off at first light the next morning.

It was late afternoon as the three ships pulled into Machos Bay. Valerianus still felt terrible. For eight days he had shivered even while soaking his bedsheets with sweat. Every muscle in his body ached and his throat felt raw. The headaches and coughing had been constant, the nausea and diarrhoea recurrent. But over the last few days these symptoms had receded and he felt well enough to pay his respects to the local chieftain. A friend in the middle of the unknown should be treasured!

He ordered a longboat to be lowered. Remembering what he took to be the local courtesies he ordered a drum to be placed on board and took a new chiton from his chest. He also took the glazed krater he had been given last visit.

He stood at the bow of the longboat as it was rowed up the creek, the drum beating slowly. He held the krater out in front of him to show any observers that he had been accepted into their village as a friend. The solemn effect of this was interrupted by coughing fits from time to time but the meaning was obvious.

This had the desired effect. By the time the longboat had tied up at the pier Machozapingi was waiting for them at the landward end with a group of other men

standing behind him. Machozapingi was wearing the silk chiton. He was obviously an intelligent politician to consider that gesture.

Valerianus ordered the men to remain in the boat, told one of the men to drape the new chiton over his forearms and stepped onto the pier. He still held the krater out in front of his chest as though a sacred emblem. "Machos," he called to his host before being gripped by another fit of coughing. Eventually this passed and after a slight pause he patted his own chest, saying "Val," his own name as he had given it at their previous meeting.

Machozapingi smiled broadly and held his arms in that formal pose of their first meeting. With upper arms by sides, forearms horizontal, palms up he responded "Wal."

Valerianus approached at a slow walk, smiling broadly and dropping his own arms into that formal pose, the krater in his right hand, the new chiton draped over his left forearm. Machozapingi also strode towards his guest with slow dignity. They met on the pier, and Machozapingi took Valerianus' left hand in his own right, and touched his own left hand against the back of Valerianus' right. He smiled again and spoke a sentence, presumably of greeting. Valerianus smiled in return. "It is good to see you again," he said in Latin, fully realising that not a word of it would be understood and then was seized by another bout of coughing.

Machozapingi stepped forward and to one side and turned so that he was standing beside Valerianus. He called out to the gathered men as though making a formal announcement. The men responded in unison with a greeting. Machozapingi then gestured with his palm to move forward and started walking beside his guest.

The group moved to the same meeting-hut Valerianus had entered on his first visit and all sat on their mats. But Valerianus waited until all others were seated lest he seem presumptuous and then presented the new chiton to Machozapingi. Machozapingi stood to accept it and then turned to say something to the woman waiting with the pitcher. The woman bowed her head briefly and then walked over to stand before Valerianus who fell into another coughing fit.

Valerianus recovered his composure and paused. If he offered the krater back, would this be seen as a cancellation of friendship? Even after another gift had been presented? Or should he hold out the krater for it to be filled by this woman? The woman lifted the pitcher slightly, as though expecting the krater to be presented to her. That was hint enough. Valerianus held it out to be filled and the woman poured the juice into it.

Then Valerianus looked to his right. Machos doesn't seem to expect me to pass it to him, Valerianus thought to himself. So he took a short sip himself, and then saw Machozapingi's right hand rise in expectation of the krater being passed. He offered it to the chief, cradling it in both hands as he did so. Machozapingi smiled as he accepted it just in time to avoid the contents being spilled by another series of coughs. The chieftain took a sip himself and then passed it on. The krater passed around the circle and Valerianus desperately tried to recall what to do when it was returned to him. Then he remembered!

The man to his left sipped and then handed him the krater. Valerianus smiled and then drank the remaining juice. Just as in the last time this was the signal for the end of the formalities. The men rose and drifted away. Valerianus also rose, smiled and nodded respectfully to the chief and started for the door. Machozapingi also rose and walked

beside him to the pier, his left hand placed comfortingly on Valerianus' back and his eyes showing genuine sympathy for his guest's discomfort as he was doubled over by more coughing on the way. As they reached the longboat Machozapingi said something and adopted what Valerianus called the 'greeting pose'. Valerianus turned to face him. He carefully adopted the greeting pose and said "Until we meet again, Machos," smiling as he spoke. Then, after an infinitesimal pause in case there was some other formality Machozapingi wished to observe, he turned to the longboat and stepped aboard. Machozapingi stood watching and smiling as the boat pushed off and oars were deployed.

The decision this time was to follow the coast in the other direction. The fleet set course to the south-west at first light the next morning. The navigators were becoming more adept at plotting on the run, leaving enough redundancies in their observations to resolve any major misfits and recognise errors. Star sightings were made every night if possible to continually re-establish latitude and hopefully longitude. But they were not too concerned about accuracy except in so far as it affected their main concern, the search for a trading partner and the location of safe ports in case of storms.

One more such haven was found fifty miles along the coast as the sun was dropping to the west. The ships filed into it and dropped anchors, planning to spend the next day sounding and charting this bay. The surrounding land was low in elevation and looked suitable for farming, but there was still no sign of a town or a port. By 20 Sextilis they had found and charted two more suitable inlets further west. On 22 Sextilis the coast turned sharply to the north. One circular bay about half a mile in diameter was found, but not investigated because of the proximity of better shelters on the southern coast. By sunset it was obvious that they had completed the circumnavigation of the island which the first expedition had hoped might have been a continental mainland.

The morning of 23 Sextilis was spent refreshing their water barrels and the fleet set off to the west before noon. More land became visible on the western horizon just before sunset that afternoon. The pattern of islands was continuing.

"Should we go to the north or the south, Caius?" Demetrios asked. "With only three ships left, I wouldn't like to split up again."

"Quite right, Demetrios," Valerianus answered. "We don't have that luxury any more." Valerianus thought for a moment. "We've been disappointed to the south and the big reach back from the south-west gave no reason to expect that to change. I think we should follow this coast to the north. Do you see any reasons why not?" Valerianus was particularly conscious of giving his Captain every chance to speak his mind. Demetrios had proven before that Big Storm that he knew better than the nominal Expedition Leader how to read the signs.

"That sounds good to me, Caius," Demetrios agreed. "And if we do find someone to trade with then the further north he is, the easier and quicker the return journey." Demetrios squinted as he stared into the setting sun. "Could I suggest that we keep sailing through the night with reduced sail? There's a good sea running, so there should be ample warning if we're heading into shoals."

"Do that, Demetrios," Valerianus agreed.

Demetrios immediately started giving orders to his First Officer for signals to be made. Soon the flags were rattling up the halyards. Lamps were lit on the poop deck and

bow so the ships could keep in close touch through the night, and the sails were reduced. Valerianus could see the same activities on Tarenos' ship, but Marcos kept full sail up and started to reach out to the north.

“You’re sending Marcos to the front?” Valerianus asked.

“Yes. If someone does come to grief, better for it to be the smallest ship. We won't all fit onto the survivors very comfortably if we lose one of the big ships. I've ordered two miles an hour during night sailing, at one-mile spaces.” Valerianus left the poop deck and walked to the bow for a better view of this new land. Would this be the mainland at last? he wondered as he studied the low coast. At least it was a flat land. It looked suitable for cultivation and therefore suitable for a civilised society.

He looked over to see that Marcos was almost a mile away now, and still under full sail. Then he saw activity on deck. Marcos was reducing sail now that he had established his one-mile lead. He felt Demetrios adjust the ship's heading to follow. Another glance over his right shoulder told him that Tarenos had also reduced his sail and was slowly dropping further behind.

The three ships wallowed along at barely two miles an hour through the night, with lookouts staring into the seas ahead looking for any phosphorescence that might suggest a hidden reef or shoal. Two hours after midnight Marcos gibed from a starboard reach back to port to approach land by sunrise.

First light showed land some six miles to the south-west. Marcos remained in the lead as he pulled on more sail to approach to within a mile of the coast. Demetrios and Tarenos also put up full sail but angled towards the west to intercept Marcos further along the coast. No significant havens were found as they plodded along the coast, nor any sign of a town. An hour before sunset Demetrios signalled for the fleet to anchor in a wide, shallow bay some seventy miles along this new coast. More land, probably another island, could be seen eight or ten miles to the north, but this seemed the better coast to follow for the moment. Valerianus had decided that he would rather anchor at night if safe to do so, rather than risk missing a good anchorage or a sign of civilisation.

And so the exploration continued. The island sighted that first night at anchor proved to be a headland attached to the main island, enclosing a bay thirty miles long and eight miles wide. There was one possible safe anchorage near the mouth on the northern shore, but there was little joy found as the search for a trading partner continued. More protected inlets were found, the most amenable on the last day of Sextilis as the coast dipped away to the south. This bay was charted and sounded and water barrels were refreshed.

It was discovered almost immediately that the turn of the coast to the south was not just a local deviation. The curve continued around and to the east until the ships could not sail close enough to the wind to follow it. Having already found an adequate anchorage if needed, there was little taste for tacking into the easterly to examine so unpromising a coast too closely. Valerianus was impatient with the thought of beating back into the wind, all for the sake of charting the south coast of an island which already had proven to be a disappointment. But this was the middle of storm season, and he had even less appetite for launching his fleet four days into the deep blue only to be trapped by another monster storm. There will be time for that in the new year, he comforted himself as he ordered Demetrios to continue mapping. Demetrios did not seem as

disappointed as Valerianus. Perhaps his caution is well-founded, Valerianus thought to himself.

Five days later the line of the coast took a turn to the west again. Maybe this was a mainland after all! They were already well to the west of their return reach in the previous Spring and they had only just missed this coast on the way back to the rendezvous at The Anchorage.

This westward line continued for two days before another curve to the south became unmistakable. There were a couple bays that might be better than nothing in a storm but the better anchorage only one day's reach to the north would be worth running for, so these new bays were not charted. Then came another turn back to the east, and more work beating up into the wind.

But there was at least some reward this time. On the 12th day of September they found a long, narrow inlet between high ridges either side. This had no beach large enough to careen, but the shelter from the wind was quite good. A whole day was spent taking soundings and preparing charts. Another deep bay just around the eastern headland was charted and sounded the next day.

The following day another promising bay was sighted as the fleet approached close, an hour before sunset. The ships entered and dropped anchor in a bay with a barrier island providing protection against heavy seas from the south-west. In the fading light could be seen a beach tucked around the corner from the south-eastern headland, completely protected from all directions.

This bay was about two miles square, but still provided good high ground protection against winds from most directions, enough to ensure that a beached ship should be reasonably secure. A full day and the following morning were spent charting and sounding. But the wind started to build and swing around throughout that morning, coming more from the north.

Demetrios signalled for Tarenos and Marcos to join him. They arrived on the flagship two hours after noon. By this time the tell-tale blanket of heavy clouds was piling in from the north.

“Onto the beach, Demetrios?” Tarenos asked as soon as he stepped aboard.

“I think so, Tarenos. What do you say, Marcos?”

“We can't afford to lose another ship, gentlemen. The beach it is! Luckily the tide is still coming in so we should manage to secure everything before dark,” Marcos commented.

“Well, that was a short meeting,” Tarenos said as he turned back to the ladder.

Beaching the ships was so much easier this time, with the strong northerly assisting rather than hindering. The rear sail and rigging were dismantled and stowed as each ship approached the shore cautiously, playing out a cable to an anchor offshore until the crunch of sand under the keel could be heard. All moveable weight was moved high and to the stern to lift the bow higher and the mainsail was deployed tentatively to gain more thrust. Then the capstan was manned to drag the hull as high as possible until the tide had clearly turned. Then all hands were put to dropping the mainsail and dismantling the rigging as quickly as possible in the deepening gloom.

As expected, the wind built through the night as the men huddled below decks. By now everyone knew the procedure. All seacocks were left open as a matter of routine. The wind built slowly throughout the night.

By morning the wind was strong, but not yet dangerously so. Demetrios ventured onto the deck and noted that the wind was still from the north. Tarenos' words came back to him; if the wind does not swing, that usually means that the centre of the storm is coming straight at you. But it seemed to be building so slowly! Did this mean that they might be pummelled for days on end when the centre finally did walk over them? He was grateful that at least the rain had not hit them yet.

By evening the wind was still from the north, but not noticeably stronger. The rain had come, but was in bands of squalls rather than a deluge.

The wind strength could be heard to be waning through the night. An inspection at first light revealed little debris and a wind from the north-west that was no longer dangerous.

“Right, men!” Demetrios bellowed down the hatch. “Time to get some fresh air! A bit of house-keeping needs to be done!”

By evening the rain had cleared and the wind dropped away almost completely before settling back into the usual easterly. All ships were reported undamaged, and would be dragged off the beach on the morning tide.

This bay looked promising, Demetrios thought to himself. It had been eight days since leaving behind the last anchorage where they had seen out the minor storm, and not one genuinely safe haven had been seen since. Admittedly those eight days had been slow because of charting the coast and working into the wind. There was little more than two hundred miles of straight-line distance back to that haven, so they could still run downwind and reach it in one day and night of full sail if they needed to. So there was no risk of being caught unprotected. But he would rather not concede all that ground into the wind if it could be avoided.

“Take us in, Piso,” he called to his helmsman. “We should be able to make it on this tack,” he judged, and called for the sheets to be hauled slightly tighter as the bow came slightly higher into the wind. “Signal ‘Follow me’ to the others.”

This bay consisted of two basins. The outer was a bit more than a mile wide and almost a mile long, opening into an inner basin about a mile in diameter. The southern shore of both basins was a chain of sandy beaches with low rolling hills behind. Probably sandhills, Demetrios thought to himself.

The routine was polished by now. As soon as anchors were dropped the longboats were lowered and their crews started taking bearings and soundings, plotting the shape of the inner basin's bottom. The longboats from Tarenos' ship did the same to the outer basin, but only in enough detail to chart a safe channel.

Tarenos invited himself onto the flagship as sunset approached. “This looks a better haven than most,” he commented. “Even if a ship is driven off her anchors, the leeward shore is sandy,” he nodded to the south and west.

“Assuming the wind is from the north,” Valerianus commented.

“The big ones usually start from the east or the north,” Tarenos continued. “If a ship survives the first half of the blow then it should manage the second half without too

much trouble. The harbour opening is to the north-west, and we know there's land only fifteen miles away in that direction. Not enough fetch for the seas to build up too high." "Even without that this bay is too shallow for a heavy sea to penetrate," Demetrios commented. "The swells would break as waves in the outer basin."

"So we have another bolt-hole if we need it. That's good," Valerianus summarised. "Do either of you see any need to linger?"

"There's something wrong about these lands, Caius," Tarenos addressed Valerianus. "So many anchorages, and we know from Machos that these people can build good-sized canoes. So why are there no towns on the waterfront, and none of these harbours being used for trade? Even if they are only trading farm goods?"

"I don't know, Tarenos," Valerianus answered. "Do you have any ideas?"

"I don't know either, Caius," Tarenos shook his head. "But such a rich land! Look at the forests! Everything grows so luxuriantly! And there's ample food to be gained from the sea. Why are there so few settlements? There must be something that makes these lands dangerous, or they would be filled with people."

"Warfare, perhaps?" Demetrios suggested.

Valerianus curled a lip in doubt. "Warfare over what?" he asked. "There's more than enough empty territory around here without needing to take any from each other. And Machos didn't seem all that scared of us. Our ships must have looked huge and threatening to someone who had never seen anything larger than a canoe before."

The conversation tailed off as the three men looked towards the southern shore. Then a sound on the far beam took their attention. Marcos was coming on board.

"Did I miss a signal?" he asked.

"No, I just decided to drop in," Tarenos explained. "But now that we're all together, is there anything we need to discuss?"

"Actually, this might be a good time to copy each other's notes and charts," Valerianus suggested. "It's been a couple of months since we caught up. This is as good an anchorage as we are likely to find, so why not take advantage of it?"

"Yes, why not?" Demetrios agreed. "The men would like some time to catch fresh fish or turtle meat instead of eating ship's rations."

Marcos and Tarenos agreed easily enough.

"Right! Demetrios and Tarenos, tell your men to chart this bay in more detail while we have the time. Marcos, you organise a few hunting and fishing parties. Plan on being here for a few days. I'll go ashore tomorrow and look for the locals, give a few gifts and so on. We might need friends here one day."

Valerianus thought it only wise to take a dozen men with him the next morning and a drum after the example of Machozapingi on his first approach. There was a considerable stream running into the eastern end of the inner basin. This was as likely a place as any to find signs of a settlement but there were no tracks visible. He angled to the north towards higher ground, rather than waste time slashing through the dense growth along the watercourse.

Nothing could be seen from the ridge, not even a fire. He angled back downhill and upstream again. Surely there must be someone living in these lands! After more than two hours of hacking through the undergrowth to follow the stream he came across

what might have been the remains of a basic rock dam across the watercourse. The smaller stones had been washed out of their places but the remaining heavy boulders that formed a ragged line across the stream bed looked too orderly to be a freak of nature. But if it had once been a dam, that must have been many years ago. The area beside the stream at that point was level enough to be suitable for a handful of tents, but there were substantial trees growing there now. People had been here once but not recently. He turned back towards the ships.

Another small but well-sheltered anchorage was discovered and charted about sixty miles further east. Then, yet another sixty miles east at what appeared to be the south-east corner of the island was a long, low island. This was separated from the mainland by a sandy channel nine miles long with the ends protected by bars that left openings about half a mile wide. Another three days were spent charting this haven. By the seventh day of October they had completed the circumnavigation, and found no sign of current human occupants.

“Well, where do we go now?” Demetrios asked Valerianus.

Valerianus shrugged. “Unless someone has a better idea, we go further west.”

“That might not be a good idea,” Tarenos dared to argue. “If we go even a hundred miles beyond land and then find ourselves in another big storm, we would have trouble getting back to a harbour again.”

“When do you think we will be safe?” Valerianus asked. “That last storm we had twenty days ago was pretty feeble compared to the others. I think the storm season might be over by now.”

“Perhaps it was weak because it didn't come close to us,” Tarenos answered. “In the China Sea storms can come as late as November.”

Valerianus bit back his impatience. Why ask for opinions unless you are prepared to listen to them? And Tarenos knew more about these storms than anyone else in this cabin. “Very well. What do you say about back-tracking along the southern coast again, so we have a good jump-off point for when the weather is safe?”

Tarenos nodded slowly. “Yes, that would be a good idea,” he agreed. “We know where the safe anchorages are now.”

The run back to the west was uneventful. The fleet anchored in September Bay, named after the mild storm they had weathered there the previous month. Fresh water was taken on board and minor repairs carried out while a hunting party went for a few turtles.

“I've been thinking, gentlemen,” Valerianus opened the discussion. “I take Tarenos' point about storms. But it occurs to me that if we round the western corner of this island and sail north-west, then no matter what direction the wind comes from we will be able to run for either the southern anchorages we have plotted, or the north-west corner anchorage. So I suggest that one full day of sailing north-west would still leave us within range of safety. Our experience in these islands so far is that we should find more land within that distance. But if not, we can turn back. Your opinions, please?”

Eyes turned towards Tarenos first. He realised that he was expected to speak first.

“If a storm is coming straight at us, or going to pass to the north, then the winds will swing to the north. That will make it an easy reach for us to come back to these harbours along the south coast. But if the wind stays from the east and strengthens, that

means the storm is south of us. We can then then reach to the north, to keep a safe distance, even if we have to tack back for the harbour.” He looked around. “So yes, I think it's reasonable. It's certainly safer than what we have been doing since Quinctilis, sailing eastwards along unknown coasts and sometimes more than a hundred miles downwind of the nearest known harbour.”

“Then we do it,” Demetrios said. “Just sitting at anchor is not good for the men. That's why we didn't camp in The Anchorage back in Quinctilis.”

It was about a hundred miles to the western tip of the island, more than could be covered in daylight hours, but the coast had already been plotted. The fleet raised anchor and worked out of the harbour in the dusk, and then crept along at 4 miles per hour, reaching out to sea for extra safety until well clear of land before pulling on more sail. At first light they tacked back to the north-west to regain the coast. The wind stayed fair throughout the day, and after sighting the western tip of the island in late afternoon they continued under full sail into the evening. The seas were high enough to ensure that any shoals would be seen by their phosphorescence, and the just-past-full moon rose after two hours of darkness.

The next morning dawned fresh and clear. Two hours into the morning there came the call from the lookout. “Land on the starboard bow!”

Demetrios took his own telescope and scanned the horizon. Yes! Barely discernible. He would not have noticed had he not been told, but there did seem to be a darker smudge right on the horizon. “Signal the fleet! Head due north!”

The ships reached the coast in the late morning. The land was mountainous, over three hundred feet elevation within a short distance from the coast. Valerianus ordered a turn to the west to follow this coast, and charting commenced.

An opening in the coast was found two hours after noon. It was just over a hundred paces in width, but as the ships drew level it became clear that this inlet was very long. As good a place as any to drop anchor, Valerianus mused.

“Demetrios, what do you think about putting into that inlet for the night?”

“I'd like to chart it, actually,” Demetrios replied. “This might be a worthwhile haven if a storm blows up. We have none this far west.”

“Then let's do it,” Valerianus concluded.

“I'd like to send Marcos in first,” Demetrios continued. “Steep terrain like this sometimes has barely-submerged rocks in the inlets. I would rather risk the smallest ship.”

“Do so,” Valerianus agreed.

Demetrios barked the order to run up a message. 'M to report.' He then ordered almost all of the sail to be dropped, leaving up barely enough for steerage, and for the helm to be brought around to steer south.

Marcos passed downwind of the lead ship by the time he had matched his own sail to that of Demetrios. He was soon on his starboard, barely astern and downwind.

“Sound the entrance to that gap, Marcos,” Demetrios bellowed. “I want to know that we have a safe haven before we go any further.”

Marcos saluted his understanding, and turned to his own crew. He fell off the wind and gibed around to go back towards the inlet. Longboats were being prepared.

“Marcos is no fool,” Demetrios commented. “He's going to stay outside himself, and send in the boats.”

Within half an hour there were three longboats line abreast across the mouth of the inlet, slowly rowing as a man in the bow of each cast a weight ahead of him and allowed the string to run out, waited until the line became vertical, and then rapidly pulled it in for another cast. All could see from the number of pulls to haul the string back in that there was plenty of depth at the moment, but would that change further in?

Almost a half-hour more passed, and the longboats were almost a mile into the inlet and still there seemed ample depth. Marcos ordered more sail to ensure steerage between the high ground around the inlet and started to follow his longboats just as they rounded a bend in the inlet and were no longer in sight.

Time passed as Demetrios and Tarenos watched Marcos sail up the inlet and then turn to the starboard. For a while they could follow his masts showing above the intervening land, but soon even they disappeared behind the ridges.

Another half-hour was enough for Demetrios. “Put two longboats over the side! I want to know what's happening in there!” There was a scurrying as the boats were dropped to the sea and oarsmen went over the rail to man them. Soon they were pulling strongly towards the coast. Just as they entered the heads one of Marcos' boats reappeared from around the bend. Still no sign of Marcos' masts, though.

Marcos' longboat pulled strongly towards the flagship, shouting a message across the water to the other longboats as they passed. The two leaders in Demetrios' boats looked to each other, exchanged a few words and then continued into the inlet.

The longboat from the inlet continued up to the flagship and stood off the poop deck rather than tying up. “Captain Demetrios!”

“Yes, sailor?” Demetrios asked, concerned that some disaster had occurred.

“Captain Marcos urges you to bring the other ships into the anchorage. It is an excellent harbour!”

Demetrios looked to the sun. It was now two hours off setting. Enough time to enter and anchor before darkness. “Very well!” he shouted down to the long boat. “Do you want to come on board?”

“No thank you, captain. Make haste to enter the harbour. We will row.”

Demetrios nodded down to them. “Piso, gybe around, make for the inlet. Full sail, and make signal 'Follow me'.”

Tarenos had been reaching back and forth a few hundred paces upwind of Demetrios. He had seen Demetrios start to gybe, and had guessed why even before the signal had been made. He ordered more canvas, gybed around, and fell into line three hundred paces behind the flagship.

The reach into the mile-long channel was easy enough. Then the turn to starboard was into the wind, a tight tack. He could hold this for only three hundred paces before he had to tack onto port, to keep clear of the shore. But he could see Marcos now, at anchor and apparently undamaged. Tarenos was just rounding the turn behind him.

The port tack was only three hundred paces again before the shore started to loom closer than he liked. Onto a starboard tack again, and he would be able to anchor a couple of hundred paces from Marcos.

Only then did he take time to look around this inlet. He was stunned. The main basin was over two miles long and over half a mile wide! Completely protected against any heavy seas by the long, narrow channel and sharp turn, and sheltered from winds by high ground. Yet the land to the north-east of the basin was broad and level enough to support a good-sized city, and judging from the dense forests it was rich enough to support farming.

Valerianus had come up on deck while the ship had been in the entrance channel. He also took in the magnificence of this harbour and surrounding land but with disappointment. If there is no substantial town here, then it seemed a safe bet that there would not be one anywhere else either.

“I think we would do well the chart this harbour thoroughly, Caius,” Demetrios broke into his thoughts.

“Oh, yes,” Valerianus broke out of his own line of thought. “Yes, it looks like the best we've seen yet,” he agreed.

Valerianus took one of the longboats the next morning with a dozen marines to row it. First he toured the shoreline at the head of the harbour, looking for any sign of human activity such as canoes or pathways. None were found. He landed at the mouth of a small stream and set off inland, some of the marines hacking a path through the heavy undergrowth near the shore while the others stood by the longboat. This undergrowth thinned out after a few dozen paces into the canopy of the dense forest. There was still no sign of a pathway or any improvements to the stream such as he had seen in other places. After a half-mile trudge inland he turned parallel to the shore, hoping to cross some other path from the shore to the hinterland. After another mile of trudge he came to another stream, having found nothing between. This stream was followed down to the harbour. They called to the longboat guards to row over to them and pick them up. Back to the ship again.

“I can't understand this, Demetrios,” Valerianus said to his Captain as he came back on board. “There's no sign of life on the shore even though the land looks more than rich enough to support a city! Why is this so?”

“Perhaps no-one nearby has the ability to cross the distances between these islands. Machos only had canoes, you remember,” Demetrios suggested.

“There was an abandoned settlement on the big island just east of us. I saw it while your men were sounding the bay. People had got that far, and then they just seemed to die out. And besides, the biggest gap of all so far is from the mainland to that first anchorage. Even these shady people who run away from us managed that crossing, so why can't they make a smaller step?” Valerianus was frustrated by not being able to understand what he had discovered. “Remember when Tarenos said there was something wrong with these lands? Im starting to wonder if he is right.”

“More likely they lost the art of building good ships once they found themselves in islands where canoes would be enough,” Demetrios dismissed the problem. “And it's not impossible that the settlement you saw on the other island was built by castaways blown out to sea by a big storm.” Valerianus was not convinced.

The run along the coast continued smoothly, the steady east wind making sailing easy. For three days the coast ran over a hundred and twenty miles due west, with rugged hinterland and not much in the way of shelter. Then it swept around to the north-east.

Everyone expected this to be the western end of yet another island, and the fleet sailed as close-hauled as possible to keep the coast in sight. Then, to everyone's surprise, the coast swung back towards the west. Might this be the mainland at last?

But problems were not far away. Within a day of the westwards run resuming they found themselves in a sea filled with offshore reefs and cays. Progress slowed as they picked their route carefully through this maze, Demetrios growing ever more nervous as the days passed and the expectation of the next big storm grew. A couple of minor bays were noted. These offered barely any protection at all, but that was better than nothing. Better on a beach and fully exposed than the risk of being driven onto a reef off the coast!

At last the offshore hazards seemed to have been left behind. Neptunus had been good to them, holding back the storms. Perhaps the storm season was over. But even so, it would be prudent to continue noting any havens just in case. Demetrios did not want to have to sprint through those shoals to get back to a beach before a storm beat them to it. Then another narrow channel, perhaps a hundred and fifty paces wide, was found between two prominent headlands. The longboats were sent in to sound the channel and assess whether or not there was a larger basin inside.

The report came back. There was a channel deep enough for safe navigation, leading to a basin perhaps ten miles long and two miles wide. There were a few sand bars just inside the main basin with only a couple of feet of water over them; enough to flood the bilges and sit out a storm safely if the need arose. But by then dusk was upon them, so the fleet anchored offshore that night. The next morning they would go in, and spend a few days charting, hunting turtles and refreshing their water.

Three days after leaving November Anchorage they were again among shoals and barrier islands, and progress was at a crawl. On the sixth day of November the wind started to swing around to the north and clouds rolled in. That was enough for Demetrios.

"Make signals to seek harbour," he ordered. "Now to look for a nice, comfortable beach," he commented more conversationally to the helmsman before looking up to the lookout's perch. "Do you see any good beaches?" he called.

Before the lookout could answer him, one of the deck watch called "Signal from Captain Tarenos, sir! 'North-east', it says."

"It seems Tarenos was thinking the same," Demetrios noted. "Don't bother with those signals," he called back to the men clipping flags onto the halyard. He noted that Tarenos had already turned, and was diverging from him. Marcos was following Tarenos.

"That beach to the north-east looks as good as any, sir," the lookout confirmed.

"Right! Bring her around to the north-east," Demetrios ordered the helmsman as he reached for his own telescope. "See to the trimming of the sails, Loukas," he commanded the one-time fourth captain of the fleet, now acting as his first officer. Loukas started barking orders as the ship swung around. What had been an easy run had now become a starboard tack.

The wind turned further during the night to come directly from the north. Its strength picked up slightly, but eased during the next day. By the second morning on the sand the easterly had returned, and the puffy clouds in a blue sky promised good sailing weather. The ships slipped back off the sand and Valerianus called a meeting.

“As far as we’ve seen, there are no people on these shores,” Valerianus said bluntly. “That means no-one to trade with. But even more annoying is that we seem to be getting further away from our mission with each new island we find. And yes, I do believe this is just another big island. If it were part of the main, then surely people would be there by now! So where do we look next?” He looked around the four other faces, inviting a comment. Tarenos was first.

“We found the mainland, down to the south, last winter. There was nothing there either. These are savage lands and its people savage as well. The only settlement we have seen was that village where you were given the goblet.” Tarenos took a deep breath, then released it. “I suggest that we give up on these islands and simply sail west until we find new lands. At worst, China is now only one hundred and sixty five degrees west of now. We could sail that distance in less than five months, during the storm-free season. At least then we will be able to tell Lord Pulcher that there is nothing to the west worth the trouble and expense.”

Valerianus nodded his appreciation for such candid speaking. This was no time for smooth words said merely to tickle the ears. Then he looked to Loukas.

“I’m not yet convinced that there is no civilisation to the south,” Loukas said after a pause. “Imagine if someone from the China had come looking for our civilisation, and had first found the Bantu just before Gallienus did. At that time the Bantu had only the most primitive iron. No steel or bronze and no crops worth trading, no written language. So if this Chinese explorer had turned south and followed the coast, what would he have discovered? Only the Monkey People and empty land! But if he had turned north instead he would have found Egypt, and through Egypt every civilised nation on earth!” Loukas paused and looked around the circle. “We have found people and we have found the northern coast of what is probably a land as big as Greater Africa. Let’s not give up before we have tried.”

Valerianus waited to ensure Loukas had finished. “So you are saying we should go south, pick up where we left off last year?”

“Yes,” Loukas confirmed.

Valerianus looked to Markos.

“I see merit in both,” Markos answered, “but we can’t do both. We can’t risk dividing our ships now that we have only three. I suggest we continue along this coast. If it’s an island we’ll know soon enough. Then we can go south to where we know there’s a mainland. But if this proves to be the southern coast of another continent, then it can hardly be less promising than the south.” Markos looked to Demetrios.

“I can understand the position of Tarenos,” he opened. “There does seem to be something wrong with these lands. I share his unease. But on balance I think Markos has it right. What sways me is that Lord Pulcher specifically wanted us to investigate these lands, not to sail to China. If we three African ships appear as if by magic in China, how are we to explain our presence? Do we say that we were sailing from Senegal to Utica, but were blown off course?” Demetrios shook his head. “No, we must not be seen by anyone anywhere unless we can explain ourselves. That means exploring these lands and then returning to Africa.”

Valerianus considered these recommendations for a moment. “Tarenos, when can we be certain that the storm season is ended?”

“I don’t know if it’s the same here as in China. Over there, storms are rare after the end of November. Another twenty-two days.”

“Then let’s follow the coast, as Markos says, until the start of December. We can decide what to do next when we have that information.”

The afternoon of the last day of November had arrived, and it seemed that they had turned the western tip of an island. All day the coast had been trending just north of east, and the long roll of the waves coming from just north of east suggested that there was no land to block them from that direction for many, many miles. Valerianus stared at the chart on Demetrios’ cabin table.

“From where we first sighted land to the western tip is seven hundred miles in a straight line. So no matter what, if this really is an island as we suspect, it will be at least nine hundred miles to complete the circumnavigation, probably more unless the northern coast is straight. Probably close to two months out of our storm-free season. And that will only get us back to our starting point. Then we will have to reach due south for six hundred miles to pick up the coast where we left it last season.” He stared at the charts for a few moments longer. “But if, on the other hand, this is part of a very large continent, then why have we not seen any sign of civilisation? These lands are so rich! They would be settled if they could be reached.”

Then he made a decision. “No, I can’t afford that much time out of the season for a diversion that is unlikely to even find humans, much less trading partners. We will sail west from the tip of the land for a day or two just to see if the chain continues. But if it doesn’t we turn south.”

“Yes, Caius,” Demetrios agreed. “I’ll call for another meeting?”

“Yes, please.” Valerianus felt relieved that he had made up his mind. This meeting would be to inform and plan in more detail, not to re-open the main question. By dusk all had been agreed and the fleet was heading west under full sail. They had already discovered that there were no hazards along this length of coast that could cause trouble.

Morning broke just in time for the fleet to catch a glimpse of West Point before it dropped over the horizon behind them. The open horizon before them beckoned. By nightfall they had covered another sixty miles, to put them a total of some seventy miles west of the point. The sails were reduced for safety during the night and lanterns lit to keep in contact until the moon rose. The night watch went smoothly.

Valerianus was on deck at the first hint of dawn approaching. “How far west of land are we,” he asked Loukas, who had served the midnight to dawn watch.

“About a hundred miles now,” Loukas replied.

“That’s the biggest gap yet,” Valerianus commented.

“Yes, unless we just happen to have passed land south or north of our path,” Loukas agreed.

“Then I think it’s time to turn south,” Valerianus said glumly. “As soon as the light is strong enough for the others to read our signal, turn due south.”

Loukas turned to one of the officers on watch with him. “Make signal ‘Prepare to turn south. Ships to acknowledge.’ Prepare to gybe the mainsail.” The junior officer busied himself with these orders as the light grew.

It was only a short time later that the lookout reported “Both ships have acknowledged your message, Captain.” Loukas gave the orders to gybe the mainsail, which had been running in wing and wing configuration. The ship eased around and was soon on a port reach. Valerianus took one last look around before going back down to his cabin.

It was an hour after noon when the call came down from the crow's nest. “Land to starboard!” Valerianus raced up onto the deck. He gazed out to the west, but could see nothing.

“What land, Sextus?” he asked the officer of the watch.

“Here sir, use my telescope. It is just forward of the beam. All you'll see is a faint line on the horizon.”

Valerianus took the telescope and thought he could make out a low mound. “Please Sextus, could we angle to the west and take a closer look?” Demetrios appeared on deck at this time. He looked out to the west, and then stood within earshot of Valerianus and Sextus without actually relieving his first officer.

Orders were shouted and the ship fell off the wind into a broad reach. The sails billowed out. Soon another cry came from above. “More land beyond!”

As they approached closer to the coast Valerianus realised that the first land seen was an offshore island. A few miles beyond the land seemed flat, and the true coast protected by a series of sandbars.

“More shoals, sir. I would rather not approach too close.” Sextus could tell what was on his mind.

“Perhaps we should send Markos in first,” Valerianus replied. “He has a shallower draft than we do.”

“True, but pulling even a small vessel off a lee coast is not an easy task.”

“I take your point, Sextus,” Valerianus obeyed his own resolution to leave the risk assessment to the experts. “But as close as you consider prudent would be nice.”

Sextus looked across to Demetrios. Demetrios smiled. “It's your watch, Sextus. You make the decisions.”

Sextus nodded his acknowledgement of the responsibility. “Very well sir. I'll go closer, but under less sail. I want to have time to react to what we learn.” Then he called up to the lookout “Keep an eye open for any sandbars or shoals. I want no chances to be taken!” Then he turned to the men handling the sheets. “Be prepared, men! You might have to work fast.” Then to the sailor on the poop deck, “Make signals, ‘vessels to stand out to sea’. And do it now!” And then he climbed the rope ladder to the crow's nest.

‘I must always leave myself a route of escape,’ he told himself as he climbed the rope rungs. ‘And I will judge that myself and not leave it to an able seaman, however sharp his eyes.’ He reached the crow's nest, a place he had not visited for fifteen years since his days as a trainee. “Right, sailor. We are a team!” he said to the surprised lookout. “You keep scanning as you should, and keep talking to me about what you see.”

It had been so many years since he had been higher than deck level that he had almost forgotten the different perspective from this height. As he stood there all the lessons from so many years ago came flooding back to him. The colour of the water, the way the waves slowed over shallower waters, it was all as fresh as yesterday. He saw

everything as if he were a god. But then, he was the acting commander of this ship. He *was* a god! He saw it all before him.

“Gybe now, north-west!” he called down to the poop deck. He cast a glance to the east. The other two ships were on reduced sail and reaching to the north, holding station.

He ran into the gap some four or five miles wide between the headlands, expecting to find a broad bay. But as he penetrated deeper, it became obvious that the land to the north was an island four or five miles long and about that distance off the mainland. As far ahead as he could tell the water was deep and clear. “Scan the shores, sailor,” he told the lookout. “Tell me if you see any sign of people.”

He held this reach for almost an hour, drawing diagonally towards the flat mainland and still pleased with the water depth. But it was getting late in the day. He called more orders down to the deck. “Bring her up into the wind, then tack back out towards the sea. I recommend that we signal 'Ships to enter and anchor.'”

“Good idea, Sextus,” Demetrios agreed. “If there are shoals around, best to sail only by daylight.” He turned to the deck watch and ordered the signal to be made.

The ships were being prepared for the day's journey in the first hint of dawn. “Canoe approaching!” came a cry from the crow's nest. All eyes peered into the lifting gloom. “Just south of west!” the lookout gave directions.

“I want a contubernium of marines on deck immediately!” Sextus ordered. “And rouse Demetrios and Valerianus!”

The canoe continued to approach until fifty paces away and then the paddlers all back-watered to bring their craft to a halt. A single voice called over the gap. By now the light was strong enough to see that no weapons were being brandished but what was being concealed was anybody's guess. The marines clomped onto the deck.

Comforted by the presence of the marines, Sextus waved in what he hoped would be seen as a show of friendship and called back to the canoe. He knew they would understand Latin no better than he understood their tongue but any words would be better than silence. This drew another call from the canoe. These natives were clearly confused. Was his reply to be taken as a greeting or a warning? “Put a longboat over the side. I'm going to meet them,” he ordered.

Valerianus and then Demetrios arrived on deck as he gave this order. “Thank you, Sextus. It's close enough to sunrise for me to relieve you now,” Demetrios said conversationally. And then to Valerianus, “How do you want to play this?”

“I'll take a gift in the longboat. It worked with Machos. I'll go to my cabin to get another chiton and be back on deck by the time the boat hits the water,” answered Valerianus as he turned back to his cabin.

Demetrios studied the natives in the growing light. The canoe was still stationary. Another call came across the water, several sentences this time. They were obviously confused. “Don't worry, my new friends,” Demetrios called back. “We are not enemies, just explorers. Wait a moment and we will be right with you!” He smiled and waved as he finished. That should re-assure them that we mean no harm, language barrier or not.

The longboat was in the water now, and the ladder thrown over the side rail. Valerianus appeared on deck with another chiton as a gift, and followed the rowers down

into the longboat. Then as he looked over to the canoe he saw what looked like a golden pendant around the neck of an impressively-garbed man in the stern.

“Men, I want you to all to smile and look friendly, but show no interest at all in anything that might look valuable. No interest at all! Do you all understand?” he demanded of his half-dozen rowers.

“Yes, sir,” came back the replies.

It took barely a minute to meet the canoe. The rowers skilfully pivoted the longboat so that Valerianus in their stern was close to the stern of the canoe. He stood, smiled and bowed, and then held out the chiton. The native stood smiling in return, but made no attempt to take the offered gift. 'Perhaps he is uncertain of our etiquette,' Valerianus mused to himself. 'After all, I don't know theirs.' Valerianus then reached forward and laid the robe over a bench in the canoe.

The native continued smiling, and nodded slightly before speaking again.

“I can't understand you,” Valerianus answered, for the sake of not wanting to appear rude by ignoring him. Then he tapped himself on the chest and said “Val”, hoping that this was not, by some freak co-incidence, an inappropriate word in the native's tongue.

The native realised what was happening. Touching his own chest he said “Ajaw”. Then gesturing to Valerianus, he said “Wal”. Next he put both hands forward and downward, gesturing to the longboat, and then swung them towards to coast. Valerianus knew an invitation when he saw one. He nodded again, and then ordered the rowers to pull away from the canoe and turn for the coast.

He waved towards Ajaw with a gesture meant to suggest that the canoe should lead. The native understood and called an order to his men.

The settlement was half a mile inland and concealed by the coastal trees. Valerianus remembered that Machos' village was also invisible from the sea and started to wonder how many settlements they had missed because of this reason. Why don't these people build on the waterfront? Then the probable answer came to him. Those terrible storms! Much safer to build inland.

“Stay with the boat, men!” he ordered as they pulled up against a stone quay. “And remember to smile at everyone, but show no interest in anything valuable. Don't stare!” The stonework of the quay was finely built, with barely a gap at the joints. These people are a step up from Machos' village in terms of building technique.

As expected the people around were curious about his foreign face and clothing. Children stared and he smiled back at them. Ajaw broke him out of this display of friendship by approaching him and calling him by name.

“Wal,” Ajaw said with a smile, inviting him to walk along a stone-paved road.

The houses here were much more sophisticated than in Machos' village, larger and made from timber rather than woven panels. He set off in the direction indicated and Ajaw walked beside him. Valerianus tapped his chest again, saying 'Val', then indicated his host to say 'Ajaw'. Then he gestured around him with both hands. Apparently Ajaw understood.

“Nisuk,” he said with a similar wave of his arms. After a hundred paces Ajaw indicated a large, impressive house standing alone. There was a small pyramid a dozen paces in front of its central front doorway. Ajaw turned towards it and Valerianus

continued walking beside him. They entered the broad doorway. Once inside Ajaw stopped. Valerianus took his cue and stood beside him as he spoke a few sentences to a decorated man sitting on a carved stone seat. Perhaps a throne might be a better word, Valerianus thought. He noted the gold torques on both upper arms. So these people have gold, he thought. Now to find something they want to buy. Ajaw turned and gestured to one of the men who had been following them. This man quickly walked forward to present the gift chiton to the seated man. It was accepted, examined briefly and then put to one side.

The seated man then spoke to Valerianus, another few sentences that he did not understand. The seated man waited. It was clear that he was expected to respond.

“Thank you for your welcome. It is good to make new friends,” Valerianus said, knowing it would not be understood but not wanting to appear rude. Ajaw broke in with a short sentence, probably to explain that this stranger did not speak their language. The seated man nodded, and after a pause spoke again. Ajaw responded with a single word, and then turned to Valerianus.

“Wal,” Ajaw said and beckoned him back out the door. It seemed that was the end of the State Visit, Valerianus mused as he was led back towards the boat. No return gift this time, but at least no hostility.

His heart leapt into his mouth as Valerianus turned a corner and saw the small crowd around the longboat at the quay. Trouble! he thought. But as he drew nearer he saw that there seemed no malice, only curiosity. They were watching one of his men whittling a small figurine. What was so enchanting about that? These people knew how to carve. Their own canoe had a finely carved head and bowpiece. Even the head of Machos' canoe had been carved.

Then he noted that Ajaw was also staring at the man's hands as he worked. What was so unusual? How do these people go about their own carving? What would make this man's technique seem so enthralling?

“Ajaw,” he said to gain the man's attention. Then he pointed at the carver, and then gestured towards the town. Ajaw clearly had no idea what he meant. Then Valerianus again gestured around to the town, and then made carving motion with his own hands. The smile from Ajaw meant the meaning had been grasped. Ajaw beckoned him to walk back into the street. A few dozen paces away he was directed towards a small building. Inside was a shelf full of wooden carvings and an old man working on another. This man was working with excruciating patience, much too slow for an experienced artisan. Valerianus saw what was different only after his eyes became accustomed to the dimmer light inside. This man was using a stone blade. No wonder he was so slow! He would not want to risk chipping the edge!

Valerianus worked heroically to suppress a shout of joy. Here was the perfect trading opportunity. These people had no steel! The crowd were not staring at the carver's hands, but at the steel knife he was using! In fact, it was clear they had no iron or even bronze, or surely this carver would be using a metal blade! But they did have gold. All he had to do was offer to sell them that wonder-metal steel, and the gold would come flooding in! He turned back to the street and Ajaw followed him out.

As soon as Valerianus set foot on his ship he ordered a meeting of captains to be called. Within ten minutes all four captains were in his cabin.

“Gentlemen, I think we have found what we have been looking for,” he opened with a smile. “These people have enough gold for their functionaries to wear gold medallions, but they still use stone knives. I think they might appreciate steel tools more than we can imagine.”

The four captains were stunned. At last Tarenos managed to ask “But how do they plough their fields? How do they stop their wagon wheels from splintering without a band of steel around the circumference?”

Valerianus was caught up short by this question. “Actually, I don't think I've seen either a plough or a wheel anywhere in these islands. I've seen plenty of men with digging sticks like hoes, but never a plough. And I haven't seen a wagon, either.” He looked around the circle.

“I don't think I've seen any animal that could pull a plough or a wagon,” Loukas offered. “Perhaps that is another possible market. We could sell them horses and bullocks as well as steel.”

Valerianus thought about this. “Possibly, but I don't want to be too hasty. If we supply them with animals, they might start to breed their own stock instead of buying more from us. At least steel doesn't breed, and over time it rusts and wears away, so there will always be more demand.”

Another pause followed before Demetrios spoke. “Let's keep following the coast, and see what else we discover. We don't have to take the first offer.”

There seemed general agreement about this, and Valerianus was pleased. “And gentlemen, you must emphasise one order to every man under your command. No-one may ever show any excessive interest in anything, no matter how beautiful or valuable. Polite appreciation if necessary, but best just to glance and then move on. We don't want these natives to think that we are actually eager for their gold!” The meeting broke up.

The next morning dawned fair. The fleet moved out of its anchorage and headed south. Two days later they came to a large bay, roughly fifteen miles long and twelve across. The water was shallow and the headlands low, offering little protection against storms, but perhaps better than nothing. Another bay, slightly smaller but better protected, was found twenty miles further south a couple of days later. The land around both bays seemed desolate, but Valerianus now knew that appearances could be deceiving. All the towns around these islands seem to be deliberately sited back from the coast, and not readily visible from the sea. But he didn't have the time to send longboats up every river or creek he found. He would rely on more obvious signs of habitation, or even just let the locals find him.

Another couple of days further south again revealed the opening into another large bay. This one ran back to the north behind a long, low sand spit with a few hills along its length. The fleet slowly felt its way into the recesses of this long bay, Markos leading the way in the smallest vessel and watchful of soundings as he went. There were a few bars near the opening, but once well into the bay there was ample depth. They anchored that dusk in thirty feet of water.

“What will the dawn bring?” Valerianus asked Demetrios in the lamplight. “Another canoe, perhaps? I think we might do well to have at least a contubernium of marines on each deck all night, just in case. Have Quintus set watches on all vessels.”

Valerianus was disappointed the next morning to find the bay was empty, except for his own three ships. With a shrug he looked over to Demetrios and suggested they get under way to explore the northern end of this large bay. Barely an hour later a cry came from the lookout.

“Canoe ahead! Just rounding the point to port!”

Valerianus reached for his telescope. The dot on the water some fifteen miles away was clearly a large canoe, similar to that seen at Nisuk. “Carry on, Demetrios. We’ll meet them half-way.”

Valerianus ordered anchors to be dropped when the canoe had approached to two hundred paces. He did not want to create the impression that he intended to barge past them. The canoe apparently took this as an indication of a polite separation distance, and came to a halt as well. A call came out over the water.

“I have no idea what you are saying, friend,” Valerianus called back with a friendly smile and a wave. “I’ll be with you presently.” Demetrios had already anticipated the call for a longboat. Within two minutes eight men were pulling towards the canoe. Valerianus was in the stern of the longboat cradling yet another formal silk chiton. Why change a winning method?

He was invited around the point of land, back to where the canoe had come from. He called for the three ships to follow at a distance. He saw no purpose in making his men row for more than an hour there and then another hour back. There was action on deck as the sails, still raised but allowed to flag in the breeze, were readied and the capstan was manned to raise anchor. Then he ordered the men to start rowing in the direction indicated.

There! Above the tree line as he rounded the point! It looked like a pyramid set almost on the waterfront, but with a flat bench as a summit and a couple of smaller buildings on that bench. This is a real town! As the boat came closer he could see people walking around the base of this pyramid, giving him a better idea of scale. It seemed about sixty to seventy feet high. It was a substantial building.

He picked out a small stone wharf on the waterfront. These people clearly preferred to work in stone rather than timber, Valerianus noted to himself, at least for public works. There were plenty of flimsier buildings scattered around within sight. There was what looked like a small official party on the wharf, apparently waiting for him.

Valerianus stepped onto the wharf with as much majesty as could be managed from a longboat, head held high and moving slightly slower than necessary to add the impression of gravitas to his person.

“Marcus, pick up that chiton as if it is worth a talent of gold, and reverently offer it to the guy with the gold torque. He seems to be the chief. Down on one knee would be a good touch.”

The near rearmost rower rose from his position. Taking the chiton over both forearms, he carefully stepped out of the boat and walked solemnly towards the official party. Stopping two paces short of them so as not to cause alarm, he went down on his left knee, holding the robe before him in outstretched arms.

The natives were confused. This was a previously-unknown approach from previously-unknown visitors and they were unsure of the proper response.

“I know you don't understand me,” Valerianus said with a broad smile. “But if I say something it should cause less tension than standing here in silence. Marcus, stand where you are and hold it by the shoulders, so they can see what it is.”

Marcus complied. The two most impressively-dressed natives chatted among themselves again, as they compared the garment with this being worn by Valerianus. Eventually the leader wearing a spotted animal hide gave an order to an underling. The servant stepped forward to confront Marcus, and then went down on his left knee and stretched out his arms, as he had seen Marcus do earlier.

“Drape it across his arms Marcus, smile, and then walk backwards to join me,” Valerianus ordered. Marcus did so and the leader of the natives gave an order in response. His servant stood and stepped back to stand behind his leader.

“So far, so good,” Valerianus muttered under his breath. Then, smiling, he held his hands out towards the natives as he approached them at a slow walk. He had only gone three paces before the native leader sensed his purpose, and started approaching Valerianus, also smiling and holding his hands out. The two men met, took hands, and smiled as they nodded to each other.

“This could be the start of a beautiful friendship,” Valerianus said sweetly. The chief nodded and replied with a few sentences of his own. Then he gently released his grip on Valerianus' hands and gestured with his right arm back towards the town as he turned side-on. Valerianus smiled and nodded again before turning back towards the longboat.

“Push out from the wharf. Tell the captains to anchor a couple of hundred paces offshore. I want them to be obvious enough to impress, but far enough away to not appear a threat. Watch for my signal when I want to return.”

Then, turning back to his host, he tapped himself on the chest. “Val,” he introduced himself. The native clearly understood his meaning. He tapped his own chest and said 'Imix', and smiled.

“Imix,” Valerianus said, smiling as he gestured towards his host. Then he tapped his chest again and said “Val'. He then gripped his two hands together, each wrist in the other hand, to signify a bond. Imix smiled and copied the gesture.

‘This fellow is sharp on the uptake,’ Valerianus thought to himself as he smiled. ‘This is probably the first time he has ever had to deal with a foreigner who couldn't speak his language.’

The town he was led through at a dignified pace was not extensive, but the stonework pyramids with their table tops were impressive. So much labour, but for so little benefit in terms of covered space! The habitable buildings were generally timber-framed, many with woven walls. But there was one stone building with a timber roof that seemed more substantial. Valerianus thought of it as the Basilica in his own mind and with good reason. It was clear that this was the centre from which the town was administered.

Imix led him into a side room with timber seats carved with heads like large cats at each end. He gestured for Valerianus to sit, and sat on another seat facing him. Two small gold cups were brought in and presented.

Imix smiled, gestured with his cup, and took a sip. Valerianus looked into his cup. There seemed a froth on the surface, and there was some warmth coming through the walls of the vessel, so it was clearly warm, if not hot. He took a tiny sip.

Urgh! It took a positive effort for him to not grimace at the bitterness of this brew. But instead he smiled, gestured with his cup, and put it aside. He hoped that the sip would satisfy the courtesies and he would not have to drain the cup.

Imix seemed satisfied with this and stood. He headed back out onto the street and it seemed the state visit was now over. But Valerianus wanted more than this. He wanted to interest this chieftain in trade for some of the gold that seemed so plentiful here. He kept his eye open for a piece of timber. He dare not use a growing tree to show off the properties of his knife, in case a living tree might be considered sacred.

There was his chance! As they walked along the beach towards the wharf, he saw a piece of driftwood that had been washed up. He halted, and gestured down onto the sand before walking in that direction. Imix followed him. Soon he was back on the cobbled street with the scrap of timber in one hand. He dropped it to the pavement, and took out his short steel blade, showing it to Imix to study. Imix was fascinated.

Then he stabbed the point into the timber, something that would be certain to destroy a flint blade. Imix' eyes widened with surprise. Then he twisted the blade to split the timber along the grain. A stone blade would never tolerate such abuse! Valerianus took one on the shivers of wood and started whittling it, heavy shavings coming off as he attacked the timber brutally. After a half-dozen shaves, he stopped and showed Imix the edge again, still sharp and unharmed.

Imix was stunned. What magic material is this? He gestured towards the blade, and then into his chest. He was clearly asking for the knife to be given to him as a gift. Valerianus raised his eyebrows and tilted his head one way and then the other, as though considering the request. Then he gestured towards the gold torque on Imix' upper arm, and into his own chest. Imix glanced at his own arm, and understood what was being proposed. He slipped the torque off his arm and held it out in his left hand, the right hand beside it palm upwards.

Valerianus unhitched the leather belt and freed the leather scabbard held by it. He placed the knife in the scabbard and placed it in Imix's hand, taking the torque. Both men smiled at each other again.

Then Imix did the unexpected. Instead of walking back to the wharf he gestured back towards the town. Valerianus followed him as he climbed the stepped side of one of the pyramids.

A chill shock ran through Valerianus as he stepped onto the wide platform at the top. In the middle of the open space was an arrangement that was clearly a stone sacrificial altar. Had he been led up here to be slaughtered? But no. Imix pointed out to the south and said something incomprehensible. Then he realised that he was not understood, and simply pointed and said "Lamanain". Then he gestured with his hands to suggest that Valerianus and he need to go south.

"How far?" Valerianus asked, and then gestured with his hands as if measuring off a distance.

Imix again proved himself sharp. He pointed towards the sun, and then pointed to the eastern horizon, swung his arm up over to the west, and continued for another two overhead swings. Then he held up three fingers.

Valerianus made an exaggerated charade of walking on the spot, holding up one, then a second and then a third finger. Imix laughed and nodded. So three days' walk was ahead of him. He wondered who this Lamanain was, that he was so important that he needed to walk that far to meet him. But he was here to explore! The more important someone was the more gold he would be able to trade. He already knew from Imix that they were prepared to trade a gold torque weighing over four pounds for a rather basic dagger.

Valerianus pointed to himself, then to the ships now anchored off the town and then to the south. Then to make his meaning clearer, he walked the fingers of his left hand down his right forearm as he pointed the path again. Imix understood.

Before he left this plateau, Valerianus looked around to get a measure of the size of the city. There seemed several of these massive stone structures, suggesting a large settlement. But huts and houses seemed fewer than might have been expected around such monumental buildings. Perhaps a thousand people might live here permanently but others come from other regions for special ceremonies and other events, he concluded.

Then he turned back to Imix. He tapped his chest again, saying "Val", then gestured to his host saying 'Imix' and then gestured around to the town spread below them.

"Imix," said Imix as he tapped his own chest, then "Wal" as he gestured to Valerianus, and then "Qotchi" as his hand swept the town. Depending on what this visit to Lamanain revealed, this port might be the gateway to rivers of gold. But let's not get ahead of ourselves, Valerianus warned himself. He still had to make it happen.

Valerianus presented himself, Loukas and ten marines at the wharf for the walk south. The plated armour and buckler-style shield strapped to the left forearm worn by the marines caused a stir of amazement. So much metal! Imix, knowing how strong and tough the new magic metal was, could scarcely believe that it could be worn in such quantities by men who were apparently servants while Valerianus and Loukas wore only light cloth.

Lamanain proved to be a place, not a person. It was a substantial city with many pyramids considerably higher and more ornate than those at Qotchi. From the behaviour of Imix as he dealt with officials it was clear that he was little more than a minor king, or even perhaps only a local governor under Lamanain's overlordship.

Eventually he and his party were admitted to a large room, offered food and drink, and left to wait. An hour or more later Imix, Valerianus and Loukas were summoned into a medium-sized audience hall with a rather surly-looking man in early middle age on a throne set slightly above floor level. Valerianus and Loukas took their lead from Imix, and walked with dignity to half-length along the hall. But when Imix dropped to his knees, Valerianus whispered to Loukas 'stay on your feet, but nod your head respectfully'.

This did not please the man on the throne. He barked a command to one of the attendants, who strode towards them with menace in his gaze. Imix called out urgently, rushing out a sentence or two apparently to warn against any enforcement of obeisance.

The man on the throne held up a hand in response, and the attendant stopped in his approach. Then Imix, in much less urgent tones, spoke at greater length. It was obvious that he had been impressed by the size of their ships, their incredibly tough knife, and their formidable armour made from that magic metal. It was clear that he was warning against making enemies of such people too hastily. The enthroned man considered this sourly and then gave a grunt as if in agreement. He waved away the attendant and then spoke curtly to Imix. Imix stood and turned to Valerianus. He gestured towards the throne and said 'Ankal'. Then he mimed the removal of his torque and giving it as a gift, and then to the scabbard on Loukas' belt as if presenting it to the throne.

Valerianus understood. But he was not going to make an offering to this king. That would send the wrong message about relative status. "Loukas, remove your knife and scabbard and hand them to Imix. Then gesture towards the throne. Let the acknowledged underling be the bearer of gifts and do all the kneeling."

Loukas complied quickly but smoothly, handing the scabbard to Imix with a smile and a gesture towards Ankal. Imix took only one step forward and held the scabbard in both palms extended and spoke. Ankal waved an attendant to collect the gift and pass it to him. He drew the blade and examined it as closely as the poor light would allow. He seemed unimpressed. A short terse conversation between Imix and Ankal followed, with the end result that the knife was returned to Loukas as Ankal gave an order to another attendant. Soon that attendant returned with a block of timber, and this was also offered to Valerianus. Imix mimed out stabbing and whittling as a block of wood was brought to him. Loukas naturally had no idea of what was expected, but Valerianus realised that a repeat of his demonstration to Imix was required. He took the knife and examined the timber. It looked and felt like softwood, for which Valerianus was very thankful.

He took the knife and showed it conspicuously to Ankal. Then he threw it to the floor, taking care that it landed on the flat. This would have shattered any stone blade like obsidian or flint. He picked it up again and repeated the exercise three more times. Then, laying the timber block on the stone floor, he stabbed it, blade oriented along the grain, with all his power. Then he twisted the embedded blade to split the timber longways. Then, with mighty hacks, he chopped large shavings off the side of the block.

Standing and smiling and breathing heavily, he offered the timber block and the blade back to the attendant. These were presented to Ankal. It was obvious that Ankal had been impressed, even before re-examining the blade. But for the sake of form he took his time, looking for chips and nicks to the edge. He seemed almost annoyed to find the blade still in perfect condition.

Eventually Ankal returned his attention to the men in front of him and spoke curtly to Imix. Imix responded with a few sentences and Ankal grunted and nodded again before giving what was obviously a final judgement. Imix tapped his two guests, gestured for them to follow him and headed for the door.

Outside Imix was all smiles. He gestured with his hands as though offering with his right and taking with his left, time and time again. His meaning was clear. Ankal had authorised trading with these newcomers. All that was needed now was to negotiate a price.

“Loukas, I have a very important job for you,” Valerianus said in a serious tone. “I want you and four men to stay here on the mainland as a trading base. I want you all to learn their language as quickly and as well as possible. We need to be able to make trade agreements, set prices and agree on quantities. Also, try to avoid teaching them Latin or Greek. I want to be able to speak with you without them understanding us. In fact, speak only Latin among yourselves routinely so we can slip into Greek for more sensitive matters.”

“If you say so, Caius,” Loukas conceded. “But why me? Perhaps someone younger might be able to learn faster.”

“You'll have young men with you, be confident of that! But I need someone with authority here to ensure respect. So it has to be one of my Captains, and the other three are most conveniently left in their current positions. Besides, you have been to see Ankal but the others haven't.”

Three days later Valerianus and Loukas were back in Qotchi. Four of the younger sailors were selected to be his staff as a trade envoy, and told that their first task was to master the native language while teaching them nothing of their own. Imix was then approached and by hand gestures and mime the message was taken that these five men would be staying. By pointing at the moon, and then scratching a crescent, half-moon, full circle, another opposite half, and then an opposite crescent, Valerianus managed to get across the concept of a month. Then marking off twelve tally marks, the meaning that these men would be staying for twelve months was understood. Another knife was presented in exchange for feeding them for that time. All smiles and nods assured him that all would be well.

Next the scales on board the ship were brought ashore. A knife was placed on one side, and gold to the same weight was placed on the other side. This was a slightly better deal for the natives than the original exchange of Imix' torque for the first knife. Imix agreed to this rate.

Having set the price, all manner of steel tools were displayed. Swords, hoes, hammers and nails, axes and spades. Imix was again amazed at the versatility of this magic metal, and at least one of everything was purchased. Several whetstones were also brought ashore, and Loukas demonstrated how he could restore a sharp edge to a knife deliberately blunted on a steel axe-head. For a small fee, of course.

“Perhaps we should set up a workshop here, Valerianus,” Loukas suggested at the end of the day. “Perhaps even a foundry.”

“No way!” Valerianus answered sharply. “I don't want these natives even imagining how to work steel. We have to keep it a mystery to them. Re-sharpening is as much as I am prepared to show them.”

Loukas nodded to signify he understood. “What if they run out of gold? What would be the rate for silver or jewels?”

“One hundred pounds of silver for one pound of steel,” Valerianus answered curtly. “Jewel purchases can wait for our return. We'll make sure we have someone who can value jewels. Anything else?”

“How long will you be before you return? Are you serious about a year?”

“I hope to be back every three or four months,” Valerianus answered, “but I wanted to cover for any delays or mishaps. I don't intend to leave any stocks of steel with you just in case of pilfering. All trade can happen when we call in. Meanwhile you learn the language and carry out any repairs they might need. Oh, and warn them to keep their steel oiled as well. We want to make sure that any rust can be blamed on their poor care rather than a fault of the metal. Keep a few small items of your own but with meticulous care. They can be proof that proper attention to oiling will prevent rust.”

Valerianus called his three remaining captains together that evening. “Gentlemen, we have five months of the calm season ahead of us, according to Tarenos. I intend to use every one of those days to chart this sea as well as possible. We know that there are people here who have gold to trade and can be parted from it quite cheaply. Now we need to know how many there are so we can maximise our benefit. Why trade with just one city when there are at least two that we know about? Let's find as many sources of gold as we can!” He looked around the gathering.

“So I intend to continue exploring and charting the coast to the south. We might find that this is part of the same mainland we discovered last year, or we might find it's just another island. We might even turn a corner and find it's the southern end of another large landmass, which would explain why the lands to the south seemed so primitive. But I want to find every city that has gold and wants steel. Let's start tomorrow!”

It took more than three months but eventually it became clear to the explorers. This coast connected to the same impoverished southern land they had charted the previous year. In the meantime they had found no more coastal settlements above the level of subsistence fishermen or farmers.

Now he turned back to Qotchi and checked on Loukas and his cadre. Sailing with the constant fresh easterly over their shoulder, they were back in Qotchi on the eighteenth day of April.

“How are the language lessons going, Loukas?” Valerianus asked breezily.

“Terrible!” Loukas answered. “These people have sounds that I have never even heard of before! Try saying a 'P' while you are breathing in or a 'T' while you are coughing! I'm starting to understand a lot of their words when I hear them but there's no way I can say them. At least not without the listener looking at me as if I'm a child and then trying to guess what word I meant.”

“And how are the other men handling it?”

“Ariel seems to be the best of them, sir. Perhaps because he is a native Aramaic speaker who had to learn Greek and Latin. He seems to master these strange sounds more easily.”

“Then call him in, please.”

It took a few minutes to find the young Jew who had been sold into slavery when his father couldn't pay his debts. Valerianus knew the situation well, having gone through the same process himself as a youth. Ariel walked into the room, a mere boy summoned to answer to Those Who Have Power. His expression was anxious.

“Ariel, I am told you are the best at this new language,” Valerianus said with a smile.

“Thank you, sir. I try.”

“As of now you are a free man, and earning Able Seaman wages. Keep trying and you can expect even more reward,” Valerianus told him. The young Jew smiled his delight.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now tell me, what is so hard about this language?”

“Well, it's not that hard really, so long as you expect it to be different,” Ariel started. “There are quite a few different sounds, but there are lots of sounds in Aramaic and Hebrew that you don't have in Latin and Greek. You just have to learn how to make them. But the grammar simpler. They don't seem to have cases, only a marker like a construct form, and verbs seem to have only two tenses. But the word order is important, so you have to arrange the words in your sentences in the proper pattern. Do this and there are no problems.”

“Excellent!” Valerianus exclaimed, not understanding most of what he had been told. “Now your specific job is to write all this down. I want you to write an alphabet for this language, including all the strange sounds. Perhaps you might use the Latin alphabet as your base, and then add Hebrew or Greek letters for the new sounds. Or anything else for that matter, so long as it's as easy as possible for us to learn. And then start on a grammar and a vocabulary. Loukas here will excuse you from all other routine duties except writing your textbook and helping the other men learn. Are you up to that task?”

“Yes, sir. I can speak, read and write in four languages.”

“Good man! I have big plans for you, so don't disappoint me!” Valerianus turned to Loukas. “Give this man every assistance, Loukas. His success is your success.” Then he turned back to Ariel. “Well man! Get to work! You'll find quills, paper and ink on the ships!” he urged with a smile. Ariel ran for the door as Valerianus turned back to Loukas.

“I intend to set up a base in the islands,” he told Loukas. “I have in mind that double bay we mapped on the second big island coming here. Protected enough against the northerlies, shallow enough at the bar to prevent high seas, no sign of natives to cause problems, and far enough away that anyone from the East won't be able to guess where our gold is coming from if we're discovered. I want to get there before the storm season starts again so we'll have some shelter built in plenty of time.

“So tell me how these natives build their houses to resist these storms. They must have a few tricks that we can learn.”

Loukas was caught by surprise. “Ah, I haven't been thinking about that,” he stuttered out. “I've been concentrating on learning their language and customs first.”

“Then let's go for a walk,” Valerianus suggested. “We can see how they build their smaller shelters. Not everything here is stonework.”

Now that they were concentrating on building styles it became apparent that the town was divided into distinct districts. The smaller, poorer houses were huddled together furthest from the monumental architecture and consisted of timber poles and frames. Walls were commonly of basket-weave panels, and roofs were thatched.

“These would blow away in any decent storm,” Loukas commented. “They must have to replace them every year.”

Some of the slightly larger houses seemed to be made of mud brick. Many were further rendered in mud, often with the fibres to bind them together clearly showing. Surprisingly, not many houses were built in stone. Only those in the most prosperous

areas afforded this luxury, and even they were all single-level structures. Only the mass stonework pyramids seemed to reach to any height, and they were clearly not intended to provide any habitable spaces inside.

Yet there seemed to be something unusual. Even the mud-brick and stone buildings had a timber framework. Valerianus recalled seeing the same technique in the rather opulent house that had been provided for Loukas as his base. He suggested that they go back to the office.

Yes, the mud-brick and rendered walls were sandwiched between vertical timber poles at regular spaces. The bases of these poles were buried into the ground and their tops tied together, as if to hold the wall vertical. And the roofing timbers supporting the thatching were bound as if to resist upward forces as well as supporting downwards load. Moreover, the thatching was tightly bundled and overlaid, almost as if quilted.

“I think I see what they have in mind,” Loukas offered. “These posts are not designed to hold the roof up. They're intended to hold it down, to stop it blowing away in a storm. That's why the bases of the posts are buried!”

Valerianus stared at the structure, and the strong anchorage at the tops of the posts. “I believe you're right, Loukas. But why the doubled posts around the outside walls? Walls this thick are not going to be blown over very often.”

“Perhaps that is to stop the whole frame from swaying sideways,” Loukas suggested.

“Perhaps,” Valerianus conceded. “But wouldn't it be easier to anchor a timber roof rather than a thatch?”

“It would be if you had steel saws,” Loukas answered. “But if all you have is an obsidian blade, then cutting thatch would be easier.”

“Yes, you're right there,” Valerianus agreed. “So it would seem that the key points we have to keep in mind when we build our own town are anchorage and bracing against the wind. The rest will depend on what materials we have on hand.”

The fleet set out a few days later intending to make another trading stop at Nisuk, taking Ariel with them. On the way they discovered another town. Again the routine of presentation of a gift and demonstration of the merits of steel was carried out, and again the local mayor was amazed. This town was called 'Zama'. But it was not added to their list of trading partners. Ariel discovered that Lamanain asserted overlordship over them. After seeing the trouble Imix had gone through to ensure he had permission to trade, Valerianus had no doubt that any attempt to trade with Zama would be interpreted by Ankal as possibly encouraging independence, perhaps even a rebellion. The reaction from Lamanain might not be good for business. He would have to be content with the one contact in Qotchi, at least until the political situation along this coast changed or Ankal's permission to trade elsewhere was made more explicit. Then on to Nisuk for a few more days of trade, only to discover the reach of Lamanian extended even this far. The whole coast up to and including Nisuk was subject to Lamanain, at least in theory, and Valerianus had no intention of triggering a war. Ariel was taken back to Qotchi and Valerianus sailed for the south coast of Hispaniola.

On the first day of Quinctilis anchors were dropped in the bay which Valerianus decided to call 'Port Sertorius' to continue the association with the main island named 'Hispaniola'. A meeting of the combined fleet's company was called on the southern shore of the bay.

"Men, this is where we'll set up our base for the trade with the natives. This will be the start of new lives for all of us. Our Patron, lord Septimius Pulcher, has commanded that we set up a new colony here where we will be granted all possible comforts. We will be provided with women to marry if we choose to. We will have light duties here in this warm new land. We will have food and wine in abundance! But not to excess of course," he joked. "You will be the founding generation of a new city in a new world. You will be remembered honourably for a thousand years to come and you will lack nothing as you become famous.

"But there is one thing you will not do," Valerianus went on. "You will not return to the old lands. Except for a very few whom I will choose as crew to communicate with lord Septimius to inform him of the success of our mission, we will have no other duties in life except to trade with the natives, enjoy our new life here, and build a city for our children after us. So if you are married you should see your captain and report the name and address of your wife, and your children if you have any. I will bring them back with me if they choose to come. Or if you prefer to leave them behind you may do that instead. Lord Pulcher has promised he will report you as missing at sea, and pay them the usual death benefit and backpay for a sailor lost at sea."

Valerianus looked over the crowd. "So let us build well! Demetrios will take charge here and Loukas will be based on Qotchi and handle the trade aspects. Markos and I go back to Africa. There we will report to lord Pulcher and return with more goods to trade, more luxuries to enjoy and women to make our new city complete! Believe me, this is the best thing that could ever have happened to you!"

There were a total of one hundred and seventy two men at Port Sertorius, and a further five left behind at Qotchi. Of those at Qotchi only Loukas was married and Valerianus had already spoken to him about his wife and two children. Over the next days the eighty-five married men in Port Sertorius put in their requests. Sixty eight wanted their wives to be brought over with a total of ninety one children. The others requested that their wives be told they were dead and paid their benefits.

Meanwhile Demetrios was growing into a reasonable Acting Governor. He had crews setting out the street grid for the new township, other gangs off in the forests clearing trails to haul timber back to be sawn, another crew putting a small dam across the freshwater creek to provide some storage during dry times and other teams out hunting, fishing and providing centralised cooking of meals. The whole population was being treated as if a combined ship's crew but now working on land.

But the first and most essential task was more symbolic than entirely necessary. A public bath house was constructed as a matter of urgency. The tepidarium pool was excavated and lined with rock. Then it was waterproofed, rendered and filled, and finally the heaters fired on the evening of 22 Quinctilis. Made it by one day! Neptunalia was celebrated in true Roman fashion, with a feast and a public bath! On that day the foundation of the City of Port Sertorius was formally declared.

Valerianus had been careful. He had chosen a small crew of forty men comprised entirely of those who had asked for their wives to be brought across. He took these aboard Marcos' ship on the morning of the 24th day of Quinctilis and set out for Olisipo. On the third morning of the voyage Valerianus called for a general assembly.

"Men, I know you are the most trustworthy of all. That is why you have been chosen for this return voyage." He paused a moment. "I also know that you are sincere in your intention to make a new life in these new lands." He paused again.

"However, it is possible that when we reach civilisation again, someone might whisper in your ear. It is possible that someone might ask where you have been, what you have seen. This someone might even tempt you to betray your solemn oath to lord Pulcher and betray his confidence in you." Another pause.

"I must advise you that such a person does not have your interests at heart. Should such a person ask where you have been, you shall say 'to China'. If you are asked what you have seen, you will say 'Everything between here and China'. If you say anything else, things will not go well for you, nor for your wife or children. Lord Septimius is a most generous and supportive patron, but he is also intolerant of ingratitude by faithless clients. So be careful what you say." Valerianus paused again.

"And if by any chance you are tempted to fade into the crowd instead of returning to your ship for the return journey to your new homes, then also be assured of this. You will be found and you will be very sorry that you broke faith with your patron." Valerianus scanned his audience. "So do not let anyone whisper in your ear."

Utica – Sextilis, 815 AUC (62 A.D.)

Septimius Pulcher rose to greet Valerianus into his office. He came around his desk to offer his right arm, a smile beaming from his face. “What news, Caius? Did you find anything worth the effort of trading? Here, take a seat! And a cup of wine, perhaps?” as he poured some of his finest Falernian into two fine Babylonian tumblers and watered it.

“In short, Septimius, it is better than you could have imagined,” Valerianus answered as he took the offered cup and sat on the couch indicated. “What would you say about finding a race very much like the Ancient Egyptians? A race that has more gold than they know what to do with, but neither bronze nor iron? They are amazed by the wonders of steel, and are prepared to exchange gold for it, pound-for-pound!”

Pulcher was struck speechless for a moment. He gaped.

“What quantities?” he asked hoarsely.

“That has yet to be established,” Valerianus answered. “But even trading for one day, in an outpost town and with no prior notice, I traded sixty three pounds of gold for the sake of sixty three pounds of steel tools. I expect we’ll be talking hundreds of talents per year once they manage to get their supply lines in order, perhaps even thousands of talents.”

Again Pulcher was silenced for the space of a few deep breaths. “Talents upon talents?” he repeated.

“I expect so,” Valerianus assured him. “They have so much of the stuff that even local town mayors wear torques like this one,” he continued as he took Imix’ torque out of a leather case he had carried into the office and passed it over the desk. “That cost me a large hunting knife,” he explained. Pulcher felt the reassuring heaviness of real gold, and stared at the strange carvings on the piece. “And that doesn’t count the silver,” Valerianus added. “I’ve set a rate of one hundred pounds of silver for a pound of steel.”

“Shit!” Pulcher muttered. “This is *too* good! If I start unloading silver and gold in quantities *that* large, people will start asking questions. My competitors might start to follow my ships or bribe my sailors. They’ll offer these natives more steel than pound-for-pound and we’ll be in a race to undercut each other.” His frustration was obvious. This discovery was so good it was too good!

“Well, I’d be the last person to suggest one possible solution, Septimius,” Valerianus said with a smile. “But since I expect to be beyond the reach of the Republic for the rest of my life, I might be tempted to make a few idle musings...”

Pulcher smiled back. “Yes. Let’s muse, Caius.”

“If any of your competitors were to send a ship after me, it just might never be seen again,” Valerianus said with an exaggerated frown. “Who knows what sort of perils might lie in the far west? Vicious beasts, sea monsters, cataclysmic storms, perhaps even barbarous pirates? Whether they follow your ships or just rely on information from a bribed sailor, there are plenty of perils out there! And the fact that I will never be seen again either will just add force to that conclusion.”

“But you’ve made it there and back twice, Caius,” Pulcher answered.

“Yes, but no-one knows where I've been. As far as the rest of the world knows, I've been in the south of Greater Africa. But if any ships from your competitors dare to sail west, they'll almost certainly be much less fortunate.”

“Oh? Why would that be, Caius?”

“Because in a couple of years' time, those western waters will be crawling with pirates.”

“How many pirates do you think might be out there, Caius?”

“Well, I'd think that perhaps four hundred men would be a bare minimum,” he replied, rubbing his chin as if in deep thought. “That'd be enough to man perhaps five attack vessels, plus another hundred or so as lookouts on the arc of islands guarding the approaches, with enough spare to make up for any losses. And of course, they'd need women! Once that's set up, their little pirate colony should be able to provide for its own future. All you'd need to do is provide any supplies that they can't provide for themselves, such as sail cloth, rope, and steel to trade for gold. All paid for by the gold they allow your own ships to bring back to you.”

Pulcher thought about this very carefully. “But there would be an ongoing risk of some sailor talking.”

“Your ships wouldn't know where the gold is coming from. The pirates would trade with the natives, and your ships would only trade with the pirates in one port. That port would look unprotected to any visiting sailor, and the pirates would pretend to be only too eager to trade with anyone who might arrive. I've even thought of a good cover story; that our little colony was actually founded a hundred and fifty years ago by some of Quintus Sertorius' veterans from the Spains. I've even called the colony ‘Port Sertorius’ and their island ‘Hispaniola’ just to give this some credibility. So any sailor who tells the secret will give his new master the impression that all he has to do is send a ship. They won't know until too late that it's a trap. And if your stupid sailor blabs to the authorities instead then this false history will not point towards you but to someone who died more than a hundred years ago.”

Pulcher breathed a deep breath. “And what would you do with your captives?”

“Enslave them. Sell them to the natives if they're too recalcitrant. The natives over there are always looking for human sacrifices.”

Pulcher breathed another deep breath. “This could be very risky if anyone escapes.”

“Risky for us pirates, perhaps,” Valerianus agreed. “But not for you. All you're doing is trading. You'd be completely unaware of what other activities your suppliers are engaged in.” He let the thought die away.

Pulcher pondered the possibilities and their implications for a few moments. “Do you really think it could work?”

“If we get ourselves set up properly, yes,” Valerianus answered. “I've thought about this all the way home. I think the critical point is that we have to get everything set up on the other side of the ocean before we bring back any quantities likely to arouse interest. We need to establish our picket lines and build our attack ships before we risk anyone coming over to see what is happening. Only then do you start milking this cow.”

“Build ships over there, you say?” Pulcher reacted. “Why not build them here, and sail them over?”

“To make sure no-one on this side of the ocean asks why a respected trader like you would be buying fighting ships rather than merchantmen,” Valerianus responded.

“So who will you take over there to build them for you? Will you try to pick up a master shipwright from the anti-pirate squadrons?” Everyone knew the Republic had ships specifically designed to run down and destroy the pirates who were still a nuisance in Chinese waters and along the coasts of Greater Africa. “How would you convince him to go with you?”

“We won't need the world's best fighting ships for this role,” Valerianus was dismissive. “We're not trying to capture pirates, only fat merchantmen. Even the old Tamil escort designs would be good enough, and we already have shipwrights under your patronage who can build better than that.”

Yet again Pulcher lapsed into silence. Valerianus took a moment to consider himself flattered that his patron was taking this so seriously.

“You say you've thought this through, Caius. So tell me how many men do you need? Are you serious that four hundred would be enough? And what sort of material investment? And how long would you need to get set up?”

“I think I could manage with four hundred, but more would be better. I'd also need enough women for the base to provide the next generation. I am thinking in the long-term here and the best way of ensuring no-one wants to return home from the base over there is to have no-one with any ties back here. Let them be replaced in the next generation by native-born.” Valerianus ticked off the first in the string of questions. “Now you ask what sort of investment. I suggest that the initial capital outlay need only be four hundred men, provide women for them, some beasts as breeding stock and grain to set up their own farms, plus ships to take them. That's all it will cost you. They can live off the land when they get there. All the rest will be profit. Gold for steel, plus perhaps routine topping-up of tools, rope and sailcloth. Now what was the last question again?”

“Ah, how long will it take you to set things up?” Pulcher asked. “To get your pickets in place in case of intruders?”

“Give me two years,” Valerianus answered. “That'll be time enough to build our interceptors, based on the Republic Navy's anti-pirate patrol boat design. Then send over your first traders.”

Pulcher nodded his acceptance. Then a thought struck him. “Just a minute! How will we find you? I don't want you to give me a chart that could be found or turned over! I could be broken by the Republic for that!”

“Don't worry,” Valerianus replied. “Just sail along at exactly 16 degrees north, and at about 106 degrees west of Babylon you will come to an island with a good sheltered anchorage on its south coast. If we're not there waiting for you, then we won't be long. We'll trade there. The less anyone on your merchantman knows about us or our base, the less risk involved. And make sure you fly your personal standard.”

Pulcher nodded again. “It'll be easy to remember 16 and 106 as the vital numbers, I think,” he commented. “That would be as close as a captain can tell his longitude while at sea, anyway.”

“And the best time of year to send a ship would be in Spring,” Valerianus went on. “If you leave Tingis any time in late March you'll avoid the southern storm season and

can return to Olisipo using the northern winds in June, when the weather is best at those latitudes. We can give you charts of a few islands on the way home in case you run into trouble. You could register these with the Cartography Records Office if you want. They're in the middle of the Atlantic and will give no hint of anything to anyone. Or if you prefer, we can provide those charts to your captain for his voyage home and he can destroy them when he's in sight of Lusitania. We can provide a new set of charts for each return voyage and no-one this side of the ocean will be any the wiser."

"I would rather there be no information this side, Caius," Pulcher commented. "Let's keep all that in your hands, out of the reach of the Republic." This time it was Valerianus who nodded agreement.

"Give me a few days to think about this, Caius," Pulcher said as he stood. "And get your sailors here into my house as guests. I don't want any of them getting drunk and talking to strangers. They can eat and drink all they like as my house guests but none of them will step outside until they're ready to leave."

Pulcher thought of little else over the new two days. He had to concede that it seemed the perfect arrangement. The profits would be enormous and he would be doing absolutely nothing illegal. All the illegalities would be done by Valerianus and his pirate colony, and they were safely out of sight. Even if some competitor did find out something, the pirates would make sure he never returned. And even if one did return he would not blab to the authorities about it! He would certainly try to carry on his own gold trade in competition and Valerianus would find out and put an end to that quickly enough. But what he needed was a credible cover story as an alternative source of the gold. He can't just produce it out of thin air!

Well, he was already involved in the Senegal trade. At present he was shipping supplies and manufactured goods south and various bulk products back into Our Sea, but this would be a good time to expand into the Senegal gold trade as well. He had two years to get everyone accustomed to the idea of the Pulcher ships bringing back ever-increasing amounts of gold so a bit more in a couple of years' time wouldn't seem out-of-character.

Yes, Caius' plan was going to work out well, both in operation and in requiring two years to set it up prudently. Two years that also provided him with the time to set up his cover on this side of the ocean as well. He asked for Valerianus to attend his office the next day.

"Caius, your plan is brilliant," Pulcher said as Valerianus settled into his seat. "I want you to take control of the western end, and I'll spend the next two years building a cover story." He smiled as he handed Valerianus a glass of watered Falernian. "My greatest regret is that I'll no longer have you on hand."

"You know the depth of my gratitude to you, Septimius," Valerianus said as he accepted the wine, "and I'm pleased that I'll be able to repay your kindness and trust. But who knows what the future will hold? After a few years perhaps things will be running smoothly and I might be able to return. We shall see."

"Be that as it may," Pulcher agreed. "Now I want you to discreetly get your men and supplies together. Call in the wives and children of the men and load up with all the tools and supplies you'll need. Engage a few master shipwrights on the basis of a five-year contract in the Far East. By the time their five years is up they will be in no position

to demand their return. Call for volunteers among my current sailors on the same basis, a five-year posting and tell them their wives and children must come with them. As for the rest, I'm happy for you to buy slaves as you see fit. You said you wanted at least four hundred men. We'll raise that many, and I expect you'll have to take at least three hundred women as well, plus at least that many kids. I reckon that'll require five good square-riggers as transport, so take some of my merchantmen out of the Senegal trade as they arrive. Better for them to go one at a time than attract attention by forming a convoy. If you want, you can have them meet out of sight in the Canaries and sail together from there. Let them form the trading and transport fleet at your end. I'll order replacements from the shipyards in Germania."

Valerianus smiled. "Hit the ground running, eh? Right, Septimius, I'll get moving. But I won't have the manpower to spare to maintain five big merchantmen in the west and I won't have the need either if I am only transporting steel and gold. I expect I might keep two or three caravels just in case the need for them arises, but the others can be sailed back home whenever convenient. Let's just see what happens."

"Agreed," Pulcher answered with a nod. "Let our trading point be at that island you mentioned; 16 degrees north and 106 degrees west. I'll send a ship there to meet you on the Ides of April the year after next. That gives you a year and a half, and we can discuss progress. It will also bring more supplies, equipment and livestock. Any ships you want to give back can be sailed from there."

Cape Verde Islands – December, 815 AUC (62 A.D.)

The five ships carrying the new colonisers had left from various ports all along the North African coast separately and one at a time to avoid arousing curiosity. Apart from the wives and children of men already in the Islands there were half-a-dozen shipwrights, another one hundred and twenty experienced sailors from Pulcher's existing fleet with their wives and children and all the rest were slaves.

The first ship had reached the Cape Verde Islands in September, and the last had dropped anchor in their semi-protected bay on the 29th day of November. The more sheltered harbour and better supporting facilities in the Canaries were avoided for precisely that reason. Secrecy was paramount and these useless bare islands were the ideal marshalling place.

Now the 'true' nature of their mission was being announced. Valerianus used a small valley inland from the beach, bowl-shaped like a natural theatre, to address more than three hundred men. The women and children were still on board the ships in the bay.

“This fleet is not bound for China as originally proposed. That was a cover story. In fact, we are headed for a secret location where a completely new trading post will be established. I've been there for the last three summers, and it's a beautiful land. Life will be good, even better than promised. The full extent of how good could not be told to you until now. We didn't want to create too much interest, but had to make this look like any other routine enterprise.” He paused and looked around the crowd, smiling warmly.

“The next five years, the term of your contracts, will be deeply satisfying. When you work you will know that what you are building will make you and your children rich! It will be hard work at first as we get everything up and running, but you will not be treated harshly. Each one of you is too valuable for that! You will be given ample food, pleasant rest, and little luxuries to celebrate each milestone. I fully expect that when your five years is completed you will ask for an extension of your contracts, so good will be the life you will have built for yourselves and your families!” Another pause as he beamed his sincerity to all.

“So when we set out tomorrow, we will not be heading south, towards the south parts of Africa or China. We will be heading towards the best five years of your lives, and if you perform to expectations many more years after that!”

The massed men did not know how to react. A buzz spread through the crowd. One man, one of the skilled shipwrights, called out above the general noise.

“Where are we going? Not to some swamp in Senegal, where the shivering sickness will kill us all!” This sent a spark of alarm through the hearers.

“No, not to Senegal,” Valerianus called back over the rising murmur. “No, we will be going to a land where I have had command of three ships for three years, and not one death from disease. A handful of minor illnesses, but no worse than happens in Utica. I wouldn't be going back myself if I thought it would be dangerous,” he finished with a smile.

“I signed up for five years in China,” another man called. “If you will not honour that part of the contract, how can I be confident that you will honour any other part? Take me back home now!”

“I suggest you read your contract again,” Valerianus called back. “You signed up for 'China or other locations as required'. But if you want to cancel the contract, I am sure that can be arranged. Do you want to be left here? Or do you want to hire a ship to take you back to Africa? Can you afford the hire?” Valerianus lifted his line of sight to scan over the whole crowd. “Make no mistake,” he advised, “Lord Pulcher has spent a very large sum already on this venture. He intends to spend much more in years to come. And he requires all of you to be willing parts of this enterprise. Any who are reluctant will not be carried. They will be released from their contracts, and charged for their passage back home pro-rata for the time not served as detailed in your contracts. But those who commit themselves to honouring their contracts will find their skills and faithful service will be richly rewarded. Lord Pulcher is a generous patron to those who serve him faithfully. Just ask the wives of his sailors with you on the ships today!”

He looked around again. “That fact alone, that Lord Pulcher is providing free food and transport for these women to join their husbands, should tell you how generous he is towards his workers and how desirable this new land is for those men to ask that their families join them! But you don't need to take anything on trust. Just wait and see for yourself and you will agree.”

The mood of the crowd was mixed. The slaves in the crowd were resigned to the fact that they were slaves and had to take whatever Fortuna put in front of them. Most of the free men among them were unconcerned. They had contracted for five years' work that included all lodging, food, clothing and other living expenses plus a small monthly cash payment for luxuries. Where they were to work didn't really matter too much to them. But it was clear to Valerianus that four of the free men were very resentful. They would take some watching.

Port Sertorius – January, 816 AUC (63 A.D.)

It had been a good passage. The navigation had been nearly perfect, hitting Septimia exactly head-on and their distance calculations had been only seventy miles out. Not bad for longitude observations taken from a rolling deck! And no lives lost in transit either. Fortuna was still smiling on them.

He looked down over the personnel manifest on his desk, checking the dispositions that Demetrios had made during his absence. His senior captain was certainly a competent commander, and had used his limited manpower very well. He had constructed two long wharves, each projecting fifty paces into the bay. To eliminate the need to beach ships during the storms he had dropped six huge anchorstones into the bed of the bay, each with a chain fixed to a floating buoy. These were at spaces wide enough to ensure that ships tying up to them would not batter each other as they swung with the wind and tide. And he had built row after row of barracks-style huts, enough for five hundred people and with more nearing completion. And of course the large kitchen and communal hall where morning and evening meals were eaten by those in camp. A good effort for a mere one hundred and thirty men in seven months, most of which had been the storm season!

He listed the workforce available to him now. Three hundred and five free men, and one hundred and fifty four male slaves. A total of four hundred and fifty nine men. Well, the crews currently on building duty can be retained in that task, now that they had experience and developed some expertise. That's sixty free men accounted for. Then there were the forty men involved in timber-getting and sawmilling. He would need even greater numbers now that the easiest and closest timber had been exploited. Say another twenty, or the builders will be standing idle. Actually make that another forty, the shipwrights will need timber as well. He would need to set seventy of the sailors as hunting and fishing parties, now that there were so many more mouths to feed and no crops or livestock yet available. Five of the new slaves had experience as herdsmen, but he was carrying only a few beasts intended to be initial breeding stock. They needed only one herdsman, but a few of the slaves could be put under him to clear and fence the paddock for them. There were a half-dozen farmers in the contingent as well, who would need more slaves to clear and plough fields for sowing the first crops. He took up his quill and started listing duties and manpower against each task.

Not as obvious, but essential if this colony was to prosper, was water supply and sanitation. Drinking from barrels and defecating in the bushes outside town was adequate for a few men for a short time, but public health would collapse if this continued. He allocated another eighty men to digging and lining a sewer outfall through the spit of land between the Port and the ocean to the south. That would allow the discharge to be directed out to sea instead of into the Bay. Another eighty could be set to building an aqueduct or flume for drinking and washing from the freshwater creek, with the overflow directed to the sewer to flush the waste out to sea.

Speaking of drinking and sewers, we will need full-time cooks to feed almost a thousand people! Demetrios' idea of a common kitchen and eating hall should be retained to allow the men more time for work. That was how most Head Count back in the Republic ate anyway, because soup and bread prepared in bulk was cheaper than each

household buying food and fuel to cook their own meals. He allocated ten men to cook in the galley. Then there are the seven ships to maintain. I'll allow ten men each and the crews can help each other with the heavier work. He totalled up his numbers thus far.

Four hundred and sixty three! That was more than his total workforce, even without allowing for new interceptors to be built! He looked down over his list again, to see where allocations could be shaved. Ah! There! He won't need eighty men as timber-workers, if no ships are being built! But the construction work will still need at least forty of them. Thirty six more to be shared between boat building and procuring the extra timber is still a very slim workforce. Perhaps he might need to delay the ship-building until after the barracks, water supply and sewers are completed. Perhaps Demetrios might have an idea. Valerianus rose from his chair and took the sheet of paper in hand, wandering towards the door of his cabin.

"That's only the start of your problems, Caius," Demetrios commented after the work allocations had been shown to him. "I think you'll need more men hunting, trapping and fishing. Seventy men will not be enough to feed a thousand mouths. Then there are the hundreds of little jobs you haven't listed. I've had two men working full-time maintaining the bath house, for example, and there will be lots of other things that just need to be done." The two men sat glumly.

"Well, I dare not delay the water and sanitation, not with a thousand arses so close together. That's how epidemics happen," Valerianus muttered. "The only answer is the one hundred and forty I've allocated to timber and building. We might have to cut them back by however many more hunters you think we need, and then re-balance until all our housing is complete. Only then do we start on the ships."

Demetrios continued staring at the sheet of paper. "By the time you allocate enough hunters, and then drop out another twenty or so for the little jobs that just have to be done, I expect you will have less than a hundred men. Perhaps only seventy. I had a hundred on timber and building even before you returned! This is going to slow down progress something terrible! It will be the storm season again before you have enough men to even think about ship-building and by then the men will be involved in cleaning up damage from one storm after another. It will be this time next year before you can even dream about ship-building."

There was another lapse into silence. Then Valerianus broke it in his annoyance. "Blast, Demetrios! I did all my arithmetic back in Africa on the basis of an on-going operation, providing enough men to maintain lookouts in the eastern islands and a few interceptors here at base, as well as two trading ships for the Maya and farming to feed to the colony! But I didn't realise how much labour it would take to get established in the meantime!" He grabbed at the sheet again, staring at it even though he knew every number by memory. "We have female slaves! Let them do the cooking! That's ten more men available!"

Then Demetrios have an inspiration. Almost stunned, he reached over to take the paper. "Women can fish, too. It takes no great skill or strength to put out nets and haul them back in. Let their hands toughen up with use!" He scanned the duties with fresh eyes. "Building work needs experience, but put a few women on duty to help the men, and they'll learn in time. And they can do the laboring work on the sewer as well. They might not be as strong, so they will work slower, but that's better than nothing. They

could even do the more skilled jobs like lining and waterproofing, with a bit of instruction.” He looked up at Valerianus. “Caius, this is not Utica where women look after the household and the children! Here we need everyone to work! Even child-minding can be done in bulk. Let them be gathered together, so each woman can be responsible for a dozen kids! That will free the rest of them to replace men on the jobs they're best suited for.”

The five shipwrights were settling into the task as well as could be expected, but the timbers in this land were foreign to them. They were not accustomed to their properties, and their techniques had to be adjusted slightly. But eventually they were ready to launch the first of their interceptors based on the standard Republic anti-pirate design. Its performance was disappointing.

“Demetrios, this is all starting to unravel!” The frustration, even desperation, was obvious in Valerianus' voice. “What is the problem here?” he demanded.

“The problem is that we have only one year's experience with these timbers and we're trying to catch up with two thousand years' experience back home,” Demetrios replied, his insubordination barely contained. “Until we learn how to work these timbers better, our ships will continue to be heavier and therefore slower. If we try to cut down more on weight we end up with insufficient strength and more leaks through the seams.”

“Well, why can't you add more sail?” Valerianus came back sharply. “More weight means more stability, doesn't it?”

“More weight as ballast gives stability,” Demetrios retorted. “But not when that weight is spread throughout the hull. Stability comes from low weight and a wide beam.”

“Then widen the beam, or add more ballast!”

Demetrios drew a deep breath. He realised that he needed to take the lead here. His commander was no expert on ship-building and this was at the root of his frustration. Valerianus knew how much he didn't know, and felt helpless. “Let's talk to the shipwrights,” Demetrios suggested. That might give Valerianus a bit more understanding and ease his frustrations to some degree. It would also provoke a bit more urgency among the builders.

Bilat was the Head Shipwright and of mixed Indian-Greek ancestry. His fathers for generations had been among the best shipwrights in Krokola, but as a younger son of a younger son he had been squeezed out of the family business and taken up employment with the Republic Navy. He had moved to the anti-pirate squadron based in the Senegal.

“Please, Bilat,” Demetrios approached the shipwright, “could you please run the Commander and me through the problems we are having, what solutions you have considered and what the complications might be?”

“Yes indeed, lord,” Bilat answered with the start of a salute. It was a habit born of his work in the Navy, a habit that was only slowly disappearing.

“The main problem is that this timber does not work like the timbers we are accustomed to. It is heavier, and more resistant to being shaped. This makes our ships heavier, so they sit lower in the water. That greater submerged volume creates more resistance, like wading through deeper water instead of shallow water,” he concluded with a smile he hoped would help the Governor.

“I know you have considered many answers, Bilat, so I mean no insult,” Demetrios smiled. “But for the sake of a clearer understanding, please explain why this cannot be overcome by more sail area.”

“That is because more load on the sails will push the ship over further. That is not just an inconvenience. It means that the wind being deflected by the sails is being deflected upwards instead of backwards, so the forward thrust is reduced.”

“Can this not be overcome by more ballast?”

“In some cases that is so, my lord. But it is not very efficient, because more ballast means the ship sits even deeper, and creates even more resistance. And in light weather, when there is no problem with the heel angle, we gain no benefit at all for the cost of this extra drag.”

“Are there any other ways of reducing heel angle?” Demetrios pressed.

“Well, we could try moveable ballast, to create a counter-heel angle,” Bilat conceded. “But that means that you would need to move the ballast from one side of the ship to the other every time you wanted to tack or gybe. That would take hours, an impossible restriction in a battle situation. Or we could make the beam wider, to create more restoring force, but that would mean much more side-slip when working into the wind. Our distance-made-good would suffer.” Bilat shrugged. “We are currently working on a couple of ideas that might provide a better compromise, but we have yet to see how well they work. We do not want to raise hopes that might not be fulfilled.”

“Well, I’ll take that risk, Bilat,” Valerianus came into the discussion. “Right now I need some hope.”

Bilat looked uncomfortable. He glanced from one to the other before he spoke. “These are only ideas, my lords, and they might sound foolish to you, lord Demetrios. But we can learn even from backward steps.” He drew a breath.

“We are thinking of making the hulls square in section, not as rounded,” Bilat said almost as a confession. “Yes, I know that this will mean slightly more timber, and therefore slightly more weight, so we will sit even lower. It also means more wetted surface area to create drag and provide more space for weed and barnacles to grow. But it will also move more displaced volume further out from the centreline, providing more resistance against heeling.” He looked slightly ashamed to be talking of so strange an initiative. “We will build one prototype only and see how it performs. Even if it is no improvement it might suggest new ideas.”

Demetrios had a far-away look for a moment. He came back to them. “Bilat, I’m not a designer, but a sailor. And without meaning to offend, you are not a sailor, so you have never had to improvise on the high seas. But I remember one time when we were hit by a storm on the China Sea. We all survived the worst of the wind, but afterwards the seas were so high that a ship sailing with us was almost rolled over. The storm had moved his cargo so far that he was left with a permanent heel angle of more than thirty degrees, and the cargo was still being thrown around so badly by the rolling that he couldn’t send any crew below deck to redeem the situation. But he had a few spare cross-arms lashed to his deck. He fixed these across his deck so they projected out to the high side, and then begged me to come alongside and winch these cross-beams down onto our deck, to hold him more level.” Demetrios groped for a way to explain what he was

thinking. “So perhaps it might be possible to use two separate hulls, connected so that the weight of each helped to stabilise the other?”

Bilat was obviously on the same page. “Brilliant! Over in the Spice Islands, there are canoes that use that trick! They have a log out to one side, so that if the log rises out of the water its weight pulls it back down, but it can't drop any lower than the water because it floats. This keeps the canoe stable, even in waves. It's the same principle!” Bilat's excitement bubbled up. “My lord, if you could spare the time I would like to work on this together,” he exclaimed. “This is outside traditional designs and your practical experience would be most helpful.”

Demetrios smiled broadly. “Anything to make life easier for lord Valerianus!” he pledged.

Life in Port Sertorius was quite unlike anything anywhere else. The presence of women in the building crews was a disturbing novelty to all. Then there were the women in the fishing crews, and some of them were becoming adequate sailors in the process. Some of the handful of semi-educated women had been appointed teachers for the younger children, a remarkable change from the tradition of all-male pedagogy. Although these working women were still only a scattering, the presence of even these small numbers was jarring to those accustomed to their near-invisibility outside family-operated trades.

The communal cooking and eating was probably the one point of similarity with the larger cities in the Republic, where only the wealthy cooked and ate at home. The lower classes could not afford the time or the inefficient use of fuel to do their own cooking, but usually ate a stew and bread at a local soup kitchen morning and evening. Both women and men followed this custom so mixed-sex public dining at Port Sertorius mimicked this routine. But the sight of so many women dressed in working clothes and talking about their work with the men made them seem... well, almost the equal of the men in some respects, like Amazon archers in the mess hall mixing with the male infantry.

Valerianus did not have the luxury of choice in many matters. The overwhelming need was to ensure the town and its infrastructure was put in place before an epidemic struck. His next priority was to establish and train an effective interceptor squadron before any intruders arrived. This demanded that every pair of hands had to be put to useful work. The surprise that women could be used productively in so many different roles drove him to employ them in an ever-widening range of tasks. It also forced him to accept that girls should be educated and trained no less than the boys whenever some degree of aptitude was shown. ‘Never waste a resource’ he kept telling himself whenever he was surprised by yet another opportunity to slip a female into productive work.

Most of the men were bemused by this development. They generally treated the women as they would children, and the women themselves were very submissive and tentative in their new roles. Anyway, the urgency of building a town and a fleet from scratch would soon pass and things would get back to normal in a year or three.

The sewer outfall was completed just before the end of April, followed ten days later by the water supply flume. The local rock had been found too hard to work conveniently, so this flume was made of timber bound with steel wire to press the seams closed. The boards would swell slightly with the constant wetting, so this arrangement

should remain watertight. It would need to be duplicated soon, to ensure that the water supply would not be interrupted if timber decay caused problems or if it was damaged by a storm. A fresh water supply cistern was built at the end of each long barracks building, and a latrine at the other end flushed by the cistern overflow. Public health was now protected by these redundancies. The sewer construction crew were already cutting timbers to cover over the open sewer trenches and bury them under a foot of sand.

Valerianus and Loukas were walking along one of the barracks buildings, assessing their adequacy before the storm season would put their work to the test. The roofing was a series of overlapping planks with a fall to the outside eaves. Over these were laid beams running up and down the slope at spaces of about eight feet, with steel rods bolted through their ends and dropping into the ground. These anchor rods had been painted with bitumen for a foot above ground level. He knew from observation during construction that these continued almost the height of a man below ground level before ending in a broad plate more than two handspans wide, and were bitumen-coated all the way down. The earth over that plate had been packed down solidly in layers about a foot thick.

“I know we've been over this before, Loukas, but I'm starting to get twitchy. Are you sure that these will stand up to a big storm?”

“I'm not an engineer, Caius, only a sailor,” Loukas started to explain. “So I approached it as a sailor would. I know that in a really big storm a sail can catch enough wind to lift so much weight through a pulley – about ten pounds for every square foot of sailcloth. So I doubled that load, and then sized the roof planking and the hold-down beams and finally the steel ties and buried anchors in the ground to take this force.” Loukas shrugged. “Perhaps I should have multiplied the wind load by ten instead of two, but we had limited resources and labour so I had to make a judgement.”

Valerianus nodded. “I'm not an engineer either, Loukas, but that sounds fair enough to me. Let's see what our worst storm does during this coming season, and how the huts stand up. In fact, we now have enough labour on hand to put up two more buildings, as trials. Construct one half as strong as you have built these, and the other twice as strong. Just the shells, don't bother fitting them out. We'll see how they fare too.”

“I'll get two gangs onto it straight away, Caius,” Loukas agreed.

Valerianus continued to gaze at the barracks as Loukas turned to leave. There was a voice beside him.

“Excuse me, Commander.” Three of the men who had been walking down the road reserve had stopped to address him.

“Yes?” Valerianus said, surprised.

“We three have been asked to speak to you about pay rates. When would you be able to discuss this with us?” The man speaking was making every effort to be respectful. He seemed almost afraid.

Valerianus glanced around the street. “Why not now?” he asked. “Here, or do you want to go to my office? Or somewhere else?”

“Wherever you see fit, lord,” the man replied.

Then let's go to my office," Valerianus suggested. "I have my records there, in case we need to refer to them."

The three men looked relieved. They followed Valerianus to the end of the street and into the building reserved for senior officers and administrative functions. Soon all four were seated around a table. Valerianus took out a sheet of paper, a quill and a jar of ink.

"Now, what's the problem?" he asked calmly. "Has someone not been paid?"

"Well, it's a larger issue we would like to talk about, lord," the spokesman said hesitantly. "We free men have been contracted on the assumption that we would be required to work normal hours. That would generally be considered ten hours a day, with the *nundina* as time off. But we have been working from daylight to dusk every day. We have had no days off. There are many men who believe that we should be paid extra, for this extra time." He ended his little presentation, hoping that it would not trigger a harsh response.

But Valerianus did not explode with indignation. He simply nodded thoughtfully as he sat. "Quite right", he said eventually. "But you must also realise that this first half of the year is the working season. During summer and autumn we can expect storms that will prevent any work, sometimes for several days on end. It will average out over the year. And you will also realise that this heavy schedule was to build your own housing, water, sewer, and so on, so it was for your own comfort and health. Now that those tasks are finished, the load will be lighter."

"I have no doubt that you are right, lord," the spokesman said, licking his lips for fear that to continue the petition might be pushing his luck too far. "But the men only know what they have experienced so far. What you say will no doubt be shown to be true in the end, but right now there is discontent. A small show of generosity now will solve the immediate tension. After that, events will show that you are not unfair in what you say."

Valerianus looked at the man calmly. "I could make that additional payment. But what would the men spend it on? We have brought with us only so many luxuries, enough to cover the anticipated demand but not much more. Will the men become discontented if they have a bag full of *denarii*, but nothing to spend it on?"

"I would hope that you would be able to do something about that, lord," the spokesman replied submissively.

"I'll consider your request, and see what can be done to satisfy it," Valerianus promised. "Is there any other matter you want to discuss?"

"Well, yes, my lord," the man said almost with embarrassment. "The married men are also wondering what payment will be made to their wives for their work. These women were not contracted to provide labour, and it was explicit in the men's contracts that transport and sustenance for their families would be provided at lord Pulcher's expense. So they ask, will the women be paid for their work which was in addition to that contracted?"

Valerianus considered this proposition in his own mind. The man had a point. And the explanation that it would average out over the year carried no weight on this issue, there being no obligation upon the women to work at all.

“I take your point, ah... May I have your name, please? I expect that we might be having more than this one talk as time goes on.”

The spokesman hesitated, clearly fearing retribution. But after a slight pause, “Marcus Lentulus, lord.”

“Thank you, Marcus. And how might I find you quickly, to talk further once I've considered your requests?”

“I work in a building gang, under lord Loukas.” There was some sweat starting to bead on his forehead now.

Valerianus smiled. “Marcus, I was once a slave. So I understand your caution and I appreciate your courage. But you have no need to fear me. We all need to work together out here and that can only happen if we all respect each other. Be assured that I respect you.”

“Thank you, lord,” Lentulus gulped out.

“Then please get back to the men you represent and tell them that I'm considering what can be done. If it's acceptable to you, I'll run through a few calculations to see what's possible and I'll meet you over the evening meal the day after tomorrow, so we can discuss these issues publicly. It's only fair that the men hear everything we say to each other. It will help them understand.” Valerianus stood to offer his right arm to each of the three in turn. They smiled as they took his arm and filed out of the office.

Valerianus strolled back to his chair and sat. He must be seen to be just, especially on this first occasion, or he will set a pattern of resentment that could cripple the colony. But he must not be seen to be weak either, or he would invite ever more demands. Apart from which, how much could he afford?

There were precious few things for the men to spend their money on anyway. The expectation had been that most of their earnings would be saved and there would be a tidy purse to take home when the five years were completed. Not that he ever intended to let any of them go home but that was something that could be dealt with when the time came. There were the whores of course, but most of the men were married anyway. Then there would be beer for sale, not part of the food ration. But he didn't want to encourage drunkenness. It would be unwise to introduce a fee for use of the bath house – which reminded him that he should also build a bath house for the women. Now that they are working they should be given at least some reward.

Ah! Perhaps he could build a theatre and put on regular plays. That would claw back some of the cash, and he should be able to afford the manpower to allocate to a theatre company once the initial building works are completed. Perhaps Demetrios and the other Captains might have some ideas as well.

The five leaders all met the next morning. Tarenos had seen first hand at the Cape Verde Islands the perplexity and in some cases the antagonism of the immigrants when told of their destination. He was most amenable to generosity. He felt more than the others the need to defuse any troublemakers. Demetrios was more authoritarian. Loukas and Markos were prepared to support whatever Valerianus decided but suggested that another journey back to Africa might be in order to both report the situation and also to pick up more livestock. Hunting was getting scarce. And this extra trip would permit a few extra items to be brought back. Perfumes and lotions might be an idea if the women

were going to be paid, or perhaps stout work boots that might attract a premium over the standard-issue sandals.

The three new captains who had come over in the last voyage were also included, even though they were still under the illusion that they would return to Africa soon. One commented that this would be a good opportunity to take the large transports back, and return with them. But Valerianus nipped that in the bud. These skilled sailors would be needed in the near future. They would be needed to familiarise themselves with the interceptors and develop a doctrine for their most effective use. The colony would need competent men to captain them. So these mariners had to feel as though they had a stake in the colony. Eventually a consensus was reached.

Valerianus collected his bowl of seafood chowder from the serving bench and walked towards the table where he had seen Marcus Lentulus upon entering.

“Hello Marcus,” he greeted the man cheerfully. “How has your day been?”

“It has been a good day, thank you my lord,” Marcus replied respectfully. It was obvious that the other diners were now hushed, listening in on what might be said.

“Marcus, I consider you one of the leaders of this colony,” Valerianus said clearly. “You obviously have the respect and trust of your fellows or you wouldn't have been chosen to speak to me on their behalf. And you have my respect for speaking to me both courteously but boldly. So please call me 'Caius'. We have a shared duty to make this new town happy and prosperous, so we should consider each other as comrades.”

“Thank you, my lor...” Lentulus stopped in mid-word as Valerianus raised one palm, “Caius,” he finished.

“Now, for the sake of those listening,” Valerianus smiled and gestured around to the men who were trying so hard to look as though they were not listening, “could you repeat the two points you made in our earlier discussion?”

“Yes, Caius,” Lentulus remembered to use the familiar name rather than the title, “I mentioned that many of the men would like extra pay for the extra time worked. I also mentioned that their wives, all of them free women and not subject to any obligation to provide services, had also been called upon to provide labour. Therefore they should be paid.” Lentulus gulped audibly after being required to state these demands so publicly, surely risking loss of face to the Governor.

“As I said, Marcus, you are both brave and courteous,” Valerianus commented. “I've considered these two points, and I agree that they have merit. That leaves only three more questions before I can act upon them. How much pay, how I am to find the coin, and how are the men - and the women! - to spend it.” There was an audible intake of breath around them. Lentulus was going to win this one!

“The first question is 'How much?'," Valerianus continued. “As I said earlier, the work in this part of the world is seasonal. The next six months will be the storm season, and there will be many days on end when no work can be done. Over the course of the whole year, I expect that the total number of days worked will still be less than seven out of every eight. So although the men have worked harder than expected these last few months, why should this not be considered no more than a shuffling of the same number of working days?”

“I have no doubt that what you say is true, Caius,” Lentulus opened respectfully. “But throughout the summer and autumn, these men will stand ready to work their seven days out of eight. If work is not possible that is no deficiency in them. They did not choose to be stationed in a land where normal work might not be possible. So why should they be held responsible for that?”

Valerianus nodded. “That's a good point, Marcus. I do indeed expect the men to stand ready to work. Perhaps we make this agreement. I will pay them for the rest days worked up until the start of the storm season. Then, during the storm season, for every two days not worked, I will be entitled to call for one rest day to be worked next winter and spring. Is that fair?”

Marcus thought carefully. This is not what his men wanted. They wanted more money, not more idleness. “The men do not want days of useless idleness, locked in their barracks while a storm rages outside. They want their rest days to be days of peace and enjoyment with their families, when they can enjoy good weather rather than enduring bad weather. So why should they be asked to exchange one day of pleasantness for the sake of two days of tempests?”

Valerianus considered this reply for a moment. “But workers generally endure that problem. If a labourer cannot find work for that day, he goes without pay that day.”

“Yes, but these men are not casual labourers hired by the day,” Marcus responded. “They have contracts for five years, so they have already accepted that their rate per day is reduced to allow for this removal of uncertainty.”

“You argue your men's case well, Marcus,” Valerianus conceded. “But by your own reasoning, those extra days should be paid for on the basis that they are cream on top of a steady, guaranteed wage. Therefore the pay rate for the extra days should be lower than the contracted rate, just as the contracted rate is lower than the daily casual rate. So I will pay for those extra days and seek no additional working days in compensation for stormy weather during the summer. But those extra days are to be paid at half-rates. Since there have been twelve such extra days, that means another six days of full pay to each man who has worked all of that time.”

Lentulus thought rapidly. This was extra pay, what the men wanted. If he pressed harder there was every chance that the Governor will retract the offer. He might even take punitive action such as reducing the food ration. So far there had been plenty to eat but there was no way he could be forced to maintain that level. “I think that would be a very fair proposal, Caius. It is an offer worthy of the generosity of lord Pulcher himself,” he added to establish his dedication to his nominal Patron.

“Then let me have your arm on that, that all of the men will accept this agreement as full satisfaction,” Valerianus asked.

“I cannot swear to you that all will accept it, Caius. But I swear that I will do all within my power to that end and provide no support to any who might remain discontent.”

“That is enough for me, Marcus.” Valerianus stood to offer his right arm, and Lentulus stood to accept it.

Valerianus dropped his arm after a respectful grip, and then sat again. “Now we have the question of the women. What do you have in mind there, Marcus?”

“The women are in a situation not explicitly covered by any contract,” Lentulus opened. “They are beneficiaries of the contracts their husbands have with lord Pulcher. So long as the husbands provide faithful service, lord Pulcher is bound to provide food, shelter and essentials for not only them but also their wives and their children. But there is no requirement that the women and children should provide service.”

“Other than respect and orderly behaviour,” Valerianus added.

“Of course they are bound to that extent, as subject to their husbands and fathers who are faithful servants,” Lentulus agreed.

“So we are agreed so far, Marcus,” Valerianus continued. “So I suggest that might be a basis on which we might assess the just rate of pay for such work. Let the work of the wives be considered as if work provided through the paterfamilias.” He paused, waiting for a response.

Lentulus sensed what was required. “It could be looked at that way,” he conceded, “Depending on how that is interpreted.” Lentulus was becoming more confident in his role as spokesman and negotiator by the minute.

“So I propose the following interpretation,” Valerianus continued. “We have already agreed that extra work by the man, over and above the contracted time, should be rewarded by additional pay at half-rate. So work by a woman can be considered in the same light, as additional work to be paid at half-rate. But the problem here is that the woman is not as strong, not as experienced, not as skilful as the man. She needs more guidance and supervision than the man. Also she doesn't have the responsibility of feeding herself, her spouse or her children. That's all the responsibility of the man. For all these reasons, I suggest that a woman be paid at one fifth of the 'extra work' rate of her husband. And since that 'extra work' rate is half of the daily rate, that would mean that a woman is to be paid a daily rate one tenth of her husband's nominal rate.”

Lentulus thought furiously. It wasn't much, but it was certainly better than nothing. And given the reasonableness and logic of Valerianus' explanation for the pay being less, he would have trouble justifying anything greater. After all they were only women, not strong or skilled workmen! “And how much would that amount to, Caius?” he asked, playing for more time to think of a way to make a case.

“It has been one hundred and eighteen days since I started allocating women to work duties. At the rate of one-tenth pay, let us say that's twelve days' worth for someone who has worked that whole time?” There was a gasp around the circle of listeners. That was substantially more than they had expected. It was twice what was being paid as extra to the men! Yet there was one voice that spoke from the crowd.

“With respect, Governor; my wife was heavily pregnant, and was only delivered of her child ten days ago. She was not allocated work. But she was allocated the duty of caring for twelve other children whose mothers were put to work. Is not her duty as much work for the common good as any other effort?” Surrounding voices tried to quieten him. He was risking their bonus! But Valerianus held up a hand for quiet.

“You have a good point there, friend. Those allocated to child-minding will be paid, as will those who helped with pedagogy and all other duties that allowed other women to work, or allowed men to be transferred to work in other tasks.”

“Thank you, lord!” the questioner exulted. “You are indeed a just man!” All eyes turned back to Lentulus.

“I think that's a most reasonable offer, Caius,” he agreed, standing and offering his arm again. Valerianus took it with a smile.

“Well, that is the first question out of the way. We have agreed how much is to be paid for this extra work,” Valerianus announced. “The other questions are how I am going to find that much extra coin, and how are you going to spend it.” He looked around the audience.

“So let me promise you now that I will not try to claw it back from you by putting up any prices for any luxury goods such as beer, or putting a fee on anything that is currently free of charge. That would be dishonest. But I do have a few ideas. I'll talk to lord Pulcher about an increased range of luxuries to be supplied and in greater quantities. I intend to start a theatre and charge fees for admission. I am also thinking of a laundry so we can do washing in bulk. Your women don't have time for that now. They'll be working, you know! But I promise I'll find the coin to pay you all, and not try to gain it back by cheating. Trust me! We are all partners in this together!” He looked around the meal hall again.

“And as a token of this, I invite Marcus Lentulus to become a member of my Advisory Council. He will know everything we plan and be able to raise objections if he considers our plans unfair. He will be able to bring to our notice anything that he considers amiss. And he will be considered sacrosanct, just like the Tribunes of the Plebs back in the Old Days.”

The prototype of Bilat's revolutionary new interceptor was ready to be slipped into the bay on the twentieth day of Quintilis. Demetrios invited Valerianus to inspect the vessel on the slipway first thing the next morning.

Valerianus was perplexed by the strange craft that stood in front of him. “I'm certainly no sailor, Demetrios. But could you please explain why this looks like nothing I have ever seen before?” he asked with a smile of bafflement.

“Yes, it does look like a nightmare, doesn't it?” Demetrios agreed with a smile. “Bilat and I just kept on thinking through the requirements for this craft and then letting our imaginations fly. One thing led to another and we ended up with this.” He took a few steps towards the front of the craft.

“First you will see it has two half-hulls, each fifty feet long and separated by a gap of twenty-five feet. The hulls themselves are only eight feet wide, so the total width of the craft is forty feet. This gives it a wide base to resist heeling, but not so wide as to make it unmanageable. It also allows the stays to be set at a flatter angle, providing better support for the mast under full load. That will allow it to carry more than twice as much sail as any other craft the same size.

“Next, we put a bit of thought into the half-hulls. With so much sail on board the tendency to side-slip would be increased. So we made the hulls deep with the outside faces close to vertical rather than gently rounded. This will allow it to bite into the water better, to resist this sideslip.

“We also realised that we don't need wide, beamy hulls for stability, like normal ships. It's the separation of the two half-hulls that provides this stability, so we can make the hulls narrow, to cut through the water like a canoe rather than push it aside like a conventional ship. But we still had to displace enough water for the ship to float, so we

made the hulls not only deeper for less sideslip, but also longer. This also had the bonus of providing a longer waterline length, which increases speed as well as providing better control.

“And finally, mounting the mast on the central platform provided us with ample space on the two front corners to mount our ballistae without interference from the foresail.”

Valerianus walked between the two half-hulls, amazed. Then he noticed another strange thing. “Demetrios, these hulls are wider at the front than at the back! Won't that make it sit back-heavy in the water?”

“It might,” Demetrios conceded. “But when we calculated how much power this craft could generate under full sail, we found that the forward load on the sails could drive the nose down. So we've made it deliberately back-heavy. If that's a problem in light winds, then we can manually shift cargo. Oh by the way, the stability from the hull separation means we won't need ballast! That makes the ship even lighter, and therefore faster. And as for the shape itself, Bilat suspects that this might even be helpful. He says fish are thickest about a third the way back from the head, rather than in the middle, so maybe that's the best shape for cutting through the water most efficiently. But we will see.”

“All the portholes seem very high,” Valerianus commented.

“Yes. Under full power the upwind hull will almost come out of the water. That means that the downwind hull will settle almost twice as deep.”

Valerianus looked up at the rigging. “At least the rigging looks normal,” he noted.

Demetrios smiled. “Well actually, it isn't. We have deliberately leant the mast backwards. Bilat is of the opinion that a caravel rig sometimes seems to lift higher in the water in a stiff wind. He thinks it's because the backward lean on the leading edge of the sail deflects the wind slightly downwards, lifting the ship slightly higher in the water. So he thought he would try the same principle here.”

Valerianus shook his head. “Start with one crackpot idea and you never know where it will lead. Anyway, what's it like inside? There doesn't seem to be much room for sleeping quarters or stores.”

The two men headed for a ladder to get onto the deck. The decks of the two hulls were flush with the wide central platform, except for the projection of four large hatchways down into each hull. These came up a couple of inches above deck. The only significant projections above deck height were the frames meant to indicate the ballista stations on each front corner, and a four foot high set of hoardings around the wheel at the rear of the central platform.

“We thought that if we were ever attacked it would be essential for the helmsman and ballista crews to have protection. Everyone else can go below decks while we outrun the enemy,” Demetrios explained without being asked. “Meanwhile the flat deck allows the sails to sweep it, creating maximum efficiency.”

The hatches were open. Valerianus glanced down the rearmost one. He could see it had a false floor, apparently closing off the bottom third of the hull.

“You might not have noticed,” Demetrios volunteered, “but there's also a double-wall to the hull in this rear section. This should be the driest part of the boat, so we have

allocated this to stores that could be damaged by water. The false bottom is to separate it from the bilge, and the double walls to protect against seepage.”

The next two hatches opened into a single larger space, again with a false floor. “Sleeping quarters,” Demetrios explained. “The walls here are up to eight feet apart, wide enough for hammocks to be slung. If we want to we could close off part of this space as a captain’s cabin. The same space on the other side can be used to stow the spare sails.”

The front hatch opened into another space with another false floor. “This is primarily intended for buoyancy space, to keep the craft back-heavy,” Demetrios commented. “But it will also serve as the ammunition locker for the ballista above it.” Only then did Valerianus notice the small hatch immediately behind the nominal ballista on each hull. Ballista projectiles could be passed up to the crew by others taking shelter below the deck. “If the need arises it can be cargo space, or anything else. If the craft carries heavy goods in there it would just need to be powered back a bit to ensure it’s not driven under. But even so it should still be faster than anything else on water, even the Republic anti-pirate patrols.”

“So you think it will be that fast?” Valerianus questioned.

“No doubt about it,” Demetrios affirmed. “When do you want to see it fly?”

Valerianus thought a moment. “Only two more days to Neptunalia. Let the launching and trial run be part of the celebrations.”

“Good idea, Caius,” Demetrios agreed with a chuckle. “Watching it fly across the Bay will be awesome!”

The launching of the prototype interceptor had gone well. Demetrios had never handled a craft like this before but he had been totally involved in the design and had a fair idea of what to expect. After a few tentative runs to learn how the boat responded, he put up progressively more canvas and ran a few fast square reaches to impress the crowd. On the last run he lifted the windward hull clear of the water and threatened to capsize, but a rapid order to depower the mainsail allowed the hull to slap down on the water safely. The crowd roared its approval, thinking that this was all part of the show. Little did they know that Demetrios had been taken completely by surprise and come within a whisker of disaster. Thankfully, the hull length was enough to prevent any risk of driving under. The combination of bulbous front end and long waterline length was doing its job. But by the gods, it was quick! Valerianus resolved to set a course for it to race against the first ship which had been based on the more standard Republican design. He wanted to see precisely how much faster this new design was.

And yet another highlight of the day was the first sod of soil turned for the Temple of Neptunus Oceanus, whom Valerianus officially proclaimed as the patron deity of the new town. The central lot of land facing onto the Public Square behind the jetties had been reserved for this purpose when the town had first been marked out. One of the three bulls brought over with the fleet to establish a breeding core for their herds was offered as a sacrifice. All three animals had lived, so Valerianus considered that the two remaining beasts would be adequate for this purpose. This town would depend on the sea for its life more than any other in history, even more so than Carthage and ancient Athens, so the goodwill of Neptunus would be essential to its fortunes.

“And now,” Valerianus announced as the celebrations were drawing to a close, “The storm season is upon us. You have all done well, much better than expected in the time we had available. We all have secure dwellings on land, we have our water supply, and the first of our fields have been cleared. And we have the start of our navy, to protect us!

“Meanwhile we will continue to build as much as the weather allows. We must be ready for our first full season of trading next year. Honour Neptunus with utmost diligence and we will all be rich!”

Meanwhile the captains and the shipwrights struggled to develop a doctrine best suited to the new design of fighting ship. The standard Republic approach was to close with the target, grapple it, and then storm aboard under cover of suppressive fire from cross-bows. But this new craft was poorly suited to that style of fighting, with so little space for the number of marines that would be required for this approach and all the food, water and equipment they would require. This interceptor could run down its target easily enough but would be unable to capture.

“Then there's only one answer open to us,” Valerianus summarised. “We don't try to capture but we destroy from long range. How can we best do that?”

Bilat, being both a Navy shipwright and half-Indian, knew about the history of the Tamil Campaign. “We do what Pedites did against the Musiris fleet. We use fire bombs from a distance instead of ballista bolts.”

Demetrios looked doubtful. “An onager on a ship like this? That would be impossible to aim accurately enough to be effective. The deck would be heaving too much.”

“Not onager bombs, but smaller bombs, fired from a ballista,” Bilat explained. “A ballista can be aimed and adjusted as the deck moves under you.”

“But we would need to close the range,” Demetrios countered. “A ballista is only good for a couple of hundred paces at most, and that would put us in range of the target's weapons.”

“If they have weapons,” Tarenos came into the debate. “And even if they do, we have the speed to be able to get directly upwind of them. Our ballista range downwind would be greater than their ballista range into the wind. At worst, they might be able to fire bolts at us, which are not so badly affected by windage as fire bombs. But they would do little damage compared to a firepot.”

The six men each thought their own thoughts for a moment. Markos was the first to break the silence. “Yes, that's right. Their bolts might punch holes in our sails, but our firepots will not rip through theirs. They will be cushioned, and then fall to deck. There they will break open and spread the fire.” There was another pause.

“All right. We can try it. But I'd like the ballistae to be big, to get as much range as possible,” Demetrios conceded. “I don't want a small ship like ours to come under fire. We can't afford that to happen.”

“Then it is agreed,” Bilat summarised. “We will build super-ballistae, and then design firepots that can take a high launch speed without the wicks being blown out. We have all the rest of this year to perfect these details. Let's get to work on it!”

“That's only one of the problems,” Markos protested. “We need to find the enemy first. How can we ensure that? It is a big ocean out there.”

“We can form a picket,” Demetrios answered. “We don’t have to stay together. We can spread out and whoever finds the enemy will have enough speed to stay out of reach but within sight while the others converge on his signal. No enemy will be able to outrun us, no matter how much a head start we allow him.”

“You mean, signal flags? They can be read from a good distance, but there are limits.”

“Make the flags bigger,” Demetrios answered with a shrug.

“A flag that is too big will interfere with the wind flow through the sails,” Bilat protested. “And besides, the flags would not be visible to anyone upwind. The sails will obscure them.”

“I have it!” Tarenos broke in. “Not flags, but kites! They won't interfere with the sails, and with a long enough cable they can be flown hundreds of feet high! Visible from everywhere, even over the horizon!”

The four men looked around the circle to each other. “I think we have something to work on now, gentlemen,” Demetrios concluded quietly. “Tarenos, you come up with a kite that is big enough to be seen from over the horizon but will not get in the way or be damaged while on board. Bilat and I will do some more trials with the prototype, and see what refinements should be made before we start producing a squadron to a standard design. Markos, you get to work on a bigger and more powerful ballista and firepots for it. I expect we will all need to think outside the box so let your imaginations run free. We’ll compare notes on the Ides of Sextilis.”

It didn't take Tarenos very long to realise that a traditional kite was not going to do the job. It would be too bulky to stow safely. What he needed was something like a bird shape, with wings that could be attached or removed quickly to allow it to be stowed in a long, thin locker. He also needed some idea of how big this frame would need to be, but that was not so difficult. It would only need to be big enough to carry a few flags to be attached to the sides.

He measured his signal flags. Just over two Roman feet from top to bottom, and almost three feet long. To carry even a very short meaningful message he would need at least three flags, and probably five would be a good idea. But that would mean a body length of at least four flag lengths, with the fly of the last trailing behind in the breeze. Unless he allowed for flags to be attached one to another, so a longer stream could be trailed... But in the meantime, allow for a body length of at least twenty feet.

But where to stow a frame twenty feet long? It couldn't be kept on deck. But if it's to be stowed below deck, how could it be man-handled out of those hatches? He would need to cut a hole in one end of the hull, and even then there would be no-where for the men to stand.

Ah! If he cut a step-down at the back of the hull, the men could stand there as they slide it out from a horizontal locker in the top of the higher part of the hull! He sketched a hull in profile, with the front twenty feet set two feet higher than the rear thirty feet of hull length. The body of the glider could be stowed under the front deck, and slid out backwards onto the lower deck for assembly. Then he sketched up a plan view of the space needed. No! That would block access to the ammunition store under the ballista!

He pushed the storage location back another ten feet to allow twenty feet of rear hull length to allow the glider to be slid out for assembly.

Now he was satisfied that a frame three feet wide would not need a locker so wide that it would block access to the hulls. The hatches could be set inboard of the locker and still be wide enough. Oh, he would need to stow the wing as well. That could be stowed in the same way, perhaps over the other hull.

He sat back and stared at the sketches. Then a new thought struck him. That idea of sliding the kite into long, narrow lockers might not be the easiest thing to do in a rough sea. The step in the deck level would also affect the wind flow onto the mainsail. But he could still have a flat deck if the locker was opened from above. The problem there was that the cross-beams that braced the hulls and connected them rigidly into the platforms would get in the way. Was there any way past that problem? He stared at his layout again. How could he fit a long, unobstructed locker into this structure without interfering with the main timber beams?

It hit him like a thunderbolt. Turn the locker around through a right angle, and set it between the main timbers! These lockers would have to be as far back as possible to allow the hatches to be opened without the boom obstructing access, but it could be done. Even if it meant de-powering the mainsail during the process, but that would be necessary anyway to provide sufficient space for the assembly of the wings to the body.

That would give him a locker more than twenty-five feet long, in fact close on thirty feet at the very back where the hulls are narrower and therefore the clear distance between them greater. Allow a bit of clearance each end, that means he can count on at least twenty-five feet being available for wingspan.

Would twenty-five feet be long enough for the wing? In fact, how big would the wing need to be? For most birds, he guessed that each wing was at least as long as the bird's body, so wingspan would be twice that! He didn't have space for a single wing forty feet long! Would he need to have two separate wings instead of a single long spar that could simply be bolted to the top of the body like a cross-beam? That would make assembly at sea so much more awkward.

No, he would try to avoid that if he could. In the meantime, he had no idea of how to calculate how strong any of these pieces had to be or the amount of lift he could generate. The first step was to experiment to see how light he could make it and what wing size was needed for that weight. If that was too long he would worry about a different approach then.

He spoke first to Bilat, showing him some more detailed sketches. The shipwright was not impressed.

"How strong will this have to be?" was Bilat's first question. "Because I can tell you now that the bending forces in the middle of that wing will be pretty high. In effect, you will be using the wing as if a cantilever beam twenty-five feet long, supported by the air. And then you will be hanging the weight of the body off the middle of it, and also the weight of the anchor cable, and then any tension in the cable needed to tow the whole contraption." He stared at the sketch for a few more moments.

"How about we try to reduce that bending by fitting a wire from the half-way point in each wing, and anchor it to the bottom of the body? Like this," he explained, marking

a line on the sketch. "That will serve like a stay on a mast, reducing the bending in the mast."

"I was hoping for something that could be assembled quickly and easily," Tarenos protested.

"I thought you were hoping for something that would actually work," countered Bilat.

"Speaking of masts," Tarenos snatched at a passing inspiration, "why am I thinking of only one wing? Why not two or more, like a foresail and mainsail? That way each wing would be shorter, and not so much bending load!"

Bilat stared at the sketch again, still frowning. "Perhaps, but the wing in front would shadow the wing behind it. That would not be very efficient."

"Then let's put the wings one above the other, like sails on a reach," Tarenos suggested. "Sail number two can be fixed to the bottom of the body, like this," he sketched a second wing on the sketch showing the side elevation. He then did the same to the front elevation.

"Yes!" Bilat exclaimed. "That would also allow the two wings to form the top and bottom chords of a truss! We get rid of bending stresses that way!" He excitedly drew in a few more lines to show what he meant.

Tarenos was impressed, but saw a problem. "That is so much more assembly to be done. And that is not going to be easy on a bouncing deck at sea."

"Perhaps the wing assembly can be stored already trussed-up, in another hatch, and the body just bolted to hang below the wing assembly," Bilat suggested.

The last piece dropped into place in Tarenos' mind. Instead of one wing level with the top of the body and the second wing level with the underside, the top of the body could be hung from beneath the already-assembled double wing. "Yes! Now let's get to work!"

The trials were not going well. The prototype glider was unstable. It was developing ample lift to fly, but almost immediately it would roll over onto its back and slam into the ground.

"I think the problem is that one side gives slightly more lift than the other," Tarenos commented.

"It would be impossible for us to produce a perfectly balanced wing," Bilat answered. "How do birds do it? They can even look around, moving the weight of their heads from side to side, without crashing."

My guess is that they adjust their wings as they go, just like a man adjusts exactly where he puts his feet each pace to stay balanced as he walks. We just do it so naturally that we don't realise we are doing it."

The two men stared at the glider frame before them.

"So how do we build a glider wing that is self-adjusting?" Bilat asked.

"I have an idea," Tarenos ventured. "I've noticed that when seagulls come in to land, they hold their wings up higher, in a wide 'V' shape. And I started to think, if that was a glider that didn't have the nose locked into place, then if one wing produced more lift than the other and started to roll sideways, then the whole glider would tend to start sliding sideways. As that happened, it would be like the wind coming from one side.

The upwind wing would see the wind coming from more underneath, lifting it higher, while the downwind wing would have the side wind pushing down on the top surface. So a 'V' shape of wing would tend to self-stabilise. So what do you think of that?"

Bilat considered this line of thought. "Yes; but that would only work if the glider could actually slip sideways. So it would work once the glider was up to a good height. But as long as we hold the nose in place during take-off, it would not be able to get up to that height."

The two men resumed their silence for a few more moments.

"So what we need to do is hold it during take-off in such a way that if it starts to pull to one side, we let that happen," Tarenos muttered. "But as soon as it goes far enough to one side the angle of the anchor cable will prevent it from going any further. If it doesn't self-stabilise in that short time, it will still roll over."

"Perhaps," agreed Bilat. "But as it gets towards the point where the cable stops it from side-slipping any further, the cable will be pulling it to one side. If we could use that sideways pull to change the wing shape, to re-balance the lift... Let me think about that!"

Two days later Bilat invited Tarenos to look at a new device mounted onto the glider. Instead of the anchor cable being attached to the bottom of the nose, there was the end of a lever projecting slightly forward of the nose and cradled in a slide to prevent it from being pulled downwards. This lever was anchored a couple of feet further back in the body. At that fulcrum point a vertical axle projected up into another disc set on the bottom wing. Two cables were attached to the front edge of this disc, one going to each wingtip. This cable ran out to the front tip of the lower wing, where it passed through a pulley to rise diagonally to the top of the vertical strut separating back edges of the two wings. Tarenos noticed that the wire on the opposite diagonal had been removed.

"You have removed the other bracing wire! The wing shape will not be stable!" he protested.

"Exactly right, my friend," Bilat replied. "Our problem was that we had built in too much rigidity. We need a wing that can adjust itself like a bird's. Watch what happens to the wingtips when I move this lever from side to side." Bilat moved the lever from side to side. As he did so, the wingtips warped slightly, increasing or decreasing their angle of attack.

"How does that help us, if the wings change shape all the time?" Tarenos wondered.

"We attach the tow cable to the end of this lever. When the uneven lift on the wings drives the glider to slip one way, the tension on the tow cable pulls the lever to the opposite side. This pulls on the control cables, warping the wingtips so as to provide more lift on the wing that is dropping and less lift on the other side. That makes the glider tilt back the other way, until the balance point is found. Self-stabilisation!"

Tarenos saw it in an instant. This should work!

Meanwhile Markos was starting to realise that simply building a more powerful ballista would not be enough. The greater launch velocity of the bomb tended to blow out the wicks once the speed of the launch went past a certain threshold, and accuracy naturally fell off at greater range. But he also discovered that the effective target became smaller! He had expected the bombs to be caught by the sails, and then fall to the deck to

break open. But the greater velocity often resulted in the bombs punching clean through. A direct hit on the deck was the only way to ensure damage to the target. He tried reducing the weight of the bombs, but this perversely did nothing to increase the range because the wind resistance was proportionately more severe on the lighter projectile than a heavy one. But it did allow for bombs to be caught by the sail, sometimes, on the target raft he had anchored in the bay. Unfortunately the greater launch velocity to get the same range against increased wind resistance made it almost impossible to prevent the wicks from being blown out.

“I think I might have an answer to the wicks being blown out, sir,” his artilleryman told him one day. “I’ve made up new shape of bomb that protects the wick against the wind.” He opened a roll of paper to show the usual cylindrical clay bomb case, but with an arrow shaft and flights. The wick was at the back of the bomb, shielded from the wind by the body of the bomb in front of it.

“That will never work, Sextus,” Markos dismissed it with a glance. “The forces at launch would snap the shaft.”

“I thought of that, sir,” Sextus replied. “This isn’t launched like an arrow, by pushing from the back. It’s launched by a backplate that presses on the back of the cylinder, but has a notch cut into it to pass the shaft and the wick. And because the wick is protected from the wind by the body of the bomb, it will not be blown out.”

Markos suddenly took more interest in the sketch. Yes! This might work! “Good work, Sextus. Get a dozen or so made up and we’ll see how they fly.”

The new bombs looked impressive. Sextus had refined his design before making up the clay bodies to be fired in the kiln. Now that the flights would offer directional stability instead of the bomb tumbling through the air, he had decided to make the tubes longer and thinner to reduce wind drag. He now had a long clay tube that looked like a small amphora. He filled it with oil, soaked the wick and jammed it into a hole in the stopper, and then pressed the stopper into position. Then the arrow shaft was pushed through a hole in the centre of the stopper, and all the way into the narrow pointed head of the amphora to ensure it stayed aligned during flight.

“Well, let’s see how it works!” Markos said. “Mount it and shoot!”

Sextus fitted the projectile onto the bed of the ballista, the shaft of the tail with ample clearance through a slot in the backboard. It slid back until the rim of the jar was against the backboard. Then the machine was elevated towards the target three hundred paces away, and tension was wound into the sinews as the backboard was drawn back. The projectile slid back down the slope of the bed.

Then Sextus held a torch under the wick, and it came to life. He smiled to Markos, and then tripped the trigger.

The sound of the latch releasing was followed immediately by a spray of oil and a flash. The agony! His face and chest were burning!

He barely had time to cry out before Markos charged at him like a heavy infantryman trying to bash an enemy to the ground. Both men fell off the pier and into the water below. Markos still had his arms wrapped around Sextus as they hit the water. The flames were extinguished, but in the time taken to fall that distance Markos had also suffered burns to his arm, shoulder, neck and the side of his head. Despite the torment he

held Sextus' head above the surface as the man choked up seawater and screamed his pain.

Two of the other men on the pier pulled off their sandals and stripped before jumping in to the rescue. It took only a few minutes to get the two burns victims to the beach at the start of the pier. In that time another man had run into the township to fetch medical help.

Sextus was severely burned. His face would be permanently scarred and probably his chest as well, but thankfully the instinctive blink reaction had saved his eyesight. Markos was not too badly burned. He had been in contact with the flames for only a fleeting moment. This was enough to cause a great deal of pain but the depth of burn was minor.

“How did that happen?” Markos asked the men standing around him.

“I was watching the bomb,” one of them volunteered. “I think the stopper came out when it launched. I could see it flying separately from the jar, with a spray of oil in the air around them.”

“Ah!” Markos saw in a flash how it happened. The enormous, sudden thrust of the launch pushed against the rim of the jar, but the weight of all that contained oil pressed back against the stopper. Under the sudden jerk of the launch, that charge of oil must have pressed with a force a hundred times its own weight! So the stopper was forced out and the oil with it before being ignited by the wick as it escaped. And then the backplate of the launcher slapped into this escaping oil, spraying it over Sextus.

“We need to modify our design,” he said calmly. “We need to put a packer on the stopper, so it rests on the launch plate instead of all that force being applied to the jar. That way, the force of the launch will hold the stopper in place instead of forcing it open.”

“Yes, sir,” the man said.

“Better still,” Markos went on. “Just make the stoppers thicker, so they project out past the rim of the jar.”

“Yes, sir,” the man said again.

“But in the meantime let's use what we already have in stock with a timber packer,” Markos hastened again. “But from now on, we don't light the wicks until we're sure that everything will stay together. We'll just launch with water,” he added with a wry grin. “Now, I think I'm good enough to walk into town. How do you feel, Sextus?”

“Yes, let's walk,” Sextus agreed weakly. He was starting to shiver from the shock. “We will get treated quicker that way.”

Sextus spent the next twenty days indoors, with a gossamer veil over his face and upper body. This gossamer was belted around the waist to protect the raw flesh from insects and other contamination. Yes, the scars would be permanent, but there was confidence that the burns were not so deep that the skin would not be able to grow back again. He would still be able to live and work productively. The speed with which Markos had dunked him had made the difference.

Markos himself refused to be put into recuperation. He had the burnt flesh oiled and then covered, and went back to work the next morning.

The big new ballista was not safe to operate. The burning oil had also been sprayed over the machine and it had taken the men some time before it had been pushed and levered into the water to douse the flames. This had left the tendons too damaged to be trusted. A tendon snapping under maximum load could cut a man as deeply as a slashing sabre.

New tendons were fitted. This allowed time for the launching plate to be modified to bear on the stopper through a packer permanently fixed in place. They were finally ready for the next test shot. The water-filled projectile was fitted and after a nervous exchange of glances the trigger was tripped.

There was a loud crack as shards of pottery flew out in front of the ballista and dropped into the bay. Water sprayed everywhere.

“What the... ” Markos asked in amazement. “What happened? Gnaeus, do you have any idea?”

“The jar shattered,” Gnaeus answered with a shrug. “I don't know why.”

Markos beat down his frustration. “Then let's launch another. But this time, over the beach, so we can recover the pieces if it happens again.”

The next projectile also exploded on the ballista tray. But many of the pieces were found and brought back for inspection.

“The front half of the jar seems to be all in one piece,” Gnaeus observed. “But around the neck it hasn't just broken, it has been shattered into tiny bits. Why?” He walked over to the stock of projectiles, picked one, and laid it on the ballista tray up against the launch plate.

Markos walked over to join him. The two men stared at the jar and ballista in silence. Markos was thinking through the procedure of the launch, in his own mind slowing down the process to think through where the loads went as the jar was accelerated up to flight speed.

“Ah!” he said. “I think I see something! Imagine when the trigger is tripped, Gnaeus! The launch plate presses against the stopper with an enormous force. This pushes the stopper hard down the throat of the jar. The jar splits! Then the launch plate continues forward, smashing the split neck of the jar, reducing it to so many pebble-sized pieces. And of course, it sprays the water everywhere as it does so.”

Gnaeus nodded slowly. “Yes. I see. But that means we're stuffed. We can't launch by pressing against the jar, and we can't launch by pressing against the stopper. So we can't launch!”

“It means we can't launch this design of jar, Gnaeus,” Markos corrected him.

“That's true,” Gnaeus agreed, slightly less annoyed. “We can still launch the old-fashioned bombs, but they don't have the arrow flights so they will not be accurate over longer distances.”

Markos nodded gloomily. “Yes. Poor Sextus has been burned for nothing! It's not going to be easy to tell him that.”

Sextus was indeed plunged into despair when he was told that the idea of the flighted firebomb was being abandoned. But he was confined to barracks so he had nothing else to occupy his mind. He started to think through ways of overcoming these problems. The usual design of firebomb was launched with the stopper at the front, so the forces on the stopper were only its own weight and not the pressure of all that oil

inside multiplied even more by the force of the acceleration. So perhaps if the new jar could be turned around, so that the flighted shaft passed through a hole in the base of the jar, rather than through the stopper... That should work! And of course, another hole for wick. And we will also need to ensure the shaft stays true and straight, so a hole through the stopper as well.... Ah, but it would be so fiddly to assemble such a device, specially on a heaving, bucking deck. Even if the shaft and wick had been fitted beforehand, the crew would need to fill the jar with oil, place the stopper, and then push the shaft further forward to pass it through the stopper hole. If they don't take care, this will push the stopper out of position, possibly spilling the oil. And spilt oil with the torch nearby to light the wicks... That would spell disaster!

Well, could they be entirely pre-assembled complete with their oil charge? Then be brought up on deck ready to launch? Not really. The traditional bomb was able to be treated like that because it was stored standing up so oil would not leak out. He had intended to do the same with his own design, storing them nose-down with the shaft and flights vertical. But a design that needed a hole in both top and bottom would tend to leak no matter how they were stacked.

He went to bed that night in pain from the burns as usual and with the gossamer resting on him lightly. It felt like spider web and he was still not accustomed to it on his face as he slept flat on his back to prevent damaging his burnt flesh. He drifted uneasily into a light sleep and then into a dream.

There was a spider's web being thrown over him! He could see its circular pattern, and the radial threads spreading from the centre outwards. It was rotating as it flew at him like the net of a retiarius, spreading ever wider. He jolted awake with a gasp.

That was the answer! There was no need to make the fire bombs lighter so they could be caught by enemy sails! Instead let three of the old-fashioned bombs be strung together so they would tangle in the enemy's rigging! Perhaps a pace or so of rope from a central knot to each bomb would be about right. Even if the bombs themselves miss masts and rigging, the connecting cords should still catch something! And even if they don't catch rigging it would still be beyond the power of the ballista to tear a hole that big through a sail. The bombs might punch through, but the connecting cords would not! The bombs would be left dangling, burning through the sails until they crashed to the deck below.

Sextus was fully awake now. Just throwing three bombs at the one time would require an even bigger ballista than the one currently being tested, but that could wait. The current machine is big enough for testing the concept and refining the details.

But that brought him back to the original problem. How can he stop the wicks from blowing out under the wind speed at launch. As he had found out the hard way, the stopper had to be at the front during launch, and that meant the wick had to be there too, if the bombs were to be stored already charged.

Then it came to him. So laughably obvious! Put a protective shield over the stopper! A dome, a half-sphere, with holes on opposite sides or perhaps even only one side. That way the wick could be lit before launch, but still be sheltered against the rush of the wind.

Sextus laughed at the irony of it. In one sense, he had been burnt for nothing! But had he not been burnt, he would never have had that spider-web nightmare which led him to this solution. No, his burning was not for nothing after all!

He lay back in his bed again, his mind still chasing through the details. The triad of bombs would not have to spin fast, just a lazy rotation would be enough to ensure they spread to the full extent of their cords by the time they reached the enemy. In fact, the slower the better, or the attachments of the chords would need to be stronger.

But actually the attachment points would need to be strong anyway, he corrected himself. Otherwise the bombs might tear off when the cords hit the enemy rigging. So yes, strong attachment was needed. Perhaps it would be best to not rely on a lug, like a handle, but to make a narrow waist around the entire bomb and fix the chord that way. Yes, that would be better! he mused as he drifted into a deep and peaceful sleep.

“A brilliant idea Sextus, because it actually works!” Markos was enthusing five days later. “We had to fit a wider launch tray to take three bombs at once, and side guides as well, but that wasn’t much trouble. Because of the extra weight, we ran the first few throws with the bombs empty. But they spread out in flight, just as you planned, and it was impossible to miss!” Sextus’ joy was obvious.

“The only problem was that the bombs themselves didn’t hit anything solid enough to break them open. One bomb hit the mast, and on another throw two bombs hit each other as they wrapped around the mast. We thought that would be a problem to be considered later. But then, when we had the new dome covers for the wicks, we found out that when they wrapped around the target the sudden jerk on the cord was sometimes enough. The stoppers came off themselves, prised off by the weight of the dome! And then we thought further. If the waist were in the bottom half of the bomb then the sudden jerk on impact would certainly wrench the tops off and splash burning oil everywhere, even if the clay bombs don’t hit anything solid enough to shatter them. So yes, everything works perfectly. The only problem is that their combined weight means we don’t have the full 300 paces of range we wanted. We can’t build an even bigger ballista prototype, because Bilat says the boats won’t be able to carry anything larger than our current version. But two hundred and fifty paces will be good enough. It’s still better than a standard ballista. And if we attack from upwind, that will add a few dozen paces to our effective range and subtract it from the enemy’s. We’ll have ample superiority.”

Sextus was filled with exultation. “Apart from that, sir, our boats are a smaller target than a merchantman. We can sprint into the limit of range, fire once, and pull back. We can’t miss now we have the spiderweb bomb, and the chance of the enemy hitting us with their first shot is practically nothing even if they have the range.”

The two men smiled at each other like schoolboys. They now had the perfect weapon! What would the Republic Navy pay for an invention like this? But they will never know, Sextus added in his own mind with a tiny twinge of regret. Nobody who ever comes up against this will ever return to the Old World to tell of it.

While the designs for the kite and the ballista were being developed a few decisions had been made. The first was that the main port would not act as a base for the interceptors. Any sailors that might visit for the gold trade must not be aware of the

nature of the colony's defences. So more detailed charting had been carried out to assess the most promising sites. One was the channel at the south-eastern tip of the island, and another was a circular bay on the west coast of the next island a hundred miles to the east. Both were found to be excellent for the purpose, so Valerianus decided to use both. This offered the advantage that a severe storm that might destroy either base would be unlikely to wipe out both. He would at worst still have half his squadron in an emergency.

Port Sertorius – December, 816 AUC (63 A.D.)

Three storms had come and gone since Neptunalia. Two of them had been relatively mild and judging by the way the wind swung around they had passed north of the township. The third had been very close and powerful enough to take down trees and scatter debris over the town. The huts had weathered the blow except for the test hut deliberately built with only half the tie-down strength. That hut lost part of its roof. It confirmed that Loukas had been pretty close to the ideal design on his first guess. But it was resolved that new construction should have just a little bit more fat anyway to ensure even the biggest of storms could be survived.

At last the revised glider design had been fine-tuned and the new interceptor design had been adjusted as required to stow and deploy it efficiently. The interceptor design itself had then been refined even further. It went too fast for the usual method of logging ship speed but it had been compared to the Republic-design ship around a marked circuit and found to be more than three times as fast in flat water, even without lifting the upwind hull. It lost some of this in the open ocean, but was still more than twice as fast as any monohull. And surprisingly it held this advantage regardless of wind angle. It cut through the water on a tack pointing as high into the wind with greater speed and less side-slip. Even downwind, the direction where it was common sense that you couldn't outrun the wind itself, trial and error demonstrated that the best way to sail was at an angle across at about forty-five degrees. This allowed the sideways component of apparent wind to increase even as the craft approached the actual downwind speed. In terms of distance-made-good it was as fast as the wind itself with the apparent wind on a tight tack.

This settled the new design and mass production of the squadron started. The new bases were being built, the closer one on the small island called 'Capri' off the south-east corner of the main island and the more distant one on the next major island to the east named 'Sardinola'. Training of captains and crews on the prototype got under way as manpower became available, either by the building projects in Port Sertorius being completed or by the drafting of women into an ever-widening range of roles.

Ah, yes! Using women to free more men for other tasks was working well! Valerianus had been quite surprised to find how quickly women were learning tasks which had always been considered 'men-only' jobs. A few of the literate ones were even working in his administrative offices as clerks. This had prompted him to include girls in the pedagogy programme, even at the cost of allocating another man and two literate women as teachers. If more women were capable of taking skilled jobs or even teaching then that would free even more men to do work requiring more strength. It would serve the colony well if the smarter girls could be recognised early and educated properly.

Now that the storm season was ending the focus shifted to building up the interceptor squadron and training the men as quickly as possible. This included attack drills and picket procedures.

The interceptors were now being trialled out on the open water as well as in the Bay. They performed very well working into the wind, cutting through waves rather than riding over them. Performance when running before the wind depended very much on the

strength of the wind, but in the usual Trade Wind strength the interceptor could usually gain enough speed to actually ride the waves. This was not only exhilarating but was also quite smooth. It made aiming the ballista at the target much easier than expected. But it required careful handling to hold onto the wave.

The difficulties arose when trying to run square. Unless the separation of the waves exactly matched the width of the hull separation, the craft rolled left and right alarmingly as the two hulls were alternately lifted and dropped. The rapid swaying of the mast made the sails extremely inefficient and almost unmanageable. A consensus soon arose to not sail square when waves were a problem but instead alternately work up into the wind, and then run before it at an angle. This imposed constraints on their handling in battle situations but the speed advantage was more than enough to compensate for this. The critical part of any attack would be to pull out of the firing run downwind to climb back upwind. This had to be done very carefully to avoid being pitched over by the combination of your own momentum, the weight of wind on the sails while square-on, and the wave action. This one critical moment in each attack exercise occupied more than half of all training time in those first few months.

It was found that simply sailing the vessel required a crew of four and sailing in attack drills demanded another three to feed, aim and fire one ballista. Therefore a crew of eight would allow two watches to be established for simple picket or patrol work, with the watches combined during an attack. Two supernumeraries were added to cover for injuries while on the water so a full complement was set at ten.

While the squadron was in training another two parties were taking a closer look at the barrier islands in the distant east. Valerianus had estimated that he would need ten or twelve watchstations spread along the island arc to be reasonably confident of being able to detect an intruder and had intended to post four men on each. Now the reports were on his desk.

Pachos, who had surveyed the southern end of the chain, had recommended six sites. The widest gap was ninety miles at the extreme south, but this was on a north-west to south-east alignment. He was of the opinion that any intruder would be sailing due west, and in the north-south direction this was only a fifty mile wide corridor. This meant that any ship would sail no more than 25 miles from the station, and the height of the land was ample for that range - so long as they didn't slip through in the dark. The next biggest gap was about seventy five miles, requiring a visual range of 30 miles for each station at closest approach on a due west heading. Again, the landforms allowed this and a string of smaller islands between would ensure that any intruder would not race through in the night. The other gaps were around fifty miles each, requiring 25 miles visual range. Not a problem.

Lucius was the other scouting party leader, with responsibility in the north. He recommended four stations, again on the assumption that intruders would sail due west. Anyone sailing beyond the northernmost watchstation would miss the Mayan Sea, finding Machos at best or emptiness otherwise.

So far, so good. His estimate of ten stations was right. Each station would need its own boat to be able to get back to the interceptor bases and raise the alarm, so that meant at least four if they were to sail without a relief watch, but preferably eight. Ten would be good to allow for injury or illness as in the battle interceptors once that manpower could

be made available. Those interceptors were too tricky to handle to allow a crew to try to sail without sleep or if handicapped. So the watchstations would need at least eighty men in total. Preferably a hundred. That was more than he had allowed originally, but with the women available to work it would be affordable. In fact, he might even include suitable wives as part of the crews. He would make a point of rotating the wives of some of the watchstation sailors through the fishing teams to give them some experience at sea.

Excellent! That would allow more men to be allocated to the fighting interceptors. The bigger the battle squadron, the safer we will all be! We might even be able to continue exploring the coasts of the mainland beyond the limits of our current charts. Who knows what we might find?

He picked up his quill and endorsed the two reports from Pachos and Lucius. Let construction commence!

The next paper in his tray was a report from Ariel, who had been promoted to Leader in Qotchi. One of the caravels had been left with him in case he had need to send a message. He had sent back a progress report at the end of the official storm season.

The language learning was going well. He was now fluent enough to go about the town and make conversation after a fashion. Certainly fluent enough to trade seriously and to make a treaty. The Maya were asking when the strangers would return for more trade.

Yes I should get moving on that, Valerianus told himself. It would be good for Septimius to have some return on his investment as soon as possible. He can decide for himself whether or not to make it public or simply stash it on those mid-Atlantic islands to be picked up some other time. He would have to ask how many of the tools used to build the Port were now excess to requirements. No! Not yet, he still had to build the watchstations. But he will send over perhaps a hundred pounds of assorted steel tools anyway, just to keep the Maya interested. He was sure that he could spare a few axes, shovels and other implements now that the bulk of the land clearing had been finished.

Septimia – April, 818 AUC (65 A.D.)

“A sail!” Marcia felt the anxiety leap to her throat. It was only a faint smudge even through the telescope, but she had no doubts.

“Where?” Thonos demanded sharply.

Marcia looked at the bearing calibrations on the telescope table. “Twelve and a half degrees south,” she answered.

Thonos checked and noted his own bearing before he unclamped the shaft of his telescope and swung it to twelve and a half degrees south of due east. Then he slowly traversed it left using the fine screw drive as he gazed into the eyepiece. There! They had trained for this moment for months and now it was happening.

“The question is, is this lord Pulcher's ship a few days early or is it an intruder?” Thonos asked as if to himself. But the instructions had been clear as crystal. Any sighting at all had to be reported immediately to the interceptor squadron in the west. Better to over-react to a false alarm than to lose valuable time if it proved to be an intruder. He looked down and to the north-west where the team's huts had been built behind a sheltered beach that served as their anchorage.

Orders were strict. The boat could be beached to protect it against a storm but had to be fully provisioned and in perfect repair at all other times, ready to leave immediately. And there had to be at least two crew members watching the lookout station at all times during daylight.

Thonos threw out the blue flag, the sign of an intruder. It hung straight over the side of the back wall of the station, its corners weighted to prevent it from flapping. This sheet was six feet square, so it was easily recognised from the huts with the naked eye.

A moment passed and then came the reply from the huts. The blue flag was hung across the front of the hut. Message received and understood! The bustle down on the beach was clear to see. The other six members of this watch crew were preparing to board the boat and sprint to the west. In good conditions they would make the four-hundred mile journey to the nearer interceptor base in less than thirty hours.

There were other ships in the bay today. Valerianus had arrived three days earlier. He wanted to be on hand for the arrival of lord Pulcher, expected in another two days' time. He had brought with him the largest caravel and three of the big square-rigged merchantmen used to transport the initial colony. Thonos smiled to himself. It's always good to show the Governor that we are on our toes! Valerianus' caravel was also busy now, readying itself to sail. Even the Governor is playing it safe!

Thonos went back to his telescope and resumed his scan of the horizon. Both watchmen on duty were expected to scan almost the full semicircle from north to south. What one might miss, the other would notice. He adjusted its pointing back to thirty-eight degrees north, where he had been looking before checking Marcia's sighting. He scanned that field, and then gently depressed the lever attached to the fine drive. This corresponded to a traverse of two-thirds of the field. It was almost half an hour later before he reached the incoming ship again, this time bearing just under thirteen degrees south. Was it any clearer? Not really. Could he make out the cross-beam of the next sail down? Hard to tell, probably fooling himself. The ship was still well over the horizon,

with only the topsail visible. He must be sixty miles away, maybe more. He won't arrive before sunset, and by then he will not want to grope around an unknown shore. He will anchor offshore and wait for daylight.

"Titus is well out to sea already," Marcia observed, looking out to the west as she unclamped and turned her telescope back to the extreme north of the sweep. The interceptor was now clear of the wind-shadow of the island and skipping away to the north-west, the foam of its passing stretching out behind it for more than three hull lengths. "I'd say he is doing at least fifteen miles an hour," she smiled. "Trying to impress the Governor! He only has to keep up the appearance for an hour or two and by then he will be out of sight."

Valerianus had sailed the caravel and three merchantmen far enough west to keep out of sight if this new ship was found to be an intruder and then turned for the next watchstation on the island some fifty miles to the south. He arrived with barely enough daylight left in the sky to find a safe anchorage and then made for the huts. Gaius was on the beach waiting for him.

"Hello, Governor," he greeted Valerianus warily. There must be something wrong for the boss to just drop in.

"Gaius, isn't it?" Valerianus asked with a smile as he offered his right arm. Gaius took it.

"Why, yes, Governor," Gaius agreed, surprised that the Governor would know his name. "What can we do for you?"

"I would be grateful if I could commandeer your interceptor tomorrow morning. The watch crew on Septimia has spotted a ship from the east. I want to be able to see who it is, but in a boat that will allow me to outrun it if they are hostile."

"Yes, sir," Gaius agreed. "When would you like to leave?"

"There are no reefs or shoals here, Gaius, so is there any reason we can't leave just before dawn? The moon is just past full."

"We can sail whenever you like, sir. We all know this bay in the dark."

Valerianus smiled. "Then let's make it a few hours before dawn. It will be light well before we get to South Bay. If this new ship isn't there, then it's an intruder and I don't want it to see us at all."

It was a clear, fresh morning as Valerianus approached the big merchantman from upwind. This ship was obviously playing it safe, anchored two miles offshore and not risking going into the more sheltered water at the very head of the bay. If this is not Septimius, then it was a huge co-incidence of both time and place.

The interceptor luffed up into the wind some three hundred paces directly upwind, and then started to drift backwards towards the new arrival. Curious sailors were lining its rails, amazed by this strange vessel approaching them. Valerianus remembered how bizarre the double-hull design seemed when he first saw it himself. He took up his speaking trumpet.

"Ahoy, visitors! Who are you, and where have you come from?" At least they will know I'm from the Republic myself, he mused. How else would I know colloquial Latin?

“Ahoy, there! We are traders, from Africa. Can we interest you in any of our wares?” This captain is cautious to not mention any names, Valerianus thought to himself. He expected me to be here but not in such a strange design of vessel, so he's not sure of my identity. Assuming he really is from Septimius and not a competitor who found out our secret.

“And what led you to come here?” Valerianus asked. “Who is your Patron?”

Another voice came over the water. “I am the Patron, stranger. Would you like to come alongside, and we can talk face-to-face.” Yes, that was Pulcher! Valerianus recognised the voice. But Septimius was pretending to his crew that they did not know each other. Valerianus could understand why. Too many eyes and ears!

“I will come alongside,” Valerianus called back.

It was the work of only a few minutes to fall out of the backward drift, loop around in a wide reach, then a gybe, and then a short work into the wind to kill residual speed. Cables were dropped from the merchantman over stern and bow to allow the interceptor to tie up to the larger vessel and a rope ladder lowered. Valerianus climbed to the merchantman's deck with a composed and courteous expression on his face. He approached Pulcher offering his right arm. Pulcher accepted it.

“My name is Septimius Pulcher.”

“My name is Caius,” Valerianus replied.

“What an amazing ship you have there, Caius,” Pulcher said smoothly. “And how nimbly it handles!”

“Thank you, lord Pulcher,” Valerianus answered courteously, copying Pulcher's formal but friendly demeanour, “And I thank you for your invitation to board your vessel. What do you have to trade?”

“You speak good Latin, so you are obviously familiar with the Republic,” Pulcher smiled as he continued the play-acting. “We can provide whatever you want. But on this journey we mainly carry steel tools of various types. We also have some livestock and various types of grain suitable for farming.”

Valerianus smiled back. Here was an opportunity to get Pulcher away from surrounding eyes and ears so they could talk more easily. “Then no doubt we can do business, lord Pulcher. But I don't have authority to carry out such trade. Please, if you would come with me to our main city you will be able to make arrangements with those in authority.”

“That's an excellent suggestion, Caius,” Pulcher took the desired line. “Would there be any objection to my ship remaining here, while I go in your vessel?”

“That would probably be the best course, lord Pulcher. It would allow your crew to make repairs and replenish water. Hunting for turtles is also good around the eastern half of this island, so you will be able to have fresh meat to relieve the boredom of dry rations.” That should keep them away from the lookout on the ridge of the western island and hopefully the watchstation's huts in the bay, Valerianus thought to himself.

“Thank you for your help, Caius, but I do wish you would call me 'Septimius'; I would like to be on the most friendly terms.”

“Thank you, Septimius,” Valerianus smiled.

Pulcher turned to his captain. “You heard the man! Repair and re-water. Hunt only around the shores of the eastern end, and don't waste time elsewhere.”

“Yes, my lord,” the captain replied.

“Then let us transfer to your vessel whatever of my goods you think might be in most demand, Caius,” Pulcher suggested. “I don't think we will be able to pack all of my cargo into your boat.”

“Please, Septimius, we have a larger ship nearby. Give me a day to fetch it. It will also be a much more comfortable journey for you as well.”

Pulcher smiled. “I will wait for you.”

Valerianus smiled back. “Then I will leave you now and return shortly.” He offered his right arm again and after a brief grasp turned back to the ladder.

The interceptor was back in the watchstation's base and the caravel on a close reach for South Bay before noon. Anchor was dropped two hundred paces upwind of Pulcher's vessel just as dusk closed in. Valerianus took a longboat across the gap to make arrangements for the transfer of cargo first thing in the morning. All was going well.

“Caius, I need to tell my men how long I will be gone. Can you help with that information?”

That could be sensitive information, Valerianus thought to himself. But Pulcher would not have asked unless he saw the need. But do I over-estimate or under-estimate? Probably best to be over or they might come looking for him.

“That depends very much on the weather, Septimius,” Valerianus decided to answer. “So long as the wind stays constant I expect we will be away for perhaps fifteen, perhaps twenty days. But it could be longer if we are becalmed.”

“Then if I tell my men a month, we should be covered?”

“We should be right within a month,” Valerianus agreed. “But if you take much longer you might be at risk. The storms sometimes can start at the beginning of Junius and they are terrible. Only the most experienced can survive them,” Valerianus explained, hoping this deters any further temptation for the merchantman to go exploring. “The waters around here can be very treacherous to those unaccustomed to the local signs.”

The unloading of the cargo and its transfer into the hold of the caravel went smoothly.

“You know, Caius, that I am taking a lot on trust here,” Pulcher commented as they watched the work. Valerianus sensed it was for the benefit of the First Officer nearby, supervising the movement. “What is to stop you from simply sailing away and never returning? You would have your loot, and I could be either disposed of or even held hostage.”

“That thought hadn't occurred to me, Septimius. Perhaps I am too naïve, but why would I want to alienate a trading partner?” Valerianus looked out to the south. “In fact, I've even arranged for a few ships to anchor here with yours, just in case we don't have anything that you consider valuable enough to pay for your goods. You could inspect these and consider them payment if you wish.” He pointed towards the horizon. “Ask your lookout to scan to the south.”

The call was made to the lookout, who took a minute before calling “Three sail due south!” That was one worried sailor up there, Valerianus thought to himself. He will be wondering how a naked eye at deck level could apparently see these new sails before he

could with his telescope from the lookout. That would have to look like slack work to the point of negligence!

“Don't worry, Silon,” Pulcher advised the First Officer with a smile. “I am told that these are friends and they will offer their vessels to serve as payment for our goods if they can offer nothing else of value.”

Silon was looking out towards the sighting with his own telescope. From the deck the approaching ships were still hull-down over the horizon, only the topsails visible.

“That is what you have been told, my lord, but three large strangers might also be pirates. I prefer to be prepared.”

“Then make preparations,” Pulcher said with a shrug.

“I'll send a longboat out,” Valerianus offered. “I'll tell them to anchor well south.”

The square-riggers dropped anchor half a mile distant in the early afternoon. The ships were secured and their longboats lowered.

“Septimius, perhaps your captain might care to put a skeleton crew on each of them,” Valerianus offered. “Inspect them, satisfy yourself that they are seaworthy, and put a value on them so we can trade.”

Pulcher turned to the First Officer, who was standing with them. “Silon, you heard the man.”

By dusk that day the reports had come back. All three ships were in good order. The transfer of cargo into the caravel had also been completed. The minimal crews from the merchantmen, barely enough to have managed them the fifty miles from the watchstation base, were also on board the caravel.

“It is going to be a bit tight with all of us on the one caravel as well as the livestock but it will only be for a handful of days,” Valerianus smiled as he publicly re-assured Pulcher. “Getting back here against the Easterly winds was always going to be the tedious bit, and we will be not so packed on the return journey.”

The next morning was another perfect day.

“Welcome to Winter in Paradise,” Valerianus greeted Pulcher as he came on deck. “Are you ready to sail?”

“Just one chest, Caius,” he answered as two men struggled up the steep flight of steps behind him.

“Good. You'll be sharing my cabin, Septimius. There's just not enough room now that we are carrying the crews from the square-riggers as well.”

“I have no complaints, Caius,” Pulcher answered.

Pulcher was on deck as the caravel entered the Outer Basin of Port Sertorius. He noted with approval the piles that had been driven to mark the navigable channel and the floating anchor points as they passed into the Inner Basin. The township behind the twin wharves presented as clean and open, with several shade trees growing along the foreshore of a wide forum.

The town layout had obviously been designed before the first shovel had hit the ground. The streets running back from the shore were alternately five and fifteen paces wide and the main communal buildings faced onto the dockside forum with simple but functional facades. The Temple of Neptunus, the Bathhouse, the Mess Hall, and a large

warehouse or storage depot. There were other vacant lots to each side, and the residential areas were set back behind these public buildings.

“You've planned for a large town here, Caius,” Pulcher commented. He was no longer concerned with play-acting now that he and Valerianus were able to speak privately.

“Yes,” Valerianus agreed. “A town must grow, or it dies. We have four hundred and thirty five men here now, but I expect to expand to over a thousand eventually. Perhaps more. We need to have a large enough population to ensure that there are enough men smart enough to keep the colony going. Not everyone has what it takes to govern a town, command a navy or captain a vessel.”

“But the four hundred-odd men you have now are enough for the moment?”

“Yes, but only because they were selected out of a larger pool back in Africa. And even now we are putting the women to work where we can to release men for other duties as required,” Valerianus explained. “In fact, some of the women have proven themselves to be the equal of a man in some ways! Who would have thought it?”

Pulcher raised his eyebrows. “What do you intend to build on those two vacant sites?” he asked.

“One will be a school,” Valerianus answered. “Given how well some of the women have managed, I have decided to educate the girls as well as the boys. The more they can do around the place, the better. The other will be a theatre.”

The two men walked through the town and into the cleared land intended for farming and grazing. Again Pulcher was impressed with the progress made. “You have done well, Caius,” Pulcher summed up his impressions. “All this, as well as building those strange ships! Who came up with such a freakish design?”

“Bilat and Demetrios bounced off each other,” Valerianus said with a smile. “And we have developed a new fighting doctrine to take full advantage of their capabilities. I'm convinced that an intruder would have no hope whatsoever of escaping us.”

“Oh? That confident?” Pulcher invited more.

“Yes, Septimius. We have watchstations all along the chain of islands that guard the route into this sea. It is impossible for anyone to get past without being noticed, except perhaps in a huge storm. But in a huge storm their ship would be very lucky to survive anyway. Once they are sighted an interceptor will rush back to alert our squadron in plenty of time to set a picket. Then we will approach from windward, demand their surrender and transfer them into our transports as slaves.”

“And if they don't surrender?” Pulcher asked.

“Then we attack from upwind with fire canisters and destroy their sails and rigging, while staying out of range ourselves. We will be able to cast much further downwind than they will be able to manage into the wind,” Valerianus explained. “Then, if they still refuse to surrender, we set fire to the whole ship.”

“How many of these interceptors do you have?” Pulcher asked.

“There's one at every watchpost. That accounts for ten. Then we have two based here in Port, for communication. And we have two squadrons of five each, in separate bases in case one base is hit by a storm. Twenty-two boats. I hope to lift the squadron numbers to eight each once we have the manpower.”

“Twenty-two boats, and each with a basic crew of eight men each, plus two supernumeraries in case of injury or casualties. Two hundred and twenty men out of just over four hundred,” Pulcher mused. “No wonder you have put the women to work!”

“Not all on the crew lists are men,” Valerianus offered. “The crews include quite a few wives.”

There was a pause as Pulcher looked over the cleared fields, trying to hide his amazement that women were now manning – womanning?– fighting ships. He then drifted to another issue. “I’ve been thinking, Caius. Secrecy is all well and good, but sometimes deception is even better. The men in my ship now know that there is a honey pot over this side of the ocean but it's protected. If one of them blabs to a competitor then you might find a genuine fighting fleet banging on your door.

“So I think it might be safer all round to let my ship sail into this port, put out the welcome carpet, and so on,” Pulcher continued. “Let everyone think that all and sundry would be welcomed. That way, if someone does let out our secret they will be sailing into a trap.”

Valerianus considered this, then nodded. “If you say so, Septimius. But I don’t want your sailors mixing with the colonists. There are one or two malcontents here and they might spoil the story. Keep your men on your ship and leave me to provide the stevedores.”

“Good idea,” Pulcher agreed. “Now, do you want me to provide more manpower? Get the women out of the workforce?”

“I don’t think so, Septimius,” Valerianus shrugged. “The women actually seem to enjoy having something useful to do outside the house, and the men appreciate the extra coin their wives bring in. We just need to provide a few more luxuries so they can spend this on something other than drink. I’ll put out a notice, asking people to nominate what sort of goods they would like to be made available. I’ll sort through the requests and give you a list for your next trip over here.”

Pulcher gestured back towards the township. “Is there anything more we need to talk about? Or should we go back now?”

After a few paces Pulcher had an idea. “Caius, don't you have good relations with a few of the locals? Not just the Maya, but also the islanders?”

“Yes, Septimius,” Valerianus answered.

“Have you thought about getting even friendlier with them?” Pulcher asked. “They could probably tell you a lot about what resources you might be able to find close to hand, what to eat, what to trade and so on. They might even be willing to provide you with more manpower. Why import more, either slaves or free, when you have a supply already on hand? And they won't pose a risk of word getting back to the Republic, either.”

Valerianus nodded. “Good idea, Septimius,” he agreed. “It'll take a bit of effort, learning their language or teaching them ours,” and then an idea hit him “But Ariel is already reducing Maya to written form. Perhaps we might have a head start if we try the Maya first.”

“Whichever,” Pulcher waved a hand. “It might be worth considering.”

As they approached the township a man was walking out to meet them. It was Marcus Lentulus.

“Septimius, this man approaching us is a spokesman for the working freemen. I have accorded him a status equivalent to a Tribune of the Plebs. That gives him considerable authority among the commoners,” Valerianus explained. “They respect him and that prevents any malcontents from gaining traction.”

“Hail, Marcus!” Valerianus greeted Lentulus when they had closed to only ten paces. “Please, may I introduce you to lord Pulcher. Lord Pulcher, this is Marcus Lentulus, highly respected by all in the township and appointed onto my Advisory Council for his outstanding merit.”

“Greetings, lord Pulcher,” he saluted his Patron with respect.

“May I call you Marcus?” Pulcher asked, holding out his right arm. “My name is Septimius.”

Lentulus was taken aback by this response. Patrons never treat their clients as equals! “I would be honoured, my lord,” he responded as he took Pulcher’s arm as if that of a god.

“And I would be honoured if you would call me ‘Septimius’, Marcus. You are yourself a man of no small honour.” Pulcher smiled warmly. If Caius found it expedient to groom this fifth-class man as a means of keeping peace in the colony then he would do all he could to support that policy.

“Thank you, Septimius,” Lentulus replied. He released his grip on Pulcher’s arm slowly, wanting to appear neither to linger too long nor drop too abruptly. He then turned to Valerianus. “My apologies for interrupting you Caius, but I have been asked to approach you on a certain matter. I thought I should raise it before lord Pulcher left us, just in case you might prefer to discuss it with him before responding.” He looked nervously across to Pulcher. “Lord Valerianus has huge respect among the people here, Septimius, as a man of great integrity and wisdom.” Then back to Valerianus. “Please, Caius, whenever you have the time to talk I would welcome your indulgence.” Lentulus bowed slightly before he turned to walk away.

Valerianus thought quickly. This would be the ideal opportunity to not only show his Patron that the colony worked on different rules than the Republic, but also to show Lentulus that he, Valerianus, had complete authority.

“No please Marcus, let us talk now.”

Lentulus was taken by surprise. He turned back to Valerianus. “Well, thank you Caius. The problem is the rate of pay for the women. Many of them claim that they are doing their work as well as any man would. Even if that claim is open to be debated, their fallback point is that they are making a man free to do some other job so they are the equivalent of a man. Therefore they want the same pay as a man.”

Valerianus was stunned. It took a moment to gather his wits. “Why, that is absurd, Marcus! Since when has a woman ever been the equal of a man?”

“They would say, Caius, since they have been doing the work of a man,” Lentulus answered wearing his ‘I am representing these ideas, not necessarily agreeing with them’ face.

Valerianus groped for an answer. “What do the men think of this? Surely they will not accept women as their equals!”

“Actually, they will, Caius,” Lentulus answered.

“But why? Don’t they realise what this will do to their own status?”

“Yes, Caius, but they also realise what this will do to their family incomes,” Lentulus explained. “A man with a working wife will now have almost twice as much money coming into his household. Those with working daughters stand to gain even more.”

“That will mean a great deal more money, Marcus,” Valerianus muttered. “I don’t know where I can find it.”

“The more forthright of the women argue this way, Caius. If the women are paid at the same rate as the men, then your wages bill will rise. But if the women didn’t work and instead relied on the contracts held by their heads of households, then you would still be obliged to provide for them, and also to import more men who would be paid at that higher rate as well as requiring additional sustenance. So it is cheaper for you to agree to their respectful petition than to turn them away.” Lentulus still wore his ‘representative’ face.

“Is that a threat, Marcus? That they would withdraw their labour?”

“Not a threat, Caius. Merely the mention of a choice that they have every right to make.”

“That is *not* their choice to make, Marcus! If their paterfamilias tells them to work then they are obliged to work!”

“In which case it is a choice that each paterfamilias has every right to make. And as I mentioned, there are many who would be eager for their women to bring in more pay.”

Valerianus remained silent for a moment as he thought through the consequences. Before he could reply Lentulus spoke again.

“But look at it this way, Caius. If you refuse this request, then at the end of their five years’ contract at least some of the men will want to return home. That is less than three years from now, but you still have enough time to convince everyone to stay freely instead of by coercion. If a significant number have to be coerced then you risk unrest, perhaps violence.

“But if you grant this request, you not only gain their willing labour but you also make a return to the Republic much less attractive. I respectfully suggest that granting this request will not only be cheaper than importing more men. It will also ensure that the colony will be united behind you and lord Pulcher in your aims.”

Valerianus considered this new dimension carefully. At length he turned to Pulcher, who had surprisingly remained silent throughout this most bizarre conversation. “You see now why Marcus has the respect of not only the free men, but also of the rest of the Council. He brings to the table a point of view that might escape many others.” Pulcher simply nodded in response.

“I can see the wisdom of your case, Marcus. But I’m not sure we can afford to adopt the full measure of it all at once,” Valerianus replied with a crooked smile. “Please, prepare to put this before the next meeting of the Council. In the meantime I will research the costs of this suggestion and of the various alternatives.”

“Yes, Caius. Thank you, Caius.” Lentulus took his leave.

Once he was out of earshot Pulcher spoke in a low voice. “How can you tolerate such insolence? It was all I could do to bite my tongue, but I didn’t want to undermine your authority.”

“Things are different on this side of the ocean, Septimius,” Valerianus assured his Patron. “It is helpful for a man like Lentulus to give us warning of what the lower classes think so we can soothe any discontent before it takes root. Better that than to have some self-appointed Gracchus rise up against me! Just trust me and you will make a profit from this trade and any extra costs you incur can be clawed back. No-one over here knows the real cost of our imports, so a denarius or two extra on an amphora of wine will never be noticed.”

Pulcher was aware that there might be eyes watching, so he refrained from shaking his head. Instead he forced a smile to his face as he said “All the gods know how much I trust you, Caius. Not only for your faithfulness to me but also for your wisdom in managing any task I put before you. But I confess that I fear your softness might be your undoing. On the other hand, severity might be even more damaging. I’ll support your judgement, knowing that you love me. You deserve no less.”

Machos Bay – January, 819 AUC (66 A.D.)

After consideration, Valerianus had decided not to recruit any of the Maya into the colony. Teaching Maya how to speak Greek or Latin might give them access to information that would be better kept secret. But these more primitive Islanders presented no such threat. And their greater familiarity with the animals and plants in their islands would be even more valuable than the knowledge of the Maya.

He looked around Machos Bay again. It was much as he remembered it from his two previous visits, the last one some five years ago. But there was no canoe to welcome his ship. How could that be? He had been visible from land for more than four hours now! After another hour waiting at anchor Valerianus decided to take the initiative. His friendship krater in one hand and a new silk chiton draped over a forearm, the drum booming from the bow, he stood in the stern of the longboat as it entered the creek leading to the village.

The longboat turned the bend, and the short deck came into view. It seemed a bit worse for wear, but still functional. But it was empty. Where was the welcoming committee? Then he realised that there were canoes half-submerged on the bank of the creek, there was no smoke from fires, no sounds of children, and most of the huts were missing sections of their roofs and walls. This was not good!

Valerianus stepped onto the deck of the pier as the longboat bumped gently against it.

“Machos!” he called. There was no answering call. He turned to Lucius, his lead seaman in the longboat.

“Bring six armed men with us,” he commanded. “There might be trouble. These people might have been over-run by an enemy. The others should guard the boat.” He placed his krater and the chiton back into the longboat and took out a sword himself.

“Let’s see what has happened,” he said grimly to Lucius as he strode towards the large hut where he had met the Elders during his previous visits. The pathways, formerly worn bare by traffic, were now overgrown. Saplings were springing up in places.

The large hut was in disrepair. This could be seen clearly as he approached closer. Most of the thatch was missing and the internal space was more than ankle-deep in leaves and debris blown in by wind. Some undergrowth bushes were growing just inside the doorway. There was no sign of life, or even recent use.

Valerianus led his group back out of the large hut and towards the more modest sleeping huts. These were also showing signs of neglect. He glanced into the first and was shocked. Bones, what looked like a disarticulated skeleton, were scattered across the floor. Yes! There was a skull! These were human remains no doubt! And there! A smaller skull! A child’s.

Valerianus was not aware of any predators in these islands able to attack a human but there were always ants and small scavengers around which could pick clean a corpse and disturb a skeleton. He stepped cautiously into the ruins of the hut, looking around in the light flooding in through the mostly missing roof and walls. He could see nothing that hinted at violence. There was no blood stain on the floor, and no ... Wait!

In the centre of what had once been a sleeping mat was a small pile of dark material. It was hard and crusted now, but he knew it had once been a deposit of flux.

Whoever last slept on this mat had suffered from diarrhoea. Had some illness killed him and left him to the scavengers? If so, why had his body not been disposed of respectfully, and the mess cleaned up?

Valerianus stepped out of the hut frame and walked to the next. He looked inside. Nothing there. Then the third, and found nothing.

Beyond that he found what might have been a make-shift graveyard, with grass and shrubs growing on scattered mounds. Between the mounds were shallow depressions with silt washed into the dips and some bones scattered around.

The picture was clear. This village had succumbed to some plague. The last survivors had tried to dispose of their dead comrades, but had only enough strength for a shallow common grave not deep enough to protect the dead from scavengers. Then they had died themselves, one in his hut, presumably with his or her child. Who knows where the others might have gone to die?

But one thing was clear. Machos' people would not be able to provide manpower for the new colony.

Over the next month Valerianus made an intensive search along the coast heading south-west. He found three more villages. One had obviously been deserted for many years, being in much the same condition as Machos'. Perhaps that same plague had swept along the whole coast. The other two were deserted, but with equipment laying around in good order, the vegetation under control, and in one case a fire still warm. But where were the people? Just like those elusive natives from the first contacts, everyone was now hiding from them. Well, live and let live, Valerianus concluded. They obviously had no intention to cause harm or these natives would have waited in ambush. But they clearly wanted nothing more to do with us.

And he recalled the words of Tarenos during those first explorations. 'There is something wrong with these lands!' Is that why they found the islands so sparsely settled and campsites deserted? He recalled that long-abandoned site upstream from Port Sertorius even though the land abounds in food and water. Were the people here exceptionally vulnerable to disease? Or did this land somehow produce more diseases than happened in the Old World?

No it couldn't be that, Valerianus answered himself. The Maya have a high civilisation, and that could not have been built up overnight. It was obvious that these problems were confined to these Islands, or at least the Peoples of these Islands. He would do well to leave them alone as much as he could or his own settlements might face the same problems.

Sardinola – February, 823 AUC (70 A.D.)

The morning was clear. The sun was peeking over the horizon just south of due east, with a fresh wind coming from precisely that direction. The Trade Wind was behaving perfectly! Maria and Punicus climbed up the short track from the sleeping hut to the lookout to relieve the watch, a duty they shared with Marius and Livia this rotation. It was the turn of Maria and Punicus to take the day duties on this five-day tour of duty, and Maria was happy with that. She much preferred to spend the nights in bed with Punicus. To her it just seemed strange to be making love soon after sunrise and then sleeping through most of the day. And besides, watching out over a dark sea during the night seemed even more tedious than the day shift. All just in case you glimpsed a light on some incoming ship that would be easily visible in the morning anyway. No ship could sail fast enough to come from over the horizon at sunset to past their lookout in the twelve hours of one night! But it was orders, Council policy that there must be a lookout every minute of every day unless storms made it physically dangerous.

“OK, sleepyheads! You can go back to the shed now!” Punicus called as he walked into the blockhouse. It was a squat, heavy building, with the roof beams bound down to the stone walls with steel rods. Up here on the hill eight hundred feet above sea level and with no shielding against the wind, the summer storms really packed a wallop. That was why the sleeping hut was nestled into a protected spot below the summit.

“Glad you’re here, kiddies,” Marius answered. Marius and Livia were an older couple, both into their late forties. “We just spotted something out there to the south of east, but I can’t make it out. The rising sun is making it difficult.” He stood back from the telescope mount to allow Punicus access.

Punicus stooped slightly to look through the eyepiece.

“It might have traversed a bit to the right by now,” Marius commented.

Punicus slowly brought down the lever on the traversing worm-thread, calibrated so that each stroke of the lever traversed the telescope through two-thirds of its field of view. Lookout duty consisted of carefully scanning each field of view, then traversing the telescope to the next field. Scanning the whole visible horizon from the western coast around to the south-west, almost 120 degrees of arc, took almost an hour. The telescope mount would then be unclamped to swing it through to the start position again. A small dark blur hovered above the horizon.

“It looks like a signal kite to me,” Punicus opined. He stepped aside for Livia to look.

“Yes,” she agreed and stepped aside.

Marius came forward for another look. “And it’s much clearer now. To be coming that fast it must have an interceptor below it.” He stared through the telescope again. “I think it is solid blue, but that might be just because we are seeing the shadowed side.” He stepped back.

Maria stepped forward, and traversed the telescope again to keep the contact in view. “I think you’re right. And if it’s blue then we can’t waste any time. I think we should message down to the base right now. If we’re wrong, we’ll know within the hour

and we can cancel the alert. They might call us neurotic but I'd rather raise a false alarm than be late for a real one.” A solid blue signal meant an intruder had been spotted by the Barrier Islands watchposts.

Marius stepped up to the telescope again. “It's blue. Signal the base! And Punicus, you're the fastest. Start running.”

Punicus turned and started running down the track to Sardinola Interceptor Base. Livia turned to the flagpole and ran up a blue flag, as square as a man is tall and easily picked out by the naked eye at the base some five miles away by line-of sight. This would alert the base sailors to ready their interceptors for sea immediately. Punicus would arrive on foot in perhaps half-an-hour to explain in more detail.

“I'll stay here with you,” Livia volunteered. “We should still keep up the scans with the other telescope and not get too fixated on the contact.”

“Thanks, Livia. That would be good,” Marius took control of the team. “We might need to send another runner as well, so your help here would be appreciated. In the meantime, Maria, you take care of the signalling.”

Livia went back to the second telescope and resumed her scan from where she had left off when the relief arrived.

Maria took the hand-telescope and turned it on the elevated open platform attached to the base control building. Their flag had been noticed. The control building was running up its own blue flag as acknowledgement, and people were starting to move with a sense of urgency. And she could see two young men starting to run up the track to the watchpost.

Then she noticed the action around the smaller placard on the balcony. Signal squares were being set into rows.

The top row was a white square, then a yellow. “Report,” she said to herself. Then the second row was a red, the signal for a formation at sea to draw closer together. Without a second flag to denote a target, or a white to indicate that the next square indicated a direction, it meant ‘approach me’. Maria interpreted the signal to mean that they wanted a personal report from a runner, she concluded. Well, Punicus was already on the track.

She started fitting squares to her own signal placard mounted on the wall of the blockhouse facing the base. White then yellow, “Report”. Second line, red white and green; “Draw closer, target flagship”. Third line, two whites; “I am complying”. They will understand to mean that a report is on its way to them, she concluded.

“The base has started to come alive,” Maria informed her colleagues, “and they seem to be sending a couple of more runners to us. What news from you two?” There was just a grunt from Marius as he watched the incoming kite. Livia continued the routine scan.

“It's closer now, and I confirm that it's definitely blue, but all five panels are blue.” Marius reported at last, and looked around to his colleagues. “Single blue is the signal for an intruder. There's no combination that starts with blue, to avoid confusion over such a critical signal. What does he mean?”

“I don't know either, but I'll relay that to base in case they know.” She slipped five blue tiles into the fourth line, and turned the telescope to the base. She saw the base signalman staring back at her through his own telescope, then turn to a companion in

conversation. After a moment, they cleared their own placard and mounted more tiles. But these were not the single-colour tiles used for abbreviated messages, but the compound tiles used for alphabetic signals. Each had a specific letter value.

The signal was brief. "*Nescio.*" "I don't understand."

She messaged back "*Sic vex.*" "Thus are the flags."

Maria looked again to the base. She saw Punicus jogging into the base now and making his way to the control building. I suppose that means the runners from the base should get here soon, she thought to herself. Then she smiled. At least Punicus had the downhill trip!

There was movement in the boats now, she noticed. The six interceptors were being readied for departure. The fire-pots were being brought onto the pier and being stowed below deck and the ballistae were being tensioned to check their fitness. Sails were being cleated ready for raising. With this strong easterly there'll be no problem getting out of the bay, she thought. An easy downwind reach with the wind over the port rail, and they were straight out.

"The interceptor is hauling down its kite," Marius announced. "The deck crew are waving. They've seen our flag, and know that we've seen and understood their signal."

The first runner from the base arrived. Gasping for breath, he seemed on the point of collapse.

"The Commander has understood that you have spotted an intruder," he gasped. "Is this true?"

"No. We spotted an interceptor flying the 'intruder' signal," Marius corrected him.

The runner looked exasperated in his exhaustion. "Then send a signal now, saying so! The poor buggers down there think there's a stranger only a couple of hours away!"

"Don't worry about that," Marius soothed him. "You would have passed Punicus on the track. He arrived at control a few minutes ago. He will have already sorted them out on the details."

The second runner arrived and collapsed into a seat. Marius went back to watching the interceptor. Livia continued the scan of the horizon while Maria offered the runners some water to drink.

"The interceptor is running up the kite again," Marius called. "The first panel is solid blue, but the other spaces are compound flags. They're too far away for me to make them out." He stepped away from the telescope. "Maria, you have younger eyes. See if you can spell it out."

Maria came over to the mounting and looked into the eyepiece. She traversed it slightly. "Solid blue, then 'Q', then 'U', 'I', then 'N'," she recited.

"Five intruders! That's why they were flying five blues at first!" Maria stood aside. "Check me, someone. I'll make up the signal board while you make sure I'm right." She pulled some tiles out of the box and walked outside.

Marius returned to the telescope and traversed it again. "Yep, you're right. Send the signal down now." He heard the clattering of the old message tiles being taken off the board and the new message being posted.

"Marius, I'll take over there if you want," Maria offered. "You deal with the signals."

“Good idea,” Marius agreed. He stepped back and took the hand telescope from the younger woman. He looked to the control building. The board showed another message. “How far,” he read out.

“What's your guess of range, Maria? I would have thought maybe twenty-five to thirty miles?”

“Sounds right, Marius. I can't make out kite alphabets at anything over thirty miles, so say twenty-five. And I'd guess they're making fifteen miles an hour out there, plenty of white caps. So that would mean perhaps less than three hours before they make it to the base.”

Marius clattered some more with the message tiles. “XXV mil” on the first line, “SE” on the second line, and “III hr” on the third.

He saw the signalman look up at him for a minute, then turn to the man standing beside him. Marius recognised that he was the base commander. The Commander nodded and gave an order, then descended the stairs to the street below. The signalman posted a solid red and a solid blue. “Come closer to intruder”. He means to intercept the interceptor, Marius concluded. He doesn't want to waste any time waiting.

A quarter of an hour later the six interceptors in the squadron were passing out of the bay, line astern. Once clear of the bay they continued just south of south-west on a downwind reach to clear the corner of Sardinola, hopefully downwind of the sprinting interceptor in case it was intending to pass straight through to Capri. His judgement was good. They converged without the messenger having to drop speed until the last hundred paces. They luffed up into the wind to report in detail.

Caius was a very experienced sailor. He had been the captain of one of the original five ships that set up the colony and he was still in good condition despite being on the other side of his 45th year. He luffed up beside the messenger and hailed for a full report.

The captain on the other craft looked exhausted. “We set sail from Septimia at sunrise yesterday. The lookouts spotted five square-riggers at dawn, twenty five miles due west, as soon as it was light enough to see. They had almost run aground in the night, and were reaching north when they were spotted. We're reasonably confident that they're not Pulcher's. Pulcher only sends two or three ships per convoy and much smaller, usually caravels. We didn't recognise any of these. They were not flying the Pulcher ensign, either.

“They were watched for a time to estimate speed and seemed to be making about eight miles an hour, which would make their passage north of Septimia about the fifth hour yesterday.

“If they don't stop to re-supply water, then that puts them due to arrive level with here just after dawn tomorrow. Naturally, if they stop over to re-water, they could take as long as they want. The plan is to send another interceptor when it's clear what they are doing.”

“What size vessels? How many crew? Could you see any weapons?” Caius wanted to know as much about his enemy as possible.

“Perhaps 300 tons each. We couldn't estimate crew numbers. No weapons visible from long range. I expect the second boat will have better information but we left quickly to get word to you as soon as possible.”

Caius took stock of the information. A 300-ton vessel would carry a crew of perhaps sixty men. Three hundred men, all up. If they're armed, then it could get nasty! It might be best to try to locate them in daylight, but stand off until night. His tiny interceptors would be much harder to hit in the darkness but the tall rigging of the traders would be impossible for him to miss. He would also need the Capri squadron to further divide their fire.

“Go on to Capri, and tell them as well. I would appreciate it if they could consolidate with us in Sardinola.”

The messenger half waved, half saluted acknowledgement and gave orders to fall off the wind. His vessel was soon skipping north-westwards across the white horses.

Caius also fell off the wind and dropped to the leeward of his squadron. He ordered that the red flag be raised, requiring them to follow him back to the base.

Once back at base Caius ordered his five captains to ensure their craft and crews were completely ready to do battle on the next morning. An early lunch was taken and a council of war was called, including all the crew members of the six interceptors. The crew of the trader in the base, kept on hand to serve as a transport ship, was also included.

“Well, gentlemen, we have trained for this day!” Caius started confidently. “Each of you knows exactly what has to be done, how and when. But remember two vital points in our rules of engagement.

“First, we must avoid any risk of being sunk or captured, and to reduce as much as possible any casualties. Manpower is too precious to throw away!

“Second, we do not want to inflict any more casualties or do any more damage than absolutely necessary. Every captive we take is a worker that will free up one of our own men for more important duties. Every yard of cloth or rope we can plunder and every piece of steel we can seize from these ships is something that we don't need to import ourselves.

“So when we get out there tomorrow, each of you interceptors will be assigned your own target vessel. Always stay upwind by a couple of hundred paces or more, and be ready to scamper if they have any ballistae or other weapons they can use against you. Even if it's simply archers to pick off your crew. I want you all out of range of anything they might have. I'll be our reserve, in case any of you get into trouble.

“If the Capri squadron is able to join us they'll all be a reserve pool, well upwind again. But for the moment we'll work on the basis that they might not get here in time to be able to join us.

“We'll start by calling on these intruders to drop sail. If they comply, well and good. We'll take as many prisoners as will fit into the merchantman. Perhaps that might empty two of them.

“So Appion,” he singled out the captain of the trader, “make sure you have a strong detachment of marines on board, and enough prize crew to man two traders of 300 tons each.” Appion nodded.

“If the Capri squadron brings its trader as well, that will help. But if not, we can simply drift downwind while Appion drops his prisoners either here or at Capri, picks up some more prize crews, and returns to us.

“Meanwhile, I'll have the stockade made ready. It's designed to take only one hundred men, so Capri will have to take at least one load off our hands, and some might have to go to Port. We can worry about that in good time.

“Are we all clear? Any questions?”

There were no questions. As Caius had said, they had trained for this day. The only surprise was the number of ships. They had expected only two or three smaller ships such as caravels in the first exploratory fleet to come to them. Five 300-tonners was a considerably larger fleet than they felt comfortable with but that was what they faced.

The afternoon started with stowing more carefully the equipment and weaponry that had been stowed in haste that morning, and with calling out enough men and women to serve as the prize crews and act as the marines. The stockade, which was a large dormitory hut set in a large open field and surrounded by a double wall of timbers, was also readied. More women were selected to serve as crossbowmen to man the towers.

The messenger from Septimia had continued to Capri to raise the alarm. The lookout at Capri was set on a hill less than one hundred feet high, there being no higher land on the island which was otherwise well suited for an interceptor base. However, the elevation of the signal kite was ample for the approaching interceptor to be noticed and the squadron to be readied to sail by the time he made port. Fabius, the Capri squadron commander, ordered his crews to make ready their craft and then assemble in the control building in time for the interceptor captain to be met on the pier and conducted immediately to the control building. By the time his brief report had been delivered complete with the request from Caius to consolidate forces at Sardinola it was mid-afternoon.

“If we sail within the hour, it will still be dawn at the earliest before we could reach Sardinola. We would need to work into this wind,” Fabius commented to the room. “By then, the intruders could be past us.” He thought for a moment longer. “That assumes that the intruders didn't stop to re-water, which would be the obvious thing for any intruder to do, so it is likely that there would really be plenty of time for a rendezvous with the Sardinola squadron. But what if the intruders did the unexpected?”

Fortunatus, one of the older boat captains who had been an officer in the first fleet, spoke up.

“I think we have to be in position to intercept the worst-case possibility that they might sneak past Sardinola just before dawn. If we form up on our own interception line due south of here, we'll have a full day to take them. If they look too strong for us, there'll be time to send a message to Caius' squadron to assist us.

“But if it dawns tomorrow to reveal a clear sea, we can then beat upwind to meet Caius. He will simply have to wait for us if he wants our help. He can shadow them downwind to meet us if he wants to consolidate before attacking.

“And if the intruders do take the chance to re-water and delay for a couple of days, we will be able to consolidate tomorrow night.”

Fabius looked around the room. Most seemed to consider this the best way to deal with the lack of time available to them. Planning had been based on any intruder being

able to make only five or six miles an hour, not the eight that this fleet was reported to be making!

Fabius nodded his agreement. “But there's one little detail that I think we should add,” he noted. “We need to tell Caius what we're doing so he knows how to respond to anything unexpected.” He turned to the messenger crew.

“Thank you for your speed in getting here, and we realise that you are exhausted. So we'll give you a decent meal and a fresh bed, while we send your boat back to Caius with our plans.”

The crew from Septimia were eager to agree. More than thirty hours of full-on sprinting had been enough for them, and fighting back upwind for another twelve or more hours was not their preferred way of spending the night.

Fabius called out one of the captains notionally on relief. He had six boats in his squadron, but enough trained sailors to fill eight crews were available to cover injury, illness or casualties. “Parvus, get together a crew. Take them down to the mess hall, grab a bite to eat and something to see you through the night, and set for Sardinola. I want to see you out of the channel within the hour.”

He turned to the other spare captain. “You have shore duty, Festus. Start organising the stockade.

“In the meantime, I want the rest of you to prepare the boats for sailing straight after the evening meal. We want to be on interception stations by first light!”

Back on Sardinola there were no bodies left that had not been appointed to one role or another when there was another call from the control building. The watchtower had hauled up the blue flag again. How could they be here already? That is almost as fast as an interceptor!

But no, the signal board explained immediately using alphabetic tiles. “kite” on first row.

Caius relaxed. That might be the second interceptor, with more detailed information.

The second interceptor was actually two craft, one of which had pulled an hour ahead of the other in the sprint. The first of the pair turned north to pull into Sardinola, the other appeared to be setting directly for Capri.

Caius was on the pier to greet this news update just as darkness was falling. A small gracile figure stepped out of the boat, leaving the hands to make their boat secure. Caius recognised her immediately.

“Welcome, Cassia!” Caius welcomed her. “Come to the control and tell all of us your news.”

The briefing room was full. Cassia wasted no time.

“The fleet passed to the north of Septimia just after the fourth hour yesterday. They are not Pulcher’s vessels. None of the names appears on Pulcher’s listing, and in any case a fleet that size is much too large.

“They didn’t stop to water but sailed in a direction just north of west, almost straight towards Port rather than continuing due west. From this we concluded that this fleet is being guided by someone who knows reasonably accurately where Port is, and also that they know they're close enough to not need re-watering. A complete stranger would surely have come ashore to refresh and top up his water supply.

“Based on our closer study, we estimate the vessels to be over 300 tons each, and they were travelling at eight miles per hour. If they maintain that speed, they'll be here shortly after dawn tomorrow. Any questions?”

Caius was first to move. “Do you have any idea of crew numbers or weaponry?”

“During the seven hours we had them in view, the crew numbers seemed a bit light.” Cassia shrugged slightly. “Again, we interpreted that to mean that they expected to find a peaceful trading city, and didn't think supernumeraries were required. So I would expect perhaps fifty to sixty per ship.

“There were no ballistae fixed on deck nor anything which might have been concealing fixed ballistae,” Cassia assured him. “We had a pretty good view from the lookout thanks to those telescopes. But that doesn't mean they don't have some artillery stored that can be set up if needed. But if they're indeed being guided by someone who has been here before they would have no reason to expect a fight.

“As for small arms, who knows? But again we come back to the apparent familiarity of their guide and the low crew numbers. This would imply they're expecting no trouble, which would in turn suggest that they are not heavily-armed.”

Cassia looked to the seated sailors again. “Questions?”

Caius waited, but no-one moved. Then he spoke again. “Cassia, when did you leave the watchpost?”

“As soon as possible after dark, so the fleet wouldn't see me pass them in the night.”

“So you have not slept in the last thirty-six hours? And covered 400 miles in the last 24 hours of that?” Caius smiled. “Thank you. You and your crew should get some food and rest.”

Cassia smiled and lowered her eyes. “Thank you. We will.” Then she left the room to go back down to the pier. Her crew had finished stowing the gear and were waiting for further orders. She thanked them and ordered them to the mess hall and then to bed.

The second despatch interceptor continued towards Capri, racing westwards into the closing darkness. “This is not good,” her captain muttered. “Picking my way into the Capri Channel by night is not going to be easy.”

His second-in-command just shrugged. “Perhaps we shouldn't even try. Just run up onto the beach and we can send a runner from there.”

“Not in the dark,” the captain replied. “He would barely be able to grope his way unless he stuck to the beach, and running a couple of miles along the beach would be slow. Quicker to sail in. If we run aground then we might try a runner.” He turned to look westward as the horizon darkened. “Rig a sailing light. They might realise we need a guide and send someone out for us.”

A lantern was lit and hung from a forestay.

Six hours later the dark outline of Capri was before them. The captain gritted his teeth and set himself to run at full speed into the dark Capri channel.

“Look there!” the bowman cried. “Starboard!”

Yes! Two lights were being swung together and apart and together again. Someone was in the channel, acting as a lighthouse for him! He wound the wheel over slightly and ran for the lights.

Another quarter of an hour and the interceptor was luffing up to a rowboat. He was told all the interceptors and the trader for taking prisoners had already sailed, and what their plans were.

“Well, that's probably as good as they could have done. The intruders are coming straight through!” he told the acting lighthouse keeper. He took the rowboat in tow and the local man piloted them into the pier. A meal was waiting for them when they arrived and a blessed, blessed bed each.

All things considered Fabius was satisfied with the response. The squadron of six interceptors had been provisioned and armed and the crews well fed, all with enough time to spare to clear the channel before sunset. His crews were moving due south, setting up a picket line with each boat assigned its own place in the chain. The six craft, ordered to take up a spacing of thirty miles, would be able to see any sizeable ship that tries to sail through for a width of 180 miles. The southernmost would need to hammer across the wind all night to be in station by dawn, but doing fifteen miles an hour across a twenty mile-an-hour wind was well within their performance capacity, even if uncomfortable. Then at first light they would send up their kites for communication along the line and to ensure proper spacing as they worked upwind towards the Sardinola squadron.

By then the despatch interceptor would have reached the Sardinola base. The squadron would probably have left by the time word of his own plans had arrived but they could chase Caius if that had happened. At least Caius would know the whereabouts of the Capri squadron and what its plans were. He could make his own plans on that basis.

Fabius looked once again at the light dropping astern in the moonlight. That was the third boat in the picket taking up station. His command boat would be the next to be nearest the centre of the line. He took his sextant and shot the two main circum-polar stars, then referred to his tables. The difference in elevation between the two of them told him what correction he had to make to their raw elevation readings. This gave him his latitude. His aim was to space the boats with one every half-degree. As expected from having so recently dropped number three, he still had almost a full half-degree to go. Perhaps an hour and a half and he would be on station himself.

Caius called out his crews just after midnight, having allowed them three hours in the cot. He wondered how many of them had actually slept. He hadn't! Each member had a solid meal. Water and rations for three days were taken on board as a contingency.

He knew from the second report that the intruders were heading north of due west so there was no need to cover the full picket width this morning. He expected them to pass within fifty miles of the Sardinola coast but in the five hours before dawn his craft would be able to reach further than that. He would certainly make seventy five with this good wind still angling from just north of east.

He watched with satisfaction as his squadron raced out of the bay in neat line astern. In view of the known heading of the intruders he had ordered the picket spacing

to be closed up to quarter of a degree, about seventeen miles. This would allow faster concentration of his forces when the intruders were sighted.

It had been a hard night of sailing for Parvus. Sailing with a wind this strong could be a bit tricky at times. You had to keep the weight well back, and allow the bottom of the foresails to billow out a bit to keep the bow above water. In some ways it was even trickier than trying to do top speed downwind, because these craft could sail at 45 degrees off downwind and pull the apparent wind around to a tack which meant that you met the waves at a much slower relative velocity! But even so, that watchstation captain who had brought the news must be an excellent sailor to keep his craft so well balanced for so long.

Dawn lightened the sky in the east. He could make out the dark hump of Sardinola and the hills on the horizon told him where to head to make the best time for the interceptor base. He decided not to put up a message kite. It would not say anything that would help the base and the extra drag would just slow him down.

He took his telescope and directed it towards the lookout hill. There was no flag apparent so he must not have been sighted yet. Then even as he watched a flag was being run up. He could not be sure of the colour in this half-light. He suspected it was white, signifying no more than a message was about to be sent by the smaller placard method.

An hour later he was pulling into the pier in a base that was devoid of boats. Even the trader was gone. The acting base commander met his craft at the pier.

He relayed his message from Fabius. The Acting Commander listened carefully and asked him to set out again, heading due south to find Caius. There he was to relay the message directly to him. Parvus swung back on board and brought the bow around to the entrance of the bay. At least this would be a reach, not a tight tack!

Two hours later he was well south of the corner of the island, skipping through the waves on a flat port tack. Through his telescope he could just make out a message kite to the south, flying the clear white to indicate the location of the northernmost interceptor in the picket but no message. He started to point a bit higher. Standard doctrine was to work upwind during daylight, and then fall back during hours of darkness to ensure nothing slipped by during the night. He expected the interceptors in the picket to be following this so he angled onto what he expected to be an interception course.

He checked again perhaps quarter of an hour later, expecting to see the message kite larger and due south of his position. The direction was correct, but the kite seemed, if anything, to be further away. And it was flying solid red, white then orange – “come closer, target south.”. He fell off the breeze ever so slightly and headed straight for the kite.

“This has been a good day so far!” Caius told his second with a grin. He had just seen the kite of the boat to his north dip to below the horizon, to re-appear with a red panel. “Come to me”. He ordered his own signal kite to be brought down and fitted with the message to be relayed to the two ships south of him, with the target ‘North’. He watched through his telescope for what seemed an eternity, but it would have been only a minute before he saw the next kite to the south being pulled in. They had the message!

Satisfied, he called “prepare to tack!” to the deck crew, and then “tacking!” as he pulled the wheel around to the left. The sails clapped, the sheets tightened and the nose continued around to the north-east. The big trader, having only just caught up with him in the centre of the picket line, followed at her own pace.

All six interceptors had converged about half-a-mile upwind of the intruder fleet by noon, and allocation of specific targets had been set. The fleet of five traders was obviously confused. At first they had luffed into the breeze as if awaiting a rendezvous, but the first interceptors on the scene had kept clear. As more of the small craft arrived the traders dropped back onto the wind, pulling closer together as if for safety. Caius did a quick count of his squadron. All the interceptors were present and the transport was clearly visible to the south. All had lowered and stowed their signal kites to provide battle manoeuvrability.

Caius was about to drop downwind to call for their surrender when the message craft was seen approaching. He pulled up and reached out to the north to meet it. Better to hear what the latest news was before committing to anything.

The news from Capri was disappointing but he could see the sense behind Fabius’ decision. To look on the brighter side, at least there was a second line downwind of him in case of failure! But it meant he was alone in this confrontation. He angled back towards the intruders, his deck crew taking cover within the hulls as he approached. These small craft had been designed to permit the sheets to be handled from below decks to provide protection against cross-bows for their crews. If only the wheel were not so exposed! But the decision had been to put no obstruction to the vision of the helmsman. He was exposed from the chest upwards. Instead of better shelter a crewman stood with him with a legionnaire’s large rectangular shield at the ready.

“Ahoy!” Caius called as he cut across some two hundred paces astern of the hindmost trader. “Ahoy!”

A man on the aft rail of the trader took up a speaking trumpet to be heard against the wind. “Ahoy! We are traders! Please guide us to your trading port!”

Caius took almost all the pressure off his sails, allowing them to flap as he slowed across the stern of this intruder. But it was only a matter of pulling some tension on the sheets, and he would be away like a hunting dog.

“Take off all your sail, and you will come to no harm,” he bellowed.

Again the trader called back “We are traders. We wish to trade with you!”

“What you want is not important. Obey, and you will come to no harm. Disobey, and you will regret it. I repeat, drop all your sail.”

There was a pause before the trader replied. “We are traders, seeking peaceful trade and profit. But we will defend ourselves if attacked.” As soon as this was said a dozen cross-bows appeared over the rear rail.

Caius dropped into a jarring gibe before responding. “I will explain the rules to you,” he bellowed when back on a steady course. “If you drop your sails and obey my command, you will not only live, you will prosper. If you do not drop your sails we will arrange for that to be done for you. Then, once you are immobilised, we will invite you to row to our transport vessel. You can see it coming up from the south even now. You will be well fed and treated with dignity. And your cargo and ship will be forfeit to us.

“But if you attempt to harm us, we will take whatever action we think proper to protect ourselves. If you attempt to damage your ship or your cargo, the officers will be held responsible for the loss and punished.”

Caius could see the officers on the poop deck in discussion. After a few moments the answer came back. “We wish you no harm. We wish only to trade. Please guide us into port.”

“We wish you no harm either, otherwise we would have already attacked you for not complying with our orders,” Caius called back. “So drop your sails immediately, or lose them. You will not be told again.”

Caius watched the lumbering giant swing away from its downwind run. It started to turn onto a starboard reach, and then continued around onto a tack, as if to cut across the bows of the tiny interceptor. The cross-bows had been moved to amidships on the starboard rail, ready to fire volley after volley into this pesky little vessel. Caius called for the sheets to be hauled in and the craft leapt with acceleration on its starboard reach, then up into a tack, and then pushed its nose even further around onto a port tack. It accelerated away from the trader to a distance of half a mile. The trader fell back off the tack to run before the wind with his fellows. Caius continued on his tack, and converged with his squadron.

“Right Maximus, he’s your target. Scorch him!”

Maximus dropped off his slow flagging reach and stooped downwind towards the merchantman. His forward crew fitted the triple canisters of a rigging-scorcher into the ballista, and stood by with the torch. Through his telescope Caius could see the cross-bows re-appear on the aft rail. 'Idiots!' Caius thought to himself. 'Those cross-bows don't have even half the range of our ballistae, even without the wind effect.'

Maximus let fly at a range of some two hundred and fifty paces, close enough for accuracy while still leaving plenty of room to pull out of the downwind run and reach away without even coming close to cross-bow range. The triple pots flew high, cartwheeling gracefully, and then wrapped around the lower yard of the mainmast. The perfect shot! Flames leapt across the rigging as the oil splashed out. The rest of the squadron raised a cheer. Maximus waved in acknowledgement.

The deck of the merchantman broke into furious activity. But regardless of the level of activity nothing was being accomplished. A pump was fetched from below decks and a bucket brigade set up to feed it, but there was not enough pressure to reach high enough to touch the flames in the mainsail. Some sailors raced to the rigging to try to lower the sail into the pump's reach, but that achieved nothing except allowing the sail to flap forward, spreading the flames to the foremast as well.

With the sails on both mainmast and foremast now ablaze and providing no power, the ship started to yaw under the unbalanced thrust of the mizzenmast. The helm lost control and the ship swung into the breeze. Soon it was being pulled backwards by the pressure on the rear sail. The rear sail was dropped, and a small sea anchor tossed over the rear rail to stabilise the vessel.

While this was happening the other four traders had started to diverge. Caius waved to the other craft in his squadron, and gestured that these should be approached and warned to drop sail as well. The interceptors dispersed like hounds, each to its own

target. All the merchantmen lowered their sails, but the original tight formation was now well spread and dispersing further.

Caius made his decision. This could not be allowed to continue until dark. He stooped down onto the recalcitrant, but careful this time to stay out of cross-bow range.

“So far you have not attempted to harm us. That is good. Therefore, we will not destroy your vessel.

“Now you must abandon it without further damage. Take to your longboats. Anyone found on board when we take it will be lucky to live.”

The master of the vessel took up his trumpet again. “We have a stand-off here, Pirate! You can immobilise us, but you cannot capture us. Why should we abandon a sound and safe vessel, for you to abandon us in longboats on the high sea?”

“You will not be abandoned. Look to the south, you see our transport approaching. You will be picked up. But if you refuse, your ship will be destroyed.”

“You cannot destroy us with your little firepots! Any that land on deck can be extinguished. And if you approach to board, we will pick you off with our cross-bows. Any of your men who make it on board will be outnumbered and cut down. I suggest to you, Mr. Pirate, that we call it a draw. Let us each go our own way.”

Caius again turned and beat upwind to where Maximus was waiting. “Give him the dart, Max,” he ordered.

Maximus’ crew scrambled to bring up a ballista bolt with flights on the tail. The burns suffered by Sextus during development had not been in vain, but had led to further development of his idea. There was a small fire-collar and a protective disc to shield it at the spear end and an annulus of an oil pot a hand-span behind. The interceptor stooped down to the trader again, the wick was ignited and the ballista let fly.

The spear embedded itself in the timber side of the trader, and the momentum of the oil in the annulus splashed the planking. The side of the ship for a length of over fifteen feet exploded into flames. Immediately the merchant crew started drawing buckets of water up from the opposite side of the vessel, running across the width of the deck and pouring the water down the side. Men were being scorched while they did this as the flames licked up to above the railing.

Caius had followed Maximus down this time. He was on hand to shout again. “How will you douse the flames if we do that on both sides? And for the full length of your hull? Take to your boats now!”

The attempt to douse the flames was starting to make some headway, but it was taking its toll on the men. The merchant captain hailed back. “We surrender. Pull alongside and we will not resist your boarding party.”

“No! You must abandon your ship first.”

“Then allow us to remain on board until your transport arrives. As you accept each boatload, the next will abandon this ship.”

Caius called back. “Agreed. But be careful to do no further damage to your vessel. You and your officers will be punished for needless losses.”

The efforts to control the fire dwindled. Their vessel was lost anyway, so why suffer further injury? Buckets of water were no longer being poured over the side but instead they were being thrown across the deck and allowed to flow through the gunwhales and trickle down the side.

Caius again climbed up into the wind to ensure he remained out of cross-bow range. He took in the situation. The five traders were drifting further apart, but not at an alarming rate and each was being supervised by an interceptor standing off a few hundred paces to windward. The whole formation was drifting downwind at perhaps two miles an hour. There was no problem with that, given hundreds of miles of sea room. But he will need to demand that each vessel lights a lamp before sunset. No vessel may be permitted to sneak off during the hours of darkness.

“Caius, I see a kite out to the west!” Caius’ second reported.

Ah! Caius had forgotten about the Capri squadron. They would be working into the wind as per normal procedure, while the confrontation had been making good time downwind. At last the gap had been closed!

That should mean the Capri transport would also be on hand soon. Or perhaps not. They would have sent it to the middle of their line, and that would usually mean about a hundred miles south of the coast. This interception was only some thirty miles off the coast, so the transport would be more than ten hours away. It would not arrive until well after dark. By then his own transport will have taken its first load to Base, and be on its way back. So another two loads in the morning seems to be the plan, he mused. He reached across the wind to Maximus’ craft.

“Maximus, run down to that kite to the west and run up a red kite to get them to follow you. When you get confirmation come back here. I’ll mind your merchantman for you in the meantime.” Maximus ordered his crew into action and reached south to go around the flotilla outside crossbow range.

The transport pulled alongside Caius and reported it was ready to take prisoners. Caius dropped downwind again to hail the trader.

“Time to leave your ship, gentlemen! The rules are as follows. You will strip bare there on your ship and climb into your longboat. You will row to the transport. When you get there all but four of you will climb the ladder one at a time, and be taken below decks. The four remaining will then row back to collect another load.

“Anyone not naked will be assumed to be carrying a weapon. Such foolishness can earn you a crossbow bolt through the chest.

“The last boat load shall inform us that no-one remains aboard. We will then send in a squad of marines to make sure that is indeed the case, and anyone found remaining behind risks his life to do so. So be wise and enjoy a long life here in your new home!”

It took only four longboat trips to empty the smouldering ship of its fifty-two men. As each man came aboard he was given a loose-fitting tunic and pair of trousers. He was then taken to one of the holds. These were clean and already strung with hammocks, a device the Islanders had picked up from the local natives. There was a long bench fitted with a row of buckets along the wall, available to serve as latrines.

The captives were bemused by these hammocks. They had never seen such a device before. One of the transport crew went down into the hold, apparently oblivious to the risk of being taken hostage. He chatted with the captives and demonstrated how to get into and out of one. His fellows watching from the rim of the hold cheered his flourish.

The marines went on board the captive vessel. They examined below-decks and signalled the all-clear. The transport came close by and played its pumps over the still-

burning section of hull to extinguish the remaining flames. Then the prize crew went aboard to repair the scorched rigging and make ready to sail.

A crew of forty-seven was also collected from a second ship and a squad inspected the vessel. A prize crew was transferred. These two captured ships set for Port Sertorius immediately to be repaired at Bilat's shipyard. The transport made for Capri, closer than Sardinola due to the downwind drift during the day and also closer to the probable position when they would rendezvous again tomorrow another thirty or more miles downwind. Two interceptors were detached for escort in case the captives managed to take the transport. That left three drifting merchantmen with an escort of four interceptors and the six boats from the Capri squadron now all within kite visibility. Maximus kept his kite up to continue drawing the Capri squadron to him.

Caius swept over to the nearest interceptor. "Marcus," he hailed the captain, "Drop in on the far north merchantman. Tell him to raise sufficient sail to make way to the central trader and to tie up alongside him. I'll do the same to the far south trader."

By nightfall the three traders were tied snugly alongside each other, and the interceptor crews stood on watches so the sleep could be shared. Another signal kite was sent up. This had a lantern hung from it in an attempt to give the Capri transport a point of reference as it came up at its own best pace. It arrived some three hours after dark.

At first light next morning the three traders were ordered to cut themselves apart again and the Capri transport took off the crews from two of them. The first load of prisoners had already been sent to Capri, so its stockade would already be occupied to close to its limit. This batch had to go to Port Sertorius for holding and processing. The two prize traders and the transport set off together for Port with two interceptors from the Capri squadron as escort.

Caius had assumed overall command of the combined interceptor squadrons on the basis of having been there first. He sent Fabius back to Capri with the special order to fan out line abreast at several miles spacing so as to intercept the transport returning to the captives. Solid guidance on where they had drifted to would be most helpful. After pointing the transport in the right direction he was to send a message boat to Sardinola to inform them of events. The rest could go back to base. The Capri squadron were disappointed to have missed the action but were pleased to be able to go home. Sea rations were not as good as home cooking!

But the transport had no problem finding the remaining prize vessel. Its drift calculations had been accurate and it had already sighted the signal kite before the squadrons separated. The final ship was taken in prize. It and the prisoner transport turned for Sardinola with two interceptors assigned to escort duty. The other two were sent at a sprint to make preparations for their arrival.

Jason was careful to do exactly what he was told. Being captured by pirates usually meant nothing more dangerous than a couple of months' wait while a ransom was demanded, collected and delivered. But these pirates were so far away from civilisation that things might not be as easy as that. If they wanted to get nasty then he didn't want to be the target of their attentions.

But so far, so good. The nakedness as they were taken prisoner didn't bother him. That was a common way of treating slaves during their processing. But once on board the prison ship they were given clothing. The hold they were confined in was well-ventilated and not too crowded. It was a little more snug than most ships but with these strange cradle-looking sleeping-slings hung two deep there was room to sleep in some comfort. And they provided latrine buckets so they were not obliged to sit in their own filth like in so many slave ships.

And then, surprise, surprise! A spare sail was set on the flat at the height of a man above the deck, to shade the hold while still allowing good ventilation. He allowed himself to hope that they might not be treated too badly if the crew were prepared to provide these extra comforts.

Then one of the crew called down through the hatchway netting. "Some of you were burnt or injured. Those men please come to this corner near the ladder."

Four men had been burned trying to put out the fire. They looked around, worried that the injured might be killed and thrown overboard because of their lower value as hostages or slaves. But if they didn't comply now they would be discovered at landfall anyway. They shuffled to the ladder.

Crossbowmen surrounded the hold as the hatch netting was peeled back enough to allow one of the men to climb the ladder. Once he was on deck the netting was lashed back into place. The three remaining burn victims looked to each other fearfully.

Half an hour later the injured man was brought back to the hold. His burns had been dressed and he seemed in good spirits. Again the netting was peeled back and he was sent down into the hold. The next man called up. One after another all the burnt and injured were taken on deck and treated. The spirits of the captives rose remarkably.

Time passed. In the late afternoon their captors passed loaves of bread through the netting. This was followed by buckets of water and some drinking cups.

"Our apologies, gentlemen, for the scant food," the officer in charge apologised, with what Jason was surprised to think was genuine sympathy rather than sarcasm. "You'll be fed better once we're ashore and have the facilities. Your patience is appreciated."

The captives looked to each other in surprise. What sort of captivity is this? Or are they just being cute with us?

"Now might be the best time to explain to you what we expect from you," the officer continued. "Our aim is to treat you well. We intend to provide you with medical care and good food. You will not be subjected to brutality. In return, we require you to comply with orders. You will be interviewed when we get to our destination and we will allocate you to work most suited to your skills and abilities. You may think of this as a benign form of slavery if you wish, but we prefer to think of it as a period of probation. Those of you who demonstrate good will and compliance can expect to be made full citizens after a few years.

"Those of you who are unwilling to adopt this attitude of mutual respect will be killed. There is no such thing as permanent slavery here and we have neither the facilities nor the desire to persist with anyone who is unwilling to fit into our way of life. You either become free citizens or you will be on-sold to less sympathetic masters who practice human sacrifice.

“When we reach shore you will be transferred into a holding stockade. This has a dormitory building in it to shelter you. It also has latrines and more hammocks. So there will be no reason for you to go outside the building.

“Around these buildings is a barrier. Then there is a gap of several feet before a palisade wall. At the corners of the palisade there are towers, occupied by men with crossbows. These guards have orders to shoot anyone who approaches the barrier. They also have authority to shoot anyone who even leaves the buildings except with permission, if they consider it appropriate.

“So you will be required to remain inside the building except when ordered out for a specific purpose. Anyone leaving the building without permission might find a crossbow bolt in his chest. I urge you all to respond with respect and obedience. Do that and you will be treated well. If you do not respond as required, then be assured that we have no need and no patience for trouble-makers.”

Nightfall was approaching when there was a flurry of new orders above. The captives felt the ship swing around from its constant starboard tack. It started to run before the wind but with little sail aloft. Gradually the swell seemed to die under the hull as they ran gently before the wind. Then, suddenly, another flurry of orders as the ship swung further around to the port, and seemed to go into the wind for a moment. More orders were barked and then they felt the jolt of drifting gently sideways into an obstruction. They could hear gangways being run out.

The officer appeared at the top of the ladder again. “Gentlemen, if you would please come up in pairs.” The netting was peeled back, and the officer gestured to two men closest to the ladder to ascend.

As they stood on deck a short rope with a noose at each end was slipped over their heads and some of the slack in the noose was taken out. “Don’t worry, this is only for the purposes of preventing foolishness. Once inside the stockade you will be released.” One crew member said to the men “Follow me.” and started walking towards the gangway. Another crew member with a gladius walked behind them.

Then another two were picked out and told to ascend the ladder. This process was repeated perhaps a dozen times. Then there was a pause until the first two crew members returned with the noosed rope for their second escort duty. The hold continued to empty as the captives were transferred onto shore.

Jason continued to be scrupulously obedient. He was transferred into the stockade. There was no lantern in the building, so finding a hammock was a matter of groping through the darkness until a vacant one was found and then feeling the groping of later arrivals following the same method. But at least he was safe thus far, and he slept well.

He awoke with dawn the next morning as his fellow-prisoners started to stir. He immediately slipped out of his hammock and headed for the latrines. Best to beat the rush! As he looked out the open doorway he saw five armed and armoured men like heavy infantry. These men opened the wire gate. The captives stood in fear and their murmurings roused the rest from their sleep.

“Stay inside!” ordered Porcius Scaurus, the lead captain. “If they want to kill us, then let them try it indoors where their armour and weapons will be more cumbersome!”

The infantrymen stopped and stood in line abreast a few paces beyond the wire gate and facing the dormitory. Behind them was a man with a yoke carrying two large stew pots into the compound. He set them on the ground just behind the heavies. Another man entered carrying a stack of bowls in each hand piled up against his chest, and a third carried a large sack that tinkled as he set it down. Two more men carried a large basket of loaves between them. Finally there was another man with another two large pots.

When everything was placed on the ground the caterers retreated from the enclosure. They were followed by the infantry walking sideways, watching the dormitory as well as avoiding the food. Once through the wire gate they locked it and then passed through and closed the outer timber palisade gate behind them.

“Attention! Attention!” a woman’s voice called from the tower beside the outer gate. “Two men shall come out of the dormitory now and take the food and bowls into the building. No more than two men shall be out of the hut at any time.”

Two men nearer the door than Jason looked at each other and one shrugged.

“Yes, you two,” Scaurus ordered. “Do what she says! But do it slowly.” They walked at a dead march out to the basket of bread, and lifted it. Then they walked slowly back into the dormitory and set it on the floor in the open space before the hammocked part of the interior. Scaurus took his position beside the food to ensure its proper distribution.

Then the two men turned and walked out again, to collect the bowls and the sack containing the spoons. Then they went out a third time, each to collect two pots of stew.

“Pile the bowls and spoons here, to my right, and form a neat line,” Scaurus ordered. “Now, put the bread to my left.” Then, using a ladle left in one of the pots, he scooped some stew and put it into a bowl from the pile. “Take one loaf as you pass the bread,” he ordered as he handed the bowl to the first in line.

Jason was again impressed. The stew was a rich chowder, quite filling, and there was enough left over after the first pass for another half-helping each. The bread was not quite so generous. The remaining loaves were torn into quarters to ensure a fair sharing.

But what to do now? pondered Scaurus. Are we supposed to put the empty containers back out? Or would that invite a bolt in the chest, as they have been so keen to remind us.

He stood in the open doorway. “Should we put the pots back outside now?” he bellowed. He waited for a response.

“No more than two men at a time,” was the reply. “And place them two paces short of the inner gate.”

The captain pointed to two men near him, and gestured to them to take the equipment. “And walk very slowly,” he urged.

The equipment was put back in place. Once the porters were back inside, the five heavy infantry re-appeared as protection while the orderlies collected it. The heavy infantry remained in the space between the two gates.

“The highest-ranking officer in the dormitory will now come out alone,” the female voice ordered. Scaurus drew himself together and stepped out of the building. He walked half-way to the gate. He then stopped and stood to attention.

“Continue to the wire gate, open it and walk through. Then close the wire gate behind you.”

Scaurus complied and stood waiting between the wire and the palisade.

“Now open the palisade gate and walk through,” came the order.

Scaurus complied. Those watching from the building saw the palisade gate pushed closed behind him, hiding him from view.

It would have been only two minutes later when the voice called again. “The next-highest ranking officer will now come forward. Do precisely as you saw the previous man do. If in doubt, stand still and you will be instructed.”

That would be me as the ship’s first officer and navigator, Jason thought to himself. He was about to step forward when another man sighed deeply, and said to those around him “Here’s hoping to see you all soon!”

Of course! The captain of the second ship! Jason relaxed again. But he had no doubt that he would be third.

The second captain walked slowly but with precision to the half-way point and stopped. Then after the briefest pause, he started walking slowly again to the wire gate and swung it open. After another pause he stepped through and pulled the gate closed behind him. Then, facing the palisade gate, he called out “Awaiting permission to open the outer gate!”

“Open the gate and come through,” was the response. The second captain disappeared as the palisade gate closed behind him.

Jason called to those around him. “I was navigator on the lead ship. Does anyone here outrank me?” There was silence. After a long pause, Jason added, “Then it seems I will be next. Have a good day, everyone!”

Jason’s call came soon enough. He went through the same procedure as the second captain, including the wait for an explicit instruction to open the outer gate. ‘Others might make the assumption,’ Jason thought grimly, ‘but I would rather be sure.’

Once outside he was led to a building that looked like an army barracks but partitioned off into separate small rooms. There was a man sitting at a table. He had a stack of papers to one side.

The man looked up to him as he darkened the doorway, then stood as he held out his right hand. “Welcome!” he smiled. “My name is Clodius.”

As Jason stepped into the room to take the proffered arm he saw a man with a gladius in the corner behind the door. ‘Friendly, but armed,’ he thought to himself.

“Oh, please sit down,” Clodius said, smiling as he indicated a chair as he sat himself. “Our aim here is to build up our strength,” Clodius continued. “Those whom we find we can trust will be made full members of our band. Those we find we cannot trust will become casualties. But we would obviously prefer as many as possible to be members.

“The purpose of this interview is to find out who you are and what your skills are. We expect the truth. Anything less will reflect badly when we decide whether or not we can trust you. And we have ways of finding out if you lie, the most obvious by asking others about you. Not that you will be rejected because one or two might say something against you,” Clodius smiled again. “We will ask enough to be able to filter our petty spite or just plain mistakes. And we will also ask you about others for the same reason.” Clodius took a sheet of paper from the pile beside him. He suddenly became brisk.

“Your name?”

“Jason.”

“Father’s name?”

“Phillip.”

“Then for the moment, your official name will be Jason Phillip. That is subject to change if there is another of the same name.”

“Your age?”

“Twenty eight years.”

Clodius studied Jason’s face for a moment. “I am noting that you have brown eyes, brown hair, of slight-to-medium build. Please rise and stand with your back against that scale,” indicating a vertical measure by the doorway. Clodius came around from behind his desk to press the measure down onto his scalp.

“Five feet and eight inches” he announced. He returned to his desk. “Now please remove your tunic and trousers and turn slowly.” Jason complied.

“No significant scars or birthmarks,” Clodius determined. “Now, please dress yourself and take your seat again.”

“Your rank or position in the ship’s company?”

“I was the navigator on the leading vessel.”

“Your education?”

“Passes in Greek and Latin, Honours in Mathematics and Geometry, all at Nova Carthago Gymnasium.”

Clodius looked up. “No Rhetoric, no Law?”

“No, only in passing as we studied the classics such as Cicero.”

Clodius bent over his paper again. “Greek and Latin classics,” he mumbled, “and honours in Mathematics and Geometry, you say?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any physical infirmities?”

“None.”

“What type of work would you prefer to be assigned to?”

Jason paused with surprise. Asking a slave what type of work he preferred? What sort of people are these guys?

“I like navigation. That’s why I’m here.”

“What other choices would you like me to list?”

Jason paused another moment. “I suppose surveying. Anything mathematical.”

“Right!” said Clodius, noting the answer on his sheet. “Now for the cross-questions. Please give me the names and positions of as many of your crew-mates as you can with confidence, starting at the most senior if you can. List any distinctive physical features that would allow us to recognise them and any information that might be of interest to us.”

Jason worked his way through the officers and the leading seamen. When he reached the rank of common seaman, Clodius stopped him. “Thank you, but that will be enough. We will rely on the leading seamen and commoners for an opinion about the lower ranks. But there is one person here who is of interest,” Clodius continued. “You say that Amelius Sextus was a 'guide'. What do you mean by that?”

“I understood that he had previous experience in these waters. He gave me clear instructions to head west on sixteen degrees north until we came to an island. We were to

pass to the north of that island, then head ten degrees north of west, passing to the south of a small but very high island that seemed a many-pointed mountain placed in the middle of the sea. Five hundred miles past the small island we were to turn directly north until we strike the coast. He said that would be about forty miles. Then follow the coast to the west until we find a harbour with a port which he expected would be less than one hundred miles further. Once there, I should be able to locate it by latitude and longitude for future voyages.”

“Hmm; I see. Would you recognise this man?” Clodius seemed intrigued.

“Yes, of course.”

It took all of that day for the ninety-nine men to be interviewed by the dozen clerks allocated the duty. As it turned out there was no-one calling himself ‘Amelius Sextus’ in the lists collected after the interviews despite him being mentioned by every officer and most of the leading seamen. Could this man have been lost at sea with nobody noticing? But there was one man who identified himself as Marius Licinius, a name which appeared on none of the cross-question answers. That was a matter to be clarified the next morning.

“Attention! Attention!” the voice bellowed from the gate tower. “Marius Licinius is required for a second interview. Marius Licinius, please come out!”

The captives looked to each other. ‘Who is this Marius Licinius?’ they wondered to each other. No-one moved. The voice repeated the request two minutes later. Again, no-one moved.

Another two minutes passed. Then the voice bellowed out again. “Porcius Scaurus, please come out.” Scaurus looked around grimly, and then stepped to the doorway.

“Porcius Scaurus as requested,” he bellowed. He did not want to be mistaken for this Marius Licinius guy who refused to appear.

“Porcius, please bring out Marius Licinius. If Marius is not available then instead please bring out Amelius Sextus.”

“I will bring out Amelius Sextus,” Scaurus promised before disappearing into the dormitory.

Marius Licinius, also known as Amelius Sextus, was cowering in the back corner. He was terrified.

“No! No! Tell them I’m not here!” he jabbered.

Scaurus looked to two men standing nearby. “Grab him. I don’t think these guys will be in a good mood if we have two names that don’t seem to exist. They might get impatient.”

The men lunged at Sextus, grabbing him by the arms and locking them behind his back. Scaurus walked to the door with the two men behind him as Sextus struggled in vain and wept in despair.

Scaurus stopped at the door. “Request permission for four to come out!” he bellowed. “Amelius was unwilling. He needs to be escorted if he is to comply.”

“Permission for four granted,” the voice came back. “Proceed through the gates.”

Once the four were outside the gates three armed guards bound Sextus' forearms together behind his back, with loops around the upper arms to ensure security. Then they slipped three nooses over his head so they could hold him equidistant from all of them.

"Thank you, Porcius, and thank you, the other two gentlemen. You may go back inside now." The guards seemed genuine in their courtesy. "If you will now return to the enclosure..." The three captives turned back to the compound.

"Listen to me! I am doing you all a favour!" Sextus pleaded with his captors.

"Then perhaps the commander will thank you," quipped one of the guards. "Let's find out now!" A quick tug on the front rope was enough to get Sextus staggering towards the interview building.

Sextus was shoved into a room and tied to the seat. Fabius was already sitting opposite him.

"You told them how to find us," Fabius said flatly.

"Yes, because it will be the best thing that has happened for you!" Sextus burst out. "Instead of only having Pulcher to trade with you will now have two merchants! You can make them bid against each other! Think of how much better the prices will be if you're not trapped in a Pulcher monopoly!"

"You told them how to find us," Fabius repeated.

"Yes, and now you will all be richer than you could dream! It's not you who should be upset, but Pulcher! He's the only one who could possibly lose out of this!"

Fabius looked around the room to the four other men with him. "He confesses," he said flatly. Then he turned back to Sextus. "OK, now comes the interesting part. Tell us everything we want to know, and things will go better for you. But if you try to play us for fools you will regret it. First, how many people know about us?"

"I told Sextus Niger that you have plenty of gold to trade in return for steel and common trade goods. His son also knows and I expect his most trusted retainers might have been told in turn. I don't know if anyone else knows. I expect Niger would want to keep the secret to his own house, just like Pulcher."

"You didn't tell any other traders?"

"No. Niger promised me two percent of profits for all future voyages as well as this one, so obviously it's in my own interests to keep it quiet."

"How much did you tell him?"

"I told him how I got to Port Sertorius in one of Pulcher's ships and that you were a people who would welcome trade with anyone. That is what everyone I talked to in Port told me!" Sextus was becoming shrill, as he started to think he might be in the clear. "'We are glad to have contact with you,' everyone said. 'Trade is what we crave,' they said. It was only Pulcher who wanted to clamp down on you! I'm doing you all a favour!"

"Calm down, and answer my questions," Fabius reminded him. "Did you supply him with any charts? Precisely what did you tell him? Take your time, and omit nothing."

Sextus collected his thoughts for a moment. "I'll start at the very beginning. I don't want you to think that I'm concealing anything."

“On my first voyage here in Pulcher’s ship, I was amazed at how much gold you were shipping out. I was also surprised at how little you were getting for it in return. I thought about how I could profit from that myself.

“Now, I’m only a common sailor so I would never be able to equip a ship of my own. And if I did, Pulcher would be certain to know about it. So I thought that I could be the invisible partner of another trader. I provide the information, he provides the equipment and does the trading. But for that to happen I’d need to be convincing. I’d need some hard evidence if I’m to expect someone to spend big coin just on my say-so.

“So I decided that I would hang around the navigators as much as possible and keep my ears open. I’d note everything they said, even try to coax some information if I could do it safely. And I’d keep my own version of a log, filled with headings and speeds as well as I could estimate them. I even tried to become friendly with the chainman who took the speed readings each morning and afternoon, and kept a note of those. In this way I had a reasonable record of the return journey. But I didn’t act straight away. I had learnt from the rest of the crew that this trip was done every year, and usually by the same ships and crews. I made a point of being a good crew member to make sure I was kept on board.

“The next time I came across I took more notes. I learnt that the standard route was to head due east along sixteen degrees north, then pass to the north of the big island and then south of the pointed island behind it. After that, head ten degrees north of due west. My records of speeds each day told me we travelled about five hundred miles in this direction before turning north to hit a coast, and then we followed the coast until we found the port.

“I also took a second set of records for the return journey. When I got back home I tried to plot all my information on a single sheet of paper. The two return journeys didn’t match very precisely, but I’m not a navigator. Then I plotted the journey westwards. That matched neither return journey, even after I made allowance for the relative positions of the Canary Islands and Hispania. I was worried that this contradictory information would not be enough to persuade anyone! But I had nothing to lose, so I went to the office of Sextus Niger. He’s the biggest merchant in Africa, much bigger than Pulcher.

“I was told to show my information to one of his ship’s captains who was in town at the time. That was Porcius. He laughed at my plots, and asked to see the raw information in my journals instead. Then he spent the rest of that day and most of the next doing his own plots. He said that my entries didn’t allow for the world being round, and also the effects of ocean currents, and that was why nothing matched up properly. Once he made those corrections, the plots looked a lot better. He said they agreed closely enough for the differences to be explained by the errors in my estimates.

“He said that was very good. If I was lying, my story would have been fashioned to look more convincing on my plots but would have been all wrong when properly worked out. So he believed me and took me to talk to Niger.

“Porcius explained my information to Niger better than I ever could have. Niger just nodded and then looked at me. ‘Two shiploads of gold each year, eh?’ he asked. I just nodded, and then added, ‘in exchange for steel, ropes, cloth and other common goods.’

“We'll send a fleet out, to see for ourselves. Will you go with it?” he asked me. I just nodded again.

“If this is right, what do you want in return?” he asked me. I said I wanted one tenth of the gold. He laughed. ‘Really, that's a very stupid thing to say,’ he explained. ‘My captain here has all your information already. What's to stop me from taking you on this voyage and then slitting your throat on the way back?’

“Until then, I hadn't thought of that. All I could say was ‘You are known as an honest man, lord Niger. I know you would not do that.’ Niger laughed again. ‘All right,’ he said. But let's say two percent of profits, not ten per cent of total gold.’

“I told him I wasn't happy with that. I wanted more. But he just shrugged and said ‘OK then. Go to another trader and ask for more. But the more they offer you, the more they stand to gain by cheating you. To show you that I am indeed as honest as you seem to think I am, I'll also give you back your logs and charts. But we'll keep what is in our heads and we'll just go exploring ourselves.’ Then he just shrugged again. ‘So make your choice. Two percent of profits from me, or a slit throat from some-one who promises you the world.’

“So I told him two percent of profits would be fine by me. That was our deal.”

Fabius waited for a moment, but Amelius appeared to have finished. “Earlier, you said nothing about this captain back in Africa knowing as well. Are you lying to us again?”

“No, that captain is Porcius Scaurus, the leader of this expedition. Obviously everyone on the ship knows about you. I only listed those still over in Carthage when I spoke earlier.”

Fabius nodded that he understood his explanation. “Why did you lie about your name and your part in the ship's company? If you did this to help us, why hide from us?”

“I wasn't trying to hide from you, sir. I just didn't want to risk my name getting back to Pulcher. I'm trying to help you, but Pulcher would take his revenge if he found out about me!”

Fabius nodded again. “I can understand that. Did you tell anyone else at all? Even your wife, or a friend?”

“No, not even my wife. She would blab it to her friends, and Pulcher would find out.”

“OK, untie him,” Fabius ordered. “And get an interviewer in here.” He fixed Sextus with a stare. “This time, tell us the truth in the interview. You will not be forgiven a second time! And by-the-way, tell us your real name this time.” Fabius stood and left the room.

Sextus almost fainted with relief. He had smooth-talked his way out of what seemed certain death! Another interviewer came into the room and the interview process was carried out again. This time he was careful to stick to the facts. At length his whole identity and background check was noted.

“Well, that's the end of the set questions, Quintus,” the interviewer said brightly, calling him by the third name he had offered. “Now, are there any other things that we should know? Remember, if we find out you have misled us a second time there will be no mercy. If we can't trust you, you die.” Somehow, that routine threat of death seemed to spring quite naturally from a genuine smile.

“Yes, lord Fabius told me that I should tell you everything I can about how I guided the fleet to you.” Then Quintus Millo, also known as Amelius Sextus and Marius Licinius, went through his story again as the interviewer wrote it down.

While all this was happening Jason had been called out of the compound a second time. He was taken to an interview room. Clodius was waiting for him.

“Ah, Jason,” Clodius rose to greet him and offered his right arm again. Jason took it. He noticed that there was no man with a gladius behind the door this time. “Take a seat! We have just the job for you, but first an outline of what you can expect here and what we expect from you.” Clodius settled back into his chair. “Purely by chance we need a mathematics teacher here in this very town. You’re the man!

“You will be issued with two more sets of clothing, a sewing needle and some black thread. You will be required to stitch your name on the left breast of each tunic and on the front of the right thigh of each set of trousers, letters about one inch high. You may not wear any clothing except what carries your name.

“You'll be taken to the school later today. When you get there you'll be allocated your own living quarters. These will consist of a living room and a bedroom/study. This is the standard arrangement for a single man or a childless couple here, whether slave or citizen. The head teacher will allocate you to classes as he sees fit.

“You'll be given ten denarii each month to spend on luxuries as you desire. The essentials will be provided to you without charge. If you are granted citizenship in a couple of years' time this allowance will be increased to thirty denarii a month.

“You're not permitted to leave the town limits. These will be pointed out to you, so there will be no excuses if you are found wandering.

“You'll be entitled to take two cooked meals each day at the public mess hall, free of charge. Breakfast will be available between sunrise and the second hour, and the evening meal from the tenth hour to an hour after sunset. At breakfast you will be provided with bread and fruit to take with you for a mid-day meal.

“You may use the bath house freely. The theatre is sometimes free, sometimes there is a charge. You are also entitled to free laundry service, one set of clothing every third day.

“Provided the head teacher is satisfied with your performance, which includes planning and preparing your lessons and assessing the students' performance, the remaining time is yours to spend as you wish. Except that you may be called upon to perform an essential task at any time if the circumstances demand it. This might be additional duties to re-build after a storm, or assist in fire-fighting, etc. In this regard you will be treated no differently than a full citizen who is also liable to such emergency measures, and you will be expected to respond as would a full citizen.

“However I must warn you that any transgressions could weigh very heavily against you. We extend this freedom of action and this trust to you expecting you to return it with diligence and reliability. If you fail us we will be most disappointed. In particular there is one offence which carries the most extreme punishment. You must never, ever attempt to return to the Old World, nor conspire with anyone to do so, nor assist anyone to do so. You are here for the rest of your life. How you behave will determine how long that is.

“Do you have any questions?” Clodius smiled charmingly.

Jason was taken aback by all this. He blinked his surprise. "This seems a rather lenient form of slavery," he commented.

"Yes it is," Clodius agreed. "How you respond will show us what manner of man you are. Your behaviour will tell us whether you are one to be granted full citizenship or one to be disposed of as unworthy. There's no such thing as long-term slavery here. You either make the grade or you die."

"I have another question, if I may," Jason dared. Clodius lifted a polite eyebrow, inviting the question.

"These people to the west that Sextus told us about. Do they really exist? And if they do exist, don't you fear that they'll take action against you pirates for interfering with their trade?"

Clodius smiled slowly. "No comment."

Jason was led into what appeared to be a small sitting room in the school building. It was just after the first shift for the evening meal, and the sun was low in the west. The Head Teacher was a small, wiry man, balding with age and cloudy-eyed. He rose to greet Jason. 'Not long to go before he will not be able to read at all', Jason thought to himself as he looked into those cataracts with a genuine wash of pity. But the old man seemed cheerful enough.

"Excellent to have you with us, Jason," he greeted the new man warmly as if already a respected colleague. "My name is Parmas. This delightful lady," he gestured towards a seated woman in her prime and who stood as she was introduced, "is Minerva.

"Clopas was the mathematician among us, but alas! he was needed more to replace a navigator who died at sea. He left us a month ago, and we've been waiting for his replacement ever since. In addition to us two 'official' teachers, some of the interceptor officers have been serving as mathematics teachers on a part-time basis. One would come for morning session and another for the afternoon. Your recruitment will cut out this need and allow the part-timers to return to their primary duties."

Jason took the pause in the old man's speech as an invitation to return greetings. "I am glad that I can be of use," Jason smiled back. He was unsure of the etiquette for a slave to adopt so he stood still.

"Then give me your arm!" the old man urged. Only then did Jason notice that the arm that had gestured towards Minerva had remained held out in front. Jason locked hand-to-forearm in the traditional Roman manner. Then, to his surprise Minerva stepped forward, offering her arm in the masculine way rather than the limp palm-down style of females in the Republic. Jason hesitated a moment, and then accepted tentatively.

Minerva burst out laughing. Then she covered her face apologetically. "I'm sorry, I mean no offence. But out here we have more work than we have men to do it. So women fill the gaps and have come to be regarded as equals."

"Don't worry, Jason. It will take a little while to become accustomed to it," Parmas waved away the embarrassment, but the moment had proven to be an ice-breaker.

"She is more than my equal," Jason offered. "I am a slave, she is free."

"Nonsense!" Minerva protested. "We are colleagues. The yellow tunic will be white soon enough. Anyway, I have a flask of Gallic wine here. Let us celebrate your

arrival as we discuss our new arrangements.” She dragged a third chair around the small table between their own places and urged him to sit. Three cups were laid out.

“Your summary sheet says that you were a navigator,” Parmas opened. “That would mean rather advanced mathematics and geometry, would it not?”

Jason nodded modestly. “In theory, yes. If I had to I could work through the processes from first principles. But it's usual to refer to pre-calculated tables. The calculations are not too difficult in concept but very laborious to perform. That often leads to errors so it's safer as well as quicker to use the tables.”

“Well I doubt you will need to teach to that level but it's good that you excel. How would you feel to be told that the most you will need to teach in this place would be multiplication and division, volumes of solids, pulleys and levers, etc.?”

Jason shrugged, and then realised how rapidly he had presumed upon the collegiate status he had been offered. A new slave responding to a master with a shrug? That would have been a rebuke, if not a whipping, back in Africa! “I am happy to teach whatever the children need to learn. But if that's so, then why do you need me? Would I not be better employed as a surveyor or navigator? Any educated adult could teach these simpler matters.”

Parmas nodded, as if to himself. “Yes, perhaps surveying. Don't be surprised if you are re-allocated to a building crew soon enough. But a captured man who is a trained navigator would never be permitted on a ship. That would be too great a risk. Were you not told that you must never attempt to return?”

“Yes, I was told that. I see your point,” Jason agreed.

“But more to the point,” Parmas continued more energetically, “There will be some brighter students who have the potential to go further. One of your duties will be to recognise and encourage them, even going beyond the limits of the set work. These exceptional students are offered places in Port Sertorius, to become the officers of the next generation.”

“Port Sertorius?” Jason questioned. “That was the place we were being guided to when we were captured. How could you pirates send your children to the place whose commerce you are raiding?”

Parmas and Minerva looked to each other. Parmas flapped his hands, as if to say ‘This was going to happen sooner or later.’

“We are not pirates, Jason. Or at least, not as far as Port Sertorius is concerned. We are their navy, protecting them from unwanted visitors.”

Jason gaped for a few moments. “But we were traders, not raiders! Surely they would want to encourage as many trade links as possible!”

“It is sufficient for you to know that we do not trade with anyone, but only with selected partners. All others are considered intruders and subject to confiscation and enslavement. Or at least, enslavement until they demonstrate that they will not betray us.”

Jason bowed his head in submission. ‘I am the slave here,’ he reminded himself. ‘Do not be fooled by the informality.’

“And don't speak of your former crew as ‘we’, Jason,” Minerva added softly. “From now on, ‘we’ means your new home. Grow accustomed to that quickly, and life will be more enjoyable.”

Jason again paused a moment, before deciding to speak again. "I can believe that. Our treatment so far has been very firm but provided we comply it has been... ah... respectful, I think would be the word. We have been fed well, and our wounded cared for, and not one unprovoked blow. What sort of society is this, to treat captives so well? Tell me as much as you can, so I can learn about you and fit in better."

Parmas again looked briefly to Minerva before answering. "Since our founding there has always been more work to do than we had manpower to do it, as Minerva said. Therefore we are always eager to get as much out of every pair of hands as we can. Everyone here works, even women and children, as much as they can.

"It only makes sense that slaves will be more productive if they are not in chains, not abused, and properly cared for. It also makes sense that setting taskmasters over them is manpower than can be better used elsewhere. Most slaves respond well to this approach. Those that don't respond well are... well, let's say that the local natives have some very interesting religious customs and are always looking for a human sacrifice or two. So even if a slave doesn't respond positively to our kindness, he still ends up making a profit for us. Thankfully, there are not many of them."

"May I ask more questions?" Jason ventured tentatively.

Parmas swept a hand in invitation. "Go ahead. We might not answer, but you can ask."

"Your Latin is very natural. I've also heard Greek as I walked around. So you must be from the Republic. So why are you so secretive? How long have you been here?"

"We are indeed from the Republic," Parmas agreed. "But we have found a very profitable form of trade. Our Patron wants to maintain a monopoly on this trade, which would not be possible if it were to become public knowledge. So we have been instructed to prevent any word of it getting back to the Republic. The sailors on our Patron's ships are hand-selected and pledged to silence. But even so, we must assume that some will tell about us, so they are kept ignorant of our defences. They are deliberately told that we will trade with all visitors, to ensure that any who break their vow of silence will not expect to be opposed by force. I understand that is what happened to your ship?"

Jason nodded. "Amelius said that we would be welcomed."

"So long as intruders think that's the case, the easier it is to capture them. By the way, do you know what will happen to the spy?"

"I understand that his second interview went well. He came back to the compound saying that they were glad to see us. But we were not set free or allowed to trade. We're still slaves." Jason shook his head. "It doesn't seem to add up."

"It will add up, all in good time," Parmas said smoothly. "But although the spy might think he has saved his skin, he will soon learn otherwise. Make no mistake," Parmas went on. "We welcome you, and all compliant captives, as we would welcome new crew members on an under-manned ship. But if you disappoint us then we will have no hesitation in doing whatever will best protect our secrets."

"How many other ships have been captured like ours?" Jason got out eventually.

"You are the first we've encountered. It was reassuring that things went so well. We were confident that all our systems and tactics are sound but it's always good to see them pass the test."

Jason was surprised. "Then those others in yellow I passed in the street..."

"They're slaves, too, but imported," Parmas explained. "Many of us came over here as free men, on the first ships that founded this place. Others were slaves trusted by our Patron, and sent over not knowing what was ahead of them. A small number were slaves who were favoured by our Patron, and invited over here as a sign of appreciation." Parmas smiled at this.

"I was his tutor when he was a lad. He knew I was becoming stiff and sore in the body, and would be blind in a few years, so he offered this to me as a gift better than my freedom." He looked to Minerva.

"And I was married to Paulus, Septimius' nephew," Minerva responded. "I became too curious about his trade web, and discovered some papers about the trade to the west. I was found out and Septimius feared I would tell my father's family. He offered me the choice of coming over here or having a terrible accident.

"Septimius had always been such a gentle, generous and considerate man! It shocked me that he would threaten my life. But he saw this as a betrayal, and I guess it was in his eyes. But I was well-born and well-educated. I refused to be ordered about like that. I simply refused. Then Septimius whispered in my husband's ear.

"Paulus stood and looked at me for a moment, then ordered me into a separate room to talk. Once in private he told me that I would not get out of that house alive if I refused, and Septimius was offering him the chance to talk me around. He told me that life over here was very pleasant from all accounts, and I was young enough to start afresh. He urged me to go.

"I just slapped him. Then I told him that he was no fit husband to abandon me like that. He just looked at me and said that I would suit this new life very well; the women over here were no cowards. Then he walked out of the room back to Septimius, dragging me by the wrist. 'She is my wife, and I have decided. She will go to the Islands, even if she must be bound, shaved and treated like a slave to achieve that.' That was the last time I saw Paulus, and the only time he ever enforced his right to obedience. In hindsight, it was also his greatest gift to me."

Jason nodded as Minerva finished. "So Septimius is your Patron? Would that be Septimius Pulcher, the merchant from Utica?"

Minerva nodded.

"That matches what Sextus said on the ship." Jason felt the whole plot was coming together. "So who are the natives to this area? There must be some, if you trade with them."

The people we trade with are a good distance away. We settled on these islands to ensure they couldn't find us and plunder us. They're a warlike crowd, but they have no ships."

"The natives to these islands, much less civilised than our trading partners, are called Arawaks. They tend to stay away from us, usually retreating to a safe distance wherever a new settlement is set up. We genuinely tried to make peace with them, frequently coming ashore if a group are seen on a beach. There was the hope that their local knowledge could be tapped and they might be incorporated into the colony to provide manpower. But they usually fade into the vegetation if they have the chance. Blankets and other good-will gifts would be left near their camp-fires and our men would

return to their boats. But generally the Arawak offered us neither resistance nor help. We have noticed that there seemed to be a lot of dead Arawak found from time to time, sometimes whole villages of a few dozen bodies found without a survivor. There is a belief going around that there's something wrong, either with the Islands themselves or with the people who live here. But we seem to be prospering, so it must be some weakness in the local people.”

Parmas then brought the conversation around to the school work. Education for children started early. Mothers were encouraged and at length required to get back to work reasonably quickly after childbirth. This usually starts with light, part-time duties a month or so after delivery. They would take their infants with them.

As the children got older they would be left each day in groups with specialist carers who would start socialisation programmes and basic co-ordination skills, etc. By the time the children were three to five years old, depending on the individual, they would be learning basic numeracy and literacy skills. When a child was considered ready for the more formal learning environment and process they would be sent to the junior school.

Although teaching was in Latin, the nominal language of the colony, many of the people were either slaves or ex-slaves predominantly from the eastern Mediterranean area. These tended to prefer Greek as their conversational language. Also most of the free men were originally sailors, again predominantly natural Greek-speakers. For this reason all students were encouraged to be fluent and literate in both languages starting even in the pre-school programme.

There were seventy-nine students aged from four to ten in the junior section of the school. These were formed into three classes. These classes would be rotated around the three teachers in the morning, learning Mathematics and Geometry from Jason, Greek and Latin Grammar, Classics and Rhetoric from Minerva, and Civics from Parmas. Civics was a catch-all subject that included history, citizenship information, religion, ethics, geography, and anything else that would mould a young person into the ideal responsible adult. Each lesson lasted an hour, with a ten-minute break between.

A further sixty-four students aged from nine to fourteen formed the senior school, again formed into three classes. These started shortly after mid-day, learning more advanced material in the same broad categories. These lessons lasted an hour-and-a-half each, again with ten-minute breaks.

Jason settled into teaching quite smoothly. In fact, more smoothly than he had expected of himself. A key part of this was the attitude of both the children and Parmas. Back in the civilised world children tended to fall into three main groups. There were those who wanted to learn, those who were forced to learn, and those who refused to learn.

It was usually difficult for a pedagogue to do anything about this. A complaint to a parent usually resulted in a counter-accusation about being a poor teacher and the loss of a client. So most teachers in the Republic didn't put too much emotional commitment into their task. Those children who wanted to learn would learn, but those who didn't still provided an income and tough luck to them if they grew up still ignorant.

Parmas would not tolerate that sort of attitude in either student or teacher. The attitude of the colonists had been carried down from the building of the original

settlements when men, women and children were all put to constructive work. It was assumed that everyone had a job to do, and a child's job was to learn. Those who learnt quickly were encouraged, and those who needed help were given help. But any slacker was treated like a crewman who refused to carry his weight on a ship. He would be told, both by Parmas and his parents, that this was not good enough. Even the children themselves would help the slow learner who tried but they would ostracise the lazy.

Parmas was no less businesslike in his approach to his staff. He would routinely ask a teacher to report to his rooms in the evening to repeat a lesson from that day or to outline his approach to a new subject soon to be taught or to discuss any students who demanded either more care or more of a challenge. This might happen once a week, often more. Just as a wood-carver needed to work with the grain of each individual block before him, so Parmas expected his teachers to understand each student to make the most of his strengths and to strengthen his weaknesses.

Jason was left thinking how fortunate Septimius Pulcher had been to have a pedagogue like Parmas! He responded to this professionalism by planning his teaching all the more carefully, working ahead in the set texts and often modifying their approach where he thought they were clumsy in presentation. He took the time to write an orderly syllabus for the Mathematics and Geometry course for the Junior School, presenting the different strands in what he considered to be the most logical order. He ensured that each step built on the preceding topics.

A year later Jason was re-assigned to Port Sertorius. He was required to teach at the Gymnasium. This was the advanced school for navigators, surveyors and other brighter students destined for the jobs requiring more proficiency in maths and geometry.

After a year at Port, his second since capture, Jason was awarded his whites to signify citizenship. He immediately applied for a position as a navigator. Much as he was diligent as a teacher, his love was the sea! While waiting for a navigator's spot to become available he re-wrote the syllabus for the Gymnasium's Mathematics course.

Thus Jason became the first captive to be entrusted with a job on a sea-going vessel.

Utica – December, 824 AUC (71 A.D.)

“This is simply not good enough, Marcellus! That fleet was supposed to return in April last year, May at the latest.” Sextus Niger was not a happy man. “Ships that size should be able to weather any storm! Even if some ships were damaged the fleet was large enough to ensure that least one or two would survive. That was why they had so few crew on each, to ensure that there would be room for all hands if a couple of ships were lost!”

Niger slapped his hand down on the top of his desk to emphasise his anger. “And they were designed for speed. They should have been able to outrun any pirate, even an anti-pirate squadron, in all but the lightest conditions. And the conditions under those easterlies are always at least moderate.” He paced the room in his annoyance. But Lucius Marcellus knew better than to speak until asked a direct question. His Patron liked to have total control over all his discussions.

“Well? What do you have to say, Marcellus?” Niger asked at last. That was the cue Marcellus had been waiting for.

“I know no more that you do, my lord,” Marcellus always made a point of starting all his advice with a self-deprecating introduction. Niger liked his clients to show submission. “But it would seem that their loss was not due to lack of speed or seaworthiness in storms, as you have so rightly said. That would suggest that they were overcome by one or more of stealth, greater numbers or superior weaponry. It might even be that the very people they were trying to trade with might have captured them and taken them as prizes, rather than pay for the goods they carried. I can think of no other likely causes.”

Niger stared at Marcellus for a moment, his face conveying disappointment almost to the edge of contempt. “Why is it that whenever I ask a so-called advisor for advice, I get little more than an echo of what I have just said myself?”

‘Because you resent anyone who shows greater expertise than you have yourself,’ Marcellus thought to himself, but he would never dare say that. “Because you are a man with great insight and experience yourself, my lord. The best we can do is to work through the problem with you. My role is to act as a resource, a stone that sharpens your own thinking.”

Niger continued staring at him for a moment longer. “Brown-noser!” he said, and returned to his desk.

‘Yes, just the sort of person you are most comfortable with!’ Marcellus thought to himself again.

“Very well,” Niger became more business-like as he sat. “I’ll send another fleet, but this time we must make it impregnable to all forms of attack. So, my little resource, let’s hear how we go about that!”

Marcellus paused a moment, just in case Niger was going to press on himself. But it was clear that Niger was waiting for him to speak. “Well, first we need to enumerate the ways in which a ship can be attacked.

“The first is by boarding. This is best resisted by ensuring that the ship carries enough marines to repel boarders, and by providing them with protection against missiles

in the approach phase. That is the typical defence used by pirates. Its disadvantage is that it requires large numbers of men.

“The second is by fire, in which the attacker seeks to destroy rather than capture. This is best resisted by galleys, preferably with no superstructure or sails to catch bombs, and a flat upper deck that allows burning oil to be washed away. Meanwhile the galley can use its own weapons to counter-attack, and oar power to row into the wind, usually the weakest direction for an attacker.

“The third is by ramming. The best defence here is better manoeuvrability and speed, but robust construction helps.” Marcellus paused, inviting comment from Niger. Eventually one came.

“So you are advising me to use ships without sails but with crews of hundreds, to row across two and a half thousand miles of open and unknown ocean,” Niger summarised. “Do you know how much drinking water I would have to carry for that? Rowers go through drinking water twice as fast as sailors! And then I would need to carry water for a hundred or more marines as well, so it would have to be a very large galley, which means even more rowers and even more drinking water!” Niger shook his head.

“To do anything on that scale would mean a galley so large it would not be able to manoeuvre, so it could be easily rammed and sunk by a lighter, faster boat,” Niger continued. “So manoeuvrability be damned! It will need to rely on a robust hull, which means more weight, which means more displacement and drag through the water, which means more rowers to keep it moving, which means even more drinking water...” He waved his right hand in a small circle to indicate that this whole process was like a dog chasing its own tail. Marcellus again waited for a clear signal that Niger had finished.

“You are right, of course, my lord,” Marcellus took his proper part in the discussion, that of the subordinate. “But we have no information about what we are facing on the other side of the ocean. If we are to be prepared for literally anything, then that is what we must do. Will I commission a shipwright to draw up plans and tender a price for construction?”

“No! I don't want word getting out!” Niger snapped back. Then he thought for a moment. “I'll go to the shipyards on the German Sea and talk to them myself. Better to do this sort of thing out of sight.”

“But my lord, one ship is always vulnerable,” Marcellus continued. “And if there is a substantial force over there you might need to not only defeat the enemy ships, but also seize their bases. You might need an entire legion of soldiers to do that! Perhaps even more, but a legion will at least give you the chance of the fleet coming back with some intelligence.”

“A good point, Marcellus,” Niger conceded. “And if I need to transport so many marines, then I should ensure that every vessel in the fleet is invulnerable. That would be expensive. But if there is as much gold over there as that fool said, then it will be worth it.”

Hammaburg – June, 827 AUC (74 A.D.)

Niger looked at the prototype ship as it stood on the slips about to be launched into the Albis River. It was big! He had first visited Albis Navifactor almost two years ago to discuss first the design and then the construction of this super-trireme. He had dropped a small bag of silver coins on the desk of Hermann Schnell, a Saxon semi-barbarian who affected the Latinised name of Arminius. Niger had asked for two things. The first was total secrecy, the second was time with their Master Ship Designer.

As Niger had expected, the combination of all the required features would mean a very large vessel. So large that Paletes, the Chief Naval Architect, was of the opinion that it should have a steel frame rather than the traditional timber frame. And it would be so cumbersome that to protect against ramming it should be built with a new hull design concept that Paletes had been developing for far northern waters. Up there ice floes and drifting logs were sometimes known to puncture hulls.

Fortunately the displacement of this design was going to be huge, sufficient to permit this new approach to hull design. It consisted of horizontal boards, thinner than usual, but overlaid by another layer of boards oriented vertically. Then a third layer of boards was laid horizontally over this again. In this way any point load on the hull would not have to be resisted by that one board alone; the load would be spread to the vertical boards for some distance either side. And these vertical boards would then spread the load to several of the innermost horizontal boards above and below the loaded point. This provided the hull with an amazing degree of resilience against a point impact. To demonstrate the strength of this arrangement Paletes built a panel some ten feet square using conventional techniques, and then dropped a heavy ram against it. The three-inch thick board under the impact was punched inwards, unable to resist. Then he put the same sized panel in place, made from his new design of three layers of one-inch boards. The ram was then dropped from twice the height, and bounced off. Niger was convinced. He approved the design for construction of a prototype, and here it now stood in front of him.

There was a ladder leaning up against the bow of the ship. Niger climbed to the deck and dropped over the solid timber sidewall projecting some four feet above deck level. This had been provided as defence of deck crew against archers. If by chance they were attacked from both sides, shields could protect the backs of those hunched below the barrier waiting for the boarders. There were gunwales at deck level to allow rain and spray to run off the deck. There was also a very large ballista mounted at the bow. He looked along the deck to see another at the stern.

“That ballista has been test-fired,” Paletes informed him. “It can throw a standard light onager bomb more than two hundred and fifty paces, almost as far as an onager itself. It has the accuracy of a ballista and the range of an onager! Unless you are attacked by a dozen ships at once I doubt any enemy will even be able to get within cross-bow range of you.”

Just behind the ballista a bronze pipe more than three feet in diameter rose from the deck and bent over, opening towards the deck. Again, there was another at the far end of the boat, just short of the stern ballista. Niger gestured towards them.

“Oh, that's in case of a bad storm,” Paletes explained. “The hatch covers in the deck can be cleated tight, and air drawn in by bellows from the pipe at one end to provide air for the men. The stale air escapes through the pipe at the other end. They are bent over like that to limit the amount of water that enters with the air as waves break over the deck. We also have four hand-pumps to lift water out of the bilge.” Paletes indicated smaller bronze pipes a couple of inches in diameter, similarly bent over and tucked up against the side walls.

Niger looked along the deck again. It was basically a single flush platform, but with cutouts and combings covered by hatch covers. These were half as wide as the deck. They provided access to the three banks of rowers below and the holds, and provided total protection and waterproofing even in the worst of storms.

Niger took a few more steps along the deck and kicked at a heavy brass plate and mount in the middle of the deck. He saw that there was also a second identical mount set in front of the rear air pipe.

“I know you had in mind a galley design,” Paletes excused himself. “But for only a tiny additional cost we can provide this vessel with two masts and sails. We have detailed them so they can be taken down and stowed if an enemy is sighted. I calculate you will be able to make more than five miles an hour in a fifteen-mile-an-hour wind. That will take a load of work off your rowers, and with less work they will need less food and water.”

“How fast can they be taken down?” Niger demanded. “When a ship is going into a battle every minute is valuable.”

“Allow me to demonstrate, my lord,” Paletes offered. Then he leant over the sidewall and called to a dozen of the workmen in what Niger assumed was German. These dozen men sprinted up the ladder and unlashd the mast from the inside face of the sidewall. They clipped the ends of four stays to its top, and passed a halyard through a pulley just below the stays. Then they set the bronze-encased foot of the mast onto the deck mounting, pushed a bronze pin into place, and heaved the mast vertical. The ends of the stays were clipped into their receiving rings set in the deck fore and aft, just inside the sidewall. Next the yardarm was unlashd by four of the men and clipped to the halyard hanging from the mast, and ropes were fitted to each end to control the angle of the yard. While they were doing this, three other men were pulling a sail out of a hold. This was unrolled and clipped to the yardarm. The yardarm was hauled up into position and the sheets hanging from the bottom corners of the large square sail were passed through pulleys and then into small capstans set onto the deck. Each capstan had a ratchet to lock the sail in correct place.

“I would rather not pull in the sheets, my lord,” Paletes said as he watched the sail flogging out in the wind. “With this breeze, it could cause the vessel to move on its cradle.”

“That was impressive, Paletes,” Niger conceded, “Even though I have no doubt you have had those men drilled for a month, just to impress. Now take it all down and stow it.”

Paletes gave the men another order in that harsh language, and the men set to dismantling the mast. This was even quicker than the erection. It seemed only a couple

of minutes before the sail was rolled and below deck and the spars lashed back into place on the sidewall.

Niger nodded his approval. “Thank you, Paletes. If we can sail at five miles an hour instead of having to row, that will be of great benefit. Now for the trials.”

This trireme had been designed to carry two hundred and forty rowers out of a total crew of three hundred and fifty men. It took all the men on hand at the shipyard plus more than one hundred day-labourers to provide the full complement of rowers, and Paletes was insistent that many of these were totally unskilled in rowing. He begged some latitude in terms of performance. It took the best part of a day to row the fifty miles down the Albis and into the German Sea. The men rested well that night, sleeping on board with the hatches at each end open for ventilation in the late Spring air.

The next morning was full of bustle. Niger insisted that the vessel be laden with weight equivalent to the full complement of rowers and supernumeraries, plus their food and water for thirty days, as per his specification. Paletes, on the other hand, had installed hand-worked pumps that took water from the lowest points in the bilge rather than just dangling a hose into the space. He wanted the boat to be as light as possible for these trials. Niger was still impressed; anything that improves performance was to be welcomed.

A gentle breeze from the south-west tempted Paletes to set a course to the north-east for measuring peak speed, but Niger would have none of that. He insisted that the course should be with the breeze on the square beam, so as to give neither advantage nor disadvantage.

“No! That cannot be done!” Paletes demanded. A rowing boat can’t work efficiently across the waves. The vessel will roll too much, and the oars can’t gain an efficient stroke with the water level rising and falling so much!”

“Then row in whatever direction you like, Paletes. But if you row downwind I will subtract the wind speed.” Niger did not become the wealthiest merchant in Africa by giving inches.

Paletes looked indignant. “Then I will have the men row into the wind. You may add the wind speed!” Niger just waved him away.

The vessel was brought around into the wind, and the timing glass readied. “Now! Pull hard, men!” he urged, and the drum started beating its rhythm. “No! Don’t turn the glass yet!” he shouted as Niger reached for the timer and looked towards the chainman who would drop the board that would mark the start of their test length. “At least allow me to get the ship up to speed before we start measuring!” Paletes demanded.

The ship picked up speed quickly. The men were doing their best but they would tire quickly in that case. Paletes could not wait too long to start the trial. “Now!” he ordered. The distance board went over the side and he turned the hourglass over as the board smacked to surface. The cord attached to the board started running out as the ship pulled through the water.

Paletes' gaze alternated between the sand falling through the timer and the coil of chord unspooling on the deck.

Thwack! The end of the chord was reached and the second timber board was dragged up the short incline and over the rear rail just as the top chamber in the glass emptied. The drummer signalled the end of the test and the men fell on their oars.

“The glass emptied first,” Niger asserted. “You didn't cover the distance in the time. This ship does not satisfy my specification. You are therefore not entitled to full payment.”

“Lord Niger,” Paletes replied calmly. “To my eye, I could not tell whether the glass emptied before or after the end of the chord, it was so close. Then recall that we were rowing into the wind. You yourself said that the wind would have an influence. Also, we have inexperienced rowers. Either of those factors by itself would more than cover any shortfall, if indeed there was one.”

“I say it does not perform to specification. I don't want to argue the reasons, only that one fact is important. Therefore your payment will be reduced, in accordance with our contract.” Niger was not going to pay a denarius more than he had to, whether his excuse was valid or not.

“Then I suggest you read your contract more closely, my lord. There is nothing in that which says we may not row downwind,” Paletes replied no less firmly. “I made that concession out of a spirit of fair play, an attitude that you do not seem to appreciate. So let us put aside such debilitating sentimentality, gather in the chord and try again. But this time downwind.” Suddenly the pliant shipwright had the look of flint in his eyes.

“I don't have the time to waste, Paletes,” Niger dismissed the suggestion. “Let us get back to Hammaburg and I will pay the reduced amount.”

“As you say, lord Niger,” Paletes agreed. “But first we must collect the chord, and then we will go back via a special route to avoid shoals. I will even order the men to row as quickly as possible, to avoid wasting any more of your ever-so-precious time.” Paletes had the look of a snake and more than a hint of a sneer in his tone.

Twenty minutes later the ship was facing downwind and the measured chord was on the deck. “Pull, men, pull!” Paletes shouted to the crew, and the ship picked up speed as the drum beat picked up in earnest. After a hundred paces Paletes felt the speed starting to stabilise. He dropped the board over, and turned the glass. This time there were five other respected men on the deck as witnesses.

“Come, men! Pull! There will be an extra denarius for everyone if we make the distance in time!” He fixed his eyes on the timer as the drum beat maintained speed.

Thwack! The board disappeared over the rail. All eyes were on the glass as Paletes turned it on its side to stop the flow of sand. “Are we all agreed that there is some sand remaining?” Paletes asked. A chorus of agreement. Paletes stared at Niger. “And what do you say, my lord?”

Niger tightened his lips for a moment. “Yes, the ship covered the distance within the time,” he conceded. “You will be paid in full.”

“And having proven the capabilities of this vessel, do you intend to complete your order?” Paletes continued.

“I will need to discuss that with your Patron, Paletes. I am not pleased with your attitude towards me today, and that will not go well with you,” Niger threatened.

“If I might be so bold my lord, I can tell you now what lord Arminius will say to you. He will insist that you will honour your contract, but with one additional clause. We will have half the cost in advance at the laying of each keel, and the remainder upon successful sea trials.” Paletes looked every inch a man who knew his Patron would back him up. “We have had experience with clients who have been reluctant to make final

payments in full, and lord Arminius has ordered that these arrangements should be put in place in such cases.”

“I am deeply insulted by that, Paletes!” Niger glowered.

“As am I by you, my lord,” Paletes answered. He said no more, but stared Niger down. After more than a full minute in which neither man flinched, Paletes finally turned away. “Men, back to the Albis, and anchor for the night!” Then, almost flippantly, he said to Niger “When you decide whether or not to honour the rest of your contract, let me know. Lord Arminius will be very interested to hear whether or not all our dealings will need to be dragged through the courts. If that situation arises it will mean that secrecy cannot be maintained.”

Port Sertorius – March, 828 AUC (75 A.D.)

There was no doubting that Tarenos had courage. He had suffered a fall two years ago that had forced his retirement from command and this ate at his soul. But his mind was still sharp. One of his many admirers was Klothe, a brilliant woman who was reportedly his lover before his injury had paralysed him below the waist. Together they had cooked up the most audacious scheme imaginable.

Tarenos had requested – in fact, demanded – that a standard interceptor signal glider be adapted to include a seat and that the swivel control system be scrapped. The glider would be towed on a fixed line, but the wing-warp control be operated by a lever in front of the seat. His plan was to put an observer in a glider to act as a lookout with a much wider range of view than any crow's nest lookout could wish for! And Klothe was prepared to put her life on the line as that observer.

Valerianus immediately saw the possibilities. But he also saw that a disaster would mean that this line of development would be cut off at the knees. He wanted to ensure that any accidents would not be fatal. So he agreed, but only if the modifications included a few safety measures. The first was that the glider must have a crash cage to absorb any impact. A latticework cocoon was built around the seat, and the observer's seat was equipped with a harness to ensure the benefit of this cocoon was effective. It meant more wind drag, but that was acceptable until all the problems were identified and overcome.

The first test flights were conducted from land out over the water of a beach, and were enlightening. As expected, the greatest difficulties were in take-off and retrieval. The shorter the length of towline, the more exaggerated were any minor instabilities. This had been the pattern with the standard kite, and the occasional crash was accepted as an unavoidable hazard. This was not so acceptable when there was a real life at risk.

A new launch and retrieval technique was adopted. This involved the anchor of the tow rope being set further forward. This prevented any attempt to tack or gybe, because it interfered with the swing of the boom. Only when the kite was well aloft was this cable cleated down at the stern to clear the boom swing. A further refinement had also been developed. As well as the side-to-side wing warp control, another set of cables allowed the small tail wing to be pivoted up and down. This allowed better control of pitch at take-off and landing. Much time and a few crashes went into making this sensitive enough to respond but not so sensitive that the craft would over-react.

After a month of trials Klothe was comfortable at the controls. She demanded that a ship launch should be attempted. Valerianus privately marvelled that a woman could show so much courage and then approved her request. Having an observer at kite height would be unimaginably better than being restricted to deck height. All that was needed was for the observer to have a good-quality telescope and a message board. But there was no point in trying to rush things. Get the technology right and the rest would follow.

The sea launch and retrieval went well. Klothe reported the glider easier to control than from land and she surmised that this was because the wind seemed more constant and smooth at sea. She was starting to develop an instinct like some old sailors, almost as if she could see where the wind was steady and where it was turbulent. But regardless of that, she was also developing an instinct for what she called it her 'air craft'. It was no

longer a machine she climbed into but rather a glove she wore, or even an extension of her own body.

That was when she made her most outrageous suggestion yet. Markos had been the Advisor with specific care for this programme and made a point of observing all the tests.

“Markos, I've noticed that the wind is much stronger when I'm at full height,” she approached the subject.

“Yes,” Markos acknowledged. “Is that a bad thing?”

“It might be,” Klothe answered. “For two opposite reasons. One reason is that the stronger the wind, the stronger the drag, and therefore the more load is placed on the tow cable. If that load becomes too strong, it could pull out the anchorage point in the frame, or at least buckle the frame near the anchorage point. That could lead to total collapse of the entire frame. I think it would be safer if the anchor point was connected into the frame with a deliberately weaker connection, so it would break away before transmitting that load to the structural part of the air craft.

“And the second reason,” she went on. “It could be that there is enough wind up top for me to stay aloft. But as I drop back down to the boat, the weaker air flow down lower might not be able to support me. I might just drop out of the sky. And there would be no way your men on the winch would know that they are pulling me down to my death.”

Markos was concerned. “What do you suggest we do about that?”

“I can create more apparent wind just by putting the nose down and going into a shallow dive. But if I try that with the tow cable attached we could get into all sorts of knots. What I suggest is that I should have a way of dropping the cable if I have to, and landing by my own power.”

“Is that possible?” Markos was alarmed. “If I cut the string on a kite, the kite inevitably crashes. How would you not crash the same way?”

“Because when you cut a kite string the kite is no longer under control. But if I'm in the air craft I'll have control whether I'm on the tow cable or not.”

“Are you certain of that?”

“Certain enough to risk my life,” she answered. “In fact, I think I'd be safer than if anchored to a boat that was dragging me into insufficient wind. I want to test it.”

“But even if you're right,” Markos persisted, “how can you land on the boat without crashing?”

“I won't land on the boat. I'll land on the water. The aircraft is timber and canvas, so it will float. Then the boat can pick me up, and then try to fish the air craft out of the water.”

Markos did not like what he was hearing. “I have this vision in my mind's eye of you gliding down to the water like a seagull. And then, just as the bottom of the frame touches the water, it catches and the whole machine goes tail over nose. It would be a disaster.”

“I have a way to make sure that doesn't happen,” Klothe answered immediately.

“Oh? How?”

“There's a minimum speed if the craft is to keep flying. Below that, it just drops out of the air. But as it approaches that minimum speed, it has to fly in a more nose-up attitude.

“So here is how I intend to land without crashing,” she continued, hunching down to draw on the beach sand with her finger. “This is the water,” drawing a flat line, “and this is the body of the craft,” drawing an inclined rectangle above the water line.

“We fit an inclined plate under the nose, set perhaps a foot below the body, and another smaller one under the tail. That way the plane will tend to skim across the top of the water instead of digging in.” She sketched in these plates.

“Then to both slow the craft and to ensure it doesn't pitch over on its nose, we have a small scoop or plough that can be swung down behind the tail. This will bite into the water first, and pull the tail down until the rear plate hits the water, and starts skimming. If the tail starts to lift, then the rear plate will lift off the water, so it's no longer being pushed up, but the submerged scoop will continue to hold the tail down.” Klothe smiled. “What is there that could go wrong?”

“Plenty!” Markos answered. “For a start, the water isn't flat. There are waves out there, you know. Then, when the kite stops it will sink. It won't be kept on top of the water by skimming if it's not moving.”

“The craft is made of wood and canvas. It will settle into the water to a depth, but it will still float.”

“That didn't answer the first problem,” Markos bit back.

“That's not a problem,” Klothe answered. “By pointing into the wind, my speed compared to the water will be almost standing still, just like a gull that can hover when facing the wind. I'll just drop onto the tops of the waves. The scoop is just there to hold the tail down against any small difference in speed.”

“And the kite will be soaked, even if we can fish it out of the water,” Markos continued.

“Better to lose the craft than to lose the craft and the pilot as well,” Klothe answered. “Or at least, that's my preference,” she smiled. “And who's to say it can't be salvaged? It can always serve as a flag kite, even if not safe enough to put a person into it again. Until it can be checked in detail.”

Markos stared at her for a moment. “Not fair! You've thought about this!” he protested with a return smile. “Let me think about it, too. I might even take it to the Council.”

Melita – March, 829 AUC (76 A.D.)

Caius Parvo didn't know whether he was pleased or not. They had made good time so far, pushed along by those steady easterlies at about four miles an hour, so they had not had to resort to rowing yet. This morning they had sighted land at 106 degrees west of Babylon, just as Niger had said his informant had told him. But they had been sailing along 17 degrees north, not 16 degrees. This had been done for two reasons. One was to eliminate the slight north-of-west leg once past that waypoint island. The other reason was in case there was a lookout on that waypoint island that might raise an alarm. So he had hoped to avoid that island altogether by sailing some seventy miles further north than the expected route. Best to get to that town before anyone could raise an alarm. He just hoped that the earlier approach along 16 degrees didn't have a deeper purpose, perhaps to guide through a gap like the Pillars of Heracles or to avoid dangerous shoals.

Well, he will skirt this land to the north if he could, and continue as close to 17 degrees north as possible until he reaches 114 degrees west of Babylon. Then to turn north. But first, this land would give the men a chance to hunt for fresh meat and restock their water supply.

“There’s something out there!” Prisca declared as she peered through her telescope. “I don’t know what. It doesn’t look like a ship, and it’s in the wrong place anyway, but ah! There's another one!”

Pteron stood back from his own telescope, which was bearing some thirty degrees south of Prisca’s. “Let me look.”

Prisca stepped back as Pteron walked over from his station.

He adjusted the focus slightly, hoping for a clearer view; but the sea haze was the problem, not the focus. He carefully worked it back to pretty much how Prisca had set it. “Yes, it looks like a sail, but only a single mainsail. What sort of ship is rigged like that these days? Perhaps they have storm damage, and that's a jury-rigged a sail. That could explain why they're so far off course, too.”

“Look further back, Pteron,” Prisca urged. There's another, behind it.”

Pteron hunched over to look through the instrument again. Blast Prisca for being so short! “Yes! I see it! But it’s another single sail. How likely is it that two ships would suffer the same extent of damage?”

The two lookouts stared at each other. The watchstation here on Melita was not on the highest point on the island. But at six hundred feet elevation it still had a horizon range of fifty miles and was only half a mile from the best harbour on the island.

“Keep watching, Prisca,” Pteron decided at last. “I’ll go down to the base and ask Marcus to send up some others. One can continue the scan with my instrument and younger legs can act as runners. And perhaps send one of the boats over to Septimia to alert them. But we should wait for more information before we run back to Sardinola in a panic.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Prisca agreed. “I’ll send a signal back to prepare a boat but wait.” She started to clatter with the signal tiles as Pteron turned for the stairs down the first pitch off the ridge. It was only half a mile to base, but six hundred feet of elevation over that distance meant that much of it was a series of staircases and in two places near-

vertical ladders. Two thirds of the way down he met the two of the five other men on watch duty this month. They had seen Prisca's message tiles. Marcus the Team Leader was one of them.

"Just get down to base," Marcus said as he passed without stopping. "I want to get to the top as soon as I can!"

Pteron's legs were quivering like jelly as he made his way into the clearing around the huts. "Has Prisca sent down any more signals?" he asked.

"Yes; she says four sails sighted so far, all singles." That was Doris, the oldest female on duty at this watchstation this month and second in command. With Marcus now on his way to the lookout, that left her in charge. "But tell us, what did they look like?"

"They were too far away when I left, almost lost in the sea haze," Pteron answered. "But I suggest that we send a boat over to Septimia and alert them. Perhaps even get one of their boats over here as a backup."

"Doing that now," Doris confirmed. "A crew of three can handle that, leaving four of us still here." Even as she spoke, the interceptor closest the shore cast off and turned to the south-west to leave the bay. Pteron dropped onto one of the crude benches around the firepit used to roast the occasional turtle.

"Then give me a few minutes to get my legs in order," Pteron asked with a crooked smile.

Doris smiled back. "You take over signalling duty. You can do that sitting down." She gestured towards the signal board visible from the lookout and went back to making preparations for the second boat, should it be needed at short notice.

Pteron raised his body again and walked over to the chair by the signal board. He glanced up to the lookout. The range was so short that the telescope was not needed to read the command signals, and some with very good vision could even make out the alphabets with the naked eye. Pteron preferred to use the telescope. He was not as young as he used to be.

His own board still carried what was obviously an acknowledgement of the last message from the tower; 'four intruder one sail'. He took up the telescope to see if there had been any update.

As he raised the telescope the lookout board was being taken in. He waited for a couple of minutes until it re-emerged. The first line was in short code; four blue squares for four intruders. The second line was in alphabets; 'trirem'. The third line was alphabets; 'large'.

"Doris!" he called. "The lookout says four large triremes! What would triremes be doing out here?"

Doris looked dismayed. "Shit! That can only mean that they're prepared to fight!" She thought for a moment. "Acknowledge the signal, and then ask 'How fast?' We need to get a good report back to the squadron so they can plan what to do."

Pteron shuffled through the placards and set a signal on the board to acknowledge the lookout's message. Then he looked through the telescope again. Marcus could be seen waving back. Then he cast another signal 'How fast?'

He waited for an answer. Eventually 'nesc' appeared on the board. 'I don't know'. Not unreasonable, Pteron thought to himself. All the regular watch crews were

experienced in judging the speed of a merchantman from the size of the bow break, but triremes have a protruding beak that makes the water behave differently. Then came another signal. It read 'b EVN' on the first line, 'c W' on the second, and 'XXXV M' on the third.

Up at the lookout Marcus was slipping into the confident, no-nonsense frame of mind that had made him Team Leader. He had ordered Prisca to observe the targets continuously, reporting anything of interest and any change of behaviour. He had called for bearing, range and course information to be noted, recorded and plotted every half-hour. Meanwhile the other telescope had resumed the normal sweep of the ocean in case a second fleet was trying to sneak through while the lookouts were distracted. He could also see the interceptor now well to the south was running up its signal kite, hoping to attract the attention of the Septimia lookouts as soon as possible. The kite was flying the solid red flag meaning 'Come to me'. Doris clearly had things under control down at the base.

"Do you see a fifth intruder yet, Prisca?" he asked, to make sure she was still scanning and not simply fixated on the four already sighted.

"No, just the four," she replied without lifting her head from the telescope. "And they seem to be pitching through less angle and more slowly than I would have expected. Perhaps they are even longer than they seem from this distance." Marcus could understand that. These intruders were on the horizon and sailing directly towards them so everything was foreshortened.

Marcus thought quickly and clearly. It was notoriously difficult to judge the size of a vessel if there were no other items for comparison in the field of view. If these triremes are bigger than estimated, then that means they are also more distant, and that would also affect their estimates of their speed. Yes, if our estimates of distance are systemically shorter than the truth, then our speed estimates would also be on the low side. That's a mistake that could mean disaster for the interceptors. We need to make sure our estimates are correct!

"Are they still sailing straight at us?"

"Yes," Prisca replied. "I have no way of guessing how long they are, I can only see them end-on. If I knew how high a trireme's mast is, I could have a better guess at their distance. The mast appears very short, but I think all triremes are like that."

"You can make out the mast?" Marcus asked in surprise.

"Well, no. But I guess the height of the sail would indicate the height of the mast. And it has only the one mainsail."

Marcus thought how he could determine speed and distance more accurately. He was Team Leader on this watchstation by virtue of being the commander of this same crew when they were on notional combat duty, which meant he was also qualified as a navigator. If he could take measurements of the angle of depression of the telescope, then that would allow him to use trigonometry to calculate distance. But the closer to the horizon, the more any error would be multiplied. The tangent of an angle approaches infinity as the angle approaches a right angle. That technique would only work once these intruders came closer.

He looked down to the south again. He had been up here more than an hour now, and how far had that interceptor travelled? He was surprised to see it was almost half-

way to Septimia! Even with the kite flying! But then it was reaching, perhaps even a low reach, so the kite would not be causing any drag but perhaps just making the weather helm a bit stronger than usual. That would be Junia in command, he mused. She wasn't qualified as a captain yet because she had trouble with the mathematics, but she was a good 'touch sailor' for line-of-sight sailing and had an excellent tactical mind. Then he thought he saw something else.

He reached for the hand telescope by the message placard and looked out towards the Septimia base. The entry into their bay could barely be seen from this lookout.

Yes! The Septimia crew had seen the kite! Two interceptors had already cleared the headland and were making for the interceptor. Marcus could understand why they had sent both their boats out. The red kite signal had not specified a number and in that case the default meaning was for every vessel to converge. He sympathised with Silon, the Team Leader on Septimia. No commander likes to be without any boats at all. But he was confident that Doris had given instructions that would clear up that uncertainty.

Which made him pause. Exactly what was Doris thinking? Time to talk to his right-hand woman, to make sure everyone was on the same page.

He walked over to the signal board and cleared it. Then he posted the message in command code 'Report to me' on the first line, and then using alphabetics on the second and third lines 'what order int'.

A few minutes later the reply came back in a blend of command and alphabetics. '1 south int to me'. Then on the second board 'Mel int sard.' Marcus understood the meaning. She had told the interceptor to send one of the Septimia interceptors to join her, and then the Melita interceptor was to go to Sardinola. Probably the best decision, given what information was available at the time. He signalled back 'sit' – Latin for 'let it be so'. Doris had done well and the best thing he could do now would be to encourage her. Self-doubt could be expensive.

"Prisca, I want you to note your telescope's angle of depression to the targets as well as your estimate of range every half-hour. And that means that I want you to estimate as closely as you can the fractions between the gradations. No rounding off, please! And when you have the time, the angle of depression to the horizon at that same azimuth, to serve as a baseline." Marcus realised that sighting data means nothing unless it is calibrated to a reference point.

"Yes, Marcus," Prisca replied. "There has not been much change," she added. "They're moving very slowly."

That's both good and bad, Marcus thought to himself. It gives us more time, but it implies that these intruders are very big indeed. And a big trireme is the one type of craft that our fighting doctrine can't handle. Scorching their sails means nothing if they have oar power. Who would have expected such a ship to cross the ocean? Well, this is where Marcus Marius will need to live up to the rank entrusted to him!

It took all day, but eventually the intruder fleet came to within a mile of the coast and anchored off the eastern bay at sunset. They were obviously unwilling to try to enter close waters in fading daylight. In the meantime it had been possible to determine their speed and size using the measurements of telescope depression and azimuth from front to back. They were indeed huge triremes, but managing only four miles per hour under

what had proven to be a fore and an aft sail. This had not been apparent from long range as the two sails tended to merge into each other when seen head-on, but they separated as the line of site became more from overhead. What was also clear from closer range was the huge ballista at each end of each vessel. Their size only became apparent when men went forward to release the anchor cables. The span of each ballista was almost twice the height of a man! As soon as night fell an interceptor was sent to Sardinola with as much information as had been gathered. This included the fact that this fleet had apparently stopped to re-water, unlike the previous expedition from Niger. But still, triremes this far from the Old World purely by accident was most unlikely. Meanwhile the watchstation crew could only hope that these intruders would not try to explore the island. That would undoubtedly reveal their presence. The evening meal that night had been cold rations because Doris prohibited a fire.

The Septimia interceptor was sent back to its home base as soon as it was dark to ask the second interceptor to attend as another courier. Then it was to sail to Chios, the next watchstation out to the north-west. Another courier could be handy. Meanwhile, the Melita station was abandoned, to ensure no-one could be captured for information.

Marcus Marius, commander of the Sardinola Squadron, took control of the meeting. Not only were his own captains present, but also the commander and captains of the Capri Squadron.

“Gentlemen, this is a challenge that our current fighting doctrine had not anticipated.” He scanned the room. “The first word from Melita was that four triremes had been sighted. My immediate reaction was to ask how much wine had been consumed the night before. Who sends triremes more than a couple of days’ journey away from land? Then came a second report. This information was that these triremes were almost three hundred feet long. Long enough to have a sail fore and aft! And over one hundred and twenty oars on each side. On both stem and stern were mounted ballistae that were estimated at more than ten feet width. We thought ours are big enough at seven feet, so these guys probably have a range advantage over us, even if we take the upwind position. And being a trireme, burning the rigging is not an effective option even if we do manage to get in a hit or two. And there are four of them! Fortunately, they’re making only four miles per hour, so they’re at least three days away even if they sailed immediately after our last message.

“They’ll be able to row straight through us, and who knows what they will do then? They’re capable of carrying up to two thousand men, enough to land and seize our settlements and reduce them all. Or they might simply go back to Lusitania and report us to the Republic. Either way, we are doomed.”

He looked around the meeting. “That is, unless we can come up with a new fighting doctrine. Right now we believe that the trireme fleet is hunting and watering at Melita, so we might have more than three days. We can expect another message to be despatched as soon as they move, so we can always rely on at least two and probably three days’ warning. Does anyone have any ideas?”

Nobody put up a hand.

“Well, to get the creative juices flowing, let me outline one possible plan,” Marius continued. “It’s based on these facts, given that these intruders have no idea of what to

expect. The first is that they will be utterly surprised by the design of our interceptors. They will not recognise them as fighting ships. The second is that they don't know where our settlements are. The third is that we have the initiative here, and they are forced into reacting. And the fourth is that they don't know if we are friendly or not. The fact that they're in triremes suggests they're ready to fight, but why would they come except for trade?

“So here is what I propose...”

Marius felt obliged to captain the interceptor assigned to first contact himself. His interceptor had been stripped, even to removing the deck mountings for the ballistae and the protective screens around the helm. Four of the female sailors had been transferred to his crew to convince these Old World sailors that his was not a warship. Two other interceptors had been similarly stripped of their weapons, and eight more women scattered among their crews.

The information was that the triremes had taken no time to re-water, but sailed due west as they departed Melita. Marius and his two accomplices set out to drop onto the 17th parallel dead south of Capri, leaving two other interceptors strung out to the north and another three spreading further south to form a picket. As soon as it was light enough all seven boats put up observers in their gliders and worked up into the wind. This not only ensured that the intruders would be seen, but also ensured that the boats in the picket were properly spaced. This was an interception that simply had to be made.

Eight hours later the gliders were pulled in. The observers were exhausted. Not only the cramped confines and the constant concentration had drained them, but even here in the tropics the constant wind at more than five hundred feet altitude caused a wind chill that not even fur-lined trousers and coats could keep out. They were given a hot meal and excused from other duties until the next morning. It was obvious from their faces that they were not looking forward to the next dawn but good glider observers were still scarce. There were still not enough to serve the entire squadron so sharing the duty by posting more than one trained observer to a single vessel was out of the question.

The whole picket line gybed around to give themselves enough sea room to be sure the triremes would not be able to pass them in the dark, and then dropped all sail. They would drift further back to the west overnight, and then make another work to windward the next morning.

The observer flying from Marius' own boat was first to see the intruders just after noon on the third day. He flashed his message board with a blue square and then the two black squares meaning to haul him down immediately.

“I saw them, captain,” he rushed out. “Just north of due east, as far as I could tell, and coming straight at us.”

“Excellent!” Marius said with a smile. “They're still on the same course!” Then he turned to the crew members handling the glider. “This is it, boys!” he said, even though two of them were women. “Send it up with a blue square and then four yellows.” This was the agreed sign for successful sighting and implementation of their plan.

It took only a few minutes to get this signal into the air, and a few more minutes for him to see that the gliders to their north and south were being lowered. They rose again with the same message, relaying it further out along the line. Marius then ordered his

own glider to be lowered again, this time to rise again with another message. The first two spaces carried the yellow and blue squares indicating a message to the contact boats alone, and the third and fourth spaces the signal 'close picket to me'. They would know that this meant they were to close up their spaces toward him while still maintaining a masthead lookout.

With only two hours of daylight left before sunset Marius' observer signalled 'Intruders XXV mil'"

Marius ordered the red square to be fitted to the kite, followed by two white squares; the signals for 'Come to me!' and the agreed sign for 'look innocent!'. As he gave the order he looked to the glider to his north. That was also coming down. Atius' crew must have seen it too! In a few minutes both Atius and Marius were flying kites at very low altitude, Atius with the blue square to indicate an intruder and Marcus with his orders. Sophon to the south was pulling in his kite in response.

"All right, lads! Pull down the kite and stow it. I want it out of sight before the intruders see it clearly!" Even if the intruders had seen a strange spot on their horizon, they would not understand what it was nor associate it with a ship they had not yet seen. He glanced north and saw that Atius' kite was also on its way back down. All was going to plan so far. But little more than an hour of light left!

The wind was coming from just south of east. As soon as the kite was down and disassembly was under way, he called for a tight tack to the north-east, his observer telling him when landed that the true bearing to the target was a touch north of due east. He had to get within hailing range of these triremes while there was still light enough for them to see that he was unarmed. To approach in gloom might trigger a less friendly response. He felt the boat skipping through the waves under him. At a closing speed of some twenty miles an hour there was still time!

At last the battlefleet was sighted! Marius headed directly for the front vessel in the fleet. As the range closed he handed the helm to his First Officer and went forward, waving his hat from the front of the cross-deck as though greeting an old friend.

"Hail there!" he called as his craft luffed into the wind and then dropped into a downwind drift to keep alongside the huge trireme still plodding along at about five miles an hour. "These are not the type of vessels that usually come trading! You must be strangers here!" he greeted cheerily. "Let me guide you into port!" Parvo in the lead trireme could see a second of these strange craft approaching behind him, and a third was visible off to the south-west.

Parvo had ordered his marines to stay below deck and out of sight for the moment. Then as a second thought he ordered the hatch covers over them to be closed. He didn't want to allow even a glimpse of them as the ship rolled. He was still bemused by the strange configuration of this odd vessel before him. "Greetings, master! What an unusual type of ship you have! What do you call it? 'Gemini', perhaps?"

Marius chuckled at that. "Yes, I remember my grandfather telling me stories from the Old Lands, and that was one of them! But no, this is just an inter-island cargo ship. The double-hull system makes it more stable. My people invented them some time ago. Anyway, let me guide you into port. You have gone too far to the west before turning."

Marius returned to the helm and the crew worked the sheets with an ease born of long experience. The sails screwed him across the wind with a speed and grace that Parvo found stunning. That was when he first noticed that the foredeck crew were not just long-haired sailors. Their smooth cheeks and chins meant they were women! He hadn't noticed at first. A woman wearing semi-trousers and a seaman's tunica was something so totally new to him that he had unconsciously dismissed it, seeing only what he had expected to see. The width of their hips as they bent to their chores confirmed this observation.

Parvo looked on envious of the grace and speed of this stranger and then with a heavy shrug he ordered the sail down and the men to the oars. He would never be able to point as high into the wind as this strange but beautiful ship! His men started straining at the oars to get underway and he steered for the stranger now skipping across the water. A glance at the second strange ship also confirmed that there were females in the crew now that he looked at them more closely. Merchant sailing must be a family business in this part of the world he mused as the strange ships took off to the north, curving up to north-east as they gained speed.

Marius soon tacked about to the south-east and shouted across the water, "You don't have to change course every time I do. Just head north-east for the moment. I'll let you know when to follow me exactly."

As the light faded from the western horizon and the third double-hull came along beside the triremes Marius dropped back again.

"This looks like hard work for your men," Marius called. "I suggest that we call into my own settlement on the way. That's further west, so you should be able to do that on sails alone. We could give your men a bit of land-rest, some fresh food and a bath. Yes, we have genuine Roman baths here, complete with hypocaust! Then we can set off for the main port in a couple of days' time. The wind might be lighter then, so you don't have to row so hard."

Parvo felt a flush of anger. This fellow had no need to tell every trooper on board that there was fresh food and a hot bath nearby! If he refused this offer, there would be grumbling!

"Thank you, stranger! That would be wonderfully hospitable of you. But do you have enough for all my men? I have over a thousand with me."

Marius laughed his oh-so-disarming chuckle again. "Our village numbers only four hundred, usually. You'll make a hole in our larder and you might have to make up a roster for the baths, but we'll manage. Anything to help trade! The Council will cover our entertainment costs. Anyway, my town is almost dead north from here so you can put up your sail now and your men can take a rest from the oars. But follow me closely. There are some sand banks, and it will be almost eighty miles to travel. I expect that might take you all night and a good part of tomorrow, depending on your speed. My third boat will sprint ahead to make everything ready for you." He gestured to his other two ships. "Just one thing I would ask of you. Please tell your men to leave our women alone. It would be bad for trade if your men caused any resentment."

His craft peeled away again. He waved one boat off and its sails flattened. It picked up speed like a dog after a rabbit, seeming to skip over the waves. What amazing

craft, Parvo thought yet again. The cheery captain turned north also, his sails de-powered and flagging in the breeze to avoid outrunning the triremes as he led them.

Marius took his readings of the stars two hours after sunset that evening and went below to do his calculations and consult his charts. Sixty five miles to the mouth of the Capri channel. The triremes were making four miles an hour on this flat reach, so that means sixteen hours to the entrance. That would be six hours before sunset. They would need that time to traverse the twelve miles of channels, avoiding sandbanks as they went. So allowing for delays, they might arrive an hour before sunset. He might need to find some way to waste an hour or two to ensure the ballistae on the channel shores would not be spotted in the dusk, but they should be well-enough concealed anyway. Yes, everything seemed to be going well enough.

The eastern tip of Capri was rounded the next day with two hours of daylight left. The sun was already close to setting by the time they entered a channel hard on the southern shore of an inlet. The half-moon overhead glinted off the calm sheltered waters of the channel. Marius called again to the lead trireme from the rear of his boat. "Only one mast at home, and that would be my third ship. Looks like the others are out of town. All the more room for your ships!"

As they rounded one more headland they could see into a quiet embayment with two long piers running out from the shore. One of the double-hulls was tied up at the seaward end of one of them. They could see some large halls or barns on the flat ground beyond the shore, one of which was glowing from an internal fire and smoke was rising from a chimney. 'That must be the bath-house!' Parvo thought with relish. Smoke was also curling up from some smaller fires scattered around in the open. Cooking fires, he guessed. Off to the left of the piers the flat shelf of land grew wider and there appeared a sizeable village.

"I expect you'll find it easier to tie up your ships along both sides of the piers," Marius called across the water. "I'll tie up against the boat at the end, so we three can get away first to guide you back out."

As the triremes tied up the master of each ship allocated a guard detail and allowed the others on shore. Soon the sounds of a feast rose from the big hall at the end of the eastern pier and men spilled out into the town square. Not all of the women had been evacuated. It would have seemed strange for the whole town to be deserted, so some eighty townsfolk had been co-opted into preparing the feast and stoking the fire for the bath-house. And it became clearer as the night wore on that they were being especially generous with the wine.

The half-moon was well down in the west by the time the fourth trireme had been secured. Each trireme had a guard of ten men stationed on it, probably more out of force of habit than obvious necessity. "Twenty armed men on each pier!" Marius mused to Jason, his navigator. "He knows there are only a few dozen of our men here! Could he be guessing that there are others lying in ambush?"

Relief for the guards straggled in as the moon set, usually with an amphora of wine for each ship to let the party continue. The relieved guards hurried off to collect what scraps were left over.

It was after midnight. The moon had set and the townsfolk had headed back to their village, leaving their guests to bunk down in the large communal buildings. Then

something lobbed out of the hill behind the town and landed on the deck of one of the triremes. It split open, and a sheet of flames spread across the deck. Suddenly, the hill was a hive of tiny lights as more firepots rained onto the triremes. At first the guards tried to put out the fires, but the oil spreading across the deck could not be extinguished. Then some quick-thinking guards started to cut the ships loose, while others ran into the town to rouse the troops. But soon every trireme was a basin of flames across its entire deck. As some of the bombs dropped through the open hatches and broke open below-decks the combustibles took fire, including the ship's own store of ammunition. Within ten minutes every ship was doomed, including the three pirate vessels as unavoidable collateral damage. The aim had been to strand the enemy force on the island and it had succeeded completely. The back-up ballistae along the passage, intended to pick off any escapees, had proved unnecessary.

By this time the officers in the town square had woken the least drunk of the soldiers and formed them into squads. They charged blindly into the black scrub and many of them were caught on the sharpened stakes set in the surrounding bush and concealed by scattered branches. In the pitch black of a moonless night there was no way to counter-attack with any speed. Eventually they struggled up to the hidden ballistae but by that time their crews had already destroyed the weapons, abandoned their positions and fallen back to the south shore of the island, so quickly had the fire-bombing achieved its objective. There had been no need for the archers to pick off the attackers to give the ballistae time for those extra few shots. By the time the soldiers had groped their way along the paths to the south shore they found only the grooves on the beach where the long-boats had been pushed out and some dark smudges out to sea where the ambushers were making good their escape on the remaining interceptors.

In frustration the soldiers stormed into the village to take their revenge. They found the village deserted. The children and women had already been evacuated, leaving their homes to be pillaged. Some men set to torching the houses but these were soon held in check by their officers. This might be the best shelter available, so why destroy it? The men were ordered back to the town square.

Parvo was dismayed. Not one of his ships could be repaired. All his provisions had been destroyed and the only weapons available were swords and javelins. Even those would need to be recovered from the burnt-out triremes, so it was doubtful what condition these would be in.

But the most important thing was food. He had one-and-a-half thousand men and no idea how he could live off this strange land. He sent out his legate to organise the location, collection and secure storage of any foodstuffs that could be found. He doubted that there would be much more than the left-overs from last night's feast. His men faced starvation within the week unless he could move them through this jungle, either to a new food source or find enough hunting to live off the land. What chance! he despaired. A party of half-a-dozen might be able to hunt for their survival here, but over a thousand was simply not possible.

As dawn broke a soldier spotted the vague shape of a boat in the channel. It was one of those double-hulled craft, well out of arrow range, but within earshot. A voice was heard carrying across the water.

“Ahoy! Ahoy, Romans! Let us talk terms!”

The soldier ran to the hall, now serving as the Parvo's headquarters. Parvo was informed and came out to the eastern headland, across the bay from the burnt-out shells of his triremes.

He told one of his legates to respond "Very well. Talk!"

The legate boomed this message back.

"As you might have noticed, we took care to minimise the number of deaths and injuries. We do not want to kill you," called Marius.

Parvo gave his response to the legate to repeat. "Then what is your purpose? Certainly not trade, it would seem."

"You are most shrewd to have reached that conclusion," Marius answered. You could almost hear that disarming chuckle in his shout! "Our aim is simple. No-one may be allowed to go back to the Republic to tell about us. Provided we can be confident you will not return home, we wish you no harm."

"How benevolent of you! Meanwhile how are we to eat?"

"Surrender to us, and we will treat you well. But enough of this shouting. Send a trusted officer out to us and we will negotiate. You will find a row-boat behind the hall."

Parvo thought for only a moment then nodded. "I will be out as soon as we can get there." He tramped back to the hall, found the upturned rowboat and delegated six soldiers to carry the boat to the water. Two of these he told to start rowing, as he sat in the stern with as much dignity as he could muster.

As the rowboat drew near Marius called upon him to stop a dozen paces short of the craft. Two archers gave weight to this request. Parvo told the rowers to stop.

"Take all your weapons and drop them overboard."

Parvo nodded to his rowers. Two gladii dropped into the water. His own personal dagger soon followed.

"Now remove your armour. I want to be confident that there are no hidden weapons. No need to drop that overboard, though. Just leave it in the rowboat."

Once the three were stripped down to undergarments they were beckoned closer. A ladder was dropped over the side for the three to climb aboard one at a time and to be patted down for concealed weapons.

Marius stood and stepped forward as Parvo reached the deck. He offered his right hand, and smiled. "My name is Marcus Marius. I'm sorry that I had to deceive you, but it was the only way to avoid bloodshed. I hope that not many of your men were hurt last night and we will do whatever we can to hasten their recovery."

Parvo did not accept the proffered hand. Stony-faced, he asked "What terms are you offering?"

Marius dropped his hand, turned back to his chair and sat. He motioned to another chair beside his for Parvo. Parvo did not move.

"As you will," said Marius, with that ever-so-charming smile. He leaned back in his chair to continue.

"As you have probably heard from your masters, we are a trading people. We are not warlike. You approached us in vessels obviously meant for war. But we prefer to destroy the weapons rather than kill the warriors, even though this means that our own homes might be destroyed in the process." He waved vaguely towards the village on the shore.

“You find yourself in a difficult position right now. The land you are on is an island, with little to feed your men. We are in a position to patrol the strait and destroy any vessels you might try to build. And we can intercept any that you might be able to build in secret. Be assured that while we'll try to minimise any loss of life, we will do whatever is required to prevent you from harming us or returning to your homes with reports about us.

“Instead, we offer you and your men a better alternative. Surrender to us and you will be accepted into our society. We're always in need of more hands and more skills. There's much useful and satisfying work that needs to be done. More than that, even the humblest of us has a level of comfort that the average Roman can only dream about. Don't be deceived by how bare our homes look! We moved all our treasured possessions out before you arrived!

“Those who surrender to us will be distributed among the various towns and farms as extra workmen. You will not be chained, nor subject to punishment at whim. You will be accorded most of the rights of a free citizen. The only rights you will not enjoy are a vote in our assemblies and the right to choose your own form of work. But we will obviously try to fit a man into a job where his skills will be used to best advantage.

“You can expect this period – call it ‘probationary citizenship’ – to last for maybe two years, maybe five. Those who show enthusiasm and good faith will be granted full citizenship in less time, the sulky and the reluctant can expect to take longer. However, there is one crime which will be punished with the most extreme penalty. Anyone found attempting or plotting to return to the Republic will be crucified – or worse.” Marius smiled. “Fortunately, we rarely have to carry out that punishment. Life is so good here that very few ever want to return.” He shrugged. “Any questions?”

“Who are you people, and how did you come to be here? Your Latin is so natural it must be your first tongue, and your features are those of the peoples of the Mediterranean.”

Marius shrugged again. “You're right. Any more questions?”

“What you say sounds reasonable, but how do we know we can trust it. You have already deceived us once, to entice us into this place.”

Marius nodded. “A fair question. I offer myself as an example. I was once a slave of Septimius Pulcher, a merchant based in Utica. I am now the commander of one division of this our navy. Ask me anything about my former life, and I will answer.” He gestured to one of his crew, one who had aimed a crossbow at them as they boarded. “Jason was a free man. He was a client to Sextus Niger, another African merchant. Ask him about his life.”

Although there was no reaction from Parvo, the glance from one of the soldiers told it all. Marcus had already guessed that this expedition had been commissioned by Sextus Niger to determine the fate of his earlier trading vessels.

Parvo spoke to Jason. “How did you come to be here, Jason? What's your story?”

“I was the navigator on one vessel in Niger's first trading fleet in 823 AUC. We were five ships, and we were intercepted by six craft of the type you are now aboard. There were more sails in the distance, still approaching. These interceptor craft were fitted with ballistae, but they didn't fire on us. Instead, we were called upon to surrender peacefully.

“My captain saw that there seemed to be only eight men on deck on each of these craft and maybe a few more below-decks. Each of our craft carried about 50 men, of whom we could spare thirty-five as fighters. So he agreed to surrender, and invited these other craft to come alongside. He intended to board and seize the pirate vessel instead.

“The pirates refused to draw close. They demanded that our men take off all sail and get into the boats. My captain refused, saying that he feared being left adrift at sea.

“The pirates then told us to strike all sails, and wait where we were on board. The extra sails coming towards us were larger transport vessels which would take us on board and we would not be left adrift.

“My captain then became desperate. He turned towards one of the interceptors, set the crossbow men on the rail and ordered his men to be ready to clear the pirate's deck and then board. That was a futile act. You have already seen how quickly these craft can turn! We were like an elephant trying to stamp on a fly! The pirates danced around us! They called on my captain to strike his sails three or four times, but he was enraged that these tiny craft were making him look so foolish.

“Eventually the pirates fired on us. You don't need to know how, but they destroyed our sails and rigging in a way that caused little damage to the hulls and little injury to the crew. Meanwhile, our other ships had tried to take advantage of this distraction to escape. They were threatened to be immobilised the same way so they dropped their sails. We were all adrift and it would have taken a day to re-rig the ship. Even if we did so it was obvious that we could be immobilised again. It seemed a stand-off and my captain suggested that neither side could capture the other so why not just let us pass.

“By now, the pirates' transport ship had caught up to us. We were told again to get into the boats and row to the transports. If we refused this time then our ships would be sunk. The pirates then started to load fire-darts into their ballistae, and we knew they could destroy us if we didn't comply. We were also warned to leave the ships intact. If any ship was scuttled the officers of that ship would be held responsible and punished.

“This time we went to the boats, unarmed and stripped naked. Only then were we permitted to board and we were ordered into the holds below. We were expecting some sort of hell-hole. But the holds were clean, open to fresh air and light and fitted with enough hammocks for everyone. Oh, that's right! You haven't seen a hammock yet. They are a bit like a cradle and take up much less room than bunks, and are better at sea... but anyway, we were well treated and supplied with new clothes and those few sailors who had been injured in the capture had their wounds cleaned and dressed. We were well cared-for and well fed.

“My transport went to this very town. We were all processed like slaves. We were asked our names and what skills we had. I was told I would be fed three times a day at a central kitchen open to everyone and given two more sets of clothing. That was when I noticed that all my clothing was dyed yellow. I was told it was illegal for me to wear any other colour. I was also told to sew my name onto the breast of each tunic and the right thigh of each pair of trousers.

“Because I was educated I was told that I would work as a school-teacher. I was taken into the town and introduced to the other teachers. We talked about what I knew and I was told how the school worked. It was decided that I would teach mathematics

and geometry. The school included a bedroom and a study for each teacher. There were three of us in total, and five classrooms.

“Apart from attending to my classes and being confined to the town I was treated as if a free man. I was fed without cost, provided with free laundry service, was permitted into the baths free of charge, and was paid ten denarii every month for my private luxuries.

“After two years I was given white clothes as a token of full citizenship. This meant that I could choose my own job now and so long as I was willing to work my rights to free food and other facilities would continue. My private allowance was increased to thirty denarii per month. I put my name on the list for the fleet as a navigator and continued working as a schoolteacher for another year until a navigator was needed. I was selected for this place.”

Parvo listened stony-faced. “Do you ever see any of your old ship-mates?”

“Yes, about fifteen were employed in the same town. A couple of common sailors were put onto the timber-getting team to gather firewood, some were put on as cooks, many more were put on as labourers on the buildings. But most were sent on to the main settlement because that town was growing so rapidly. An officer from another ship in my fleet was actually given charge of some building works with fifty men under his control, many of them white-shirts! So you had a so-called “slave” with authority over full citizens. This is why Marcus described it as ‘probationary citizenship’ instead of slavery.”

Parvo nodded even so slightly. “Another question. There were many women in the town last night. Where did all these women come from? I would expect that you would only capture men.”

This time Marius answered. “We import female slaves from the Republic. Once here they are treated as probationary citizens just like our captives.”

“Who from the Republic trades with you, to get these females for you? How can you be sure that your secrets will not become known?”

“I think you already know the answer to that,” Marius replied flatly. “Some people back in the Republic already know we exist, and are sending out people like you to discover more! That’s why there must be no chance of your return. So long as these people know as little as possible, the more difficult it will be for them to learn more. Even the one trader we permit into our waters is under a strict regime. He must sail only where we permit him to sail and his sailors are under threat of death if they speak to anyone about us. But we still have a few tricks in reserve, such as a strong navy that none of his men has ever seen. For example, those sailors from the Republic whom we allow to come here never see any of our defences. That’s why the spy who told Sextus Niger about us knew nothing about these interceptors and he was easily taken when he guided Niger’s first fleet over here, as Jason has just explained. Did Niger tell you how to recognise us as attack vessels?”

“When we captured and identified this spy he was blinded, had his tongue cut out and his hands lopped off. Then he was taken around each visiting ship so all visiting sailors knew not to commit the same mistake. That’s how seriously we treasure our privacy and how we will do whatever it takes to ensure your men either join us or die.”

Parvo nodded again in acknowledgement. "I understand. What arrangements do you want to make for our surrender? I have 1,408 men, of whom thirty-four are injured. Two more died by running into those sharpened stakes, and another four drowned after being trapped on the piers by the fire."

Marius cast his eyes down for a moment. "I am sorry to hear of the deaths." Then he looked up again. "I hope to start evacuation within three or four days. You should have sufficient food for the moment and more will be coming soon. By-the-way, don't think of repairing our ballistae and turning them against us. You might succeed in driving us off, but that would accomplish nothing except your starvation."

Parvo nodded again. Then he stretched out his right arm in salute. "I acknowledge you as a brilliant general!" Then he turned and lowered himself over the edge of the deck into the rowboat. Soon his two men were pulling towards the shore. Marius and Jason went below-decks.

"1,400 men! That's a new man for every man and woman already in the colony! How can we prevent a rebellion?" Jason gasped. "We dare not put more than a sprinkling of them in the boats or the picket islands, which means they'll outnumber us at the Port!"

"That's not our problem to figure out," replied Marius. "Leave it to the Council."

This proved more difficult for the Council than any previous expansion. The new recruits were more than could be housed conveniently and they were fighting men who could not be allowed to become a threat. The most immediate problem was their safe containment.

It was paramount that the prisoners felt that they were being respected, to minimise the risk of their resentments leading to unrest. Thus providing food and dignified accommodation for the men on the island while awaiting transport was critical. They had eaten well the previous night but the stores on the island were sufficient for at most a week for so many men. The invasion had been half-way through the supply cycle and much available food had been evacuated across the strait with the usual residents to feed them in their make-shift camp.

On the night of the ambush less than a hundred men and women had been left on the island for the catering and one hundred men for the attacking force. These had fled to the southern shore of the island after the attack, to be evacuated by their remaining five double-hulls and another four from the Sardinola squadron, overloaded to the limit of safety. Nearly six hundred children, the other two hundred adults and a great deal of food had already been ferried across the strait to the mainland the previous day.

It took until morning the next day to send a message back to Port Sertorius with as many of the children as they could fit safely on the transport ships and available interceptors. Then, discovering that Port had been evacuated in case the triremes got through, it took until noon to reach the smaller emergency refuge port another 40 miles across the bay opposite Port Sertorius. The remaining pirate refugees stayed in their makeshift shelters on the mainland across the channel from Capri.

There were two ships in the secondary port, one already loaded with supplies for Sardinola's usual delivery due to leave the next day. This was sent immediately. They did not deviate to take on board the standard yellow new clothing for prisoners, usually

stored in Port Sertorius. The second ship, a faster vessel, also set sail at noon but for Port Sertorius. There it took on hammocks for the prisoners' return journey, and yet more supplies. This was loaded overnight, and set sail for Capri in the morning. The two ships arrived in the western end of the channel almost simultaneously on the evening of the fourth day after the destruction of the triremes. Overnight they unloaded more supplies for the pirate refugees from one of the ships, which then took on the remaining children for transport back to Port Sertorius. The other then moved into the channel at first light.

On sighting the transport Marius hailed the shore and invited Parvo out to make supply arrangements. Parvo came out again and stripped again before boarding. Again Marius offered his hand. "My name is still Marcus," he joked with a smile. "I must apologise for not greeting you by name."

This time Parvo took the hand. He had already surrendered in theory. During the four days since then he and his officers had scouted the entire island and reluctantly concluded that resistance would be useless. He had already learnt from his own experience and the prisoner-transporting routine outlined by Jason that these pirates would not be able to be taken by any ruse. So there was no point in continuing in any behaviours that could create resentment and thus limit their future options. "Caius Parvo at your service," he responded.

Marius turned back to his seat and gestured Parvo into another as he had done the previous morning. This time Parvo took the seat.

Marius gestured up the channel to the transport ship a hundred paces to the west. "The first transport is here now, with ample food for your men until evacuation is complete." Then he leant forward, businesslike but friendly. "When it's unloaded we will take on board your injured to return them to our hospital. We should also have room to take some able-bodied. Usually a transport can carry over two hundred guests if absolutely essential and over one hundred in some reasonable comfort, but I think it best if we allow ample room to care for the injured. So we'll decide as we go how many to take on board for the first load when we know how much room each injured man needs to be treated properly.

"It will work this way. The transport will lower its four longboats and start to load them. You will return to shore. When hailed, your rowboat will go out to the transport with six men on board. These men will then row back to shore in a longboat with the rowboat in tow, where your other men will start to unload the longboat. The rowboat will return immediately, with six men to take a second longboat. Thereafter, as each longboat is unloaded, eight men will row it out to the transport, tie it up for loading, and transfer to a full longboat and row it to shore while the empty one is re-loaded from the transport. There will be only two longboats under your men's control at any time.

"There's enough food on board to feed 1,400 men for ten days, but because we'll be taking men off progressively the supplies will last longer. Combined with what was left in store and the fish I've seen your men catching, you'll have ample.

"Make sure your oarsmen are not only unarmed, but also naked. We will not tolerate anyone to come close to the transport unless we're certain he is not carrying a weapon. Anyone who approaches while clothed will find a crossbow bolt in his chest.

"When the supplies are ashore you can start bringing out your men, one boatload at a time. Again, all men coming near the transport must be naked. The injured may be

bandaged, but that is all. Your men should bring their light clothing with them in a pack. The packs will be lifted on board first, inspected to ensure they don't contain weapons or armour and then released back to the men as they board."

Marius shrugged apologetically. "I'm sorry to put your men to these indignities but I'm sure that you, as a military man, will understand our caution. We usually issue free clothing to our guests, but we didn't have sufficient time to cater for so large a party. That's why we are permitting your men to bring their own. I expect more transports to arrive over the next few days to take back more of your men. Depending on weather I hope to have all your men off the island within ten to fifteen days."

In fact, it took almost a month to complete the evacuation. Not that the men minded all that much. They made themselves at home in the abandoned township, kept the bath going and ate well. A second delivery of supplies arrived after ten days to reassure them that they would not be left hungry.

The delay was not caused by weather but by the need to empty the receiving station near Port Sertorius. This was designed to accommodate only 500 men, twice as many as anyone had ever dreamed would be required, and the Council didn't want more than a hundred strangers allowed to wander free in the main town at any one time. So the caravels were used to disperse them to the work gangs around the islands before picking up more from Capri. Many were sent to the farms, many more to the timber-getting crews and many were put into a totally new site to build barracks-style accommodation, water and sewer services as the start of a new processing centre. But the time taken to transport them with limited shipping stretched the evacuation process.

In between transporting the new slaves the ships had also been taking the Capri residents out of their emergency settlement to Sardinola for better housing. Port Sertorius was busting at the seams. This episode underlined the need to have ample extra accommodation, food and stores on hand for large groups of new arrivals. The 'spare' barracks-style accommodation in each settlement was marked down to be amplified in preparation for another large intake.

Septimius Pulcher had, of course, been aware of Niger's earlier attempts to send traders. The success of the pirates in not only intercepting the intruders but also assimilating them into the colony had pleased him greatly. Much cheaper than buying slaves! But when the report of the trireme war-fleet got back to him the following summer he was genuinely amazed. He decided to visit the colony again with the trading fleet the following winter - as well as purchasing and sending another 300 teen-aged female slaves. This would provide additional servicing for the increased male population, and permit the existing female slaves to be freed to become wives. This intake of fresh men had substantially increased the colony's ability to protect itself against intrusion, without having to spend a denarius on buying more able-bodied male slaves and shipping them over.

On arrival he was guided around all the settlements and many of other projects. He was particularly impressed with the high morale in the colony. Everyone, even down to the newest slave, seemed happy to be part of such an open and dynamic society. Much better than labouring for bare survival back in the Republic! When hearing how the

trireme fleet was eliminated he insisted on meeting the two commanders of the interceptor squadrons and ensured they were both promoted to the Council. He was so pleased with the good order and dynamism of the colony that he didn't begrudge their requests for increased cloth, rope, tools and women – provided he still received enough gold and silver to ensure a two hundred percent profit. But he did take silent note of the attitude of the Council members as they accepted the additional Council members and presented their requests for supplies, particularly more women to balance the population. They departed themselves neither as slaves nor as clients obeying a Patron, but as Senators in their own realm entertaining an honoured trading partner. The pragmatic egalitarianism of the colony over the thirteen years since its founding had changed these men and they were not going to be changed back into humble clients any time soon.

Pulcher now realised that he had created something that he could now only influence, not control. The original colonists were now barely a quarter of the adult population, and even of them fewer than half had been his free clients. The overwhelming bulk had only nominal personal loyalty to him. If these people ever decided to do something that he didn't approve of, he could do nothing about it. Perhaps send in a trireme fleet like Niger, but armed with better understanding? That would achieve nothing except the destruction of his monopoly! Better to accept that he now had a partner rather than a client colony; he could not command, but had to work for mutual benefit. That way he would retain all his present advantages.

And he also realised with regret that he would never be able to hand over the business to his son and retire to here. The idea of someone living in idle luxury was repugnant to their whole ethos. This was a society in which personal slaves were unknown, everyone above the age of five was either learning or working, and 'retirement' was nothing more than a tapering off into lighter duties as physical capacity declined. He would always prefer the showy opulence of life back in Utica, despite the obvious attractions of the pioneer spirit in the colony.

Port Sertorius – June, 834 AUC (81 A.D.)

Valerianus called his Advisory Council to order. This was not going to be a happy meeting. He had given the last meeting the doubly-bad news. The first item was that Septimius Pulcher had died and been succeeded by his son. Valerianus did not have the same personal relationship with the son nor same high regard that he had enjoyed with the father. How could he, when young Septimius had only been a youth when Valerianus had left Africa forever some twenty years ago?

No, the new Septimius Pulcher saw the colony as just one more investment from which the returns must be maximised. He had informed the Council that while the father had been content with a 200% return and had been willing to provide luxuries as requested up to the limit imposed by that profit margin, the son saw no need to be overly generous. As his letter on the last trading convoy had said, the four thousand adults in the colony now had all the land they needed to grow their own food, so they were not going to starve. He was prepared to provide ships' chandlery as required for their two squadrons of interceptors, their watchstation boats and their four larger ships. These were a necessary overhead for the Mayan Trade. And he was not quibbling about a reasonable measure of luxury goods for the six hundred men and women who actually manned these ships and conducted the trade. It was fair enough to consider them effectively his servants. But he saw no reason why he should also pay for luxuries intended for their farmers, their schoolteachers, their infrastructure builders, their maintenance materials, and the myriad of other people who were employed for the benefit of the colony in general rather than specifically for Mayan Trade. Let the colonists pay for these benefits out of their own pockets!

There had been only a few days while the trading convoy was in port and the one thing the Council had agreed in that hastily-convened meeting was that they should not respond without thinking through and discussing their response most carefully. Now they had been individually chewing over this for a month. Valerianus thought it time to start formulating a reply that could go back with the next trading convoy next year.

This question had been complicated by the second bit of news relayed in that letter. Pulcher had claimed that the southern tip of Greater Africa had been explored and that gold had been found there in abundance. The Republic had acted swiftly to prevent a rush that would have caused stupendous inflation, but even so the value of gold already in circulation had plummeted in anticipation. This meant that the gold they were shipping back to him was worth barely half of what it had been worth in previous years. He simply could not justify the value of goods being shipped out even if he were to maintain his father's generous policy.

Not all members of the Advisory Council were prepared to take this information at face value. Demetrios in particular had spent some time as the master of a vessel that had been effectively the plaything of young Septimius when he was a youth. Back then the boy had shown himself to be quite happy to bend the truth and exploit his authority. "Let me not put too fine a point on this, Caius," he said flatly. "If young Septimius said 'good morning' to me, I would first check the time, and then the weather. The man will say whatever he thinks will be to his own advantage. He has no honour."

Valerianus had promoted candid speaking in the Council, but this was so blunt that he was angered. He stood in indignation.

“He is our Patron, Demetrios! I will have no-one insult our Patron!”

“Excuse me, Caius, but he is not my Patron,” Marcus Lentulus chipped in. “We were engaged on a five-year contract and promised wealth and a return to our homes when our contract was completed. Now we know that we would never have been allowed back home. Much as we all love this place and are quite happy to stay, you have to admit that even old Septimius deceived us there! And if the lad has the same faults but none of the redeeming virtues as his father, I for one would like these assertions verified independently. Because I can tell you now that a reduction in imports or an increase in prices will not go down well with the average worker.”

Valerianus paused and then sat down. Lentulus had been admitted to the Council specifically for this purpose, to let the murmurings of the workers be heard in the Council before dissatisfaction built into a rebellion. In the almost twenty years since his appointment Lentulus had done his job well to both of his loyalties. He had helped the Council keep control while also gaining considerable benefits for the workers who looked to him as their champion. If ever there was a consummate politician who could balance competing claims, Lentulus deserved that title.

“I respect your point of view, Marcus, as always,” Valerianus said at last. “How do you propose to verify this information? Pulcher is himself our only contact with the Republic.”

“By making it so that Pulcher is *not* our only contact with the Republic,” Lentulus said firmly. “We all know the Rule. No-one is permitted to return to the Republic. But you returned once, Caius, back in the days immediately after Port was being founded. And Markos went with you and his crew as well. So I suggest another covert trip back to Lusitania, with a crew hand-picked for their reliability. Pretend that you've been sent by a Babylonian merchant looking to sail a direct route from China around the south of Greater Africa to Spain, and keep your ears and eyes open. Information is power, and right now young Pulcher has all the power. We need to see if he's playing a straight game with us.”

“And if he isn't, what do we do about that?” Valerianus countered. “If we say anything, he will know that we've sneaked out behind his back.”

“First, get the information,” Lentulus continued. “We won't know what options we have until that information is in front of us. Then we can talk about how to respond.”

Port Sertorius – February, 835 AUC (82 A.D.)

The Council came to order, the first meeting since Demetrios and Valerianus had returned from their incognito visit to Lusitania over the autumn. Demetrios looked grim, and Valerianus subdued.

“Let's not waste time before we get to the main issue, gentlemen,” Valerianus opened the meeting. “Demetrios and I are largely in agreement over the facts as we discovered them. However, we differ slightly on how we should respond. But first, the facts.

“During the twenty years we've been over here, the Republic has changed. Yes, a huge deposit of gold has been found in southern Greater Africa. But the Republic has clamped down on the rate of extraction, so that the value of gold has only dipped, not plummeted. Also, the cost of cloth, rope and other goods has dropped rapidly as more of these goods are being produced by steam-powered machines instead of by hand. By our own calculations and including the cost of transport, Pulcher Senior was actually making about six hundred percent profit on the trade in the last few years, not the mere two hundred percent he told us about. Pulcher Junior is aiming for more.” Valerianus looked almost ashamed. “So Demetrios has been proven right. We were being misled and milked. Not only now by the son, but also by the father whom I had trusted completely.

“Now comes the hard bit. What do we do in response? They have already made a huge profit from us, even allowing for the first few years when they were paying for the initial exploration and the costs of setting up the colony. But they have repaid us with lies. I now agree that they have breached faith with us. We owe the Puchers nothing. “That's not to say that we should respond in any one particular way,” Valerianus looked around the table. “But it *is* to release us from any consideration of loyalty. What we do now should be governed by one guiding principle only; our duty to the men and women entrusted to our care here in these Islands.” He sat, and Demetrios rose.

“It has hurt Caius to come to this conclusion, and he deserves our full respect for the courage he has shown in admitting to this sad state of affairs. He still has my total confidence in his government of this colony.” Demetrios gave a slight pause to allow this to be absorbed.

“So what do we do in response?” he continued. “Do we let Pulcher know that we know? If we do that, there's every chance that he will send his own triremes over. They will not be fooled. They know where we are and how we operate, and they'll wipe us out. Then he will install his own colonists, who will see the example of our fate and be his pliant tools. Any of us who survive will become fugitives and eventually eliminated.

“Do we continue to trade as usual but under these increasingly oppressive terms? Well, I don't want to be gradually reduced to a status not far removed from slavery and I don't want even worse for our children.” He looked around the table again. “The next trading convoy will be here in a little less than two months. Perhaps we can come to a decision in that time and put it into effect. If not, then I suggest we carry on business as usual this year and give ourselves more time to put in place a more permanent solution.”

Marcus Marius and Marcus Lentulus both lifted a hand to indicate their wish to speak. Valerianus indicated Marius as he said “Marcus, your thoughts, please?”

“Demetrios is absolutely right when he says we will not be able to resist a properly-prepared battlefleet that knows our locations and abilities,” Marius asserted firmly. “Whatever we do, we must not allow Pulcher to think of us as an enemy. Remember that we cannot appeal to the Republic. We are the pirates in their eyes and Pulcher could claim to be doing no more than clearing out a pirate nest.”

It was now Lentulus' turn. “I see a more important question underlying our considerations,” he prefaced his comments. “That is, how do we present all of this to the people? I mean no offence to you, Caius. But you are Pulcher's appointee, so now you carry no moral authority whatsoever and nor does this Council which was appointed by you. There will be a significant number out there who will believe you are compromised, regardless of your sincerity. Before we do or decide anything, we must first establish our legitimacy in the eyes of the people.”

The other men sitting around the table looked to each other. They knew Lentulus was right. “What do you suggest, Marcus?” Valerianus asked after a pause.

“It's obvious, is it not? This Council must be replaced by an elected body,” Lentulus answered, opening his hands expressively. “And you, Caius, must subject yourself to election as well.”

“What?” That was Markos, leaping to his feet as he interjected. “So that you, the Champion of the Plebs, can become Consul in your own little Republic?”

“Please sit down, Markos,” Lentulus waved away the outburst tiredly. “We can't afford divisions now, or petty politicking that might lead to dissent. For twenty years now Caius has shown himself to be honest, just and reliable. If anyone is foolish enough to stand against him, I would be very surprised. I'll be backing Caius every step of the way. But it's essential that the people acknowledge with their own votes his right to speak for them.”

There was silence while everyone took in the implications. Finally Valerianus broke in. “I see your point, Marcus, and I agree with it. But do we do that now, or wait until after the trading convoy has left? And how do we explain it to Pulcher?”

“I would suggest the sooner we do it, the better. The foreshadowed drop in imports and increase in costs has been general knowledge for almost a year now. If this is not resolved before the next convoy the people will assume we are acquiescing.”

“You're right,” Demetrios agreed. “We don't have to actually do anything immediately but we do have to be seen to be preparing a response.”

“Right then,” Valerianus became businesslike. “Who is to be permitted to vote? Should we take our lead from the Republic model? Male citizens at least 30 years of age?”

“Ah, I think you might be asking for trouble there, Caius,” Lentulus objected. “Women think of themselves as the equal of men now. We should include women as well, or you'll be offending half of our population.”

Valerianus was shocked for a moment. “Women allowed to vote?” he asked at last.

“You should get out of the office more often, Caius,” Lentulus smiled sardonically. “There are women out there who command work gangs. Do you think they'll step back while their underlings vote and they can't?”

“Fair enough, women as well,” Valerianus conceded. “Are we agreed?”

“No.” That was Markos. “The Battle of the Triremes was only six years ago, and a good number of those men have been difficult to fit into place. Some were resentful to be made slaves, which meant that they were not granted citizenship for a long time. Some are still wearing yellow even now and if I had my way we would sell them to the Maya! So I think there should be a minimum duration of citizenship, to ensure only the most co-operative are given a voice. Let’s say, minimum of four years citizenship.”

That will lock most of them out, Markos,” Lentulus warned. “You might be creating the very resentment you are worried about.”

“All right then, let’s say two years,” Markos offered a compromise. “Most of the co-operative ones had their whites within three years, so only the less co-operative will be excluded. And even they will understand that they will be entitled to vote in future elections.” He looked around the table. Most heads seemed to be nodding.

“Two years’ citizenship it is, then,” Valerianus announced. “Now, who may be a candidate? Will there be a *cursus honorum*?”

“No *cursus honorum*, Caius,” Lentulus demanded. “If we impose that, it will mean that only we will be able to contest the Governorship. That’s precisely the message that we don’t want to send. I suggest that everyone entitled to vote should be entitled to be a candidate. And when the new Council is elected, then the Council should appoint as Governor whoever has the confidence of the majority of the Council.”

Valerianus considered this for a moment. He realised that his own position had to be at the consent of the Council, or the whole exercise was pointless. He looked around the table. “Then it’s agreed. Next, how many are to be elected, and on what basis?”

“We’re all rather spread out around the islands, Caius.” That was Loukas, who now carried responsibility for the main interceptor squadron on Sardinola as well as being nominally responsible for the main trading post as Qotchi. “I suggest that each settlement elect one of their own. Perhaps bigger settlements like Port can elect a few representatives, because of their greater population. Let’s say one representative for every four hundred electors, rounded up or down. Watchstation crews will vote as part of their home base in Sardinola or Capri, and smaller outposts like the Trading Station in Qotchi can be bundled together to share a representative.”

Valerianus looked around the table again. There seemed to be no advance. “Right. We’ll let those ideas settle for a while, and talk further at the next meeting. If we reach some consensus at our March meeting we can announce the elections to be held in May, before the storm season hits us.”

“So the elections can’t be held until after the trading convoy leaves?” Lentulus asked.

“I don’t think we have time, Marcus,” Valerianus responded.

“I think we do, Caius,” Lentulus insisted. “We can meet in five days’ time to discuss further, and then another five days after that to finally decide. We could make an announcement the next day, and proclaim details of who votes where a few days after that. Even allowing time for candidates to put their hands up and for ballots to be prepared, we could have the new Council in place before the first of April. That would be in time to present Pulcher with a done deal.”

“That’s precisely the problem,” Marius butted in. “If it happens without him being warned he could see it as a rebellion. I think it would be wiser to sort out the process and

make that public knowledge, but delay the election until May. That means that Caius could explain it in a letter to Pulcher as necessary for maintaining morale as the terms of trade decline.”

Valerianus looked from Marius to Lentulus and back again. “We’ll meet every five days as Marcus suggests, but what we decide at each meeting will be left up to each meeting. Let the timetable develop rather than being imposed.”

Port Sertorius – April, 835 AUC (82 A.D.)

“Septimius, it's a surprise and an honour that you would visit us!” Valerianus enthused. “You would know how it tore at my heart to hear of your beloved father's death. It is pious and fitting that you continue his work, and that in this way he lives on. What more could such an honourable man have asked for?”

“Thank you for your welcome, Caius,” Pulcher responded politely. “It's good to have a man of your proven fidelity in this place to ensure things continue to move forward smoothly. Tell me, is it possible to increase the volume of trade here?”

“All things are possible, Septimius, but increased volumes might only devalue our commodity, steel. We have long insisted that this marvellous metal is very rare and difficult to produce. A sudden increase in its supply will risk not only its apparent value but also our credibility. I would suggest we continue to allow the cities to continue to bid against each other in their desperation.”

Pulcher was obviously disappointed with this answer. “Well, you know the local conditions, Caius. I am sure my father's love for you was not misplaced.” He started to walk down the pier towards the large public square of Port Sertorius.

“You've been in these waters now for more than twenty years, Caius,” Pulcher prefaced his questions. “Your devotion to my father, and by extension to his house and myself, is warmly appreciated. What can I do to repay your fidelity?”

“Why, I am flattered and honoured, Septimius,” Valerianus answered in surprise. “I had not thought of any such thing, only to continue to be of service. Your continued trust and support is the greatest benefit I could ever seek from you!”

“Enough of the ritual piety, Caius, I'm serious.” Pulcher stopped and turned to face Valerianus. “What do you want? I need you to know that my gratitude is worth every effort you make to maintain it.”

Valerianus paused for what he thought might have been a painfully long time. What he was thinking was that young Septimius was the sort of man who thought of even loyalty as a commodity to be bought and sold, and had no qualms or sense of shame in letting everyone know it. How right Demetrios had been in his assessment of this turd! But if that's the way he wants to operate, then I have no choice but to play the game back at him. “To be totally candid, Septimius, I want no more than your continued faith in my judgement. Conditions over here are totally unlike life in the Republic and some of the things I have allowed – even promoted! – will seem very strange to you. But by these decisions I've maintained your authority and your profits. If I am to ask anything of you, it would be your continued and total trust.”

“Yes, I remember Father saying that you were not only putting women to do men's work, but even paying them the same rate,” Pulcher said with a hint of scorn – or was it even disgust? “That would be considered an abomination back home, but Father was prepared to tolerate it. So I will too. But surely you will wind this back once there's enough manpower to make this unnecessary?”

“With respect, Septimius, that is something that Pandora will not be able to push back into the box.” Valerianus smiled apologetically. “The women appreciate the respect they gain in this way, and the typical man is eager for a wife who can add to their family income.” Then he saw the natural opportunity to advance his agenda.

“Even now I'm confronted with a most unexpected situation. There's a strong groundswell in favour of the colony adopting a more Republican political model. There's a feeling that the Council should be more representative, as if we were a Tribe in our own right rather than continuing to accept that I am in authority purely by appointment.”

Pulcher recoiled at this statement. “What? Are we talking about a mutiny here? I demand that you crush such talk immediately!”

“Ah! But to do so would provoke exactly the response you most fear, Septimius! I have not only held my authority here for twenty years, I have enhanced it by appearing to be their champion in minor things. Thus I gain their support in major things. Consider, Septimius, even the bizarre concept of women doing men's work. Is that not cheaper for you than importing more men and their wives as well? I have effectively doubled the workforce here at no cost to your father! So allow me to appear to support this rising sentiment so I can thereby control and direct it. Better that than to lose everything!”

Pulcher frowned. “Do you really think you can control this impulse towards anarchy?”

“I've controlled greater threats over the last twenty years, Septimius,” he re-assured his patron with a smile. “I'm not sixty years old yet, in good health, and I'm grooming my successors to continue serving you and your family. I keep telling them that without the House of Pulcher we would have nothing! As I asked earlier, trust me!”

Pulcher was obviously troubled by this vision of loss of control over his most profitable investment. But what course would minimise the risk? To try clamping down from a distance of thousands of miles away, or to patronise these impulses and thereby control them?

“Whatever you say, Caius,” he said at last. “But remember! If things get out of hand, I can send a legion across if you need it. It's an expense I would rather not pay and blood I would rather not spill, but let that be our backup plan. Are we agreed?”

“I think that's the perfect plan, Septimius,” Valerianus said with a warm smile.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” Valerianus called the Council to order, “but now let's get down to business. I've convinced Pulcher to accept the idea of an elected Council, but he has also warned that if that results in any sign of disloyalty he will send a legion across to re-establish his supremacy. Henceforth, we must give Pulcher the impression that we remain faithful to him, while giving as little genuine information as possible in case he suspects otherwise. We must also build up our defences against him, defences that he is unaware of and therefore cannot plan against. Loukas, Marcus, Caius, that's for you three to work out. Get planning straight away!

“Next, we need to find an alternative supply source for the goods we need in case Pulcher starts driving too hard a bargain.” Valerianus looked around the table again. “That can only be done by re-establishing contact with the Republic, but we must do it in a way that Pulcher doesn't recognise and others can't trace. I propose that we register a company in southern Greater Africa to act as our cover, in the port that trans-ships the southern African gold. We can appoint a local agent there to act as an address and he can then forward everything through to a more convenient agent in Lusitania or Tingis.

“And finally, I propose that when the right time comes we start telling Pulcher about a great civil war among the Maya. A war that is strangling the gold trade.

Meanwhile, we will divert this gold into our own trade with other merchants in the Republic. We will let them assume that this gold is from southern Africa, so everything will seem natural.” He looked around, inviting comment.

Eventually Loukas spoke. “It seems you've been thinking about this for some time,” he commented.

“Yes,” Valerianus admitted. “Ever since my trip back to Africa last year.”

“I agree with your proposal, Caius,” Demetrios said firmly. “We must break away from Pulcher, and we must do it in such a way that he suspects nothing. What you outline makes sense.”

Port Sertorius – July 1, 835 AUC (82 A.D.)

The election had gone smoothly and with great popular support. There was an almost universal appreciation of the personal integrity shown by Valerianus and appreciation of the sincerity shown by the Council as a whole.

Six men and two women had been elected. These included Marcus Lentulus, Markos, Sophia and Demetrios from Port and Loukas from Sardinola. The second woman was Minerva, the teacher from Capri and one-time wife of a nephew of the first Pulcher. Lucius Napolitanus and Herrius Parvus represented the smaller scattered camps and the crews of ships on long-term missions such as mapping and surveying the coasts and major rivers in the mainlands. There had already been talk of exploring further up the Rio Grande, Mississippi, Orinoco and Amazon to see if there were trading civilisations inland. Even the St. Laurence was being promoted as worthy of further investigation.

July 1 was the inauguration of the new Council. This date had been set for two reasons. The first was practicality. This was the end of the storm-free part of the year, so plans for the next year's trade and expansion could be made during the storm-bound months in much the same way as the Republic held its elections at the beginning of winter. The second reason was more politically-driven. The old Council wanted an election to be held before too much dissent arose after the poor quantity of imports from the trading convoy.

The Basic Law of the colony named the new body politic 'Terrapulchra'. This was Latin for 'Beautiful Land', but also a deliberate attempt to appease the House of Pulcher by adopting that name as their own. It introduced a Chairman of the Council to be elected by the Council from among their own number to hold both a determinative vote and a casting vote if determinative votes were locked. It also allowed for the Council to appoint any citizen to be the Administrator, responsible for the day-to-day running of the new state. He held office at the pleasure of a majority of the Council and was bound by the resolutions of the Council.

When the new Council met Marcus Lentulus was elected unopposed as the chairman. The second item of business was also unopposed as Valerianus was invited to accept the role of Administrator. The very first Law passed by the Council was the *Lex de Terrapulchra Incognoscenda*; 'A Law that Terrapulchra must be Unknown'. Under pain of crucifixion it was illegal for anyone to do anything that might inform or assist another person to do anything to inform any outsider about Terrapulchra, except with the express and specific permission of the Council and only in so far as authorised by Council.

Then the real business of government began. Valerianus, now a servant of the Council rather than its master, was asked to make a 'continuity address' to the incoming Council.

“Lord Lentulus, honoured members ...”

“Caius, please do not insult me or the other Council members!” Lentulus protested with the appearance of irritation. “You yourself set the example that we are all brothers and sisters in a common duty. Let us not be so quick to abandon the valuable heritage you have bestowed upon us! You know our names, so please do us the courtesy of addressing us as your brothers and sisters in duty!”

Valerianus gave a twisted smile. “My sincere apologies, Marcus.” Then he composed himself again. “Brothers and sisters, the previous Council perceived a serious problem. It is your sacred duty to address this perceived problem and act however you consider most appropriate.

“The first point for consideration is that we are very much at the mercy of the House of Pulcher. There are several ways of dealing with this. The most obvious option is to submit, but the previous administration was of the opinion that this would lead to a progressive impoverishment of Terrapulchra. The next most obvious option is to resist, but the House of Pulcher has the means and the information available to it to destroy us and replace us with a more compliant population. The third option, which the previous administration endorsed, was to placate Pulcher but use the time to secretly establish means to be able to resist him should he ever move against us.

“You are not bound by the decisions of the previous administration. However, I would suggest that you fully acquaint yourselves with their reasons and their policy before you act otherwise.

“Other problems confront Terrapulchra. One is the imbalance of sexes within our population. At present that is kept under control to some extent by the fact that a significant percentage of our males are still slaves, and therefore not permitted to marry. But within a few years that situation can be expected to change and men in their full strength will not be satisfied with the brothels forever. We need to consider the need to have more females of marriageable age as a matter of some urgency.

“The third major issue is the apparent reluctance of Pulcher to provide trade on terms that would support an acceptable standard of living here in Terrapulchra. He seems driven to force the terms of trade down, until we become no more than subsistence labourers. The previous administration had plans to establish alternative trading contacts that would provide a better return on our exports for our people. I commend these plans to your consideration.

“Finally, there is the problem of scale. We are now established. We have a situation in which we can provide all the services required for our maintenance without resort to the need for our women to provide their contribution to the economic life of Terrapulchra. But do we want this? Do we want to settle back into a colony of subsistence slaves? Instead of this dismal future, the previous administration had in mind to continue to use the contribution of all our citizens to build other sources of income that would allow us to establish ourselves as an independent society. This would empower us to be able to resist Pulcher should he ever turn against us. I commend this alternative to you, but remain your obedient servant in whatever role you would cast for me, whatever you decide.” Valerianus sat.

This was the first that the new members of the Council saw of the complexities before them. Suddenly the secondary implications of ‘commonsense’ policies confronted them. Minerva, who had first-hand knowledge of the House of Pulcher back in Utica, was the first to speak.

“We would be glad of more detailed advice, lor...” she paused as she caught herself, “if you would care to speak at greater length, Caius.”

“I would be pleased to do so, Minerva, but I'm reluctant to appear to force my opinions upon the Council. With your permission, I would prefer to answer questions

from the Council as a whole. These should be directed through the Chair.” All eyes turned towards Marcus Lentulus.

“Caius, my brother, be assured that this Council treasures your wisdom and experience. Until the Council resolves otherwise, I invite you to a seat at this table. By law you will have no right to speak except as invited, and no vote. But we would value you as a resource.” The whole Council visibly relaxed at this invitation.

“Thank you, Marcus,” Valerianus replied.

Then Lentulus turned to the table as a whole. “Caius has just outlined the main options that the previous Council had discussed in regard to Pulcher. Basically, it is either business as usual, in which case we can expect creeping impoverishment,” Lentulus started ticking off the options on the fingers of one hand, “or open defiance, in which case we can expect a major assault by Pulcher to replace us with more amenable colonists, or the third option of apparent business as usual while we secretly build up our strength to resist him. One variation on this is to reduce the amount of gold traded with Pulcher, using an excuse of a civil war among the Maya. This will allow us to trade that gold directly with the Republic ourselves. Does anyone see another alternative?” Lentulus looked around the table. “Please, everyone, think carefully about this over the next month. We have time enough to think through our position and plan carefully, but we must not waste time in procrastination. I propose that we address this problem again next month and see if we have any other options. I would ask all of you to consider this situation carefully and put forward anything you might think could be helpful. We must keep moving forward on this matter, either by considering fresh options or by deciding between those we already have in front of us.”

The August meeting quickly disposed of routine matters by delegating substantial authority to Valerianus as Administrator, subject to a requirement of acting within the resolutions of the Council and reporting back all decisions. Sophia, elected as one of the Port Sertorius representatives, was specifically charged with the office of Tribune. She would be responsible for assessing any complaints against the Administrator and his staff and was provided with a budget for this purpose. Next came the problem of Pulcher.

“Caius, members have had time to think through for themselves how this should be managed,” Lentulus opened discussion on the question. “If you could please outline the plan that the previous Council was considering...”

“Yes, Marcus. The previous Council had not come to any decision on this matter, but was more favourably disposed to one particular plan than the alternatives.

“This was based on informing Pulcher that there was war among the Maya and that this was interrupting the trade in gold and silver. And everything else, for that matter. We would tell Pulcher that the various factions were flooding or otherwise destroying the mines of their enemies and raiding any trade between cities. But in truth the gold trade would continue as usual.

“The gold would then be diverted into trading directly with the Republic cities in our own ships, getting much better returns even allowing for the cost of shipping the goods ourselves. This additional income would permit a greater population here in Terrapulchra, which would in turn permit us to support a stronger navy to defend ourselves. Of course, this greater naval strength would be based well away from

Pulcher's eyes and Loukas already has in mind another site for more and improved interceptors if and when we see the need. Should he ever suspect that we are deceiving him, he will still be completely unaware of our true strength and be sending his men into a trap." Valerianus paused at this point.

"I now add my own refinements to that broad outline as generally accepted by the previous Council, if I may?" He glanced around the table.

"If you would, please, Caius," Lentulus invited him.

"Thank you. My thoughts were centred on building up the strength of our navy as rapidly as possible and also about diversifying our weapons and fighting doctrine, so as to be all the more certain that a force sent by Pulcher would not be able to simply overwhelm us. To do this we need not only more fighting vessels, but a wider variety. In particular I would suggest that we think carefully about building our own sea-going triremes after the example of the Niger fleet. The only way to defeat a trireme fleet in open battle is another trireme fleet. It was only brilliant deception that permitted our victory back then. If we had an effective squadron of triremes and they were properly guided to the enemy fleet, they would not be able to be defeated. Unless, of course, Pulcher also sends triremes, but that would be most unlikely. He would believe that we rely solely on our interceptors and he would be confident that he would be able to carry ballistae with a much greater range than our lighter interceptors can mount. We would also be well advised to provide shore batteries at the mouths of Port, Sardinola and Capri, and any other major settlements that we might build in the future, so we can pick off any that might make it through. These batteries should be concealed from the view of visitors so they remain unknown to Pulcher's men.

"All these measures require a navy with vastly more men than we can spare, and vastly more sailcloth, steel and other supplies than could be comfortably spared. And more than we would want Pulcher to know about. That is the more so when we consider the greater population needed to feed this force, all from the same supply of gold and silver. I don't think there is enough precious metal coming out of the Maya to pay for all of this. So we also need to find other commodities we can trade." He looked around the table as he paused for dramatic effect.

"We can't afford to rely on the Maya to pay for our independence. We have to build a complete and self-sufficient State if we are to survive, and we must do that as quickly as possible. Therefore we need to increase rapidly our exports, and to do this we need to find commodities that are in high demand in the Republic. Then we have to produce these commodities in bulk. That means we need to increase our working population very rapidly, much more rapidly than merely natural increase.

"Therefore I recommend that we put in place a policy of buying young, fit slaves from the Republic markets, importing them, and that these slaves be progressed to citizenship except for those individuals specifically deemed unsuitable. I expect that we could import ten per cent of our population per annum, perhaps more, at least over the next ten years. Our only problem will be finding the gold to pay for them. And while this is being done, we should see what we can grow or manufacture here that can be exported to the Republic without anyone knowing where it really comes from. That will help us find the gold we need to buy these slaves.

“To assist this export drive, I recommend that we set up a trading company in Port Limpopo in southern Greater Africa. This will act as a front for our current gold trading, and later it can diversify into other goods. To determine what those other goods might be, I suggest we send a small party to areas similar to Terrapulchra in climate. Places such as India, the Spice Islands or Bantuland might have valuable crops that can be produced in our islands just as efficiently and shipped to Gallia, Hispania, Britannia and Germania more cheaply than from these other sources. I also suggest that we look at plants or other products native to our own land which we can export while pretending that these goods are produced in China or other strange places. I commend this plan to your consideration and discussion.” Valerianus sat.

Lentulus nodded his appreciation. “Brothers and sisters, this Republic of Terrapulchra has the favour of all the gods, in that they have bestowed upon us a man of the intelligence, imagination, integrity and vision of Caius Valerianus, our Founder.” He stood and applauded. The other Council members joined him for a half-minute of respect. Then Lentulus sat. “But of course, we are the elected Council. Although we can delegate duties we cannot delegate responsibility. I ask all of you to consider the advice of our brother Caius, but not feel bound by it. I propose that we all speak on this matter next meeting, every one of us! If we have a consensus then, we will act. If not, we will discuss this issue again each meeting after that until we have a settled mind, even if not unanimous.

“Now, the next item on the agenda,” Lentulus changed gears smoothly. “Demetrios, this item is in your name. Please speak to it.”

“Thank you, Marcus,” the aging Demetrios acknowledged the call. “From the very earliest days, some twenty years ago, we have always been driven to discover what these lands have to offer. Since our founding here at Port we have usually had two ships not required for other duties and we have usually sent these off to chart ever more lands rather than have them sit at dock. We might have even justified this effort as ‘good training for the crews’, but at heart there was always the desire to learn more about this beautiful land. By doing this, we have charted with reasonable accuracy the entire mainland coast from 55 north to 45 south, the presumed limits for any society worth trading with, and also up to a hundred miles up most of the major rivers.

“But it might be that there are yet more lands further west than even the Main. We need to push even further, not only to the limits of civilized societies but to the limits of navigation! It might yet be that we can turn the corner, like Philippos turned the corner of southern Africa more than eighty years ago. And who is to know what treasures, what opportunities, await us there?

“If we are to grow we need access to new resources. It might be new markets for gold or it might be a fabric that makes silk look like sail canvas or it might be a medicinal leaf that heals wounds overnight. Who knows? We don’t, until we go out there to find out!”

“I urge that we build and equip two fleets of three caravels each, sending one to follow the coast to the far north and another to the far south. They are to press as far as conditions permit, wintering over if prudence dictates. But their charge is the same as that given to Caius, Tarenos, Markos and me more than twenty years ago. They are to be

instructed to find new lands and new trading opportunities. If we fail to do this, we fail to be true to our roots.”

Markos raised one hand, a twisted smile on his lips as he did so. Lentulus gave him the nod.

“Thank you, Demetrios. It’s been a long time since it was implied that I am a good root!” There were chuckles around the table.

“Talk to me later for a free evaluation,” Minerva quipped, with more chuckles.

“You would wish!” Markos replied. Then addressing the table as a whole, “But yes, Demetrios is right. Even more so in the light of the advice we have heard from Caius. In fact, I would like to be ten years younger and lead one of these fleets myself,” he looked across the table, “if only to escape Minerva!” There were more chuckles.

“Are there any who would speak against?” Lentulus asked. “I mean, against the question, not against Minerva! I’ll see to her myself, given a chance.” There were more chuckles around the table.

“To quote a wise man, ‘You would wish!’” Minerva responded with a smile. More laughter.

The question was agreed to unanimously.

Writer’s Note. This sexually-loaded by-play was actually recorded in the minutes of that meeting. Apart from the by-play itself, the fact that it was recorded without any apparent concern for propriety is profoundly significant. It is firm evidence that the levelling of sexual roles and attitudes over the generation since founding had taken such deep hold that there could be no going back. In future centuries this sexual egalitarianism, first conceived in the necessity of the moment when Port Sertorius was founded, would spread throughout the whole world. Any Tribe that did not adopt this revolutionary social model was soon overwhelmed economically.

Port Sertorius – March 5, 836 AUC (83 A.D.)

“Agapates, how good to see you again!” Lentulus greeted the Trademaster effusively.

“And I'm pleased to see you, Marcus,” Agapates Paron greeted the Chairman. “And how are things going for you?”

“Alas, not well my friend,” Lentulus responded. “But that's something that should be discussed with the Council. You know where the bath is, so let us wash off the salt and relax the bones. Then Caius and I can explain the situation more thoroughly.”

“That sounds ominous, Marcus,” Paron commented as he fell into step with Lentulus, heading for the bath house. He was so much looking forward to fresh water on his skin instead of salt spray.

“All will be revealed in a couple of hours' time, my friend,” Lentulus said wearily.

“Agapates, we are facing a crisis,” Valerianus said somberly. “War has broken out among the Maya. Gold production has slumped. The various cities are destroying each other, and that includes their crops, their fields and their mines. Even what little production is still happening, most of it is impossible to transport safely.”

“That's bad for the Maya, certainly, but how badly is it affecting our gold trade? I would have expected that the start of war would make them even more eager to have steel weapons,” Paron responded.

“Oh, absolutely,” Valerianus agreed. “But eagerness doesn't come in heavy yellow ingots. The demand for steel is stronger than ever, but the gold to pay for it has stopped flowing. Our best trading partner, Lamanain, is set inland. We trade through Qotchi, one of its seaports, but the road between the two is no more than a walking track and subject to raids by their enemies. Qotchi itself was raided and sacked a few months ago, and anything of value looted. Perhaps there might have been some buried hoards, but we won't know until Lamanain forces manage to re-establish themselves there and fortify the place. A similar situation applies to our other contacts.” Valerianus raised his hands and then dropped them in a gesture of helplessness. “There is simply no gold in a place we can reach to trade.”

“How long do you think this war will last?” Paron asked.

“Who knows?” Valerianus responded. “We have only a handful of men who can even speak their language, and how do we know that what they are being told is true? But it does seem to be a very nasty war, as brutal as anything Mithridates could have imagined.”

“What can be done about it?” Paron asked.

“Nothing,” Valerianus ordered. “We don't have the manpower or the local knowledge to impose our will, and I have no intention of being an auxiliary force that can be sacrificed to promote some Mayan chief's agenda.”

“Then I suppose we'll just have to wait it out,” Paron concluded.

“Which brings us to what might need to be a period of rationing,” Valerianus progressed the conversation. “We have precious little gold for you this year, Agapates. Is there any flexibility in the prices you can offer?”

“I'm sorry, my friend, but you know the Master! He expects his instructions to be followed to the letter.” Agapates shook his head. “I'm bound by the price schedules he

has given me for this trip. I suggest you choose carefully what your priorities are. Perhaps I can persuade him to be more generous next year.”

The South Atlantic – June 12, 836 AUC (83 A.D.)

The three caravels sent southwards in December 835 AUC pushed into the easterly winds as quickly as they could to the easternmost point on the mainland, and then sprinted south-south west and later around to the south-west to get as far as possible before the southern winter closed them down. By mid-Junius they had made their objective for the southern winter, the broad estuary and river discovered by a previous expedition. This estuary emptied into the sea at 35 degrees south.

Stefanos, the leader of the expedition, saw no point in pushing further. This was far enough north to make the winter-over acceptably warm, the river was wide enough and deep enough for their ships to go well inland to escape the force of any storms and they had time to fell some trees and build huts on the shore of the river. On the other hand, any further south would simply mean a later start in the next Spring. The natives in the area had met the first explorers and established a good friendship, so fresh food would be available to his one hundred and twenty four men for the price of a few knives. And only two lives had been lost so far, men taken overboard during the night in a storm. It had been an ideal start to the voyage.

Late September brought warmer weather after a mild winter. The three vessels were still a thousand miles north of the furthest point south reached in a previous mapping expedition, and the reports from that voyage suggested that the land turned southwards after that, so too early a start would be of little benefit. They would just outrun the good weather and sail into colder conditions. Stefanos took his time to careen his ships, clean the hulls of growth and ensure all their rigging was in perfect repair before taking his leave of the locals and donating a steel axe to them for their goodwill. The small fleet sailed on the third day of October.

This was not a mapping expedition as such. Their primary mission was to 'turn the corner' if there was a limit to the southward extension of this continent, like Greater Africa. Who knows what trading opportunities might be found on the west coast? Having done that, mapping roughly as they went, they would be able to investigate suitable anchorages in more detail on the return journey.

They reached the limits of the known charts on thirteenth day of October. From here it was uncharted territory, and night sailing would be restricted to no more than three miles per hour in a line-astern formation, spaced out at mile intervals. Tedious, but safer than risking all three ships running into a shoal at the same time.

In this way the fleet followed the coast some three miles offshore. What appeared to be the mouths of a few rivers were noted, but there was plenty of water on board already. The fleet pushed on.

Then, on the eighteenth day of October, at 52 degrees south, there was a large bay that looked inviting. Stefanos ordered his lead ship to sail into it. At the western end there was a channel barely two miles wide, winding to the south. Stefanos considered the possibilities. Foremost in his mind was the wind. Unlike in the lower latitudes, the wind here was predominantly a westerly, like in the same latitudes in the northern hemisphere. If he tried to enter this tight channel he will have to tack repeatedly, and tacks too close together could result in loss of steering headway. And loss of steering headway in a

narrow unknown channel, possibly with hidden shoals that would not be revealed by waves breaking over them as could be expected on the high seas...

“No,” Stefanos decided reluctantly. “Just another river estuary,” he dismissed to opening.

The journey down the coast resumed, arcing progressively further out towards the east this time. After another three days the trend of the land was slightly north of due east. Perhaps he is sailing across a wide bay open to the north, and there is no route to the south and then west. Stefanos started to think that perhaps that blind channel might be worth a closer look. If he had no other choice he could always send a longboat forward with an anchor and use the capstan to drag himself through the channel. He decided that this was too important to act without proper consultation.

He ordered the fleet through a gap some two hundred paces wide that opened out into a circular basin almost a mile across. This would be a safe anchorage for the moment while plans were reviewed. The fleet might even be wise to take this opportunity to do some repairs and maintenance. It was still only Spring and the conditions could only get colder and worse if they did find a way further south. There was no need to hurry. He called a meeting with his subordinate captains that evening.

“I agree, Stefanos,” said Kaios. That fashion of taking a Latin name and then Hellenising it was spreading! “That narrow passage might, just might, lead somewhere. But we can leave that option open for later. Personally I'd rather cover the fast, easy and safe miles first and leave the slow, tricky and dangerous miles for a last resort.”

“I'm tempted, Stefanos,” Nikolaos was more inclined to take anything that seemed to lead westwards. “We know that the water in that channel was salty, so my guess is that it's not a river. Or at least, not a river big enough to have such a wide estuary. Whether or not it actually leads anywhere is the big question. I can only think of the other straits around the world, like between Africa and Hispania, between Arabia and Nubia or between Germania and the Northern Lands. They are all much wider than a mere two miles. Inlets as narrow as this tend to be dead ends, like the Gulf of Corinth or in the Suez. On balance I think I agree with Kaios. Let's look further before we turn back. At least until we are being forced northwards a lot sharper and longer than we have seen so far.”

Stefanos dropped his hands onto his thighs. “Well, I didn't ask you to discuss this question just so I could over-rule you,” he said. “Let's keep looking. But first, let's put ashore and make a sacrifice to Neptunus. Perhaps the problem was that we didn't observe Neptunalia last year while we prepared winter quarters. Why should Neptunus remember us if we don't remember him? It worked for Philippos when he was right on the southern tip of Greater Africa without knowing it. Neptunus is our patron god, so surely he will do no less for us!”

The shore party went hunting, but could find nothing worthy of being offered to Neptunus. They had no male horses or bulls on board, livestock being restricted to one cow per ship to provide milk. The whole world knew that the Babylon Museum had discovered that fresh vegetables, herbs and milk were essential to keep men healthy on long voyages.

That was when Stefanos made his decision. If he could not offer a bull then he would offer two cows. Surely Neptunus would recognise the dedication implicit in that action! The men would have to make do with their milk cut to a third.

Kaios objected. Better to not sacrifice at all, rather than insult the god with an improper sacrifice. Quite apart from the effect on rations. But Nikolaos agreed with his commander.

“Better to offer the best we can with a sincere heart than to ignore the god we depend on. I'm sure he is more likely to hear us even if we speak poorly than if we don't speak at all. And remember that Philippos had neither horse nor bull in Poseidon Bay but sacrificed the best there was available. Neptunus heard him!”

The sacrifices were made the next day and the one hundred and twenty one men crammed themselves full of fresh meat. Rigging was repaired and sails reinforced as the remaining meat was smoked and cured. There was genuine optimism in the air as the sun broke out from behind the cloud cover over the next few days and the land gained warmth. The small fleet prepared to leave their haven on the second day of November, a light shower in the morning creating a rainbow on their port beam as they exited through the channel.

The ships angled out to the north-east to gain some sea-room. As they did so it became apparent to them that the next cape, barely eight miles away, seemed to be the last of the land. Within two hours it was clear that there was no more land visible as far around as dead south-east.

In the lead ship Stefanos was overcome with a sense of the numinous. He was barely able to stand, so powerful were his emotions. He had to croak out the order, “Number One, run up the signal 'Neptunus loves us.' Then take command to turn the corner.”

On rubbery legs, Stefanos managed to get himself down into his cabin. There he laid face-down on the floor and wept for joy and awe.

Neptunus had indeed blessed them, and without delay. But the strong westerly winds still meant that they had to work hard to secure the benefits of that blessing. After rounding a second headland another five miles to the south-east they could do no more than reach out to the south-west across the wind. Stefanos knew from the coast already mapped that they had to make at least two hundred miles to the west before they even made it back to the longitude of the mystery channel, and who knew how much further (if ever!) the coast would run before it turned northwards again? At least the sea out to the south was open, and the big rollers implied that there was no land to windward for a very great distance indeed. So the coast mustn't turn south again any time soon, he reasoned. Therefore, it probably turns north. Satisfied with his logic and a heart still filled with gratitude to Neptunus who obviously loved him, he drove hard to the south-west.

The next day he tacked back to the north-west. As sunset approached there was the hint of a smudge on the horizon but the failing light would not allow certainty. But the wind was steady and the big ocean swells enough to warn of any shoals purely by sound, so he pressed on under reduced sail. The moon would be up before midnight anyway, and he doubted they would cover the distance to that suspected shore before they had good visibility.

The next dawning revealed that it was a shore but a craggy and desolate one. Stefanos looked out to his starboard beam where Kaios was holding position half a mile away. Excellent visibility! Nikolaos was also clearly visible half a mile astern. Both ships would be able to see him clearly. He gave the order to tack out to the south-west again. Kaios responded with his own tack promptly. He had probably ordered 'prepare to tack' even before Stefanos made his move. A few minutes later Nikolaos also came about.

For the next ten days and a thousand miles the land continued to curve ever closer to the north. The craggy land of mountains and steep-sided inlets was eventually behind them, the land becoming less stark and more forested. But the coast showed no sign of significant settlement. As the trip north continued the land became drier and the forests more open, until eventually it was barren.

But Neptunus continued to smile upon them! After they passed sixteen degrees south they found villages of Nacha natives, and traded two steel knives in return for fresh food and water. The voyage continued, now to the north-west, and more settled villages were found. But they offered little of value as trading partners.

As they neared the equator, villages of a different style were sighted.

"Let's pay our respects to the locals," Stefanos said to Quintus, his navigator. "Who knows what we'll find?"

The caravels dropped anchor in the shelter of a headland and a longboat was launched. A few minutes later Stefanos was on the beach, holding a yellow silk chiton across his forearms and smiling as broadly as he could without getting cramps in his cheeks. After telling his men to stay with the boat he walked towards a group of six men standing at the edge of the sand.

"Hello," he said in Latin, for the sake of saying something to reduce the foreboding that silence can cause rather than in any hope of being understood. He stopped ten paces short of the nearest man, went down on one knee to place the chiton on the sand, and then stood. With both hands he gestured to the robe, and then to the man. Then he stepped back to allow the native to approach it without fear of suffering a surprise attack. The man did so, picking it up by the shoulder. He felt the texture of the fabric carefully, and his expression showed his surprise and appreciation. He gave a quick order to one of his fellows, who turned and ran up the hill behind them. He disappeared over the crest in a couple of dozen strides. Then the man apparently in charge gestured for Stefanos to come to him and held both arms out towards him.

Stefanos smiled and approached, his arms out in the same gesture as his host's. The native smiled in return and took Stefanos firmly but evenly by both hands. Then he released one. The other hand maintained a firm but friendly grip as the man turned and started walking up the slope from the beach. After a few paces the handgrip was dropped. When Stefanos reached the crest he saw the village that had been sighted by the lookout on the mainmast. It was a hundred paces inland, surrounded by planted fields. Beyond that was a broad gentle valley with scattered trees set in what appeared to be grazing land. He paused at the crest, indicating back down the slope to the men by the boat and holding up two fingers. The native understood his intention, held up one finger and nodded.

“Gnaeus, come with me!” he called to the men. “And bring a knife and a plank, for the usual demonstration. The rest of you, stay by the boat. Don't come any further.” Gnaeus took a short length of timber out of the boat and started up the beach at a jog. He was soon beside the group, who then turned back towards the village.

The path into the village included a log beam bridge to pass over a small rivulet. Stefanos could see from the marks that the top of the log had been chopped flat with an adze. Judging by the size of the peck marks it would have been a stone tool, not metal. These people were another market if only they have something valuable to give in exchange.

Stefanos and Gnaeus were led into a central square in the middle of the village and there was no mistaking the gestures to stand and wait. A few moments later an impressively-dressed man appeared in a heavy red cloak with black threads woven through it. He wore gold torques on both arms. Two armed men stood beside and slightly behind him on each side. The man still carrying the silk chiton approached respectfully and offered the robe.

The chieftain touched it and then rubbed a fold of it. He was as intrigued as the first native had been. Then he lifted his eyes to take in these strangers. Long, pointy faces, he noticed, with rounded eyes and strange skin colour. In fact, the colour of their skin seemed to vary. Their faces, arms and necks seemed brown, but their bodies were paler, and with some hair. Still, he had to show courtesy. He held up his right hand and spoke the traditional greeting to strangers.

Stefanos had been through first encounters many times before. He knew how to take a lead from the host. He raised his own right hand and replied in Latin.

The chieftain's surprise increased. This stranger's words were neither Moche nor Nacha. He had never heard any other language, although there were tales of strange tribes in the mountains far to the north-east. He spoke again, asking where these strangers had come from. But again he received only a reply he could not understand, and a warm smile. What did these people want? He stood lost for what to do next. Gnaeus, who had picked up a little Mayan, tried the words for ‘friend’ and ‘trade’, but it was clear this native knew no Mayan either.

Stefanos took this hesitation as an invitation to speak or act himself. “Gnaeus, time for our little demonstration.”

Gnaeus knew the routine. He slowly took out his hunting knife, holding it by thumb and forefinger only, and displayed it. He then threw it to the ground so it landed on the flat, and retrieved it. Then he laid his small plank on the ground and stabbed the point into it, the blade oriented along the grain. The plank started to splinter down the middle as the tip of the blade projected through the back side. Gnaeus then twisted the blade to prise the two halves apart. Then he started whittling the edges in thick, heavy shavings, using the blade brutally to demonstrate its power, sharpness and robustness. No stone blade would be able to tolerate such harsh treatment! After half a minute of this he placed the knife on the board as though it were a serving tray, and placed it on the ground three paces in front of the chieftain before retreating back to level with Stefanos.

One of the chieftain's ceremonial guards stepped forward to pick up the half-plank and the knife. The chieftain examined the blade carefully, and tapped the timber to check

that it was as sound as it appeared. Satisfied, he smiled and nodded to Stefanos before putting it to one side.

'He thinks this is another gift!' Stefanos realised. He waved his hands, palm outward. He gestured to the knife and then palms up and outward to the chief as if offering, then he touched his upper arms where the chief was wearing his gold torques and then gestured to himself. The meaning should be clear enough. If you take the knife, I want the gold torques. The chief understood. He spoke to one of his men, who ran off immediately. Soon he was back with a small leather purse.

The chief took two small gold bars out of the purse. He placed them on the half plank and waved his man to take them forward to Stefanos. Stefanos picked them up and weighed them in his palm with a look of disappointment on his face. Then he put them back on the plank, still held out for him. He held up seven fingers. Then to make sure the message was understood, he tapped a finger on the two small bars in turn, and then five more times along the board. Now it was the chief's turn to look disappointed. Reluctantly he called the plank-bearer back, and put another three small bars on the plank. This was re-presented to Stefanos.

Stefanos looked disdainfully at the new offer and shook his head. Turning away, he said to Gnaeus "It's time we did a little bit of play-acting."

"Yes, sir," Gnaeus replied. "Let's see if I can talk you into returning to the table," he answered as if urging patience upon his captain. The natives, of course, would have no idea of what was being said but would have to read the body language.

"Then try one more time," Stefanos said abruptly.

"Yes, sir. How about if I wave my arms a bit, like this..." he pleaded as he gestured to the chieftain, "and I suggest you ask for just one more bar," he held up one finger for show.

Stefanos paused as if annoyed, but then turned back to the plank, still being held out for him. He tapped a finger on each of the five bars in turn, and then once more on the plank beside the sixth. He held up six fingers to emphasise the point.

The chief hesitated. Then Stefanos pointed to the chiton, still being held by his escort, gave that palms outwards gesture meaning to push it towards the chieftain. 'Two gifts for the price of one' was the intended message. After another slight pause the chieftain himself approached Stefanos, took another bar from his purse, and placed it on the plank.

Stefanos smiled and nodded. The chieftain smiled and nodded in return. A deal had been made. Stefanos then took the six bars and put them in his own purse, and then placed his own hunting knife on the plank. He held up six fingers. Another trade?

The chieftain shook his head slowly. One of these amazing blades is enough to demonstrate his wealth and status. It was unique! A second blade would only detract from that glory.

Then Stefanos took the scabbard from Gnaeus and showed it to the chief. He gestured for the knife to be returned to him. He then took a small pouch of fat from his belt, carefully smeared a touch over the blade and pushed it into the tight leather sheath. Stefanos wanted his customers to take good care of their new steel and to inhibit rust. It would remain more valuable that way and in any future deals his steel would demand higher prices.

The celebrations after the conclusion of the deal included a considerable amount of brewed drinks. There was much patting on the backs and mutually unintelligible praise before Stefanos and Gnaeus started walking back to their boat in the afternoon. Stefanos had been careful to drink slowly, but perhaps Gnaeus had been less alert. He lost his footing on the bridge on the way back, and fell into the rivulet and onto the pebbles in its bed.

“Argh!” he screamed. “I’ve broken something!” he cried as he struggled to keep his head above the water in the stream. “My left ankle!” he cried as he localised the pain and struggled to the bank. A group of natives rushed to help him out of the water.

Stefanos was beside him in a few moments. The joint was already swelling but there were no protruding bones. So far, so good. Gnaeus was probably overstating his injury. Stefanos didn’t think it was a break, but nasty damage to the ligaments was likely. Then he noticed that the chieftain was beside him. He took something out of his purse and offered it to Gnaeus. It looked like a couple of leaves. He gestured to put one of them in his mouth and chew them.

“Gnaeus, chew on these leaves,” Stefanos urged. “If you don’t, our friends will be most insulted.”

Gnaeus took the offered leaves and started chewing. “Should I swallow them, sir?” he asked.

“No, just keep chewing,” Stefanos answered, worried about anything that could not be undone.

There was one native other than the chieftain who seemed to have authority. He examined the ankle and made some exploratory probings and flexures. At last he gave orders, and the ankle was bound in strips of cloth.

“Actually, sir, it feels all right now. I think I can walk back now.” Gnaeus started to regain his feet, but was held down by the natives.

“I think you should do what the locals say,” Stefanos ordered flatly. “We don’t want to offend.”

By this time the locals had managed to find a stretcher. The chieftain gestured towards the boat on the shore with one hand, and then back to the village with the other, and then moved them up and down as if a beam balance. His meaning was clear. Stefanos smiled to indicate lack of suspicion, and then pointed towards the longboat over the crest. The chieftain then reached into his purse again. He drew out another leaf like the one already given to Gnaeus, pointed to the sun, and then to the western horizon and swept along the ground to the east. Then he drew out another leaf, pointing first to the eastern horizon, arcing overhead, and then to the west. Then he gave these two leaves to Stefanos.

Stefanos had been trained to communicate by gestures and signs, but he was surprised that this man with no prior experience could be so clear. These men were not fools! But to confirm, he pointed at the sun, traced its route to the west and then underfoot to the east, and then to a leaf and then to Gnaeus. The chief nodded his agreement.

Stefanos was impressed. He took out his pouch and gave one of the small gold bars back to the chieftain as payment for his care.

Now Gnaeus was getting chatty. “No, I’m alright! I can walk from here!” he was insisting.

“No, Gnaeus, you will lay in the stretcher!” Stefanos commanded. “Don’t argue!”

Gnaeus seemed comfortable through the evening, reporting only a dull ache from his ankle. The ship’s physician was surprised. He had diagnosed an avulsion fracture, which can be very painful. But as morning approached the pain seemed to increase. At first light he was given one of the strange leaves and started chewing on it. After a short time he reported a deadening of the pain. These leaves had remarkable properties! They might well be worth more than their weight in gold to the obscenely rich traders in the Republic. Those fat parasites would pay anything to ease the pain of their gout or arthritis! All that was needed now was a route for transport that was less dangerous and tedious than the passage around South Point.

Stefanos went ashore again in the mid-morning. He took a small pack of sewing needles, some strips of fabric and some thread in his pouch. He was confident that these needles would be a valuable trading commodity to the natives. He approached the village along the same track as taken the previous day, smiling, calling out and with his empty hands held away from his body.

He was met and welcomed by an older man and led into the village square. A simple gesture obviously meant he should wait while the native hurried off. Stefanos sat on the ground and threaded one of his needles. Then, folding the edges of two strips of sailcloth together and pinning them in place, he started to join them in a seam. The natives started to cluster around him, watching with interest. Of course they knew about sewing. Their own clothes were sewn. But such fine thread was a marvel, and the steel needle was outrageously small compared to their bone implements. The crowd of entranced spectators grew. And then the Chief arrived.

Stefanos leapt to his feet to show respect and bowed slightly. He smiled broadly and showed open palms. The Chief did likewise. Now Stefanos took the initiative. He showed the chief the partly-sewn seam, the needle still dangling by the thread. Then he indicated the needle specifically. The Chief nodded his understanding that this was the item of interest, not the cloth.

Then Stefanos displayed the magic leaf due to be given to Gnaeus that evening and hand spread to show five fingers, and then gestured to the needle and held up one finger. Finally, the action of one hand going towards the Chief while the other was withdrawn back, to indicate an exchange.

The chief understood, but frowned. Then he shook his head. He held up a leaf and three fingers.

Stefanos took his turn to frown, and then held up four fingers. The Chief looked annoyed, then shook his head. He showed three fingers again.

Stefanos smiled wistfully, then reached for his knife. He cut the thread, put the needle back into the pack, and handed over the partly-sewn cloth to the Chief. Then he bowed, took the respectful three steps backwards and turned to leave. He had taken two steps before the Chief called out. He turned back, to see the chief holding up four fingers. He smiled, held out the needle between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, and his left hand beside it with the palm up.

The exchange was made, and then Stefanos held up a second needle in one hand and four fingers of the other. Four more leaves changed hands in return. Stefanos started to wonder how much they would pay for the fine cotton thread. All the clothing around him seemed to be sewn with a coarse fibre more like wool than cotton. There were five small trees in the square, one at each corner and one near the centre. He held up his reel of cotton and tied the end off to one of the corner trees. Then he walked to an adjacent corner, unrolling the reel as he went, wrapped the thread around that tree, and then back towards the first. The length of thread fell just a couple of steps short of the return journey. Stefanos then started to wind the cotton back onto the reel. When he had completed this, he held out the reel, and with the other hand showed a full five fingers, closed his hand, and then three more fingers. Eight leaves for a roll of the wonder thread.

The Chief turned slightly and spoke to a commoner leaning in a doorway nearby. The commoner stood straight and walked over to examine the sewn cloth. He pulled at the partly-completed seam, and then at the loose end of the cotton. He wrapped it around his finger to pull harder, testing its strength. A short conversation ensued. Eventually the Chief held up two fingers. That man might be involved in spinning their coarse yarn, Stefanos surmised. The Chief has the wit to talk to the closest thing he has to an expert. Stefanos held up four fingers.

The Chief responded with two fingers again. Stefanos smiled thinly and shook his head. Then he took out his pack of needles, and showed the Chief that it held more needles in a bed of fat. He touched his finger to it, and rubbed thumb and finger together, holding his hand out to the Chief. ‘You must keep them coated in fat’ was the obvious message. The Chief smiled and nodded his understanding. Then Stefanos put the pack of needles back into his pouch, together with the cotton reel, and took the polite three steps backwards before turning away again. This time there was not a call to come back.

He decided to check on Gnaeus when he arrived back on the ship. To his horror, Gnaeus was bleeding from the mouth.

“Gnaeus! What has happened?” he exclaimed. “Do those leaves make your mouth bleed?” This could ruin his plans to trade in these leaves, if they had side-effects like that! But no, the natives had told him to continue the treatment for another day.

“Not at all, Captain,” Gnaeus answered with a lop-sided grin. “I bit the inside of my cheek, and didn't notice until Markellos saw me bleeding. This leaf not only reduces the pain in my ankle, but it numbs the mouth almost completely.”

“Ah! Another possible use,” Stefanos exclaimed. “A cure for toothache! In fact, dentists could offer these while performing extractions! These could be worth more than the gold trade! Once gold is in circulation it stays there, but a consumable like these leaves will create a permanent demand for more!”

Stefanos smiled. “Well, take more care of yourself, Gnaeus. How is the ankle?”

“The physician has bound it, and says I should stay off it for at least a month. But I can still serve on the signal flags if I have a seat to sit on,” he offered apologetically.

“That would be a good idea,” Stefanos agreed.

The Western Ocean – May 1, 837 AUC (84 A.D.)

There was definitely something wrong with either his navigation or his charts. Stefanos checked and re-checked his raw observations over the last month. They were consistent with no sudden jumps, so it was difficult to believe that he was making an error of the same magnitude in the same direction every sighting. Then he checked his data from the ephemeris. No mistake there! Finally he went through his calculations again, this time completely afresh without reference to his previous notes. The same answer came out.

He went back up on deck and over to the sailor specifically dedicated to signalling and watching for signals from the other two ships. “Run up the signal ‘Follow me to anchorage’, Gnaeus,” he ordered. Soon the halyards were rattling. A minute later Gnaeus reported “Signal acknowledged by both ships, sir.”

“Thank you,” Stefanos answered and then turned to Quintus, the officer on deck. “Please find a convenient place to drop anchor for the night, Quintus. I’ve just checked your navigation against mine, and I agree with you. We need to get this right. Let’s see what Kaios and Nikolaos say.”

The three ships tucked into a small shallow bay, sheltered somewhat from the steady easterly breeze. The next morning the two subordinate captains came aboard with a minimum of formality, carrying their latest navigation plots as instructed. The three men went to Stefanos’ cabin below.

“What is your latest position, Kaios?” Stefanos asked.

“As of two hours after sunset last night, we were at 8.4 degrees north, 122.6 degrees west,” Kaios answered.

Stefanos looked over to Nikolaos, who referred to his log. “My position was recorded as 8.4 North, 122.55 West. Arius likes to interpolate half divisions,” he smiled. “But we were anchored to the east of Kaios, so that sounds right.”

“Close enough to my readings,” Stefanos agreed. “Quintus and I both take sightings and reckon our position independently, and then compare. We both got 8.4 North, 122.6 West.”

“So what’s the problem?” Kaios asked. “We all agree.”

Stefanos unrolled a chart onto his table. “This is a copy of one of the old charts, mapped back in the year 814 AUC by Demetrios. That position puts us right here.” Stefanos dropped the tip of his compass on a point about three miles out to sea on the Mayan Sea side. “According to this chart, we’re back in the Mayan Sea. But it’s obvious we’re not.”

“I never thought to look at the old charts, Stefanos,” Kaios admitted. “But no-one ever goes down into that far southern corner, anyway.” He looked at the chart again. “Well, I’m absolutely confident that our navigation is right. Perhaps old Demetrios made an error. That part of the coast is never visited because we know there’s nothing of value there, so no effort has been made to chart it more accurately.”

“I agree,” Nikolaos commented. “There’s no mistake in our work. Demetrios must have made a mistake.”

“Do we put a party ashore? Tell them to climb a ridge and see if we can catch sight of Our Sea?” Stefanos asked. “If Demetrios made a mistake, then I'd like to know how big a mistake.”

Nikolaos frowned. “What good would that do us?” he asked. “The best way of solving that problem would be to press on with our own work, and when we get back home we can suggest re-charting that coast from the other side. But I don't want to sit here doing nothing while a land party has to slash its way through that jungle for who knows how many miles. It could take them months.”

Stefanos stood quiet for a minute. “Yes, I suppose you are right. At least we can be confident that our navigation is correct. But that far shore has to be re-visited. If that finger of land is narrow enough, then a road over it would be a good way of establishing a trade route to those pain-killing leaves.”

“I'll agree to that, Stefanos,” Kaios answered cheerfully. “But that's a question for another day.”

Port Sertorius - May 21, 837 AUC (84 A.D.)

Agapates Paron walked down the boarding plank, leading with his right arm and beaming a smile.

“Caius! And Marcus, it is good to see you both again in good health!”

“And I am glad to see you, Agapates,” Valerianus replied. “At least something is going well with the world!”

The two men joined arms firmly. Paron then released, and took Lentulus' arm.

“Your greeting was less than exuberant, Caius. It doesn't sound like things have gone well, my friend.”

“No,” Valerianus agreed as he gestured towards the landward end of the pier and the bathhouse. Bathing together straight off the ship was becoming a relaxing tradition for them. “The Mayan war was brutal from the outset but now it's becoming insane.” He shook his head in disbelief. “Not even barbarians wage war like these people, who are actually sons of the same ancestors! It is like the Peloponnesian War but worse, a war of extermination between cities who should be brothers!”

“Well, I don't weep for them if they bring ruin upon themselves,” Paron answered brusquely “But if they are ruining our trade in the process I'll weep for you and for us.”

“That's precisely what they're doing, Agapates,” Lentulus confirmed. “And they're becoming manic in their desperation. Last time we went to Qotchi they seized our longboat crew and held them for ransom. They had no more gold or silver to trade for more steel, and the lives of our colleagues were the only things that they thought we might consider precious.”

Paron looked up sharply. “Did you pay the ransom? How much?”

“No; we tossed a ballista bomb onto the beach, and Ariel told them what would happen to their whole city if they didn't release our men.” Lentulus smiled wryly. “There was no need for a second bomb.”

Paron sighed deeply. “But even so, I expect you'll be in no rush to go back there. Do you have any other trading ports still open?”

“None that we trust our lives to,” Valerianus replied.

“So how do you intend to pay for supplies?” Paron felt compelled to put the hard question on the table.

Valerianus slowed a pace to allow his guest and Lentulus to enter the bathhouse first, and then followed them through. They found an unoccupied bench and clothes rack, and started stripping.

“I'm still trying to think of an answer to that question,” Valerianus said blackly. “I don't suppose we could take things on credit?” he asked with a wry smile.

“Septimius was saddened to hear about this war last year, so he has halved the prices for you until things improve. But I wouldn't expect his generosity to stretch much further than that.” Paron slipped into the tepidarium. It was a warm day, but this would wash the salt out of his pores better than the frigidarium. The cold pool would come later, to refresh himself after the warm rinse.

“Half-price, you say?” Lentulus stepped into the water beside him. “If he was originally working on 200% profit - that is, getting three sesterces back for every one he is spending, then that means he's dropping back to one-and-a half for every one spent.

Only 50% profit now. That's quite a haircut he is taking for us! You must tell him how much we appreciate his support," Lentulus managed to sound sincere in his gratitude.

"Actually, he's probably making even less, because the cost of shipping the stuff over here is a fixed overhead," Valerianus added. "He's probably subsidising us."

Paron knew that Pulcher's fixed marginal costs were less than a talent of gold and the prices he was charging were inflated ten times cost, but he also knew better than to say anything. He just grunted and pushed away from the pool edge, floating on his back for a short distance before returning. "How much have you got to trade this time?" he asked.

"Just under six talents of gold, and thirty two of silver," Valerianus answered dejectedly. "And we expect to have even less next year, judging by what happened in Qotchi. The Maya would not risk breaking off all contact unless they had absolutely nothing left."

Paron rubbed his body and limbs all over to flush the dirt and salt out, then dipped under the surface to rinse his hair for a moment. Then he took the steps out of the pool and gathered his old clothes and the bag containing his fresh change. "To the frigidarium?" he suggested.

Lentulus and Valerianus followed him out of the room and onto the open decking at the northern end of the building. The three men stepped into the cool water and pushed across the width of the pool. Then back again before climbing out. Soon they were dressed in clean clothes and refreshed.

"Here's my cargo manifest, Caius," Paron handed over two sheets of paper. "You should choose carefully if you're short of cash."

Valerianus looked down at the pages. "Certainly no wine," he commented. "Or cosmetics," he continued. Then he looked up.

"First priority will be sailcloth and rope. If we can't keep at least one squadron in working order, then we're lost. We can make tunics out of old sailcloth if we have to." He looked down at the list again. "We don't need much in the way of farming tools. We're fairly well stocked at the moment, and we've cleared all the land we need to feed ourselves. Same with building tools and nails. And given the state of the Mayan trade at the moment, we should take only minimal trading steel for the moment." He continued scanning down the list. "Ah! Surgical instruments! Yes, we need a few fine blades!" Valerianus swapped the bottom sheet for the top.

"Olive oil! Yes, we need that for cooking. We use animal fat for lighting and for preserving our steel, so that saves a bit of gold," he continued. Then he looked up again. "Let me put in a special request, Agapates. Please bring over a hundred olive tree seedlings next visit, so we can make our own grove. That should make things a bit more tolerable and reduce our costs in future years." He continued scanning down the list. "We'll have to take an hour or two to see how much we can afford, but these reduced prices are going to be our salvation this year. We'll worry about next year when it comes." He gestured into the town with his right arm. "Go into the town and see how we're managing," he invited his friend. "We'll catch you at mealtime and give you our order." The men joined arms, and then the two Terrapulchrans left for Caius' office in the warehouse.

The evening meal that night was ample and exotic. Fish, turtle meat and pork, each course wrapped in palm leaves and roasted in a pit oven. It was delicious.

“This is wonderful!” Paron enthused, “but it must take a lot of time and effort.”

Valerianus smiled. “We don't always eat as much as this, but we do a lot of our cooking in the pit. That way our steel and iron cookware lasts longer! Here, have some beer,” he offered as he passed a jug over the table.

“Beer? Are you Germans, or something?” Paron joked, and then wanted to fall through the floor with embarrassment. Of course there would be no wine! Wine had to be imported, but beer could be brewed from their grain crops grown locally.

But Valerianus pretended to not notice. “Try it, you might like it,” he said more in hope than expectation.

Paron poured a half-mug and took a sip. It tasted muddy and rough. He looked across to Valerianus, his expression making words unnecessary.

“Well, perhaps that was too much to hope for,” Valerianus said with resignation. “But you'll get used to it. Right now we're trying as many different things as possible as import-replacements. Just in case this war goes on for a long time.”

“Speaking of which,” Paron changed subject, “have you drawn up your shopping list yet?”

“Oh, yes,” Valerianus reached into the huge pocket sewn into the right thigh of the baggy knee-length shorts that seemed to be standard clothing for men and women alike in this land. He drew out a folded sheet. “Here it is. We'll have the gold and silver ready to be weighed out for you at the first hour tomorrow.”

Paron had the designated cargo unloaded and on the pier an hour after sunrise. And then as an afterthought, he also took out another three packs of sailcloth and a dozen spools of sailmaker's thread and put them to one side.

“If you are prepared to barter, Caius,” he asked, “perhaps you could provide me with a cow and enough mown grass to feed her for a couple of weeks, and also a few hens and some grain for them. Fresh milk and eggs on board would be a delight.”

Valerianus grinned his widest. “Of course, Agapates!” He turned to one of the young lads assembled for the duty of carrying the goods into the warehouse. “You heard the man! Make that one cow, a dozen hens in light netting, and three bushels of wheat!” The lad ran off towards the farms.

The metal was weighed out and the livestock and their food brought on board. By early afternoon Paron was ready to sail.

“All done in less than a day!” he said with regret. “But Septimius doesn't like his ships standing idle in port any longer than necessary. Perhaps next year, my friends. But I half expect that Septimius will not want to divert a ship from a more profitable route until this Mayan war is over and their cities have recovered. We will see.”

“Until next time,” Valerianus responded, offering his arm.

“Whatever Fortuna brings,” Lentulus said as he offered his arm in turn.

The two Terrapulchrans stood on the pier as the front cable was cast off and the south-easterly pushed the ship's bow away from the pier and towards the Inner Basin. The yardarms were swung across, the sails dropped and sheets hauled in. They continued

watching as the ship eased out of the mouth of the bay two miles away, and then turned south-west towards the passage home, between Capri and Sardinola.

“That beer was foul,” Valerianus said at last.

“Yes, wasn't it,” Lentulus agreed. “That should keep him away for a lifetime!”

The Western Ocean – October 1, 837 AUC (84 A.D.)

The journey went on. In June they thought they had found another civilisation and excitement ran high. But they soon discovered that these people recognised their steel implements. Words of Mayan were exchanged, and it was discovered that these people were in fact the Southern Maya. The prices they were prepared to pay were considerably higher than those offered by Lamanian, but not so much higher that it would be worth the longer journey around South Point. They were still restricted to trading through the coastal cities on the opposite side of this land. No wonder why those eastern Maya refused to allow Terrapulchrans through their territory to trade inland! They were milking a margin of their own! An increase in steel prices to Lamanain was now on the cards.

The exploration continued as the northern summer brought better conditions to the higher latitudes. On the last day of September, 837 AUC Stefanos reached 59 degrees north, 184.5 degrees west of Babylon. He knew that the furthest Chinese trading port was about 74 degrees east of Babylon, still more than 100 degrees further to his west. But he was reluctant to follow the coast he was mapping, trending more and more towards the east, in case word of white men filtered back to other traders exploring eastwards from China. Besides, it was most unlikely that there would be any civilised people this far north anyway and the northern winter was starting to close in. If the coast turned north he would not be able to follow it into the winter and even if it turned towards the east it would be dangerous to follow that into December and January! Better to leave any hope of discovering any northern passage to the Northern Expedition specifically instructed to do that.

For all these reasons he decided that he had gone far enough. Instead of following the possibly dangerous coast he would strike out into the huge hole in his map, the Great Ocean between the coast he had mapped and the known Chinese lands. If there was a civilised land out there, totally cut off from the rest of the world... or even if there was no civilisation but there was a virgin land to be claimed... Yes, that was a fair thing to do. And he was not worried about storms. He would head south-west to drop below the zone of winter storms, and the great summer storms seemed to be confined to western coasts in both the Atlantic and the China oceans. He would not go that far west.

“My lords,” he addressed Kaios and Nikolaos formally at a meeting in his cabin, “To my mind, we have fulfilled as much of our mission as could have been hoped for. The important thing now is to get our findings back home without unnecessary risk. Therefore I intend to turn back. But even on the way back we can still add value to our work. I intend to reach out to south-west, to see if there's a yet-unknown land between our continents and China. If there is, then the possibilities are unbounded! I intend to go no further than 250 degrees west because that leaves ample room to ensure we will not be discovered by anyone exploring from China. What do you say in response?”

Kaios was the first to respond. “250 degrees west would put us about 125 degrees west of land by the time we hit the Equator. If the winds there are easterlies it would be a long beat back to safety if anything goes wrong, probably three months or more. We are caravels! We were equipped to follow the coast, we have only one cow, and Babylon's recommendations are that sailors should never go more than two months without fresh

fruit. In fact, they recommend one month as prudent to allow for delays. So I respectfully suggest that your plan is perhaps too bold.”

“Kaios, I sincerely thank you for your contribution,” Stefanos said. “I greatly respect a fearless critique.” Then he turned to Nikolaos. “Your thoughts, please?”

“I can see the attraction in what you propose, Stefanos. It would indeed be a coup if we find virgin lands, and even better if we find yet another previously unknown society. But I must agree with Kaios. Is there a middle way?”

“Stefanos, if I may,” Kaios butted in. “Might I suggest that we sail to the south-west for perhaps five days. Then we turn to the south-east, and follow parallel to the coast we have plotted. Then if we need to make landfall, we would be faced with perhaps eight or ten days’ sailing to beat back to land.”

Stefanos thought about this proposal. “That would mean that we would be following the known coast at a distance of perhaps six hundred miles out to sea. A good start,” he conceded.

“And a future expedition could be launched specifically to search further west if required, and equipped to look like China traders if discovered,” Kaios added in a rush. “Three caravels so far from land would look too suspicious; but a couple of square-riggers would seem entirely reasonable.”

Stefanos turned again to Nikolaos. “Your thoughts?” he asked again.

Nikolaos was aware of how the turning of the corner had affected the expedition leader. Stefanos had remembered that and had been insistent that they celebrate Neptunalia this year. He had barely been restrained from sacrificing their only remaining cow on the day. “There is no doubt that Neptunus loves us,” he said. “But we must not be presumptuous. To maintain that love we must also show respect. I suggest that we don't over-reach. I think it more pious to follow the idea Kaios has put before us.”

The reference to Neptunus pulled Stefanos up short. Yes, perhaps he should not presume upon the god. And they had not sacrificed this year. Neptunus would understand the necessity for keeping the cow alive. Obviously so, because so far only five men had died since turning the corner and all of them due to carelessness. But he mustn't be presumptuous and over-play the god's patience with them. There must be no carelessness at the command level! Yes, the blessing of Neptunus must be treasured, not gambled.

“I thank you both for your wisdom. We will track the coast at a distance of six hundred miles, more or less,” he decided. “Let's refresh our water, hunt fresh meat and make repairs over the next few days. Then we sail!”

The journey back to the south was broken by three intermediate landfalls for fresh water, hunting fresh meat and minor repairs. There was no point in too much of a hurry. January or February would be the ideal time to round South Point to ensure the best weather and that meant four months to cover nine thousand miles. The third landfall was to call in on the Moche again to find more sources for those marvellous pain-relieving leaves and to test the market for better terms of trade. They learned that they were called 'coca' by the locals. The best deal they managed was eight leaves for a needle, or pound-for-pound for bulk items such as a small axe head. That made it the same price as gold by weight, and Stefanos was certain that the wealthy in the Republic would consider it

gold well spent. The sooner we find out how far wrong Demetrios was with his navigation, Stephanos thought to himself, the sooner we will be making more money out of the trade.

Port Sertorius – May 2, 838 AUC (85 A.D.)

The other exploratory fleet, commanded by Lymachos, had been despatched in March of 836 AUC to explore the northern limits of navigability just as Stefanos had been sent south with the same purpose. Their one surviving vessel arrived back in Port Sertorius on the last day of April 838 AUC, thankfully with seventy two of the original one hundred and fifteen men still alive. Their Report was harrowing.

The voyage went as expected until we were past the end of the current charts. After that we progressed more slowly, charting as we went. We thought we had turned the corner at 62.5 degrees north, but this proved to be the entrance into a huge gulf which did not open to the south or west. Past this point we had to resort to probing into long, narrow sounds that might or might not be passages. They were all dead ends, none ever turning to the south.

At the height of summer we managed to push beyond 74 degrees north to turn another possible corner, and to some extent this was so. But once around that corner and after a southwards path of some four hundred miles, the ragged coast trended stubbornly eastwards roughly along the 69th parallel, with a myriad of possible straits that all proved to be blind inlets.

By November we had reached 187 degrees west of Babylon. More than half-way around the world! We realised that we would probably be too late to retreat to more temperate lands, so we prepared to winter over. Two timber huts were constructed on shore for this purpose, with double walls and the gap between rammed with earth to keep the cold out. The doors were built with double airlocks to prevent draughts and reduce heat losses when opened, and the two huts were connected by a passageway covered by mounded soil.

Too late we realised that even the salt water of the sea would freeze at this latitude. The hulls of our anchored ships started to crush. There was a bitterly cold wind blowing, such that a man could not expose his hands or face without the flesh freezing. But even so, the men managed to haul two of the ships up the beach to safety.

That winter was unbelievably cold, murderously cold, even inside our insulated huts. I gathered all the men into the one hut to make our firewood last longer. The extra body heat in those conditions also helped.

The sun dropped so low in the south that it didn't rise for a month on end. At best there was a glow on the horizon to the south for a few hours, or we would not have been able to keep count of the date.

The cows could not be fed, so they were slaughtered and their meat added to the rations. Keeping it from rotting was easy enough. We just left it in the vacant hut which now served as our storage barn to make more room in the residential hut. Within hours the meat froze solid. It was no longer possible to forage for fresh food, and vegetables had to be rationed. At least they kept well, being frozen.

But even with these measures our men became sick and extremely irritable. I had to impose a strict discipline. I ordered that any action that needlessly provoked another was punished by being ordered outside for five minutes if the wind was still, or into the storage hut for an hour if the conditions outside were too extreme. I even imposed this

discipline on myself from time to time when I felt driven to distraction. Strangely this time outside, although a bitter torment physically, seemed to improve my mood and helped me think more clearly. I adopted a policy of requiring all the men to spend a few minutes a day outside if conditions permitted it.

The sun returned and the hours of daylight lengthened, but still the sea was frozen. By March it was warm enough during most afternoons to inspect the two beached ships and carry out repairs after the exposure to the winter. The crushed ship still in the bay was cannibalised and the timbers used for repairing and strengthening the hulls of the two fit ships.

That was when we first encountered those huge white bears. Twice as big as the common bears further south and absolutely fearless, they could knock down an armed man and kill him with impunity. Three men were lost this way. The only defence against these bears was to put a few cross-bow bolts into them at long range. As many bolts as possible and as fast as possible because these bears did not go down easily. Every work party now needed a dozen armed men to keep watch and protect them.

By Quinctilis the sea ice had melted enough to suggest that sailing might be possible. The bows of both ships were reinforced with cannibalised timbers to protect against impact by floating ice, and they were dragged out into the bay.

So far, so good. A few leaks were discovered and repaired. The stores on board were re-distributed to balance the weight of the heavier bow. After a short discussion with Silon and Paris it was agreed that pressing further on was pointless. All of us were of the opinion that this coastline probably went on to link up with the lands far to the north of China, with no passage through. Even if there could be found a route we were convinced that the length of it and the dangerous passages, combined with the very short season it could be open, would make it too dangerous to use. Best to go back home and report our findings rather than to risk all for nothing.

The sailors were pleased. But once out of the bay, the complexity and difficulty of tracing a path through the maze of ice floes became obvious. There were places too many to recount where I had no choice but to deliberately barge through where the ice looked thinnest. Every time I had to do this I winced with the impact and prayed that Neptunus would add his strength to the extra timbers at the foot of the bow.

But on other days conditions were near to perfect with only a light scattering of small floes and we made up as much time as he could. We realised that on the journey out we had hit that northernmost point at exactly the right time, in late September when the ice was probably at its best, and the freeze had followed us south after that. Now we needed to get to that northernmost point by September again. We had to push right up against the retreating ice if we were to slip through the gap before it closed again.

This consideration probably drove me too hard. On that northward leg, at 74 degrees north and almost to the corner, we were pushing through a sea full of ice when the wind shifted. The floes were now being pushed together! I rushed for the lee of an island, desperate for protection against this unstoppable approach.

My own ship barely made it to shelter. The second ship, only three hundred paces behind, was trapped. Over the next ten hours it was crushed. This was a slow-motion grip of death. The slow progress of the disaster allowed Paris and the men to lower their longboats and evacuate onto the ice. They retrieved almost all the food stores before the

hull finally and irrevocably splintered. By that time the floes were jammed so tight together that they could drag the longboats over the surface of the ice to the island.

One remaining ship! I dared not take any risks at all now. I had the men haul this caravel up onto the shingles in case the wind shifted yet again and swept the ice around the shoulder of the island.

Three days later the wind did shift. The water along the main coast opposite the island was cleared as the wind swept the accumulated ice out to the north-west, except for some scraps pushed up against the beach our ship was occupying. But the wind was warmer, well above freezing, so the men went to work hacking this grounded ice into smaller pieces so we could re-launch the ship.

Only another thirty miles to the east was the North Point, and another eighty miles past that the coast turned dead south. The waterways east of north Point were narrow, too narrow for miles of ice to accumulate and be driven against us like a battering ram of dream-like slowness. If we could make it that far we would be safe.

After two more days of steady south-easterly winds we were confident that the sea ice was now so far out that we would not be caught again. We slipped the ship and stacked it with all the stores we could carry. Then we set out to the north-east with all our men on that one vessel designed for a crew of forty. We prayed to Neptunus for safety. We could not carry enough longboats for the full number on board.

Our navigation on the outward journey had been meticulous. But even so, the strait we had to sail through was so narrow and there were so many other blind sounds so close together that choosing the right one was not easy. And although we refused to act in haste we were aware that another winter was following close behind and each day had fewer minutes of light than the one before. We dared not sail without good visibility so that meant each day covered less distance than the day before. We dearly wanted to reach as far south as possible before winter caught up with us. Once we were below 50 degrees north we were confident that sea ice would not be a major threat.

Eventually we limped to 40.5 degrees south before a late December storm forced us into a nearby river estuary that had been found by the earlier exploration. That was far enough, we thought. More bad weather would be inevitable this time of the year and the men were starting to suffer lethargy and bleeding gums. They needed vegetables soon. After anchoring in the estuary just south of the largest island, I took a few gifts and steel knives onto a longboat and went looking for the locals. Surely they would be prepared to trade! The first expedition through here several years ago had found them to be amenable and nothing had happened since to change things.

Thus the Northern Expedition spent its second winter away from home, but this time in much greater comfort. There was at least some daylight every day, and the snow not so deep that it could stop the usual routines of life. But most importantly, there was not the gripping, numbing, penetrating, murderous cold of the far north. We were as good as home already.

On the fifth day of March it was clear that the winter had passed. Our voyage could be resumed. We made good the ship, re-stocked the water barrels and came home hugging the coast in case of damage. We arrived on the last day of April. I attach copies of the logs of all three ships and our charts of lands north of the previous limits of exploration.

“In summary, I don’t think we have a viable route to anywhere worth trading with,” Lymachos stated after tabling his Summary Report to the Council. “I doubt that there is a passage to the Chinese Ocean. I believe the land is connected to the other lands north of China. Even if there is a passage, it's a very dangerous route even in the comparatively settled weather we met. If the Southern Expedition also finds its way blocked, then our best chance of profitable trade is to use the rivers running from the mainland into the Mayan Sea to explore inland.”

The Council was silent. Then Lentulus stood. “Thank you, Lymachos. Not only for your report and the excellent charts you have made, but most of all for your courage and dedication. That you couldn't find any source of wealth is not due to any failing in you. It is just a fact of life and we are the richer for now knowing that we would best direct our efforts in other directions.

“In every sense that was humanly possible, your expedition has been an outstanding success.” He then started applauding, and the other Council members took this cue to stand and applaud with him. After a respectable period, Lentulus ceased his applause and sat. “We can only hope that Stefanos will bring his men back alive as well.”

Port Sertorius - May 2, 839 AUC (86 A.D.)

The interceptor based in Septimia drew up to the wharf in Port Sertorius with practised ease. The cables were cast over the bollards and the crew tied up the boat and dropped the sails with barely a word being spoken, their co-ordination so instinctive. The helmsman stepped onto the planking of the pier and walked with a businesslike stride to the large warehouse that served as the main office for the port as well as administration for the settlement. He knocked twice on the door and then opened it and entered without waiting for a reply.

“Pulcher's ship is here again, Marcia,” he informed the woman behind the desk.

Marcia gave a shrug of mild disappointment. “I suppose it was only to be expected. Last year was a bonus, Pison. That's the way we have to look at it.” The regular trading trip had been skipped last Spring.

“Marius from Melita is also on the water,” Pison went on, “as a backup just in case I ran into trouble. I expect he might be only an hour or two behind me.”

Marcia smiled. “Not that you two would push harder than you should, of course! Only schoolboys would turn a serious mission into a race!”

Marius smiled back. “Of course not, Marcia! But why not make use of the mission to fine-tune our skills? It took us spot on two days to get here, so I expect Pulcher to take another two.”

Marcia flicked her right wrist at him as she smiled more broadly. “Get out of here, or Marius will see your mast and deliberately tear his sail to create an excuse!”

Pison turned and left the office. Marcia strolled outside to the main square of the township and rang the large bronze bell. It took ten minutes for most of the townsfolk to assemble.

There they were told that Pulcher's ship was expected the day after tomorrow. Everyone should put away the little luxuries and good clothing they possessed and drop back to 'Condition Destitute' until further notice. This included wearing clothing with sailcloth patches, hair tied back with string instead of ribbons, and all new tools to be hidden. They had to look like a town that was living on left-overs from years ago.

Pulcher's ship pulled up to the Port Sertorius jetty early on the second day after that. Marcia was dockside, ready to welcome it. Agapates strode down the plank, smiling and with right arm extended. He remembered he had to treat women in positions of authority as if they were men.

“I am Agapates, lady; I notice that Caius and Marcus are not available.”

“Welcome, lord Agapates,” Marcia responded, taking the offered arm as a man would. “My name is Marcia. I'm the Town Administrator when no-body senior is here. I regret to inform you that Caius and Marcus are both busy with a new settlement. We've found it increasingly difficult to fish and hunt turtles near Port, and we fear it's over-exploitation that's the problem. Our plan is to spread ourselves more evenly among the islands to reduce any local overload.”

“That would sound prudent, lady Marcia,” Agapates replied. “I can understand that could be a problem.” Agapates looked Marcia up and down as respectfully as he could. Her feet were bare and horny, her tunica roughly patched and her short trousers – why do

the men and women here all dress the same? he wondered yet again – her short trousers were becoming threadbare around the bottom of the large pocket on her right thigh. So threadbare, in fact, that he noticed a second line of stitching a couple of inches above the bottom. She had saved the pocket's function by shortening it. The pocket on the left side was still serviceable. “If I might say so, I hope you're pleased to see us.”

“We are always pleased to see you,” Marcia smiled warmly. “It's good to keep in touch with old friends. But sadly, I don't know that we have much to trade. The Mayan war continues.”

“Ah! That is sad!” Agapates responded. “Septimius was hoping that peace might have broken out by now. But I have some good news! Septimius is prepared to supply you at bare cost price until this war is over. He accepts his duty as Patron, and will fulfil it.”

“What a good man he is!” Marcia exclaimed with satisfaction. “Please, walk with me, and I will show you what we have to trade this year.” She gestured back towards the warehouse. Agapates fell into step beside her.

“Unfortunately there's no gold or silver to be had, so we went looking for other commodities which might be of some value,” Marcia started again as she walked into the shade of the warehouse. “We've found these. Let us know if you think they're worth trading.” She indicated three trestle tables, with various hides, furs and other items spread over them.

“Let my eyes grow accustomed to the shadows, please,” Agapates asked.

“No, even better. Let's carry the tables out into the sunlight, so you can see more clearly.” Marcia went to one end of the first trestle and lifted it, expecting him to take the other. Agapates was momentarily stunned. He was not accustomed to respected women doing manual work, nor was he accustomed to women in authority. But a woman in authority doing the work of a slave? In fact, he would never have thought to move the table himself, but would have commanded others to do it. But he knew things were different out here and moved quickly. Once the three tables were out in the open, he started inspecting the goods.

“These furs are coarse and sparse, even those from apparently small creatures,” he commented. “Completely useless for lining coats and other clothing against the cold. It's probably the climate here. The last thing an animal in these islands needs is warmth. These furs could never compete against the fine furs flowing into the Republic from the lands north of the East German Sea.” So much for the first table.

The second table carried a range of shells. All of them were visually interesting and unusual, but no more striking than those that could be found around better-known lands. The only feature in their favour was their novelty, being unlike shells from known lands. Which was precisely why they were dangerous! Gold was gold and silver was silver, wherever the metals came from. “If I bring back shells of an unknown type,” Agapates explained, “it could lead some to the conclusion that I'm trading with unknown lands. That would destroy the secret of our trade with the Maya, once it can be re-established. Septimius would never tolerate that!”

Then he walked across to the third table. This carried several bowls of strange fruits, bowls of strangely-coloured creams, and a few mugs.

“What are these?” he asked.

“These fruits are quite tasty,” Marcia explained. “There might be a market for them if you can get back to the Republic quickly enough. They tend to go bad after about ten days, but if someone in the Republic has found a way to keep fruit fresh....” Then she moved on to the creams. “One way of serving them is to mash them and blend them with cream, or their juices with butter. Dip your bread in them, and enjoy!” She moved to the far end of the table. “Here we have some wines made from these fruits. You might find them interesting.”

Again, this was not what Agapates was looking for. Anything previously unknown in the Republic would amount to an announcement that he was trading in new lands. But to be polite he sampled one of the fruits. Too tart by itself, but perhaps its juice might make a savoury additive. Then another fruit, this one with a flesh almost like soft butter. He moved on to the pastes and dipped a morsel of bread into one. Not bad, he thought, but the concept was all wrong. Trade this far away had to be for foods that were aimed at the higher Classes, and dipping bread into a paste was something that the Fifth Class and the Head Count did.

Then to the wines. He took a sip from the first mug.

He immediately spat out the wine and wiped his face with the front of his tunic. “Argh!” he grunted in disgust, “That’s even worse than your beer! Oh, by the gods, I will never forget that beer!”

Marcia was downcast. “Well, this is all we have!” she protested, almost in tears. “It might not be to the tastes of the gentry, but there must be a market for some of these things even if only among the poor!”

“There probably is, Marcia. But the poor will not pay what it would cost us to transport it back.”

Marcia stood still, breathing in snatches and with a tear on her cheek.

“I’m sorry, Marcia, but this is worthless to us. The round trip from Tingis and back is almost ten thousand miles. That takes up to a hundred days, more or less, and most of that is the return journey. So a fruit that spoils in ten days is useless. Bulk commodities that spoil will never be profitable for so long a journey. We need to trade in metals, or jewels, or something that can be stored indefinitely.” He softened his voice when he realised that he was crushing this woman’s spirit.

“Really, Marcia, the only stuff that I’ve seen here that would be safe to trade is of inferior quality to that which can be obtained more cheaply from elsewhere. I simply can’t take this back to Septimius and expect to keep my job.” He tried to smile some encouragement. “Do you have anything else to offer?”

Marcia just shook her head, face down, apparently not trusting herself to speak without a sob. Then, gathering herself to become a good host, she said. “I’m sorry to have wasted your time, lord Agapates. Please, allow us to refresh your barrels of water while your men tend to the ship. We’ll fetch a cow and some hens like last time. We’ve prepared a feast for this evening. We value your friendship and that of lord Pulcher.”

“And what can I give you, to show appreciation for your supplies to us?”

“Well, as much sailcloth and rope as you could spare, please,” Marcia asked tentatively. “As much as you think lord Pulcher might think justifiable.”

Agapates smiled. "I will allow ten thousand sesterces for the cow and a dozen hens, Marcia. Come back to the ship and I will give you the price list set by Septimius, and you can choose what you want."

Valerianus arrived after dawn the next day, just as Agapates was preparing to cast off from the jetty and Marcia saying her farewells. Valerianus wore a chiton specially set apart for the occasion. Once it had been of good quality, but now it was stained and thin in places. The impression was one of threadbare nobility.

"Agapates! I'm so glad to have caught you!"

"Caius, my friend! Marcia has told me that your difficulties continue."

"Yes, sadly," Valerianus agreed. "And I doubt that conditions will improve in my lifetime. Even if the Maya make peace today, there will be at least ten years of rebuilding ahead of them before they can indulge in the luxury of draining their gold mines. And even then, being flooded for so long will probably mean that they can never be made safe again."

"Then what are we to do?" Agapates seemed genuinely concerned. "Septimius will be reluctant to support this colony forever if there's no hope of it turning a profit within a reasonable time."

Valerianus looked around the crowded wharf. "Come with me into the office." The two men and Marcia walked back to the warehouse and into the office. Valerianus gestured towards the chair for Marcia – after all, it was her office and her chair – and to the secondary chair for Agapates. He sat on a low cabinet himself.

"The Council has considered this possibility," Valerianus started speaking, "and elected members have also held a few meetings in their own constituencies. The general feeling is that they would rather stay here and make a subsistence living than go back to the Republic.

"The only imports we can't replace with local materials are cloth and steel. The only need we have of cloth is for sails. We can sew hides together for clothing if we have to! And the occasional explorer that comes our way usually carries enough spare sailcloth to keep our supplies up if we are thrifty with it and don't care too much about patching torn sails instead of replacing them. It's much the same with steel and brass, if we use metal only where wood and bone won't do. We already have an acceptably good design of a wooden plough, to be used where the soil is not too stony.

"So we're confident we can survive even if we never get another ounce of material from Septimius. And in the meantime we will still be here, protecting the secret of the Mayan gold from outsiders until the trade can be revived again." Valerianus smiled wistfully.

"I'll probably not see that day, but when it comes we'll be ready. Until then we're happy to be left here in our own land. A whole generation has been born over here who know nothing about the Republic. They wouldn't be able to survive in that totally different world and the adults want better than that for their children. So please tell Septimius that we are happy here. We'll stay, and we don't mean to use that to blackmail him into providing more supplies for no profit to him."

"That might be so, Caius, but how are we to know when to resume trading voyages, in that case?"

“We have two caravels here, and two square-riggers. We can send word back using a trusted crew, just as we did in the early days,” Valerianus answered. “In fact, our interceptor crews are so good at what they do that they could make it to Lusitania in their own craft without any concern at all, except that the strange design would start rumours.”

Agapates looked from one face to the other wordlessly.

“And I must apologise to you for my tears yesterday, Agapates,” Marcia offered. “I had convinced myself that we had something of value to give in return for lord Pulcher's kindness. I was so disappointed that it wasn't so.”

“Well, I'll tell Septimius what you have told me,” Agapates said as he stood. “What he does with that information is for him to decide.”

Marcia and Valerianus also stood.

“Then let us see you to your ship, and say our farewells,” Valerianus said as he gestured for Agapates to precede him out the door.

Port Sertorius – July 1, 840 AUC (87 A.D.)

The new Council held its inaugural meeting according to the new traditions that had sprung up by force of habit. Minerva had been Acting Chair since the death of Marcus Lentulus three months earlier and was formally elected to Chair. Valerianus had asked to be permitted to retire due to his poor health. He was begged to stay on so the new Council could do him the respect of asking him one more time, but he would be permitted to decline. So he was formally invited, and formally declined. Nobody wanted it thought that he had lost the confidence of the Council.

Valerianus having now stepped aside, nominations for Consul were invited. Only one name was put forward. That was Pandoros Eulogos, a fifty-year-old former Marine Commander captured during the Battle of the Triremes only eleven years earlier. He had proven himself competent and diligent, earning citizenship after little more than one year. Since then his energy and commitment had been shown in a series of increasingly responsible positions. This progression had culminated as Consular Assistant during Valerianus' illness. Terrapulchran society not only allowed such social mobility, it even demanded it.

“Then Pandoros it is,” Minerva made it official. “Please, invite him into the room.” The appointment had been only a formality. The Councillors-elect had already discussed this position and agreed to this appointment informally after the Council election had been declared. Pandoros had been asked to attend today to accept.

After the invitation had been offered and accepted, Pandoros sat in the Consul's chair. This was set at a three feet by three feet extension off the round table of the Council and diametrically opposite the Chair. This arrangement was meant to convey that he was welcome at the Council, but not part of it. He was instead their servant.

Minerva took control in her brisk but friendly way. “First, let us review for our new members what the Council had tentatively planned in the last year.

“Item One. The southern shores of Our Sea have now been re-charted, and the errors in the old charts corrected. As far as the accuracy of our navigation allows, the tongue of land is at most thirty five miles wide at its narrowest. And that's along a line almost perfectly north-south, which is the easiest direction for our navigators to measure most accurately, so it's considered reasonably reliable. The old Council intended to send a survey team there during the next calm season to determine if a road could be built across this finger of land to create a trade route for coca leaves.

“Item Two. We have registered several companies in Port Limpopo in southern Greater Africa, all owned by Limpopo Investments, and the listed owners of Limpopo Investments are Junius Maniculus, Pontius Herrius and Quintus Atius. The address for all three notional owners is care of Silon Pachemos, a shipping agent in Tingis. He has been made fully aware of the rewards of faithful service and that faithlessness might well be dealt with in ways other than through the courts. In return we are paying him a small annual retainer.

“Item three. Now that we have all our arrangements in place, it's proposed that we continue to divert Mayan gold into our own trading route via this new network of companies. We propose to spend as much as we can afford on young, fit slaves for the purposes of building up our population. The aim of this is to be able to support a fleet

large and diverse enough to ensure that we are safe against attack, by Pulcher as well as the Republic

“Item four. The population here in Port has now reached more than three thousand. If we are to continue to convince Pulcher that we are still isolated, then we cannot allow that population to grow too quickly. That means that any population increases from imported slaves must take place out of his sight. The old Council had in mind to set up a complete new city on Corsica, the island to our west where Pulcher won't go. Loukas and Markos have suggested an excellent sheltered harbour they found on their second exploratory voyage. It is suggested that the Council as a whole might have a look at it as soon as the storm season is finished.

“Item five. While Loukas was in the Republic registering Limpopo Investments and making various business arrangements, he was watching for other trading opportunities. He has suggested that a new luxury being produced in India might be suitable for production in our lands. It's called 'sugar' and can best be described as crystalline honey. It fetches a high price per pound in the Mediterranean, and with our much shorter transport distance we should be able to make a tidy profit while matching the prices of the Indians. He suggests that we import some of this 'sugar cane' plant to run trials on growing it here. Apparently it grows very easily in warm wet conditions.” Minerva looked up from the page in her hands and noted that all other members of the council were also reading the notes.

“I have explained to Pelandra, Sextus and Lucius that our customary procedure is for me to now call the item number,” she reminded the new members of the Council. “That is the invitation for anyone who would like to discuss the item to raise a hand. If no discussion is required, the recommendation is considered to have been passed without dissent. I now call item one.” She looked around the table. “Item two.”

Sextus raised a hand, and a nod from Minerva was sufficient invitation for him to speak. “How certain are we that this shipping agent can be trusted?”

Minerva nodded towards Loukas. “We can be very certain,” Loukas asserted. “He is my father-in-law. But even so, he knows nothing about us other than that we demand secrecy and want him to act as our agent to preserve that secrecy. I've told him that I can say no more. But even if familial piety is not enough, he is aware that we know where we can find those whom he loves.”

“That's good,” Sextus replied, and lapsed into silence.

“Item two,” Minerva repeated. No response. “Item three.” Another glance around the table. “Item four.” Sextus raised a hand again.

“What are the implications for Port if we try to continue this pretence?”

“If this is adopted, Port will stay much as it is,” Minerva answered. “Over time, it will become more threadbare as fresh supplies from Pulcher are cut off. We will have exhibition farms that use wooden ploughs, and our linen tunics will fall from our backs to be replaced by sailcloth or hides. Port will progressively become an exhibition of former times. We must make him think that we are unprofitable, so he will eventually abandon us. Indeed, we might even abandon Port altogether, eventually, and even Capri.”

“That will be a big price to pay for those who remain.”

“I'm confident that we will find volunteers. There are many who love this place just as it is, and don't want to live in a big city,” Minerva smiled. “And any shortfall in

food or luxuries can be made good over the other eleven months of the year, when Pulcher is not here.”

“If he bothers to come,” Loukas interjected. “He has only been once, and not bothered the last five years despite the reports of war and the disappearance of the Mayan gold.”

There was a pause. “Item four,” Minerva repeated. “Item five.” No response.

“Then we move on to new matters,” Minerva concluded, turning to the next paper.

Loukas had long been the nominal point of contact with the Mayan trade, and was now entrusted with the role of overseeing the trade with the Republic. In part this was also because of his relationship with the agent Pachemos in Tingis. However, he was instructed that he must also introduce an assistant to the agent and fully inform this assistant of all arrangements so he would be able to take over smoothly in case Loukas was incapacitated. Where possible, this assistant should accompany him at all times to ensure a clear understanding.

“Father, it is good to see you again!” Loukas enthused as he embraced his father-in-law.

“And I am pleased to see you, my son!” Pachemos replied. “After believing that you had been lost at sea twenty years ago and my daughter trapped in some overseas who-knows-where, I thought I had gone senile and meeting you last year was only a dream! It is good to know you are prospering.”

“I have a letter for you, from Psuche. You will recognise her hand.” Loukas offered a folded paper to the older man. “You will see how she tells you herself that she is in good health and filled with joy to know you are also healthy. She also talks of our two sons and daughter, so you will know that I am not sweetening my story.”

The old man took the paper eagerly and the temptation to open it on the spot was obviously overwhelming. But he fought to be courteous in the company of a stranger. “And who is your colleague?” he asked.

“This is Lukios Parmenes, father,” Loukas answered. “He is not only my colleague, but a dear friend and charged with carrying on my work if the need arises. You can trust him no less than you can trust me.” Loukas stepped aside to allow Parmenes to offer his right arm to Pachemos. His smile was broad and easy.

“I am honoured to meet you, lord Pachemos,” he greeted the agent.

“Please, call me Silon, if you will permit me to call you Lukios,” Pachemos simultaneously acknowledged the respect paid to him and waived the need for it. “I notice that you carry a hellenised Roman name, as so many do today. That can only be a good thing, to weld our people together more firmly.”

“Indeed that is true, Silon. Are we not all one Republic, with a common purpose?” Lukios replied with a casual bonhomie, playing his part well. In fact, he was one of the more isolationist even among Terrapulchrans, or he would not have been trusted for appointment to this role.

Loukas broke in at this point. “Father, I have need of substantial services from you. We require you to find the best prices possible for shipments totalling around a thousand talents of gold and two thousand talents of silver every year. We also expect other

commodities to be added in time. The money raised from this trade is to be directed towards paying for substantial quantities of common goods, such as tools, cloth and some common luxury items. Each year we will give you a list of material and required quantities to be collected in the following year. The value of gold and silver in excess of these costs will be made available to me in the form of Negotiable Notes in denominations of one sestertium milia each. Are you confident you can provide this service, gaining the maximum price for our goods and providing our material at the lowest prices?"

Pachemos was confident. "I have not lived to the age of seventy without making good contacts, my son. It is possible that I might not pick up the cheapest prices on some local liquidation sale of small quantities, but overall I know I can do better for your masters than any other trader in Africa or Spain."

"I hope so, father," Loukas replied. "Because my master is both generous and harsh. He is prepared to alter our tentative agreement from our last meeting. He will give a one percent margin to you for both imports and exports instead of the fixed annual fee of our previous arrangement. That is one percent of a thousand talents of gold and two thousand talents of silver – probably much more! And we expect to be trading in very large quantities of other commodities in a few more years, so you will become very wealthy so long as you play straight."

"But my master also tells me that he has other agents, unknown to me. If they report that you are systematically milking him he will not be constrained by legalities in his response. He will act ruthlessly. Please, father, do not agree to this new arrangement unless you can perform faithfully."

Pachemos paused for a moment. Then he spoke with a quiet intensity. "Loukas, my son! I have no other sons! My own son Silon died only six years ago without children, leaving Psuche as my only living descendant. What reason do I have to live, except to prosper my grandchildren through Psuche and you? So tell your master that I will do all I can to advance you in his esteem. If I fall short then the failure is mine, not yours."

Loukas was shocked. "I didn't know about Silon's death. He was a good man."

"Yes. Even if he was not inclined towards women, he was a good man," Pachemos agreed.

Loukas pulled himself together. "So I take it that you agree to the new terms?"

"Of course I do!" Silon responded. "How could I do anything else? You and your children are my future!" Pachemos embraced his son-in-law again. "Please, consider me no less a client of your patron than you are yourself!"

Loukas embraced his father-in-law. "Then let it be done," he responded. "Our first shipment of gold is on my ship now. Please make arrangements as soon as possible for its secure collection, storage and sale. I have here a list of materiel I will need to collect from you on this date next year. Please purchase when prices are good, and store them ready for collection. Use the credit gained from selling the gold and silver for this purpose. Until next year the free cash may be invested in top-quality investments only. We demand that any investment you make on our behalf must be totally secure and readily converted to cash." He handed another letter to the old man as he spoke. "I would also be grateful if you could write, sign and seal a business reference along these

lines as an introduction for me,” as he passed another page. “I will be back tomorrow, father!” The two men embraced again.

After they had left Pachemos' office Parmenes said with a grin “How did you get to marry the daughter of so wealthy a man?”

“He was not so wealthy thirty years ago,” Loukas answered. “But he has always been an honest man and a faithful friend. Because of that he has often been invited to be a partner in the plans of other more adventurous men, and benefited greatly in the process. His wealth now is just reward for his integrity and prudence.”

“Do you expect to inherit?” Lukios continued. He wanted to understand this relationship in all its details. That was his mission from Council.

“I don't know,” Loukas replied casually. “I expect Psuche will be left a good amount, but Silon will probably spread a bit around a few friends as well. But what does that matter? Wealth means nothing in Terrapulchra! My main hope is that he lives for a lot longer yet. We need an agent on this side of the ocean.” Loukas glanced sideways to Lukios as he walked, and added “Once you're satisfied that he is trustworthy, I intend to ask him whom he would recommend as his replacement once he passes on.”

The precious metals were collected the next day by an armed company of guards serving *Eugenes et Philemon*, one of the biggest banking houses in Africa. The ingots were weighed and a receipt given for their quantity 'subject to purity to be established'. Loukas knew he could leave independent testing of purity to be organised by Pachemos. He collected his references from Pachemos and then boarded his ship to set out for southern Greater Africa.

Tosali, Further India – February, 841 AUC (88 A.D.)

Loukas had been to Further India before, on one of his first voyages as a junior officer on a Pulcher merchantmen more than thirty years ago. That was only a few years after the petty princedoms of Further India had imploded, their inept and callous rulers swept away by uprisings which promptly begged the Republic to step in to provide just government. That had been a time of turmoil, the countryside still filled with marauding bandits and demobilised soldiers.

Pulcher has sent a ship to assess the trade possibilities but not bothered going back a second time. At least, not before Loukas had been posted to the Far West. But the province had not been difficult to pacify. Most of the population were only too willing to help the Republic's cohorts obliterate the armed gangs. They were also thankful for the employment and pay that came with the infrastructure works that the new Administration initiated. Peace and civil order were achieved within a few short years.

Tamilia had already achieved Tribal status within the Republic and now Further India was talking about making their own Petition. There was an optimism in the air, and that is always good for trade.

Loukas and Lukios were both dressed in simple chitons that screamed understated elegance. Each was followed by two 'slaves', young sailors from their ship who had been chosen specifically for their fine looks and good bearing and then shaved, scrubbed, perfumed and dressed to imply the opulence of their masters.

The Terrapulchrans were accompanied by Barnabas Kupriotes, Assistant to the Manager of the Anatolian Bank, the second-largest bank doing business in Tosali. He had his own personal retinue to protect the party.

One of Kupriotes' slaves lifted the knocker on the street door of an impressive villa, and rapped it against the bronze plate three times. After only a few moments the peep slot slid open.

“Lord Kupriotes and his guests have arrived,” the slave announced to the frown he could see through the slot, and then stepped aside. The slide closed again and the door bolts could be heard sliding back. The door swung open. Kupriotes strode through, followed by Loukas and Lukios and then the personal slaves, then the armed retinue.

“Please, this way my lords,” an attractive young Indian woman said in clear Greek as she smiled and bowed slightly. She turned and led the three men and their personal slaves through a vestibule and towards an open courtyard beyond. The doorkeeper waved the armed men towards a much simpler hall off to the right where they could await the completion of their masters' business.

A prosperously-dressed man in the courtyard stood and smiled warmly. “Barnabas, it's good to see you!” he hailed cheerfully.

“Timotheos, it's kind of you to allow me to visit as such short notice,” Kupriotes replied no less warmly.

“Not at all,” Timotheos Kalates waved away the comment. “It's a welcome break from the accounts! Now, please introduce me to your two friends.”

“I present to you Loukas Solothos and Lukios Hermenes,” Kupriotes announced as he swung an arm theatrically towards the two. Greetings and smiles were exchanged, right arms offered and accepted.

“By pure co-incidence they came to the bank yesterday, expressing an interest in investing in a sugar plantation,” Kupriotes continued. “They asked if I knew of any of the bank's customers who might be thinking of selling. Naturally, I thought of you immediately!”

“That's very kind of you, Barnabas,” Kalates replied, “but most of the other plantation owners already know that I'll be liquidating my assets and going home. I've already received a very tempting offer.”

“There's no harm in having another bid on the table, Timotheos,” Kupriotes answered with a cunning smile.

“That's true,” Kalates conceded. Then turning to his other two guests, “My lords, please take a seat, have a pastry and some wine! It seems we have some common interests to discuss.”

Loukas smiled and accepted the invitation, sitting on one end of a polished marble bench. Lukios took a place beside him and reached for a pastry while the other two men sat on a second bench on the opposite side of the low table.

“I gather you are new to Further India, Loukas,” Kalates opened the conversation.

“Yes,” Loukas agreed. The less they know about us the better, Loukas had already decided beforehand. “But our Patron has heard that Further India is ripe for investment, and has sent us to investigate.”

“And who is your Patron, Loukas?”

“He trades under the name 'Limpopo Investments', mostly in precious metals. But the margins in that trade are narrowing. He's looking for growth, and thinks that sugar might be a commodity worth adding to his portfolio.”

“Indeed it is, Loukas!” Kalates said heartily. “I came out here not twenty years ago, and already I have increased a modest family fortune by tenfold! Demand is rising at more than ten percent per year. That's faster than supply can keep up, so prices are as strong as ever.”

“Then if I may ask, Timotheos, why are you selling?” Loukas asked with a smile.

“One can only drink so much wine and eat so much quail, Loukas!” Kalates laughed his reply. “I have enough behind me now that neither I nor my two sons need ever worry again. But to be blunt, the climate here is not to my liking. I would prefer to live in the more gentle weather of Athens, or maybe Ephesus. I will attend the theatre, enjoy the cultured life, and let my fortune maintain itself through less strenuous means.”

“I understand, Timotheos,” Loukas replied with his own smile. “My Patron shares that same attitude. That's why I am entrusted with so much authority to act on his behalf. And if I may boast, I apply myself diligently to being worthy of that trust.” He smiled as he paused. “So I would be grateful if you might allow me to inspect your plantation and examine your books. I would like to make a fair offer for your plantation, to the benefit of us both.”

“Well, you heard me tell Barnabas that I already have a very attractive offer. But if you wish to make a bid yourself, I will welcome it. When do you wish to inspect?”

“As soon as possible, Timotheos,” Loukas replied.

Kalates looked across to Kupriotes. “Barnabas, have you confirmed that lord Solothos genuinely represents this company, and that it has the funds to make a genuine offer? I don't want to open my books to just anyone.”

Loukas snapped his fingers before Kupriotes could answer. Immediately one of Loukas' slaves stepped forward and opened the satchel he was carrying. He removed a folder. Loukas took the folder and passed it across to Kalates.

Kalates opened the folder and looked at the top page. It was from Pachemos, bearing his seal and signature. The text was one short paragraph.

I confirm that I act as agent for Limpopo Investments. This is a company registered in Port Limpopo and trades predominantly in gold and silver bullion, typically a thousand talents of gold per annum. The current Representative of the Principal of Limpopo Investments is Loukas Solothos, assisted by Lukios Hermenes.

Kalates passed the page to Kupriotes. "Do you know anything about this Silon Pachemos, Barnabas?"

"Yes, of course," Kupriotes answered even before the page was in his hand. He paused to scan it. "Yes, this looks genuine. And Pachemos is one of the leading shipping agents in Africa. He has an immaculate reputation."

The next page was the Bankers Receipt for the gold and silver unloaded in Tingis. Kupriotes again verified the seal.

The third page was a certified copy of the Registration Certificate of Limpopo Investments.

Loukas smiled. "You will understand that I didn't think it prudent to bring too many valid Negotiable Notes with me. That would have been asking to be robbed! But we have the cash with our Bankers to pay out in full, should you accept our offer. It will just be a matter of sending a letter to our Banker to transfer the funds to Barnabas, to credit to your account."

Kalates had been convinced. "Whenever you wish to view my books you will be welcome," he agreed.

"Then I would like to inspect the plantation starting first thing tomorrow morning, and then move onto the books immediately afterwards. I would be assisted by Lukios and a few other men, if I may. Then we can talk about a price."

Kalates rose from the bench and offered his right arm. "Agreed!" he said with a smile.

Loukas was a sailor, not an accountant. But Lukios was an accountant and he knew what he was doing. He also had half a dozen trained assistants with him. Three days later, armed with a pouch full of closely written pages, he asked Kalates for assistance.

"Lord Kalates, I would appreciate your good offices to have Barnabas supply me with a copy of your personal account. Then I would ask you to introduce me to some of your business contacts."

"Why do you want to see my private banking account, Lukios?" Kalates asked. "Lord Loukas is offering to buy only the plantation, not my entire wealth. The plantation's books record all its banking transactions."

"You are quite right, of course," Lukios answered with a smile. "And I must say how impressed I am with the yields your plantation manages to achieve. It's producing significantly more sugar per iugerum than anyone else in the area. The different

management and work practices you seem to have introduced two years ago have had a startling effect.” Lukios raised his eyebrows and nodded. “And to think that I would never have discovered this dramatic improvement if I had studied only the last two years’ worth of accounts!”

Kalates frowned darkly. “What are you saying, Lukios?” he demanded.

Lukios smiled back. “I am saying that the books show your plantation to be producing in abundance and it has done so for the last two years. Before that its performance was rather ordinary.”

“But why do you want to pry into my personal wealth?”

Lukios dropped the smile and stared straight into Kalates' face. “Because I think there might be some connection. And the business contacts I would like to meet include the traders who buy your product. I want to have their assurances that they will continue to buy from us after we buy your plantation. And while I am chatting with them, I just might raise the question of precisely what quantities each of them do indeed buy from you.”

“That's all noted in our books!”

“Yes, and I want to know what quantities are noted in *their* books.” Lukios paused, waiting for a response. Kalates gaped and worked his jaw for a moment, then closed his mouth. Lukios started speaking again. “Don't worry, lord Kalates. We both know that presenting false books is a major crime. But we have no intention of taking this any further. That would simply complicate what should be a straight-forward purchase.”

Kalates dropped his gaze. “Yes, you are right. Two years ago I decided I wanted to go back home. But rather than just putting the plantation on the market, I decided to make it appear a more attractive investment. So I started to make dummy entries for additional shipments to my wholesalers, shipments that never existed, and paid for these in cash taken from my personal account. It cost me nothing to do this except the three per cent tax each time I put the money through a cycle. But with sale prices generally around ten times annual profit, every sestertium milia of cycled cash was gaining for me ten sestertium milia of sale value for a cost of only thirty sesterces in tax. Well worth it!”

“Well worth it, if it works,” Lukios agreed. “But it didn't.”

“So now you know the true state of affairs, let us negotiate a price based on the accounts from more than two years ago,” Kalates tried to move on.

“Yes, that sounds like a good idea. I've discussed that with Loukas, and he's prepared to pay three times the average profit over the previous three years.”

“Three times?” Kalates squawked. “That's barely quarter-price!”

Lukios smiled warmly. “Yes, but much better than being prosecuted! Loukas has always been a man eager to avoid embarrassment.”

Kalates knew he had little choice. Prosecution would certainly result in conviction, and conviction would mean not only the plantation would be lost but a good part of his savings and other investments as well. Depending on the mood of the jury, it could end in total confiscation or even slavery. He bowed his head again. “Loukas drives a hard bargain, but what else can I say? Let us conclude the agreement tomorrow.” He gestured towards the door, and Lukios took the hint without offence.

Kalates slowly paced the floor. He resolved to remove and conceal those old books overnight. Without them Loukas would have no hard evidence. Barnabas would not

surrender the details of his personal account because he was into it up to his ears as well. There would be no paper or money trail to follow!

Oh, no! The Fraud Assessors! They had the power to examine his accounts! Then they could examine his buyers' accounts. And then his own private account. It would be enough for the Assessors to give evidence that the extra payments in the plantation account do not match those of the buyers but that they did indeed correspond to cash withdrawals of his own funds. He was lost!

But would Loukas bother? Would he spend his time and effort waiting around to prosecute the case? Surely he has other things to do with his time rather than spend it to no profit for himself. Perhaps, Kalates thought to himself, if he refused this piddly offer then Loukas would just walk away and buy some other plantation, or even start a new one. That would leave Kalates free to sell to the next fool at the inflated price. In fact, it occurred to him to destroy the genuine books from those earlier years so no new buyer will be able to see the same discrepancy that Lukios had picked up. He could say they had been destroyed in a fire or something. He hurried to his stables and carriage house.

Kalates arrived at the plantation office two hours before sunset. He walked straight into the manager's office.

"Demetrios, I need to do some research on our operations over the last few years," he announced with a tinge of impatience in his voice. "It is not easy, selling to someone as suspicious as lord Solothos! Please give me all our records for the last five years."

"Oh!" Demetrios replied in surprise. "Then you must have missed lord Hermenes on the way! I wonder how that could have happened."

"What do you mean?" Kalates asked darkly.

"Lord Hermenes was examining the books this morning, and had some questions I couldn't answer. So he took them with him, to ask you in person." Demetrios was not in the least bit perturbed. "I wonder how he missed you. There's only one road between here and the city. But he said he would have them back here in time to write up the day's accounts, so it's probably best to just wait. He can't be too far away."

Kalates felt a chill up his spine. He was certain that Lukios would not be back with the books any time soon. He had delivered the ultimatum and this was the demonstration of its sincerity. But he bit back the panic welling in his throat. "I can't wait right now, Demetrios. I'll be back tomorrow so hold the books here when they are returned. If lord Hermenes wants to ask questions, tell him I will be here tomorrow around the third hour. We can talk here."

The coach ride back into town went by in a blur as Kalates tried to think through his options. Could he go to the rabduchoi and report a theft? 'Not wise!' he sneered to himself. If the books were recovered they would be held as evidence, which was the last thing he wanted.

Perhaps a counter-threat of personal violence? No, that would only prompt Loukas to take even stronger protective measures, perhaps even go to the Fraud Assessors himself.

Perhaps to hit without warning and recover the books. He knew a few men in the city who specialised in such tasks. But Loukas would be alert to that risk. He would have protection and probably not be spending the night in the town anyway. He would probably be safely aboard his ship in the port, if not somewhere even more difficult to

reach. And would he leave the books just lying around? No, he would have to be captured alive and conscious, to force the information out of him at swordpoint.

In despair Kalates realised there was only one safe option. He would have to accept the offer. Then he would look to strike before the sale became final. But he must not act until he was certain that the books could be seized in the process.

There was a note waiting for him when he arrived home.

*Loukas Solothos, acting with full authority for Limpopo Investments,
to lord Timotheos Kalates,*

Warm salutations!

Lukios has told me that he has spoken to you earlier today concerning our preferred basis for establishing a sale price for your sugar plantation. Since then he has arrived at a firm offer based on this approach.

I am pleased to make a formal offer for the plantation, all equipment, all stock and produce on hand, and all other obligations, assets and liabilities as listed in your accounts as of sunset yesterday. Our offer is eight hundred talents of gold, with this amount to be held in trust by your Banker and adjusted five days after settlement to account for any trade between sunset yesterday and settlement date.

This offer is subject to the usual terms for such transactions; that you undertake to gain no interest in any aspect of the sugar industry for at least five years, that you hold commercial-in-confidence all aspects of the plantation and associated dealings, etcetera.

This offer is also subject to the following additional explicit conditions.

The contract for sale is to be executed within three days and settlement shall be completed on a date of our choosing within three months. Payment shall be acceptable as satisfaction if offered by any combination of Banker's Guarantee issued by Eugenēs et Philemon of Tingis, Negotiable Notes issued by any Tribe of the Republic, or cash. Settlement shall occur in the lobby of the Tosali Basilica or the office of the Anatolian Bank as the Purchaser specifies, unless some other location is agreed.

Until settlement the plantation shall continue to be operated in utmost good faith as a going concern and you shall do nothing to injure its profitability and good standing. We reserve the right to execute settlement while withholding an amount for any damages which we might claim on this basis without invalidating the settlement. Should you contest any such deduction or claim we might make against you, that dispute shall be settled in the commercial courts. If we are found to have withheld more than we can justify we will refund the excess and also pay damages as the court might find appropriate.

I will have a formal contract generally along these lines drawn up as a matter of urgency and have it delivered to you as soon as possible. I thank you on behalf of Limpopo Investments as well as personally for your courtesy and co-operation in this matter. May you enjoy a long, pleasant and healthy life!

They must have been watching me, Kalates thought to himself, to have known when I had gone out to the plantation and to have this delivered while I was absent. But at least I will have up to three months to do something about it. That period was probably stated because they will need that much time to send a message to Tingis, deposit the payment, and then return with the Guarantee. That will give me time to find those books and then get rid of Loukas. If there's no-one here within three months with both the authority and payment to complete settlement then the contract lapses. Well, I have two days before I need to reply. Time to think.

Lukios called around late the next day. Kalates dared not refuse to receive him.

"Greetings, Lukios," Kalates smiled as he offered his arm. The smile on Lukios' face had all the characteristics of friendly and sincere as he took the offered arm.

"Lord Kalates, thank you for seeing me without notice. I have just come from Loukas. He wanted you to have a copy of our proposed contract as soon as possible so you could consider it fully." Lukios held out a hand to his notional slave, and a leather pouch was passed to him. He delved into it and pulled out a sheaf of papers. "With your permission, Loukas will be here just after noon tomorrow to execute the contract with you. Barnabas has indicated he can attend to witness the documents."

"Thank you Lukios," Kalates smiled back as he took the sheets. "I will go through them and send a message to Loukas if I see any problems or need any changes."

"Oh, you will not see any problems or need any changes, lord Kalates," Lukios replied confidently. "This is the offer."

'Take it or else!' Kalates finished that last sentence in his own mind. These Africans can be just a bit cocky at times. "Then I thank you for your care," Kalates said. "But we are still standing in the atrium! Could I offer you some refreshment?"

"Thank you, lord Kalates, but I have several errands to run before sunset. If you would now excuse me?"

"Of course!" Kalates replied. "And I thank you again for being so prompt in the midst of your busyness."

Kalates saw Lukios out the door and started reading through the draft contract as he slowly strolled back to his office. Three pages later he was left in no doubt. The contract gave him very little wriggle room. Even the desperation measure of claiming illness on the day of settlement or even simply not attending had been blocked. The contract included a default clause to the effect that if he or his agent failed to complete settlement at the prescribed place and time on the set date, then settlement would be deemed to have been completed as soon as the contract sum had been deposited for safekeeping in his name 'at the office of any bank, temple or senior public official in Tosali'. That was some catch-all!

No, the only way out of this would be the ultimate option. He had to ensure that it would be Limpopo Investments which failed to turn up at the settlement. He would have to ensure that a Terrible Accident or two happens while they send to Tingis for the Banker's Guarantee. In the meantime it would be counter-productive to drag the feet. He must look as though he is totally cowed and only too willing to take a haircut rather than bite back at this blackmail.

The next morning Kalates sent a message to Kupriotes, asking him to serve as a witness to the contract at the third hour after noon. Another note was sent to Loukas, proposing to sign and exchange contracts in the office of Anatolian Bank at the third hour after noon. Within an hour their agreement had been received.

Kalates made a point of arriving well before time. Kupriotes greeted him effusively as he was shown into the formal office. "That was very quick work, Timotheos," Kupriotes said with a smile and some enthusiasm. "They must have made a good offer!"

"Yes," Kalates answered reservedly. "Eight hundred talents isn't a huge sum of money, but there were other considerations that made it very attractive. So don't show any sign of disapproval."

"Eight hundred talents!" Kupriotes was shocked. "Why, that's giving it away! What other considerations could they have put on the table to compensate for that?"

"With all respect, Barnabas, that's not your concern," Kalates tried to stop the conversation. "Just show no sign of surprise or interest, much less discontent. You're a witness today, not a contracting party."

"With all respect, Timotheos, it *is* my concern," Kupriotes argued. "I was promised five per cent of the additional value when I agreed to this scheme, but now you're selling it at reduced value! What profit do I get for my risk?"

"As you just admitted, you took a risk. That risk didn't pay off," Kalates answered flatly. "Just be thankful you're not being skinned into the bargain, as I am."

"Ah, so that's the 'other consideration' in play!" Kupriotes saw it all in a flash. "But how did they find out?"

"Because that idiot Demetrios gave them access to the old books," Kalates spat.

"But they were not entitled to them!" Kupriotes objected. "By law you are only obliged to show them the current year and the two previous."

"Lukios asked and Demetrios complied," Kalates explained. "Whether he was just too eager to be helpful or whether he was bribed, who knows? But it gets worse! They have actually stolen the books for the last five years, and threatened to prosecute me for Fraud unless I sell cut-price." Kalates looked around the office, angry. "Well, now you know. So keep your mouth shut, play the part, and we'll see what we can do to redeem the situation before settlement. I have a few ideas but we'll have to bide our time."

The two men settled into a desultory discussion until there was a knock on the door. The door to the outer office opened slightly and Kupriotes' secretary poked his head around the frame.

"Lord Solothos is here, my lords, with lord Hermenes and lord Atticus, saying they have an appointment."

"Yes, show him in please."

A moment later Loukas and Lukios walked into the office. Behind them was the Assistant Manager of the Bank of Tamilya.

"Greetings, Loukas, and you Lukios! Farthenes! Welcome into my humble office!" Kupriotes rose in professional courtesy to his counterpart.

"Thank you, Barnabas," Farthenes Atticus answered smoothly. "I'm here as the banker of choice for Limpopo Investments in this city. But it's also a personal pleasure to see you again. We are both too busy!"

“Now, let us get down to business,” Loukas cut through the forced civilities. “I know that you are both very busy men, and your time is valuable. Let us have the contracts signed and witnessed. I have taken the liberty of having five copies made; one for each party, one for each witness, and one to be registered in the Basilica for their records of land and business registration.” He laid out five copies on Kupriotes’ table.

“With your permission I will sign first, followed by Timotheos and Lukios, then our two witnesses,” he explained, and uninvited took the quill standing in the inkpot on the desk. He went around the table signing each copy in turn and then offered the quill to Kalates.

Kalates signed all five copies and in turn handed over the quill to Lukios. Then it was passed to Kupriotes. As Kupriotes bent over the first copy, Atticus called for a pause.

“Excuse me, Barnabas, but we have obligations here,” he explained. Kupriotes let his annoyance show for a moment, but composed himself as he straightened.

“Yes, of course,” he agreed. “But I considered that an unnecessary formality when dealing with experienced businessmen.” Then he took on a more formal tone.

“My lords, have you read and understood this contract?”

“Yes,” Loukas, Lukios and Kalates agreed together.

“And does this show the full extent of the transaction between you, there being no other inducements or considerations not explicit in this document?”

“It does,” Loukas said, while Kalates simply answered ‘Yes’ again. Lukios nodded and gave a small grunt of agreement.

“Thank you,” Kupriotes said, and bent back to the desk.

Soon all five men had signed and Kupriotes offered his right arm to Loukas. “Thank you for making use of our services, Loukas. Perhaps in time, if you decide to operate through multiple banks in this Tribe, we might be able to be of greater service. Until then,” he smiled as he moved to the office door and opened it.

“Thank you, Barnabas, but our work is not yet done,” Loukas raised a hand and smiled. “In accordance with the terms of the contract, I now propose to settle immediately.”

“But the contract allowed three months!” Kalates blurted out.

“The contract allowed Limpopo Investments three months,” Loukas corrected him. “But it also allows for us to settle any time within that period, as we choose. I now require you to settle immediately.”

“But you need to send away for the Banker’s Guarantee,” Kupriotes objected.

Loukas held his hand out towards his notional slave, who passed him a leather pouch. He drew out some sheets of paper and an envelope.

He placed these on the table. There were three Banker’s Guarantees for 250 talents of gold. Then he started counting out Negotiable Notes issued by Africa Tribe. The Notes were in denominations of fifty sestertium milia each.

“Fifty talents of gold is worth one thousand two hundred and fifty sestertium milia, at least in African denominations,” Loukas said, and counted out twenty five notes. “I would greatly appreciate it if we could all now sign this second set of documents which will acknowledge settlement in full.” A second set of five pages was taken from the pouch.

Kupriotes and Kalates looked to each other glumly as Loukas went around the table again, signing the five copies of the second document. This time it was Atticus who recited the formal questions to be asked before witnessing a legal document. The deal was done.

“Thank you, my lords,” Loukas said with a smile. “Now if you would be kind enough to also sign this short note, Timotheos. It is just to confirm to Demetrios that Limpopo Investments now owns the plantation, and that I am the new owner’s representative...?”

This was one document too far for Kalates. He smiled politely as he said “I am sorry, Loukas, but I can’t. How can I know that you have that authority? I know only that you had authority to buy the plantation, not to manage it.”

“Very prudent of you Timotheos, you are quite right.” Loukas struck out the part of the letter concerning his own status. Now it only confirmed that the plantation belonged to Limpopo Investments. “Then could you please confirm the sale. I will leave Demetrios to put together the puzzle about management for himself.”

“You have your confirmation of settlement, Loukas. Show him that. Now if you will all excuse me, my lords...” Kalates walked out the still-open office door.

“That was perfectly done, Lukios,” Loukas smiled as he sat back in the carriage and commended his partner in this enterprise. “From his reaction when we tabled the payment, it was obvious that he was playing for time. Asking for three months was the perfect deception! He might even have resorted to violence if he had realised how quickly we could act.”

“Well, it’s too late for him now if he’s as intelligent as he seems. I doubt he’ll throw it all away simply for the sake of revenge,” Lukios agreed. “Now starts the hard work.”

“Yes,” Loukas agreed. “It’s time to put our new staff in place.”

Loukas and Lukios set out for the plantation the next morning, with two men and a woman with them in the midst of their retinue.

“Demetrios, good morning,” Lukios offered his right arm to the manager.

“Good morning, lord Hermenes,” Demetrios took the arm deferentially. “My lord, where are the books? Lord Kalates was out here two days ago asking for them, and you had promised me they would be back before sunset two days ago. We’ve been keeping temporary notes since then, but that’s not entirely legal. The Day Book is supposed to be filled in every day.”

“My apologies, Demetrios,” Lukios said with sincerity. “If there’s any problem, I assure you that I will explain that you bear no fault. Just keep the temporary notes inside the updated book, to show you did indeed record every day. But that’s not the main reason for my visit today. You have already met lord Solothos,” Demetrios gave a respectful nod of the head towards Loukas, who smiled a response. “Now allow me to introduce you to Gnaeus Parrius, who will be the new Director...”

“New Director?” Demetrios was taken by surprise.

“Yes. The plantation is now owned by Limpopo Investments. We signed contracts yesterday, and paid on the spot,” Lukios explained. “Lord Solothos has the documentation if you want to look at it.”

“No, I will take your word for it, lord Hermenes,” Demetrios did not want his new masters to think he questioned their integrity.

“Gnaeus will be the Owner’s Representative here and act as Company Director,” Lukios continued. “Of course, we would very much like you to stay here as Manager, and we propose to increase your salary by ten percent if you would consent to that.”

“That is most generous of you, my lord,” Demetrios showed due gratitude.

“Then it is done,” Lukios confirmed. “Atia is his wife, but not for her is the boring life of a gentlelady!” Lukios smiled. “You will find her very busy around the plantation!” The female among them smiled and stepped forward, offering her right arm as a male would. Then she remembered that this was not done by ladies in the Republic. She quickly turned her hand palm-down and held it limp, so it could be taken in the more traditional manner.

“And Saron will be Assistant to Gnaeus,” the second man stepped forward and grips were exchanged.

“And now, Demetrios, I must leave you.” Lukios offered his arm once again, exchanged a grip, and turned for the door. Loukas also offered his arm and followed Lukios.

Gnaeus broke the pause. “Demetrios, you will find us unlike any other employers in your experience. So please feel free to ask for clarification whenever you're confused. We will take no offence, so long as you are diligent. But there are a few rules that we must insist on.

“The first is that our employer absolutely demands that confidentiality must be maintained. And this extends to everything! He is a good master, generous and faithful to all who are loyal to him, but he hates infidelity with a burning rage. He has the power to make a man totally unemployable if he finds that he has been betrayed. He is remorseless in this regard. If ever you want to leave his employ honourably you will be released, perhaps with a parting gift of appreciation. But I warn you, never betray him!

“The second is that we three will not live in Tosali. We will live here on the plantation and we will watch and learn all about sugar cultivation and processing. Our employer has it in mind that this will be only the first of many plantations, a learning experience and trial plant to gain an understanding of what is involved. He will then apply the brightest minds in the world to introducing improvements and innovations, and if these are successful they will be applied to other plantations that he will be buying or establishing. If you perform well you will be given greater responsibility and rewarded appropriately.

“The third is that our employer is more than merely our employer. He loves us as though we are his children and we respect and honour him as if our father. That makes all of us brothers and sisters to each other. So you will not find Saron addressing me as ‘lord’, except perhaps in polite company. Nor need you. Do you have any questions?”

“Ah, yes, lord Parrius; what changes do you intend to make?”

“None for the moment, Demetrios,” Parrius smiled. “Except that it might take some time for you to stop calling me ‘lord’ and start calling me ‘Gnaeus’. Demetrios smiled in return.

“I must advise you, Gnaeus,” Demetrios used the familiar name tentatively, “there is no suitable accommodation here on the plantation for you. It will take some time to commission and build a proper villa.”

“That’s not a problem, Demetrios. Let us go for a walk around the plantation and choose a suitable site. I will engage the builders myself.”

“But where will lord Saron live?” Demetrios was perplexed.

“With us, of course!” Parrius smiled as though he was announcing the betrothal of his daughter. “I told you! We of Limpopo Investments are brothers and sisters! Never forget that, Demetrios. If you show proper loyalty, diligence and competence you might even be invited to join us.”

Cras, July 1, 844 AUC (91 A.D.)

Much had happened in the last three years, and most of it good. The new port and future capital of the new republic had been founded and was growing rapidly. It was a measure of the spirit of the colony that it had been called 'Cras', Latin for 'Tomorrow'. Port Sertorius had been planned to grow naturally, slowly, by generation after generation of children. But this new city was being deliberately designed to cater for a hundred thousand citizens within a decade. It was imperative that Terrapulchra have the manpower to support an invincible navy as quickly as possible and that would need a large population to support it. It was only a matter of time before the Republic discovered them and set to cleaning out what they saw as a den of pirates.

Minerva had retained the confidence of the Council, primarily because she was brilliant in the Chair. Meetings under her control neither wasted time nor caused anyone to feel passed over. Running meetings efficiently is a gift that few people have but she had it in abundance.

Pandoros had also come into his own. His military background had made him very much aware of the principle of 'Economy of Force', and he transferred this over to civil society. Every pair of hands was put to work, even the injured or maimed being used for whatever tasks were within their capabilities.

This was driven by necessity. The prosperity, good food and good medical care provided by the colony brought about a booming birth rate, and the purchase of thousands of slaves meant the population was indeed growing rapidly. This created the need to clear more land, build more accommodation, plant new farms, amplify water supply and sewer disposal and produce more food. The demand for ever more infrastructure was always snapping at his heels.

The lessons from the first days of the colony had been well learnt. Females were now fully integrated into the economy, all children were being educated and housing was standardised into a small number of set designs that allowed rapid construction by men and women operating almost by rote. There had never been a huge gap between the standard of living of the elite in this society and that of the bulk of the workers, even in the days of Valerianus. Now such trappings of class and status simply could not be afforded. There was no time! The only 'privilege' available was recognition of competence and diligence leading to the respect of one's peers and promotion to more responsible positions.

And that was about the only thing that promotion actually gained for the new elite; more responsibility and respect. It had been decreed that preference for accommodation would go to those with the greater need. Housing closer to the facilities went to the old or the injured, not to the young, the fit or the respected. Larger quarters were allocated to larger families. All differential in pay scales, never great, was abolished. All were entitled to eat at the common mess hall or take a prepared meal home, all were entitled to the baths and laundry and all citizens were paid the same allowance for personal luxuries or entertainment, depending only on age. Not even Minerva and Pandoros drew a denarius more in their monthly entitlement than any other citizen over thirty years of age.

This first meeting of the incoming Council followed what had become a tradition under Minerva. All tentative plans left by the previous Council were recited and explained for the two new members and formally accepted as on-going policy. Then Pandoros was formally invited to act as Consul again, which he formally accepted. Next came the latest Reports.

“Stefanos?” Minerva called. Although Stefanos was not a member of the Council he had been entrusted with the mission of assessing the possibility of the coca leaf trade. He rose from the seat he had been permitted to occupy.

“Thank you, Minerva,” he addressed the Chair, and then looked around. “Thank you, Council members. Most of you were on the Council almost two years ago when I was sent back to the Moche, to test the possible scale of their production of leaves. I went with Ariel and a few other Maya-speakers, hoping that there would be some commonality in their languages. Unfortunately, this proved to be not so. We spent several months in the largest of the towns from April to October last year, trying to learn their language. This was not easy but Ariel went about his business very expertly. He learnt enough to make himself understood on basic things, enough to survive, and he was confident that in a year or two he would be competent enough to be able to negotiate long-term arrangements. So I left him there as he requested so he could reduce Moche to a written language with an alphabet and grammar. But while we were in the region we continually moved from town to town trading for more and more leaves. The natives soon got the message that so many as they could supply, we would buy. I am hopeful that Ariel will be able to persuade them to step up to full commercial production as quickly as possible.”

“Your written Report says you returned with three talents' weight of leaves,” Minerva commented.

“Yes,” Stefanos agreed. “They weighed a bit less by the time we got home as they dried out. But our physicians have used the dry leaf to ease childbirth for some of the women and they report that the dry leaf is still effective. So perhaps weight is a poor measure of value.” He dared to shrug. “Perhaps those among us more learned in these things might be able to extract the essence of these leaves into an elixir or something more convenient and standardised.”

Minerva spoke at this point. “Our inland survey of the Neck went well enough, even though the land is rugged and covered in jungle. It is suggested that it would take three hundred men about two years to build a road between the two oceans, and then we would need to build a small port and settlement at each end with a hundred men to keep the road in good repair and service the trade,” Minerva reminded the Council members as well as Stefanos. *(Note to the modern reader. It is worth mentioning at this point that 'men' is a not-entirely-accurate translation. Unless specifically intending a reference to a male, Terrapulchrans usually used 'anthropos' rather than 'aner' when speaking Greek, or 'homo' rather than 'vir' when speaking Latin. But to use the more accurate 'person' or 'human' would be an overly-tedious translation.)* Then she looked straight down the table to the Consul. “Pandoros, I understand that you have worked out a way of comparing the benefits of putting men to different classes of work, so you can use them most efficiently. How much would we need to profit from this coca trade to justify allocating this scale of manpower?”

“At present, I value a fully fit man with skills suitable for the task at about four pounds of gold per year,” Pandoros answered. “But that's partly because of the high urgency given to building accommodation at the moment. Once the population reaches a level so that the immigration increase represents a smaller percentage of total population, the value of a worker's productivity will drop too.”

Minerva nodded her appreciation. “Then just to carry on the trade, and not counting the set-up costs, we need to look at four hundred pounds of gold per annum. Setting up would cost us two years of twelve hundred pounds, that's twenty-four hundred pounds, so let's spread that over ten years. So our annualised costs would be about six hundred and forty pounds of gold, about nine talents.” She looked again to Stefanos. “Assuming that we can sell the leaf in the Republic for its weight in gold, that means that we would need at least three times the quantities you gathered, Stefanos, every year. Do you think the Moche will be able to produce that much?”

“It is hard to say, Minerva, but I would expect so. It is still not too late in the year to round South Point in the southern summer and find out what Ariel has been able to discover. A return visit plus his improved language skills should encourage the Moche to become trade-croppers. Let us ask them if they can meet demand.”

Minerva smiled. “Your first trip was a three-year expedition away from home, followed by only a couple of months before the second trip which took almost two years. Now, after only two months home you're volunteering for a third voyage! Are you keeping a woman out there, or something?” The Council chuckled. Minerva looked to Pandoros again. “Do you have any more important use for two ships and seventy men?”

“The only alternative use for the ships would be to explore somewhere else,” Pandoros replied. “Since we already have good charts of all the coasts within reasonable range and exploring up rivers is better done by oar power, I would suggest that this would be the best use of these two caravels. So this would only cost us the loss of manpower. Seventy men for two years costs out at 560 pounds of gold; say eight talents. Add that to what you said earlier and spread it over ten years, and that is less than another talent per year. So we are looking at around ten talents per annum as the break-even point to justify the investment. I think that we could afford that initial investment of eight talents worth of manpower up front just to find out if it is possible,” he grimaced slightly. “Yes, I would say that would be man-days well spent.”

Minerva looked around the table. “Are we agreed?” She asked, and all and responded 'yes'. “Then I would be grateful if you could prepare two ships for another voyage, Stefanos.” She smiled.

Stefanos bowed slightly, and left the room to allow the confidential business to be discussed.

“Loukas has received a report from Atia in Further India,” Minerva read from the agenda. “Please, Loukas...?”

Loukas stood, despite the pain in his hip. The day he couldn't stand to address the Council would be the day he would resign, he had sworn to himself. In fact, this last election he had announced to the Sardinola constituency that he represented that he didn't want to nominate this time around, but he had been prevailed upon to serve 'one more year' while the others started to look at each other for a successor. He had already handed over most of the responsibility for Trade to Lukios.

“Lady Chair, my brothers and sisters,” he started as was his habit. “Atia has been confident for the last year that the Tosali team has the knowledge and expertise to start a sugar plantation here in Terrapulchra, and the trial plantings made last year outside Cras have been very successful. We have also built up a good relationship with Rhine Steel, a company in Germania, for our steel to trade with the Maya and to use ourselves. By coincidence Rhine Steel also happen to be a major supplier of refining equipment and other heavy industrial goods. There's no reason why we shouldn't buy more sugar refining kettles on the pretext of expanding our operations in Further India, and instead bring them back here to allow our new plantations to go into commercial production next season.

“I urge the Council to adopt Atia's recommendations that she and Gnaeus be brought back to run the new industry and teach more managers here and that another couple be sent to Tosali to learn the business under Saron.” Loukas sat.

Brutus raised a hand, and a nod from Minerva gave him the call.

“I support Atia's recommendation about commercial production here. But would this not be an opportune time to sell the Tosali plantation? The more people we have stationed permanently overseas, the greater the risk we are taking.”

“You have a good point, Brutus,” Loukas conceded. “But for the moment I think it would be helpful for us to maintain an on-going and stable business, for the sake of more future plantation managers gaining experience. It will also provide us with an inconspicuous source of more root stock in case we suffer loss of our Terrapulchran plantation by natural disaster. At least we should wait until we have several widely-dispersed plantations. But I can see that in a handful of years we will indeed sell the Tosali plantation as you suggest.”

No more hands were raised. Minerva sensed that there was not yet a consensus, so she decided to leave the question hanging and moved on. This is what made her such a good Chair. “Then we will think about that and see if we are ready to bring it to a vote tomorrow. Next is Chimines.”

Chimines was less formal than Loukas and spoke while seated. “I have circulated a paper written by Marius Tenna. He has found that pressing the white flesh of coconuts and then separating out the fibre and water can produce a good cooking oil. He reports that this lasts longer than olive oil before going rancid. Therefore it should be preferred in warmer climates such as ours, and also in Bantuland, Africa and the Indias. He suggests that this should be investigated to see if we can do this on an industrial scale, both as an import-replacement and possibly as another export product. Please read his paper tonight. I have asked him to attend tomorrow so we can ask questions.” Chimines sat.

“Pithes, you have given notice of a possible new source of raw materials?” Minerva invited the new representative from Eastern Port, elected after the death of the enormously-respected Demetrios.

“Yes, but this is admittedly not a matter of urgency. I commend it as something to be kept in mind, to be followed up as manpower becomes available,” he opened tentatively. “But it occurs to me that the new continents probably contain secrets that we cannot even imagine at present. Look at how the new land of China provided

commodities nobody could have imagined! Or the Spice Islands, or Bantuland and southern Greater Africa!

“I suggest that these new lands probably contain treasures and marvels beyond our imaginings. And that means profit! Until now we have done no more than follow the coasts. I understand why this has been our practice so I mean no criticism, but it was not until Psaretos went inland that the stunning wealth of the Limpopo was discovered. Who knows what lies inland in our own new continents? Here we are, talking about the coca leaf trade that might or might not fetch ten or twelve talents of gold each year. But for all we know, the inland might offer rewards of hundreds or even thousands of talents!”

He paused and looked around the table, “If there's one thing that we should have learnt in the thirty years since our glorious founders first discovered this land, it is that there is opportunity everywhere. For every expedition to the far north which gained us knowledge but little profit, there is a voyage to the west that finds the Maya, or a voyage to the south that discovers the Moche! The more voyages we make into new lands, the more we find sources of wealth that we would never have imagined!

“Therefore I urge that we deliberately put in place a policy that we support an Inland Exploration Division. I suggest we dedicate at least seventy suitable men and enough river-worthy craft to be a permanent cadre to explore inland via the rivers. We should leave it to their expertise to decide which avenues deserve priority.” He sat abruptly.

Minerva turned first to Pandoros. “Can we afford that diversion of resources?” she asked.

“Lady, we can afford whatever the Council wants, so long as it is understood that these resources will need to be subtracted from some other work or works. I am the servant of the Council.” He spread his hands expressively.

Minerva looked around the table. After a pause, Loukas raised a hand and was answered with a nod.

“Brother Pithes is right,” he answered simply. “We wouldn't even be here today except that someone thirty years ago wanted to throw money into the unknown, to see if it would come back to him! And look at the result!” Loukas gestured left and right to make his point. “Pandoros, if we were to adopt this policy as well as exploring the coca leaf trade, what works would need to be cut back?”

Pandoros leant back in his chair, thinking. At length he answered. “In itself, seventy men would not be a huge burden in terms of numbers. But these would have to be men in their prime years, and physically very fit. I would probably take them from the forestry and land-clearing teams. Then, because both of these activities are needed to build accommodation, I would need to transfer some of our builders over, to re-balance demand and supply for timber. The end result would be a slight slowdown in building. I would rather not cut back on farming or fishing. We have to eat every day, but we can sleep a bit more crowded and still survive. And if we send these explorers out, that would mean fewer bodies to accommodate here in the colony anyway.”

Loukas looked around the table again. “Then I support the proposal by Pithes,” he said. “The sooner we have this knowledge, the sooner we can start making a profit from it.” There was a murmur of agreement and heads nodded.

“Is there a speaker against?” Minerva asked. No hands were raised. “Then I take it we are all agreed?” Again no response.

“Then if you would please set up this Inland Exploration Team, Pandoros,” she directed the Consul. “Pithes will be the Councillor responsible.”

Tingis, September 21, 844 AUC (91 A.D.)

Loukas was past embarrassment as he limped along the street, Lukios at his side and within their halo of security. His hip was so bad now that he was genuinely considering using a litter. Or perhaps a chair on wheels like a wheelbarrow, he thought wryly. Much less pretentious! But at last they were here now.

One of the retinue banged on the door and waited for the viewing slit to open. "Lord Solothos and lord Hermenes have arrived," the armoured man pronounced with pomp. 'If only the folk back in Cras could see that!' Loukas thought to himself. Everyone would piddle themselves laughing! But the party kept straight faces. Here in the Republic such displays of self-importance were not only expected, they were demanded.

Not for the first time he marvelled that what had seemed so normal, even necessary, in his younger days now struck him as totally distorted. What a waste of resources and manpower. How could a social system like the Republic avoid collapsing under its own weight? So many men unemployed, resorting to crime to survive! So many more men employed to do nothing productive, only to protect the wealthy from criminals! So many more again, employed producing bars and vaults and locks to discourage crime! And what little was left was wasted in profligate living by the obscenely wealthy instead of providing honourable employment. In fact it only drove even greater numbers to crime for their survival. And there the cycle started again.

The door swung open and the men stood aside to permit Loukas to enter first. Philippos smiled in greeting but it was obvious that his mind was elsewhere.

"Welcome, my lords," he said in Latin. Although Greek was the common tongue even here in Africa by now, Latin was still used for formal occasions. It was an affectation meant to convey roots in ancient nobility. "I regret that lord Pachemos is unwell and cannot greet you in person."

Loukas showed his concern. "Is Silon very sick? Can I see him now?"

"He is in the care of an excellent physician," Philippos assured him, "who has taken up a room with us to be on hand whenever required. I will ask if a visitor would be permitted. But if I could show you to the triclinium first..."

Loukas dismissed the retinue, who ambled out into the walled garden. Loukas and Lukios followed Philippos into the formal room where pastries and watered wine were being set on a low table for them. Philippos smiled and gave an inclination of the head to excuse himself towards the bedrooms.

After a few moments a balding man appeared. He offered his arm to Loukas, who rose painfully to accept it. "My lord, my name is Alexander. I am told that you are Silon's son-in-law."

"Indeed," Loukas answered. "This is my associate, Lukios Hermenes," he introduced Lukios who offered his arm in turn.

"Silon is not long for this world, and he is quite aware of that fact," Alexander gave a summary prognosis without any fanfare. "He has already made arrangements for that time. And he has expressly insisted that if he lives long enough you should be taken to him as soon as possible regardless of his condition, so he can speak to you himself. So if you would follow me, my lords?"

They followed Alexander down a corridor, around a bend and into a large, well-lit and airy room. There was no window, with one entire wall occupied by a set of sliding doors opening out onto a private courtyard. Almost lost in the sheets was the thin, pale face of Pachemos.

“My son!” the old man croaked, labouring for breath.

“My father!” Loukas replied, taking a frail hand in both of his own.

The old man flicked his eyes across to a woman sitting in the corner of the room. Loukas had not noticed her until that moment. A nurse, he mused. “Go!” Pachemos ordered thinly. The woman rose and walked towards the door. Pachemos wagged a finger at Alexander, suggesting that he should follow her.

“Loukas, I do not have much time,” Pachmos gasped, “and even less strength. Let me waste neither! Take careful note.” And then the old man was seized by a coughing fit, large flecks of blood coming up and spraying over the sheet beside his face.

“I have made a last testament leaving everything to you. I thought that best, in case I died before seeing you again. Once it is yours you can dispose of it however pleases you. I have nominated Heironymos Philemon as trustee until you claim the estate. You know Hieronymos, the banker?”

Loukas nodded his head.

“But you will need a new agent unless you decide to retain the business and appoint a manager,” the old man continued, only to be overcome with another coughing fit. This one went on for minutes until Loukas was on the point of calling for Alexander again but Pachemos recovered.

“Breathing is such hard work!” the old man muttered. “ah, a manager... will you keep the business running? It's not the sort of thing you can sell, I suppose. It's all about personal dealings.”

“If you can recommend someone, we will keep it going,” Loukas replied. “Otherwise, we would like you to nominate an agent to replace you.”

“Tychikos Andronikos,” Pachemos answered. It was obvious he had thought long and hard about this question. He indicated a sealed letter on the table beside his bed.

“Tychikos Andronikos it is, then,” Loukas confirmed, taking the letter.

“And how is my family?” Pachemos asked with a broad but weak smile, now that the business had been finalised.

“Psuche is well and prays for you, as do our children and grandchildren,” Loukas answered, smiling no less broadly.

“Grandchildren!” Pachemos said with surprise, and broke into another coughing fit. This one did not last as long as the previous one. Loukas waited for it to end.

“Yes. Little Sophia was born to Berenice last December, and Silon became the father of Leonidas in February! You are a great-grandfather twice over!”

“So young, and they pray for me already!” Pachemos said teasingly.

“Well, they are being taught how to while we pray on their behalf. That's a start!”

“Why were those names chosen?” Pachemos asked. “Why are the first-born not named properly, after their parents?”

“We have different customs, father. It doesn't matter,” Loukas waved the question away just as Pachemos fell into another fit of coughing. This time the sound was

different, and it was clearly distressing the old man. Alexander came bustling into the room, followed by the nurse.

"I am sorry, my lord," Alexander said as he swept in. "I was not listening to your conversation, but that coughing can be heard right down the corridor. We must position him correctly now."

Even as he was speaking Alexander and the nurse had turned Pachemos onto his right side, bent him into an open foetal position and wedged him with pillows. The edge of a thick white woollen towel was placed under the old man's head and allowed to spread out in front of his face. Within moments it was covered in a spray of blood.

"If I might ask you to leave now, my lords," Alexander said, frowning deeply. "The effort of breathing is great enough, but to speak is even more difficult for him. It causes his lungs to fill with blood. He is exhausted now, and it will take him some time to recover."

"We will wait for you outside," Loukas said. He patted the old man's exposed left hand and turned for the door.

It was some ten minutes before Alexander entered the triclinium, towelling water off his freshly-washed hands. "Not a pretty sight, I know, but I am glad you arrived in time for him to see you," Alexander said. "Now he can close his eyes in peace."

"What illness is this?" Loukas asked.

"It is not contagious, as far as we can tell," Alexander re-assured him. "These symptoms are typical of a rare inner failing of the lungs. Previous sufferers have been subject to post-mortem examination which reveals that the lungs start to grow fleshy nodules inside, and these nodules have knotted blood vessels, with very thin walls. This slowly chokes a man's breathing, until the effort causes the thin-walled blood vessels to rupture. Inevitably the victim dies, sometimes of asphyxiation, sometimes drowning in his own blood. It is heart-breaking to watch it."

"What causes it?"

"We don't know," Alexander shook his head. "But we do know that others in the same household seem to have no greater risk of contracting the same disease than the general population. We expect it's just one more way in which the body fails as it grows older, though in some cases men as young as thirty can be afflicted. It's in the hands of the gods."

"Is it painful," Loukas asked.

"Not particularly so," Alexander replied, "Except that being unable to breathe is never pleasant. But painful as in a wound or a broken bone, no." He looked steadily at Loukas. "So an extraordinary act of mercy is not called for, if that is what you were thinking."

"No, I wasn't thinking of that at all," Loukas replied quickly. "Thank you for that assurance." He looked to Lukios for a moment, and then back to Alexander. "If you have no objection, Alexander, we will call in each day if we can."

"For a few moments only, please," Alexander replied. "It does tire him, but a man's last days should not be lonely. I am sure it would be a good thing for you to spend a few minutes each day."

Once out in the street Lukios was first to speak.

"You were thinking of the leaves, weren't you?"

“Yes,” admitted Loukas. “But it seems they wouldn’t be of much help. In fact, it might even cause him to choke.”

Lukios paused a moment. “If I may ask, Loukas; why do you not chew a leaf to relieve the pain of your hip?”

Loukas stopped and glared at his assistant. “These leaves are for a difficult childbirth, or serious surgery. They are not a comforter for a child with a grazed knee!” Loukas showed his contempt for the thought. “Let the fat and idle classes of the Republic use them to ease their pampered bodies, but a real man takes the everyday pain in his stride!” And then, with a wry grin, “Even if his stride has been shortened somewhat!”

Lukios slapped Loukas on the shoulder and smiled. “Let’s find Andronikos!”

The directions to Andronikos’ house were simple to follow. His house was barely eighty paces along the same street as Pachemos’. The slave knocked and announced Loukas as the son-in-law of Pachemos. The eyes in the slot took in the retinue.

“Please, my lords, your retinue may not enter. If you would be good enough to have them cross to the other side of the street I will admit you.” Loukas nodded to the men surrounding him and they walked across to the opposite side of the street. Then as an afterthought Lukios darted over to collect the leather pouches two of them were carrying and returned.

Then there was a rattling sound above and behind the two men. Lukios turned and looked up to see a light grated portcullis dropping behind him.

“Please do not be alarmed, my lords,” the voice from the slot spoke comfortingly, “It has been known for some unscrupulous men to hide some ruffians out of the field of vision of this peephole. So the Master has set in place certain routines.”

The portcullis was now down to the ground and the bolt to the main door could be heard sliding back. The door swung open for the two men. They stepped through and a well-built young man smiled at them. “One last precaution, my lords,” he said apologetically, and Lukios suddenly felt two hands patting him down from behind. The leather pouches were taken from his shoulder and he heard them being opened and the papers inside shuffled.

“Thank you, my lord,” said a deep voice behind him, and the guard then turned to Loukas. The procedure was repeated, and then the men were escorted into a triclinium. A man in his late middle years stood to greet them with a smile and an outstretched right arm. He invited his guests to sit and then sat himself.

“I am told you claim to be the son-in-law of Silon Pachemos,” he greeted them. “But you will forgive my caution with strangers until that can be confirmed.”

“I have never considered prudence to be unforgivable,” Loukas replied with a smile as he took the arm. “My name is Loukas Solothos, and my friend here is Lukios Hermenes.”

Lukios offered his own arm in turn and nodded a greeting. He then took a folder out of his pouch and offered it to Andronikos. “If you are familiar with Silon’s own handwriting you will know this letter of introduction is authentic. We are here today because he has recommended you as his successor as our agent here in Tingis.”

Andronikos glanced down at the seal. Yes, that was Silon’s seal, and his friend had even made his own personal autograph for emphasis.

“Do you want me to read it now?” he asked his guests.
“If you would be so kind,” Loukas said.
Andronikos broke the seal and unfolded the page.

Let us put aside the formalities, Tyche!

I don't know if I will still be alive when you read this but I dare not wait any longer before I put quill to paper using my own hand. This business is, I think, too sensitive to use an amanuensis and I do not think it will be very long before I am unable to write myself. If I have passed on by the time you read this, then I thank you for your friendship over the years.

But to business! I am already tiring. If you are reading this letter that can only mean that my son-in-law Loukas has accepted my advice. Or perhaps Lukios, his assistant. If you accept my advice as well then I promise you that the appointment he is about to offer you will be most profitable but also most demanding.

At this point the handwriting, which had become progressively weaker and less legible up to this point, seemed refreshed.

Back again! I am weaker than I thought! I will leave Loukas to explain his requirements. But I urge you to accept his offer. You will have no regrets so long as you act in good faith. And may all the gods smile upon you!

Andronikos looked up from the page. “Is Silon dead? I called by a few days ago, and I was told he was too ill for visitors.”

“He is close to death,” Loukas admitted.

“Then why did he not talk to me about this when he was still able?” Andronikos pleaded. He glanced down at the letter again. “This letter is dated almost three months ago! If he had it in mind to nominate me, then why would he not mention it to me first?”

“Because one of our Patron’s fundamental conditions is that our agent must say nothing to anyone without gaining our approval, unless absolutely essential to fulfilling his duty,” Loukas answered. “As Silon says in the letter, our requirements are most demanding.”

“May I visit Silon now?” Andronikos asked.

“If you wish, but we can’t guarantee you will be admitted. Perhaps tomorrow would be better. He was in a poor condition by the time we left him today.”

Andronikos glanced down at the letter again. “What can you tell me about this appointment?”

“We are looking for an agent based here in Tingis but with connections as far afield as possible,” Loukas answered. “We require him to get the best prices possible for our exports which will generally be delivered in November each year, and buy at the lowest prices the various materials to be shipped out. And we require that to be done with as few questions as possible. Our Patron demands confidentiality. We also expect you to provide representation in any legal issues, but that will be covered by additional payments as merited.”

“What are your exports?”

“At present, gold and silver,” Loukas answered. “In the future, it could be anything.”

Andronikos suppressed his disappointment at so vague an answer. “And your purchases?”

“Generally anything that would be needed by isolated mining sites, plantations and latifundia. Things like steel tools, sail canvas, ropes, some luxury goods, leather, fabric for clothing, etc. You will be provided with lists of goods and required quantities each year.” Loukas paused. “But of course, circumstances could change drastically from one year to the next. That's why we want a man who has breadth of contacts.”

“And on what basis would I be paid?”

“We are paying Silon one percent of the value of both imports and exports, on quantities roughly equivalent to three thousand talents of gold each year in total. We expect that to increase in years to come but we are offering no promises. There is also a bonus. We allow that it's impossible for an agent to pick the absolute best time to buy or sell in any given year, so we will allow the aggregate cost of purchases to be up to 10% greater than the best possible combination of the perfect call. If your aggregate comes in under this allowance, we will allow a super-commission of one fifth of the savings below that 10% mark.”

“So about thirty talents fixed and then another thirty talents if I manage to get within 5% of optimum,” Andronikos mused. “And I won't ask your assurances that it's totally legal. Silon would not have been involved otherwise.” He summarised with a shrug. “Why not?”

“There's one possible ‘why not’,” Loukas replied, “and it's only fair that I put it on the table up front. We demand that you maintain absolute secrecy in every detail. If you decide later that you no longer want to do business for us we will accept that in good spirits. But even then you must never say anything about us. You must not even let it be known that what you buy for us is going to the same people as those who supply the gold that you sell. You are to operate all aspects of our trade as though they are completely separate businesses, and any transfers of cash into or out of the respective accounts must be done via your own account, to mask the paper trail. And if you ever become aware that anyone, even the Republic itself, becomes aware of any possible connection, then you are to advise us immediately. Not that we are doing anything illegal, but there are commercial secrets here that not even the Republic has any right to know. Do you understand that?”

Andronikos looked steadily at Loukas for a moment. “I can guess that you will also tell me as little as possible if you are that worried about secrecy. But what do I do if I need to contact you immediately?”

“One of the accounts Silon has set up for us is for that purpose,” Loukas smiled. “If you make a single deposit into that account for any amount that is exactly divisible by three talents of gold, we will know. We'll tell you more about that if you decide to accept the appointment.”

Andronikos was silent for a moment. “Ordinarily I would thank you, wish you all the best and walk away. But if Silon was involved in setting up these arrangements, and

if he has specifically asked me to carry them on..." He paused. "I'll visit Silon tomorrow and then I'll let you know."

Loukas stood, smiled and offered his right arm. "Thank you, Tychikos! I could ask no more! Now, I should leave you in peace."

Tingis - November 846 AUC (93 A.D.)

“Come on in, Lukios!” Andronikos stood and came around from behind his desk as Lukios was admitted into his inner office. His right arm was taken in a firm grip. “Take a seat!” he commanded, gesturing towards the more comfortable couches under the window.

This window was one of the new status symbols. The domes over the Great Houses designed by Sulla had twenty-four windows around the base of the dome, to create the impression that the dome floated on light and air. These were originally fitted with timber shutters to keep out the rain and the cold winter winds. These windows had recently been fitted with glass panels now being produced by the iugerum by the famed Babylon Glass Works to allow light in at all times while excluding the wind and rain.

This had created a demand for the wealthy to have their own glass windows now. Cold winds and rain didn't happen in Tingis very often, but Andronikos had not hesitated in obtaining his own statement of prosperity.

Lukios sat on one couch and was joined on the other by the agent.

“I trust you and your loved ones are in good health?” Lukios asked.

“Indeed, and I pray to the gods for you and yours,” Andronikos replied. But Andronikos knew the manners of these Terrapulchrans by now. They didn't mean to be brusque, but nor did they have time for the formal niceties of what the Republic considered polite society. So he cut straight to the business.

“The goods you ordered last year are stacked away in my warehouse, ready to ship. These are the prices I paid for each batch and their transport costs,” he explained, handing over a sheaf of papers. “I have also added storage costs payable to me as we discussed last year, for the dedication of that section of the warehouse you wanted sealed off from the rest.” Then came the part that made him nervous.

“The variation in the market was particularly large this year. I tried to buy each commodity at the time of the year when its price is usually low, but unfortunately I didn't hit every minimum. The worst was paper. A new method of production came in after I had already placed my orders, and I ended up paying more than 15% above the actual minimum price. The next worst after that was cotton thread. Apparently there was a fire in the factory that produces most of the supply from Tamilia, and this pushed the price higher just a month before the usual low point in the cycle. That put about 12% on the bottom price before I could fill the order. All other commodities were less than 5% above minimum, and the aggregate was just a touch over 7% above minimum.”

“The sales were more predictable. The prices of gold and silver have now been fixed against the sestertius by Republic law.”

“Thank you, Tyche,” Lukios accepted the papers. “I'll look over these later, but it sounds like you have earned your bonus this year.” Lukios grinned his approval.

“Now, we have a surprise for you this year,” Lukios went on. “We've taken up sugar production. At the moment the quantities are rather small, but how better to gain a foothold into the market? We will treat this separately from the other goods. We will allow a margin of 15% below maximum selling price, with that margin to reduce by 1% each year down to the usual 10%.”

“Another commodity we have developed is a new cooking oil. We call it 'Java Oil', and of course you need to know nothing more than that. Let others speculate all they want. Its big advantage is that it lasts much longer than olive oil without going rancid, and it also has a richer, more full-bodied taste. At least, we think it does. We expect it to command a higher price than olive oil once it becomes known in the market place, but that will not happen overnight. We expect you to market this aggressively. Organise tastings for the high and mighty, for the owners of the Head Count taverns that do the wholesale cooking for the masses, whatever it takes to bring it to public notice as widely and as deeply as possible. This year we have fifteen amphorae of it, and hope to have double that amount next year, and double that again each year after year for a few years to come. For the first two years we'll allocate the total quantity to you to be used for promotional purposes free of charge. For the next ten years we will allow you a 50% commission on however much you can sell, at whatever price. Then, for the next ten years after that, the commission will reduce by 4% per annum until it reaches 10%, which will be yours regardless of the price. In other words, you will be getting 10% commission on this line, not the mere 1% plus bonus like on gold, and this will continue until some other supplier comes on line. Which we hope will be never!” Lukios smiled. “But if someone does discover how to replicate this product, then the arrangement will drop back to the usual 1% flat with a supercommission on anything you sell within the 10% margin below best price.” Lukios felt it prudent to emphasise the need to market this product aggressively, so he repeated “Remember, those first twelve years are your big chance to make a fortune out of this commodity, so the faster you grow the market, the more sales you will gain in those first ten years of actual sales.”

“That sounds an excellent product to sell, Lukios,” Andronikos agreed. “I'm already thinking about contacts that I can use to promote it far and wide on an agency basis.”

“Excellent!” Lukios approved. “And that's only the start of it. New commodity number three is this leaf.” He took out a pouch and opened it to reveal a brown shredded vegetable. The aroma was pungent, but in a pleasant way.

“What's that?” Andronikos asked.

“It is called ‘Tabak’. It is to the lungs what garum is to the stomach,” Lukios answered. “You pack a wad of this shredded leaf into a pipe, set fire to it, and draw breath through it. With each inhalation the leaf burns slowly, producing a fine aroma and a most soothing sensation. Between inhalations, it simply smoulders. It's somewhat an acquired taste, but once acquired it's not only pleasant but addictive. So I suggest you don't try it yourself. But once a user has grown accustomed to it he'll pay any price for it. So again this would best be marketed very cheaply at first, even given away as free samples. We can creep the price upwards once we have that captive market. Don't tell anyone that it's addictive, of course. We offer you the same two-year plus ten-year deal as for Java Oil, and we have five hundred Roman pounds of it on board today. Again, we expect to increase the volumes every year for several years to come.”

“Amazing!” Andronikos breathed.

“And commodity number four is this, another leaf,” Lukios pressed on with his presentation. “We call it ‘Sindolor’. We're presently working on a new way of

presenting and preserving it but for the moment its raw state will suffice.” He handed a coca leaf across to Andronikos, who sniffed it.

“What does it do?”

“When chewed, it deadens pain,” Lukios answered. “We first discovered this property when one of our men broke his ankle. He chewed one of these leaves and within minutes he was telling us he was able to walk. Since then we’ve used it to ease childbirth pain for women, and best of all it completely deadens the mouth during tooth extraction.

“It also greatly eases other chronic pain, such as arthritis or gout. We expect this to be very popular among dentists, surgeons and physicians. Again, we offer you the two-years plus ten-years formula, except that there will be a long-term minimum price on this. We expect the price to stabilise no lower than weight-for-weight with gold, and hope for something closer to three or four times that price.”

Andronikos considered the leaf carefully. “To say that something is 'worth its weight in gold' is a cliché; but if it takes away pain so effectively then it might be true in this case,” he said at last.

“Your job, Tyche, is to make it so,” Lukios asserted.

Andronikos sat staring at the leaf in his hand for a moment longer. Then he spoke. “It is a pity that this was not available to Silon.”

“It was available then, but it would not have been effective,” Lukios answered. “We asked about it, be assured. Loukas would have done anything to ease his suffering, but it simply would have been pointless. But I am impressed that your thoughts went straight to him. You’re a good man, Tyche, and that is why Silon named you.”

Andronikos sat another long moment. “This will be difficult to administer to children. They tend to swallow rather than chew. Is it possible to distil the effective component into an elixir?”

“Perhaps so, Tyche,” Lukios answered. “We’re working on that at the moment. But in the meantime, we want you to establish it in the market.”

“I’ll do so, Lukios, but have you taken this to the Museum in Babylon for their help? There are some brilliant minds there. If there’s a way of making this more conveniently measured or of adjusting the required dose, then they are the ones who would be able to develop it.” Andronikos paused for a moment. “In fact, I would not put it past them to buy a supply of these leaves and work on the problem independently. They would then be able to claim intellectual rights for the further refinement process and corner the market. You should talk to them on the basis of a share in the profits.”

Lukios was struck by this advice. Even if the workers back in Terrapulchra could crack this problem they had no firm standing in law to register their discovery. After all, Terrapulchra was unknown and wanted to stay that way. Andronikos had a point here, more trenchant than he could have guessed.

“That’s good advice, Tyche, and I thank you for it. I’ll follow through with that idea. So the leaf is not for sale yet. But if and when we have an elixir I promise that the two-plus-ten structure will still be offered to you.” Lukios reached over and took the leaf out of Andronikos’ hand. “I’ll keep you informed.”

Andronikos took a deep breath. “Are there any more surprises in store?” he asked. “I know that you value your secrecy, so I wnn't ask where these innovations come from. But it would be good to know if you have more surprises in the pipeline.”

“You are wise to not ask, Tyche,” Lukios smiled, “and we'll tell you more as your need to know arises. In the meantime, I would be grateful if you say nothing about the Sindolor leaf for the moment but merely work in the security of your own mind how this might be best marketed.”

“Indeed, Lukios. I know your requirements and will honour them to the letter.”

Lukios gazed at Andronikos for a moment, as if pondering something. Then he spoke. “Tyche, I am very impressed with your work so far, even though it's still early days. Remain faithful and diligent, and I am sure my Patron will reward you generously.”

Three days later Lukios sailed out of Tingis with a full cargo of goods for the Islands and a pouch full of Bankers Notes. He had made sure that there was enough credit in reserve for Andronikos to have some flexibility in his buying and selling cycles. He was last seen sailing south from Tingis, as one would expect for a company based in the Limpopo. But after three days he met up with three other Terrapulchan vessels and boarded one of them. Those Bankers Notes would buy more slaves in the markets of Mediterranean Africa and Hispania, and these three ships were specifically fitted out for that purpose. While that was being done, he would take passage to the Orontes and catch the railway to Babylon.

Babylon - February 847 AUC (94 A.D.)

Slaves were always cheapest in December. No-one wanted to feed and clothe them over winter when less work could be extracted from them. But December to Quinctilis was the non-storm season in Terrapulchra so it was the perfect time for the Terrapulchrans to make their purchases. And once bought there was no point in leaving them in the harbour. The sooner they were in Terrapulchra the sooner they would be productive, quite apart from the health risks of keeping close to two hundred bodies confined in the ships' holds during the winter months. So Lukios had ordered the ships to sail, comforted that at least he would have all year to do the job thoroughly in Babylon.

His first approach had been to the Head of Medicine, but he was soon directed to the Head of Alchemy instead.

Eutropes Thales, a man in his late middle years, had the build of a sparrow and the vivacity to match. He never moved or spoke slowly. Even as Lukios explained the properties of the leaf and his requirements for the essential components to be isolated into an elixir, this alchemist nodded vigorously every second sentence.

"But above all, lord Thales, it is essential that every batch must have the same potency," Lukios emphasised. "It is simply not acceptable for one patient to receive an inadequate dose, and another to receive an overdose." He paused for only a moment before asking "Do you think you can do this?"

"I see no reason why we should not be able to do this, lord Hermenes," the alchemist answered. "It might be as simple as infusing tea, but no doubt your people have already tried something that obvious. But there are many other solvents and techniques that might be required. We will work through them all if we have to, and perhaps even invent some new tricks. As you so rightly say, the wealth to be made from this product would be immense!"

"So how long do you think you will need to perfect this extraction technique?" Lukios asked.

Thales shrugged. "We are talking about research here. It might be as little as a month or it could take years. And you should be careful when you talk about 'perfecting' a technique. Nothing is ever incapable of further refinement or development."

"Well, the sooner we can get the product on the market the better," Lukios waved away that caveat.

"Indeed, lord Hermenes," Thales agreed smoothly. "Now, let us talk to the Museum's lawyers. We have several other agreements in place for processing raw materials. Surely one of these would serve as a suitable template."

"I'll take this to my own lawyers for assessment, of course," Lukios said to the Museum's Chief Lawyer, "but let me summarise in my own words to make sure I have the bones of it right. Otherwise we could waste time correcting misunderstandings." He took a deep breath.

"This agreement would mean that the Museum will retain intellectual property rights to all techniques developed in this effort," Lukios ticked off one finger. "Because these processes will be published as part of the registration of intellectual property, that

means that any other person is free to use these processes provided they pay the licence fee to the Museum.” Lukios ticked off a second finger.

“That is correct, lord Hermenes,” the lawyer agreed.

“And the publication of your process must by law include complete details of every aspect of that process. There may be no secret ingredients or steps? So if we are dissatisfied with your performance in the commercial aspects, we will not be impeded either by law or by practicalities from finding another manufacturer?”

“The only impediments any other manufacturer might experience would be lack of experience or lack of competence,” the lawyer assured him, “but not lack of information. You must also realise that the Museum has an unequalled reputation for quality, so you should also expect that product processed by someone else would not attract the same price in the marketplace as the product of our own plant.”

“You will understand that I am not foreshadowing any dissatisfaction, lord Poronthes,” Lukios smiled. “But my Patron must be assured that he is not locked into any arrangement which could make the profits from this trade vulnerable to unwarranted or excessive demands by one link in the production chain having an effective power of veto.”

Lukios became businesslike again. “But your point about the prestige of the Museum adding to the value of the finished product is certainly accepted, which is why we would prefer to deal with you rather than another, so long as you deal fairly with us.

“Now we come to the benefit the Museum seeks in return for this research and development work to be done at your own expense. You require us to pay the licence fee for the value added by this process in respect of every ounce of product, whether produced by you or by some other factory,” Lukios pressed on. “But how do we determine that fee? We are supplying the raw material ourselves, so how can we determine the value added by the process if the cost of these raw materials is our commercial secret?”

“Allow me to be blunt, lord Hermenes,” Poronthes leant forward on his chair. “Compared to the finished product, the raw material is of negligible value. But we are prepared to accept that for the sake of this agreement we will consider the raw material to be worth half of the finished product. To put it another way, consider the raw material worthless, and you are paying half the legal intellectual property licence fee.”

“So, two and a half percent of wholesale price,” Lukios summarised.

“Yes,” Poronthes agreed. “And then we add to that the cost of processing. Who knows what chemicals, what processes and how many steps will be required?”

Lukios paused for a moment. “Tell me, lord Poronthes, exactly what is Limpopo Investments getting out of this deal? You are asking us to pay effectively full intellectual property fees for the finished process, and to provide you with raw materials free of charge while you develop the process. Admittedly these leaves do grow on trees, but the money to harvest and transport them does not. We are contributing significantly to the development of the extraction process but we are being offered nothing in return.”

“You can always take this proposal elsewhere, lord Hermenes,” Poronthes spread his hands.

“I think I might,” Lukios answered.

“Where else would you find facilities to match ours?” Poronthes asked almost sarcastically.

“I think we could provide facilities even better than yours, if we concentrate on only this one line of research instead of spreading ourselves too wide,” Lukios answered. “All we need is the expertise.” Then Lukios smiled. “And that would not be hard to find. Perhaps lord Thales himself could be persuaded to resign and join us, if it meant he took a share in the intellectual property. He knows how much money could be made out of this! And he might also consider an on-going position as Production Manager if we decide to supply the raw materials to no-one except our own processing plant.”

“Thales can't do that,” Poronthes smiled smugly. “He has a contract that clearly states that all developments he registers within ten years of leaving us automatically become the Museum's, except for his one-quarter share. That clause was put into every staff contract after Heron resigned more than forty years ago.”

Lukios shrugged. “First you have to find him. We operate out of various secret settlements. Then you have to prove that he developed the process. That might not be easy. But if lord Thales doesn't want to join us, then we could always attract one of his best students. What young man would not want to set himself up for life with an opportunity like this?”

Poronthes sat in silence, staring at Lukios for a while before replying. “That would be a messy, tedious and futile business for all concerned, lord Hermenes. For the sake of avoiding that, let us say that Limpopo will be entitled to half of the intellectual property fees. That's what you were talking about offering Thales, but without the cost of setting up a laboratory for him and paying a salary to him and his assistants.”

Now it was Lukios' turn to stare. Finally he spoke. “Thank you, lord Poronthes. I accept that huge back-down as a confession that you were trying to try to bleed us dry. But instead of a half-share, I think Limpopo Investments should take a 90% share in intellectual property rights in this case. What do you think?”

Poronthes kept his face impassive as he stood and walked slowly over to his glazed window to look out over the Museum grounds. He thought furiously. Assuming the raw material was deemed to be half the final value, the total intellectual property rights would be worth two and a half percent of the final price. These Limpopo guys were talking about processing at least a ton of leaves per annum, and much more as their plantations grew. One leaf weighing a tenth of an ounce was enough for a dental extraction or a difficult childbirth... Then each leaf would be worth at least ten denarii to a man with the means to pay for it, which means a hundred denarii an ounce, which would mean... a bit of arithmetic here... more than fourteen thousand sestertium milia per ton! Intellectual rights of five percent of that would be one twentieth, or about seven hundred sestertium milia per annum, forever. About twenty-eight talents of gold every year! And more as supply of this drug grew. Even the ten per cent being offered out of that would be a nice income stream for no further effort.

But would it create a precedent? He dare not commit. He made up his mind and turned to face Lukios again.

“It would hardly be worth the effort for us, lord Hermenes,” he said flatly. “But when I think of the benefits this new medicine could bring, I am inclined to say it would be worth doing purely as a pro bono exercise.” He smiled wryly. “But if Limpopo is

going to demand their 90% anyway, our sacrifice of 10% would be inconsequential. I will take this to the Board and see what they say, but I suspect they will require either a 50% share, or complete pro bono by us both.”

Lukios stood and offered his arm. “Then I'll go now, and seek further instruction as well. I'll be back in a couple of months.”

Lukios smiled as he approached the young man in the Museum's Central Square. He offered his right arm as he spoke. “Greetings, Titos. My name is Lukios Hermenes.”

“Greetings, lord Hermenes,” Titos Paleos replied as he accepted the arm. “Do we know each other from somewhere?”

“No, not at all,” Lukios smiled. “But I'm hoping that will change soon. I would like to offer you a job.”

“Thank you, lord Hermenes, but I have not yet finished my studies.”

“I have taken the liberty of finding out a few things about you,” Lukios replied, “and that you have not yet gained your doctorate is the worst thing I have discovered! But I am told you will be awarded that next month. You are expected to be Foremost in your year.”

“Well, I don't know about that but I hope so,” Paleos replied.

“Whether Foremost or not, that doesn't matter. I would like to offer you the job regardless. We need a top class alchemist. Would you care to join me in the Bull's Head to talk about it?”

Paleos knew the Bull's Head. It maintained a refined clientele by charging like its namesake. Many of the Senior Staff resorted there for their personal business. “Why not? I have no lectures on this afternoon.”

“I know,” Lukios smiled.

There were plenty of unoccupied booths on the ground floor of the tavern, if it could be called that. More like a privately-owned Club for the higher Classes. Lukios gestured around the room for Paleos to choose a booth and then followed him to his chosen place. A waiter appeared as they sat.

“May I buy lunch for you?” Lukios asked the student.

“That's very kind of you, lord Hermenes. A bacon soup, if I may?”

“Two bacon soup,” Lukios said to dismiss the waiter. Then to Paleos, “I must demand that you treat everything we say here today as totally confidential. You are not to repeat any of this to anyone. Do I have your word on that?”

“Indeed you do, lord Hermenes. Now, whom do you represent?” Paleos got straight to the point.

“A company called Limpopo Investments,” Lukios answered. “We import gold, silver and a few other commodities. Which is the point of my approach to you. We have discovered a plant which has amazing medicinal properties even in the raw state. But natural variation means that applying the correct dose can be a hit-or-miss affair. We need an alchemist who can extract the active essence, and reduce this to a uniform potency to provide a convenient and easily-measured dose.”

“That sounds a rather routine task,” Paleos replied.

“For someone who knows what he is doing, it probably is,” Lukios agreed.

“Why do you not approach Doctor Thales? He could have one of his staff do that for you. It would probably take him only a few days, a month at the most.”

“Because if we did that the Museum would own the intellectual rights to the process,” Lukios explained. “It’s also possible that they might discover other details, properties, and so on that they might not want to report back to us. Make no mistake, we are talking about very large sums of money here.”

“Oh? How large?” Like any ambitious young man, Paleos took an interest in making his fortune as quickly as possible.

“The specific plant I have in mind at the moment has leaves which, when chewed, can block pain. It has proved very effective in difficult childbirths and surgery but a more convenient form is obviously preferred. We are confident that just the intellectual rights to an efficient refining process would be worth perhaps a thousand sestertium milia per year.” Lukios saw no point in stating a higher, more realistic figure. Even a dozen sestertium milia a year would be a substantial guaranteed minimum income to an orphaned student from a fifth-class family. Lukios had already discovered that Paleos had sold virtually all of his patrimony to support himself through his studies.

“That does sound interesting,” Paleos responded. “If it can be done, that is. Not every essence can be extracted, or at least not efficiently or easily.”

“And this plant, being unlike any other in scientific experience, might not be amenable to the usual methods,” Lukios finished the thread for his listener. “Which is why I am looking for a man with the deep understanding of basic principles needed to be Foremost, but not weighted down with preconceptions of what is impossible. I want a man like you.”

The soup arrived, and the men took up their spoons.

“I think I would like this project,” Paleos admitted after a few slurps. “Where is your laboratory?”

“We have none at the moment. We’ve only just discovered these strange plants,” Lukios confessed. “Part of your job would be to set up the laboratory as required by the task in hand.”

“I am still thinking through this, lord Hermenes,” Paleos held up a palm as if to slow the momentum of the conversation. “I had expected to be a junior member in an established laboratory. In fact, I had hoped to join the Museum staff. So to have to think things through from the perspective of the project manager is new to me.” He took another spoonful of soup. “Would I have any staff?”

“That depends on what’s required, but I would expect one or two assistants and a cleaner-bottlewasher would be employed,” Lukios commented. “Don’t forget that this particular project is probably only the first of several.”

“So how long do you think I would be in your employ?”

“That is where we come to the big question, Titos,” Lukios held up an index finger. “My Patron values his privacy, indeed his secrecy, very highly indeed. He has two classes of client.

“A client in one class is given whatever is needed, and paid well for his efforts. But he is told nothing except what is absolutely essential to his task. He is paid well for diligent and faithful service. But he must first swear never to disclose anything to anyone that he had once been employed by my Patron, not even years later. And I must warn you here that my Patron is powerful enough and has reach enough to break a man without the victim even knowing what has happened. Yes, I must confess that he might even appear

spiteful and vindictive to those who betray him, as he is no less generous and supportive to those who serve him faithfully.

“The other class of clients are like me. He loves us and honours us like the perfect father should, and we respond with total dedication and gratitude. We will never be cast aside and even in old age we are cared for with the best of everything. Only we are privy to his secrets. But we are also totally at his disposal. Whatever task he sets us, we accept. Wherever he sends us, we go. And we may never ever leave his service. We are his sons and daughters and we give him total allegiance, even more than a soldier to his general. And we do it rejoicing.

“I am authorised to offer you the choice,” Lukios said flatly. “Which category of client would you prefer to be?”

Paleos was taken aback. He was wordless for a moment. “Well, what is the pay like?”

“If you choose to become his son, then pay is not relevant. We effectively have free access to our Patron's purse, subject only to his discipline if we abuse it. But if you prefer the status of an external employee, then I can offer to cover all your expenses in setting up and operating the laboratory, plus a salary of two hundred sesterces a month. Of course, all rights would become the property of my Patron.”

Paleos sat bemused. The salary offered was quite generous without being opulent, but the conditions of employment for these 'inner clients' made them seem more like an extended family than a normal company.

“How many employees does your patron have?” he asked at last.

“Paid employees? Five directly, basically acting as his agents or managing his investment properties. Indirectly, such as labourers working on his farms or plantations, several hundred.”

“And how many of these 'inner clients' does he have?”

Lukios paused a moment. “It will do no harm for you to know this, but I must emphasise that you are bound to secrecy. There are several thousand of us. Our numbers are growing every year.”

“That sounds more like a small city than a company,” Paleos commented.

“Well, we certainly consider ourselves a community rather than a commercial organisation,” Lukios agreed cryptically.

“It would seem from those numbers that your Patron prefers clients rather than employees,” Paleos volunteered a comment.

“Indeed. We use external employees only where it is an absolute necessity. We would prefer you to join us but I know that's a lot to ask from you. But I can reveal no more, I'm sorry.”

Paleos finished the last spoonful of soup. “If you offer to buy me another lunch tomorrow, I'll give you an answer then,” he smiled.

“Agreed,” Lukios answered with a smile. “In fact, I might even stretch it to a loaf and a jug of wine as well if we have something to celebrate!”

Lunch the next day started with more questions rather than an answer.

“Lord Hermenes, if I were to agree to joining you as one of these 'inner clients', what would that involve? How much detail can you provide?”

Lukios paused for a moment. "Remember, I have your oath that our discussions are in strictest confidence." He looked to Paleos for his explicit agreement. Paleos nodded.

"You would be subject to deployment wherever the Patron would send you. In the short term you would be subject to my orders and I would have you finish your studies here before sending you to our main settlement. That's a secret independent town. There you will set up your laboratory and do your research.

"If you are so minded we would permit you to invite any family you might have, but I believe that you have no family. Still, if you would take a wife that's your business.

"We have excellent food, a pleasant climate, no crime except for some personal disagreements from time to time, good medical care, not many personal luxuries but much worthwhile work to do. We don't have any who live in relative opulence, not even our Patron. Nor do we have others who live in poverty. We have no slavery except for some who are bought as slaves and then manumitted when they have demonstrated their worth. Nor do we have a Class system. All citizens are treated equally, even manumitted slaves. Some former slaves have been elected to high office, and our current Chief Administrator is an ex-slave."

"Citizens? Elected? Administrator? You make it sound more like an independent Tribe than a company under a Patron!"

Lukios raised an eyebrow and tilted his head. "And so it seems if you live in it."

Paleos was silent as he sipped on his soup. Then he spoke again. "I expect to be appointed onto staff when I am awarded my Doctorate," he said. "And after that I'll be guaranteed a good income and interesting work for the rest of my life. I'll be surrounded by colleagues who are the cream of the world in their respective fields. Why should I turn my back on that? And why should I do it irrevocably?"

"Then don't," Lukios answered with a shrug. "Would you be prepared to be engaged as an outside consultant instead?"

"Two hundred sesterces a month salary, all equipment and supplies paid for by you?" Paleos sought confirmation.

"That's right," Lukios agreed. "And all discoveries and intellectual property rights will vest in my Patron. But you'll get publishing credit when we register the process, which would do your reputation no harm."

"And I'll be permitted to set up my laboratory here in Babylon?"

"If you want to. And I'll supply you with two assistants. They won't be skilled in Alchemy, but intelligent lads just the same. They can wash your bottles and follow routine instructions."

"I would rather employ two students, lads in their second year of study."

"I can't allow that. Not enough protection against our secrets getting out."

"But you are going to register the process anyway!"

"I said 'when we register the process', and that might not be immediately."

Paleos contained his impatience. He dropped his tone back down to conversational. "It might be dangerous if I have to work with people who don't understand exactly what they are doing."

"Then train them," Lukios answered. "As I said, they'll be intelligent lads, inner clients. If that means a few more days before you get down to the serious work, then take

comfort in the fact that you're being paid for your time. In fact, think of it as practice for when you're put onto the Museum staff."

Paleos paused. It was clear that these people really were paranoid about their secrecy. It drove home to him that he really should honour his pledge of confidentiality too, or they might respond to any betrayal of trust with more than mere resentment. "Very well," he submitted at last. "You're the one paying for this, so I'll take the time to ensure their safety. In the meantime let's look for somewhere to rent so we can set up the laboratory. I'll put together a list of equipment and supplies we need to buy in."

"So you're not going to wait until your Doctorate is conferred?"

"What difference will it make?"

"Well, none, I suppose," Lukios admitted. "Finish your soup and we'll get moving."

Finding a suitable place to rent for the laboratory was not as easy as expected. Paleos insisted on something that had ample ventilation and light, for safety. Kurios demanded that it be confined, easily secured against break-in. The two sets of requirements did not line up very easily.

Eventually Lukios cut through the knot. He bought a modest villa an hour's ride out of the city and dedicated the rooms facing onto the rear courtyard as the laboratory. "It will also save us paying for accommodation in the town," he justified his actions, "as well as providing good security."

That was when Paleos first glimpsed that his new employer had a very deep purse and Lukios very considerable authority when it came to spending from it. The whole of the purchase price was paid for on the spot in Negotiable Notes issued by Africa Tribe.

As well as Lukios and Paleos, ten other men moved into the villa. Eight of them were dressed as trusted slaves, and two as professional businessmen. But Paleos soon learnt that these appearances were a sham. Once out of public gaze the slaves behaved as if the equals of the other three and were tolerated in this presumption.

"Lukios, how can you allow such behaviour from your slaves?" Paleos had been told that honorifics grated on his employer. He had been asked to use first names.

"Oh? Ah, yes! Didn't I tell you that we didn't have slavery? These men are all free citizens. We just have to put on the appearance while we are in public. So Stylos and Perez pretend to be business associates, and the others pretend to be my retinue. Come, I'll introduce you properly."

The introductions were made. The two men allocated to be his assistants were made known to him and he took them out to the light and airy back rooms set apart for the work.

"Do either of you know any alchemy?" he asked.

"No," Piso replied. "I'm a sailor, Lucius is a cook."

"Well, it's a bit like cooking, I suppose," Paleos accepted the fact that he would need to start from the basics when it came to handling chemicals.

The equipment was bought and set up and the various jars of liquids and powders set on shelving specially-designed to ensure nothing could fall off by accident. The three men got to know each other, chatting easily as they went about their business.

“Lucius, am I allowed to ask about your home?” Paleos asked as they took their midday bread.

“I suppose so, Titos. But don't expect me to answer every question you ask.” Lucius dipped a morsel of bread into the bowl of paste and popped it into his mouth.

“Are you married?”

“Yes I am, actually. Her name is Sophia. She's a cook too. We have one son so far, and with any luck she's about to give birth to our second.”

“Your wife is a cook, too?” In Paleos' world a married woman, and particularly a mother, would rarely leave her house.

“Yes, that's how we met. She was posted to the same kitchen as me straight after she left school.”

“She went to school?”

Lucius smiled. “Yeah, you people don't educate girls, do you? Back home everyone goes to school. The brighter ones like Lukios go on to higher studies but ordinary types like me and Sophia are allocated to work.”

Paleos was confused. He groped for understanding. “What's the point of wasting time educating the girls? And how can everyone afford to send their children to school?”

“Ah, you wouldn't understand, Titos,” Lucius waved the question away.

“Try me,” Paleos responded. “Unless it's a secret, of course.”

“Nah, no secret,” Piso took over the conversation. “All the kids go to school, starting about three or four years of age. And it's all paid for by the Council so it costs nothing. That's how we find out who has the smarts for the important jobs. How else can we get the best people into them?”

“But sending girls to school? Maybe the daughters of the wealthy, perhaps, to make them fit for high-status marriages. But *all* of them?”

Piso looked to Lucius, as if to say 'Would this be a waste of time?'. Then he shrugged, and then turned back to Paleos.

“Where we come from, everybody is rich. Or nobody is poor, I suppose. That might be closer to the truth. And the women work just like the men do. Three of the eight Council members are women, including the Chair. The master of the fishing boat I went to when I left school, she was a woman.” Piso paused for a moment. “In fact, when we were chosen for this mission I didn't believe a society could survive if half its population were idle. I didn't really accept it until I saw it for myself.”

Paleos was shocked. Piso apparently lived in a world completely different from anything that could be imagined. Then another question rose in his mind.

“Do even children of slaves go to school?”

“Well, it's hard to answer that one,” Piso answered. “By the time a child is old enough for school, their parents are usually citizens even if they started as slaves. My mother was a slave when I was born.”

“Was your father a slave, too?”

“Probably,” Piso answered off-handedly. “most citizen men marry young, so most of the clients at the brothels are slaves.”

Paleos was shocked beyond anything he had considered possible. Dare he even ask this question? It would be a mortal insult in his experience of the world. Tentatively he stammered “So you are telling me that your mother...”

“Was a prostitute? Yeah, she was,” Piso confirmed casually as he dipped another morsel of bread. “She was given her citizenship soon after I was born, and married about a year later.”

Paleos was speechless, and it showed.

“What's wrong with prostitutes?” Lucius asked. “It's a job, and it serves a socially-useful purpose. Usually it's a job given to new slaves, straight off the boat. Most citizens would rather not apply for it because it gets in the way of them marrying.”

Paleos looked from one to the other, gaping. They both seemed quite casual about it. They were not joking. “I'm sorry,” he stumbled out at last. “I meant no offence. It's just something I'm not accustomed to.”

“I can understand that,” Piso said sympathetically. “This Republic is crazy. I'd hate to live here!”

The loaf of bread that they had shared for lunch was almost gone now.

“One more thing, if I may,” Paleos pushed his luck. “You said no-one is poor. How can that be?”

“Because everyone is allocated to a job and everyone gets paid for doing it,” Piso answered as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I can't understand how the Republic manages to survive, with so many people in such desperate fear of poverty and starvation all the time. How do they handle the anxiety?”

“Allocated a job? What if it's a job you don't want?”

“The worst jobs are usually given to slaves in their first year or two. Or sometimes young people fresh out of school might not get their preference first-up,” Piso conceded. “But you just put your name in for any other jobs you would prefer. When a vacancy appears, if you are the best-suited to it from among the names on the list you are transferred into it. It's a much more sensible way of doing things.”

Lucius had taken the last of the bread while this was being said. Paleos stood and walked back over to the demonstration bench under the large window in the northern wall. His two assistants followed him. The top of this bench was virtually covered by a large glass box. It had a front wall on hinges that would allow it to be swung up and a pipe out the back venting to the free air of the courtyard. There were several jars in the glass box.

“First step in handling chemicals that give off fumes,” he started his explanation, “is to ensure that they're stored safely. You will notice that these liquids are not in jars with stoppers, but with screw-caps. That's to ensure that any buildup of pressure doesn't force the stopper out of the neck.” The two men grunted their understanding.

“Next, before you open the access into the chamber you make sure that there's been no build-up of fumes by slow leakage. For example, if a top had not been screwed down tight.” He started the treadle that operated an exhaust fan in the vent pipe. After a moment he continued talking.

“Now we've established a slight pressure differential. The exhaust fan ensures that if we make a small opening into the chamber the flow of gas through that opening will be from the room into the chamber and not the other way around. This ensures that the chamber is safe before we expose ourselves.” Then he removed a stopper from a hole in the front wall of the chamber.

“Give the fan time to flush the chamber completely,” he explained while he waited, still pedalling the treadle to the exhaust fan.

After at least a minute he spoke again. “That should be enough. Now we can open the access panel.” The front panel was swung open. Paleos reached in and put his hand around a jar.

“Now comes the part that even experienced workers tend to forget!” Don't just take out the jar you want. While it's still in the chamber, you must put the jar on the flat surface of the bench and then, slowly, carefully, twist the top and crack the jar open.” He followed his own advice.

“Can either of you tell me why that must be done?” he challenged.

“Ah, so you don't get a face full of fumes when you open it elsewhere?” Lucius offered.

“Good,” Paleos answered, but with an upward inflection to suggest that there was more to come. “What might happen if you get that face full?” he prompted.

“You might suffer injury,” Lucius continued.

“That in itself would not be a nice thing,” Paleos agreed, “but what consequences might that have?”

“It might cause you to drop the jar and the liquid would spread everywhere!” Lucius finally got the point.

“Correct!” Paleos commended him. “But that's only one reason. What others can you think of?”

“If there is any pressure in the jar, then the sudden release of that pressure might jolt the jar out of your hands,” Piso contributed. “That's why you said to put it flat on the bench.”

“Good work, Piso!” Paleos went through the process of venting the jar, and then carried it to a second bench. This bench had another glass hood, but much smaller. It was clearly a work space rather than a storage space. He set the jar on this bench. “Now let's assume we've finished with that chemical. Talk me through what I should do now.”

“First ensure the lid is tight, to prevent slow escape after you put it back,” Piso suggested.

“Good work, Piso!” Paleos tightened the lid, and looked to Lucius.

“Carry it back to the chamber and put it in its correct place, so it can't be confused with another chemical if the next person isn't careful,” Lucius offered.

Paleos carried the jar back to the enclosed bench and then turned the jar so its label was clearly visible.

“Close the access,” Piso knew it was his turn. Paleos pulled the panel down.

“You didn't seal it properly, Titos,” Piso interjected.

“Good work!” Paleos commended him. “Always make sure the hatch seals properly.” Paleos gave an extra push to the hatch. The leather seals around the edges of the hatch could now be seen to be in contact with the glass of the hatch all around, thanks to the oil on them pressing against the glass. Paleos stepped away from the bench.

“You haven't sealed the small stopper hole yet,” Lucius reminded him.

“Excellent! I'm starting to feel very safe in this laboratory!” Paleos smiled.

The work was going well. The easiest way to extract an essence was simply steeping the shredded leaf in hot water. It didn't take long to realise that this was not going to work. Even boiling water seemed ineffective.

Generally there were four ways an essence might dissolve. Water was only one. The other three were oil, acid or base. Solution in an acid or a base often caused damage or even total loss, so the next attempt was oil. Olive oil was one possibility, but this would be too difficult to drive off afterwards. Using heat to speed this could damage the essence as well. Paleos thought it well worth the expense to buy a different very light type of oil that would evaporate quickly if not kept in a sealed container. This would make it very easy to drive off the excess liquid, leaving only the residue of the essence. But this oil was rare, being produced by lightly heating pitch from a new tar eruption and then cooling and condensing the gas driven off in this process. But the tar eruption had to be fresh. The heat of the daily sun was itself sufficient to drive off this gas if it was not reached within a day or two.

The Museum had a steady supply of this light liquid. Paleos made enquiries about its source and discovered that this was from an area a couple of hundred miles upstream from Babylon. Two days later he set off with Piso, Lucius and two other men as his escort. A few Negotiable Notes had been sewn into their tunics, but otherwise they were so shabby that no self-respecting highwayman would bother to loot them even if they were already dead on the road. Not that they expected any problems. The new steam-driven paddlewheel boat would make this a safe and easy trip.

"Lucius," Paleos struck up a conversation to relieve the boredom, "Do you mind if I ask how much you get paid?"

Lucius shrugged. "While on mission, we just spend what we need to, keep notes about how much and what for, and Lucius keeps our cash topped up. So long as our expenses are reasonable we have no need for pay."

"But when you're back home?"

"Oh, that. I get twenty four denarii a month."

"That's pretty poor pay!" Paleos was surprised. He himself was being paid more than eight times that amount, plus free food and accommodation.

"Oh, that's after free accommodation, free food, free laundry, free theatre, free baths, free clothing issue, and all the rest," Lucius explained.

"Oh, I didn't know about that," Paleos commented.

"It really is completely different from here," Lucius agreed.

"And how much does Piso get, as a sailor?"

"Piso is only twenty-two, two years younger than I am. So he would get twenty two denarii a month. That's the rate for that age."

"But it's a different job," Paleos protested.

"It doesn't matter what job you do, pay depends on your age. Unless you're still a slave of course, but most get their whites in less than two years."

"Their whites?"

"Sorry, that's a term for citizenship."

"Oh, so each year older you get paid more?"

"Up to thirty years of age, yes. After that it is thirty denarii, flat."

“Unless you get a better job, I suppose. I wonder how much I would be paid,” Paleos mused.

“Makes no difference,” Lucius answered. “How old are you? You get a denarius a month for each year of age, with a minimum of fifteen and a maximum of thirty.”

“What? Even Lukios? And your magistrates?”

“Yep,” Lucius answered directly. “It's much better that way. It means everybody ends up in the job they most want and are best suited to, instead of being tempted to take a job he doesn't really like just for the extra coin.” He turned to look directly at Paleos.

“Tell me what work would you want to do, if all jobs earned the same pay?”

“Well, I'd still be an alchemist, I suppose.”

“So why should you get paid more for doing a job you want to do anyway?”

Paleos had no answer. He thought through the strange society these men came from. How it even made sense in its own topsy-turvy way, like the most ridiculous dream makes sense but only while you are dreaming it. After a few minutes he spoke again.

“Your leaders might not get any more money in their pay but do they have more personal slaves, or better houses, or better food?”

“No personal slaves,” Lucius answered. “We don't really have any need for them with all the cooking and laundry done for us. The food is the same for everyone. We all tend to eat in the same mess hall, from the Chief Administrator down to the newest slaves. House size is allocated on the basis of family size, and the older people or cripples tend to get the housing closest to the centre of town so they don't have to walk so far. It makes much better sense than what I see here in the Republic.”

Paleos was bewildered by this. “But don't you have any ambition?” he asked. “Don't you want to improve your standing, acquire some wealth and status, become someone with... with dignitas?”

“Of course I do,” Lucius answered as though this was the silliest question he had ever been asked. “I hope to become Chief Cook once I get back home. In fact I had hoped to have that job already. Marcia's getting old and not really up to the job and I was basically doing it for her. But this mission came up and I always wanted to see the Old World.” He gave a snort of contempt. “And I've seen enough of it now, thank you! At least when I get back I'll have a few ideas about how to preserve meat better. It's quite warm and humid back home, a bit li...” Lucius stopped himself. “I shouldn't have said that. Please forget it.” He stood and walked away.

Paleos was left marvelling. Here was a young man, obviously intelligent from his aptitude to pick up the intricacies of alchemy, but he had no idea of wealth and his concept of status and dignitas extended no further than promotion within a menial role. But then Paleos recalled that one searching question; ‘if all jobs were paid the same, what would you want to do?’. And Paleos had to admit that he would be happier doing what he loved. And if that attracted as much status and dignitas as any other job, then would he not rejoice in it? What a strange, upside-down world these strangers must live in! And how they must be bewildered by ours as much as I am by theirs! He decided that he might talk to Lukios when the party arrived back in the villa.

“Lukios,” Paleos asked tentatively. Even after this time, he felt awkward when addressing a superior so personally. “Is the offer of becoming one of the inner clients still open?”

“If that’s what you want, Titos,” Lukios answered in his surprise. “But I thought you had your mind set on going back to the Museum.”

“I do indeed, Lukios. But I thought that perhaps your Patron might like to think about starting his own Museum. Even if it starts with nothing more than Alchemy as applied to extracting essences from crops. You hinted that this is only the first of many.”

Lukios thought for a moment before answering. “A policy decision like that is well above my level of authority. I can promise you nothing except to take the idea back when I return.”

“I can understand that and I respect your honesty,” Paleos persisted. “But at the least, can you guarantee that if I come over I will be given a lifetime of work in what I love?”

Again Lukios paused before answering. “I can assure you of this; that I can’t conceive of my Patron not taking full advantage of your skills. And as our numbers grow and our range of opportunities expands, your idea of our own Museum will become increasingly attractive. If you come over then you can expect to be frustrated that things might not go as quickly or as smoothly as you might hope. But in fifty years’ time you will look back on your work with deep satisfaction. What more could any man ask?” Lukios spread his hands expressively. “But I have to warn you that ‘satisfaction’ in our minds might not be what you imagine it to be in your own. Our world is so different from yours that you would need to re-cast your expectations into a completely different mould.”

“So I have gathered,” Paleos agreed. “My conversations with Piso and Lucius have given me a glimpse into a world that I would never have imagined.”

“What have they told you?” Lukios asked, alarmed.

“Oh, that your women work like men do and that all children are educated, not just those of the nobles. In fact, that you don’t have nobles and that you, lord Hermenes, have no more personal status than a female recently released from forced prostitution.” He smiled as he finished this statement. The reaction from Lukios would tell him so much!

“And would you be comfortable in such a society?” Lukios asked.

Paleos was taken by surprise. To compare any noble with a prostitute would be a monstrous insult in the Republic. But Lukios seemed not to even notice it!

“Are you... are you not insulted by that comparison?” Paleos asked, bewildered.

“What compar... Oh!” Lukios laughed. “One of my sons is married to an ex-prostitute. I didn’t realise that you were insulting me!” Lukios chuckled for a few moments more. “I have to confess, I’m still not immediately aware of these social niceties!”

Paleos made his decision. “Lukios, I’m barely Fifth Class, and probably not even that any more because I had to sell most of my assets to pay for my studies. I’m probably Head Count now! But even if I still qualify for Fifth Class I would be treated with contempt by my academic colleagues who are mostly Second or Third Class. Much as I might dream of an academic career and I reasonably expect that I’d be able to gain one,

I'll always be a step or two behind everyone else in social terms." Paleos drew a deep breath. "I seek acceptance into your apparently Classless society."

Lukios paused again. "Surely you realise that you're throwing away a huge amount of money over your lifetime. This is irrevocable."

"Yes," Paleos replied. "But if the pay scale that Lucius mentioned to me holds true, then I will have to ask that I be equipped with a functional laboratory and granted extra money to buy from the Museum any publications that align with my discipline. That will keep me up-to-date professionally and also be of benefit to your Patron."

"I can promise you that all publications by the Museum will be made available to you free of cost, and those from the German Museum as well."

"That's as much as I could ask," Paleos replied, and offered his right arm.

Cras - February 848 AUC (95 A.D.)

There was good news and bad news waiting for Lukios back in Cras. The production of sugar was increasing rapidly and the new Java Oil was coming to be known primarily because of its low price. Tabak was making some headway, much of it as an aromatic used in incense burners in baths and the houses of some wealthier people as a novelty. Little of it was being smoked, the most addictive (and therefore the most profitable) use. But the acceptance to date was encouraging.

The worst of the bad news was that the road across the Neck was taking more time and manpower than expected. Already the scale of the project had been cut back from a standard Roman Road wide enough to take a wagon. Now the aim was no more than a trail wide enough for a train of mules, and with gradients and geometric layout to match. At least the goodwill of the locals had been gained. The trail provided them with a route into new hunting and gathering grounds in the hinterland. While they had always had foot paths, the new mule trail made it much easier for them to bring larger kills or collections back to their settlements on the coast. The two new ports had also been sited and were being operated to ensure no interference with the local fishing and hunting grounds. As an added gesture the two towns held a feast for the locals every new moon. Friendship was abounding.

The good news he brought back with him was that Paleos had discovered a process that could separate out the essence from the coca leaves, and had already designed a refinery that could handle this on a large scale. Unfortunately this process required a supply of this light mineral oil as a consumable. It was not cheap to buy, and transporting it from Babylon would add to the cost. And it would also attract attention, given the volumes required. Attention was something that Terrapulchra did not want.

Paleos had included some refinements to minimise the loss of this oil. Rather than allowing it to simply evaporate he had tried to use a still to condense the vapour. This was done by wrapping the exit tubing in wet cloth and blowing air over the cloth, but even so the recovery yields were only a fraction of the input volume. An entirely enclosed system was a possibility but would be very dangerous, risking explosion at worst and serious fires if there were a leak in the pressure vessel.

The Council noted the good work that had been done and asked the Inland Exploration Director to seek out tar pits close to home. It was not expected that it would be too difficult to find a tar pit. It was known that the primitives on the shores of the southern continent used pitch to seal their canoes, so a dozen men were sent to explore that region. They experienced the usual disconcerting treatment by the natives who would elude them at every opportunity. They even walked into camps with the food still

on the fire, but not a person in sight. Eventually a tar pit was found on the big island closest to the coast of the continent. A well was drilled near its shores and a lighter, less viscous pitch could be extracted from a greater depth.

Paleos was sent to the island with his equipment. He managed to extract his light, colourless mineral oil from this lighter tar, using a still and condenser at atmospheric pressure. All was well! He set about the more serious business now, to design and build an enclosed still to make the process more efficient and self-sustaining. For this he needed to adapt some of the steel kettles, boilers and pipework bought from the German steel works to build and maintain the new sugar plantations. This material and a few skilled steelworkers were made available to him.

Eventually he developed a separator that worked well. The raw pitch was pumped into a kettle and the vapour passed through a series of condenser coils which collected the output oil in various grades. The condensate from the coils closest the still was the heaviest grade and the output from the furthest condenser was the most volatile. A drain from each condenser allowed these products to be removed even as the process continued. Excess vapour from the pressure-relief valve at the end of the condenser series was captured and piped back as fuel to heat the kettle, and there was a slow drain from the bottom of the kettle to remove the heavy pitch residue. It all went smoothly, providing not only the mineral oil for the coca extraction but also heavy liquid fuel to serve as a fire-starter and pitch to be used for sealants and torches.

Within a year the process could guarantee a steady supply of mineral oil and some of the techniques developed here were retro-fitted onto the scavenger system on the still he had originally developed to minimise losses during the drying of the coca essence.

Paleos was more satisfied than he could have imagined. He had developed an entire new industry! Certainly, he had been given a few hints from seeing the way the oil was refined back in Mesopotamia, but those hints were common knowledge to any competent alchemist. Here he had applied them professionally, and invented a continuous process rather than the batch processing used in the Old World! After only one year in this new land he felt he had accomplished as much as most would in a lifetime. Now for the next challenge!

Cras - April 852 AUC (99 A.D.)

Paleos was very pleased indeed. It had been a leap of faith, almost motivated by spite against the Class System of the Republic, that had brought him across the ocean. But he had never regretted it.

He had developed (he had resolved to never use the word 'perfected') the Closed-Cycle Still to acquire that light mineral oil solvent to assist in the purification of coca essence. This also proved to be the ideal fuel for the ballista bombs used by the interceptors. A fire using this oil spread much more rapidly and aggressively than an olive-oil fire, and was virtually impossible to extinguish.

As soon as this was done there suddenly arose other applications for the heavier by-products. One particular favourite was a slightly heavier oil with a higher boiling point. This could be used as a safe liquid fuel for cooking. This was especially useful when at sea, the oil being much more conveniently handled and safer to control than firewood.

Even heavier by-products almost as viscous as pitch were excellent lubricants, better than lard and without the downside of going rancid or attracting insects and other pests.

As a result of these efforts he was being given his great wish. He sat on the platform, radiating joy as Persephone finished her speech.

“So it is with great pleasure I present to you the founding Curator of the new Terrapulchra Museum!”

Persephone threw an arm out towards Paleos, inviting him to stand. The crowd cheered and applauded. Not exuberantly, because everyone knew that this was a Time of Small Things, but in good spirits and optimistic that growth into something more worthy of the title was inevitable in time.

Persephone stepped aside and Paleos took her place.

“Thank you, everyone!” he smiled and waved casually. “It's good to be among friends!” There was another cheer. “I know the title 'Museum' might sound a bit grandiose,” he admitted. “Because it is!” he thundered and then laughed. “At present it's just me, three experienced assistants with no official training or degrees – but with plenty of smarts, mind you! - and a couple of rooms full of equipment specially designed to impress the Council. And it worked!” he laughed again. Then he continued more seriously.

“But I am gratified that the Council has seen the need, made the plans, and found the resources for what will become a great asset to our Republic. We are indeed fortunate to be led by men and women of such vision!” Paleos had learnt very early to recognise the role played by women in this new society. After his initial bemusement at something so novel to his experience he had come to embrace it. He saw in it a parallel to his former subservient position as only Fifth Class in the Republic, surrounded by Second and Third Class who always saw him as their inferior despite his greater ability.

“Over the next few years the Museum will grow. And it will grow in ways that will offer the greatest benefit to all of us! My first priority will be the establishment of a Medical School, with a focus on the problems unique to our conditions. I've been distressed by how easily a minor wound can become infected or ulcerate, a problem considered unimportant in Babylon and therefore ignored. But it's a major problem here,

where the wet conditions bring moulds to every surface! I also want to know why the natives in these lands seem to suffer from such deadly plagues from time to time, the most recent examples being the friendly clans at either end of the Neck Road. We can only consider ourselves lucky that the diseases that seem to rage through these people have not affected us yet. But that good fortune can't last forever and I want the best medical attention possible to be brought to bear. I want physicians who know how to treat such problems, or even to prevent them. We will not gain that knowledge by reading what comes out of Babylon! Babylon doesn't even know these problems exist! We must do that work ourselves and that means we must train our own men and women up to a standard of competence to do it.

“We must also recognise that we have only begun to understand this beautiful land, this Terrapulchra. I am certain that it contains treasures that we have not even recognised yet, resources that are beyond value if only we knew how to use them! Look at the coca leaf as an example! Who would have imagined such a gift from the gods even as little as fifteen years ago? It would have sounded as if it came out of a story from Homer! How many other great gifts are out there, waiting for us?” He paused, to allow this rhetorical question to sink into the minds of his hearers.

Then, starting again more slowly, at a lower pitch and with slightly less power, “I know that the Museum as it stands today seems such a small thing. I have been trained in Babylon, and I admit that our Terrapulchra Museum today looks like a child's pretend citadel. But over time it will grow and serve our young nation well. And I thank the Council that it has had the vision to see what is not there now, but will be in the fullness of time.”

He waved again to the crowd, smiling casually as demanded by the Terrapulchran culture of informality and egalitarianism. Then he took to the steps at the front of the platform, to mix with the crowd and accept right hands and pats on the shoulder. How much he loved this society and its disdain for self-importance!

It was almost an hour later before he had received his last right arm and good wishes. The crowd of perhaps five hundred had dispersed in the deepening gloom towards the mess hall for the evening meal, so he headed that way himself. Persephone fell in beside him.

“That went well, Titos,” she said to him cheerily. “You hit exactly the right notes.”

“Thank you, Persephone,” he accepted the compliment. “It's not hard. All I have to do is remember that I'm speaking to friends, not to a crowd. By all the gods, I love this place!”

“Who wouldn't?” Persephone asked rhetorically. “Silly question, of course! The proud, the lazy, the spiteful, the dishonest wouldn't like it! So make sure you're careful whom you speak to and what you say when you go back to the Old World.”

“Indeed I will, Persephone,” he agreed. “I came over here to escape such people! The Republic's Class System with its culture of puffed-up self-importance promotes such arrogance and callousness. I know what to look out for, both to approach and to avoid.”

Paleos had been in no rush. He had arrived in Babylon in June, and made a point of enrolling in the School of Medicine. The teaching staff were slightly perplexed by this.

Enrolling half-way through the year was a bit pointless, but so long as this young man was prepared to pay the fees...

It was also considered strange that he never attended the First Year lectures or classes, but spent his time in the most senior classes that he had no real chance of understanding. But his enrolment entitled him to attend whatever classes he wanted. If he failed to pass the examinations or complete the assignments because he organised his subjects inefficiently, that was his right and it was also his problem. He should know better, anyway. Wasn't this the same young man who had dropped out of the Alchemy School five years ago, only a month before graduating as Foremost?

But Paleos had no intention of taking up Medicine. His aim was to get to know as many of the top students as possible. Almost every mid-day break he was buying lunch for someone, and chatting informally about their family, their plans, their politics, their motivations, anything that would give him an insight into their world-view.

By August he had a reasonable idea of who might be worth approaching and who would best be avoided. One of them in particular, a Jew, showed special interest in ulcerations and other diseases common in tropical areas. He also seemed to not put too much emphasis on his Third Class status.

"Thank you for taking the time to visit, Reuben," Paleos said as his acquaintance was admitted into the atrium.

"Why would I not?" a smiling Reuben ben Yacoub replied as he dropped his two shoulder-bags to the floor and accepted Paleos' right arm. "You're a puzzle I would like to understand better, Titos, but despite our frequent chats you have revealed so little about yourself. My curiosity compels me!"

The house slave who had opened the door picked up the shoulder bags and stood waiting.

"Oh, thank you," ben Yacoub said to him. The slave nodded in silent appreciation.

"Why do you bother to thank a slave?" Paleos asked. "It's his job!"

"Slave or not, he is as much a man as I am," ben Yacoub answered. Then he waved a hand, as if to dismiss his comment. "It's just one of my religious foibles."

"We all have foibles," Paleos agreed. "I've allocated Marcos as your personal attendant while you're here. Let him show you to your room. When you're ready I would like you to join me in the garden."

The slave led off to a hallway to the right of the atrium, and ben Yacoub followed. Almost immediately Marcos turned into a doorway to the left. This villa had been designed so that the guest rooms were adjacent the atrium, but did not open directly onto it.

"Marcos, I'm sorry if I have caused any trouble for you when I spoke in the atrium," ben Yacoub said once they were in the room and out of earshot.

"Thank you, my lord, but I will not be in any trouble," Marcos replied. "Do you require anything of me at the moment? If not, I'll be waiting outside your door."

"Well, if you would please put my bags on the bed, and then show me where the latrine is. And then to join Titos in the garden."

"I will put your things away then, my lord."

“Thank you, Marcos, but I'll do that myself later,” ben Yacoub smiled. “It will make me feel more at home.”

Marcos placed the bags on the bed. “This way, my lord.”

Having relieved himself, ben Yacoub followed Marcos into a shaded walled garden. There was a fountain tinkling down one wall. The air was cool and fresh by the artificial waterfall. He turned to Marcos again. Not wishing to provoke Paleos, he spoke without warmth. “You may go now until called.” Marcos bowed slightly, and walked out of the garden.

“What a delightful garden!” ben Yacoub commented as he sat next to Paleos. “In fact, a very pleasant villa.”

“Yes,” Paleos agreed. “I like it very much.”

“If I may be so bold, Titos,” ben Yacoub prefaced his question, “Is this villa yours? I've heard that you withdrew from your course before graduating in Alchemy, and seemed to disappear off the face of the earth. So how did you acquire such a delightful home?”

“Never mind being bold, Reuben,” Paleos laughed. “I'll take no offence, so long as I'm permitted to be equally bold to you!”

Ben Yacoub made a small gesture with his right hand. “You cannot offend unless you mean to offend, Titos.”

“Thank you,” Paleos replied. “But you asked first, so I'll answer first. No, this is not my villa. It belongs to my Patron, who has given me free use of it. And yes, I did disappear before gaining my doctorate, because my Patron offered me a much better alternative.”

“What was that alternative?”

“No, I have answered one question. Now it's my turn to ask you one,” Paleos teased good-naturedly. “My question is, what is this religious foible that causes you to thank a slave? Don't Jews keep slaves?”

“I'm Jew by race, but a Christist by religion,” ben Yacoub answered. “We Christists believe that all men are created in God's image, and therefore all are worthy of respect. A slave is as much a human as a Senator. They just have different jobs.”

Paleos raised his eyebrows in an expression of surprise. “An interesting thought!” he commented. “But what about *female* slaves?”

“Our sacred book, which we inherited from my own ancestors, says 'In the image of God He created him, male and female He created them.' We read those two sentences to mean that all humanity is one, as God is one, but it consists of two equal components, just as God is composed of equals, the Father, Son and Spirit.” Ben Yacoub smiled weakly. “Of course if we said that sort of thing publicly, or if our women dared to assert their equality, we would be declared nefas. That's why one of our great teachers urged women to be submissive in public. But in the privacy of our own homes our men are told to show their wives full respect and honour.”

“That *is* a strange concept, Reuben! One god in three parts! I can't imagine that!”

Ben Yacoub shrugged. “Perhaps because you're thinking of gods as the Romans and Greeks and Egyptians imagine them. As if they are merely bigger, stronger, immortal versions of humans. But we worship a God who is infinitely above us, more like the Greek concept of the Logos but even more powerful.”

It was Paleos' turn to shrug. "I was never one to delve into philosophy. It makes my head hurt! But let me get this clear, the practical outcome is that you would consider a female slave the equal of a Senator?"

"Equal before God, and therefore equally deserving of our respect, but with different roles in this life," ben Yacoub summarised. "Do you find that scandalous?"

Paleos casually ignored that return question. "Now your turn to ask me a question. Or do you want to go back to the one you have already asked?"

"Yes. What alternative career did your Patron offer? Everyone expected you to be Foremost, and then taken into the Museum staff. Your disappearance was thought at first to be a murder."

"I was offered everything I ever wanted in life," Paleos answered. "I was offered a lifetime of work in my chosen field, with access to every specialist journal I wanted, my own laboratory, and the sort of respect that I would never have been given as a Fifth-Class orphan surrounded by Second Class heirs. And all in a community where everyone was equal, regardless of heritage."

"And you responded to that with gratitude and love?" ben Yacoub asked.

"Of course! Who wouldn't?"

"And now you have dedicated yourself to this Patron who loves you?"

"Yes, I have," Paleos agreed.

"So if you treat your slaves the same way, will they not dedicate themselves to you in love and gratitude?" ben Yacoub smiled. "That's one practical reason, quite apart from my religion, why I believe we should treat even slaves with respect!"

Paleos felt as though he was a man seeing for the first time, never realising before that he had been blind. Everything that he most loved about Terrapulchra, this man was talking about in the Old World. But how could he have even imagined such a possibility? He groped for words. At last he found some that he dared to speak.

"Reuben, do you realise that if this religion of yours spreads, it's going to turn the world upside down?"

Ben Yacoub smiled. "Yes it will, won't it?"

There was silence for a few moments before Paleos regathered his composure. "I've lost track. Whose turn is it to ask a question?"

Ben Yacoub spread his hands. "You're the host. You decide."

Paleos was still at a loss for words. "Well, I know you are one of three sons and I think you have a sister as well..." he saw ben Yacoub nodding, "and your family is Third Class. What do you expect to be doing in ten years' time?"

Ben Yacoub showed a slight firming around the mouth for a moment. "Titos, I believe I can trust you, mystery that you are. Do I have your word that you will keep our words together a personal confidence?"

"It is easy for anyone to answer 'yes' to that, Reuben. But for reasons I hope will become apparent soon, I assure you that I will keep your confidence."

Reuben looked at Paleos for a long moment, as though making a decision. Then he started talking.

"My father is moderately wealthy. I don't need to build wealth of my own. So my father and my brothers have agreed to support me while I learn all I can about the terrible diseases that afflict the natives in the Spice Islands. I'll work towards treatments or even

cures for what they suffer. You have no idea of their distress, Titos! Even the slightest cut can cause infection, sometimes leading to amputation or death! I must understand why this happens and how to protect these people from such terrible injuries.” Here ben Yacoub paused a moment. “And I will admit that the trust they give me because of this medical help, I will use for my own agenda. I will spread my so-called ‘poisonous religion’ among them as much as I am able.”

Paleos stared at ben Yacoub for another long moment. “So what is your motivation, Reuben? To cure them of their diseases or to spread your religion?”

“The only answer I can give to that question is ‘Yes’, Titos. I will cure whatever I can cure, whether it is physical or spiritual. What I can’t, I can’t. It’s all in God’s hands, not mine.” He took a deep breath. “So now you’ve seen into my soul, Titos. I don’t know why I’ve been so candid with you, but I trust in God and I trust you. Please do not make any difficulties for me in the future.”

Paleos thought for what seemed an eternity. But he was convinced that ben Yacoub could be trusted, out of fear as much as anything else.

“Reuben, I have a confession to make. I have no interest in graduating in Medicine. In fact, I have no interest in learning Medicine. I have a much better job already, if you will pardon the boast. But I seriously want to recruit on behalf of my Patron a man who is a good physician and that physician must also satisfy certain other criteria. I thought you might be such a man, which is why I invited you here for a few days of rest. I wanted to evaluate you more closely. I hope you will forgive me for that small deception. But perhaps the best way forward would be for me to call Marcos back to help me explain.”

Ben Yacoub spread his hands. “You are not the first to offer me a job, so that is nothing to apologise for. I should apologise to you that I have already made my plans.”

Paleos stood and walked to the entry back into the atrium. “Marcos, if you could come here, please.” For just a moment ben Yacoub was surprised to hear the polite request rather than a simple order to a slave, but he didn’t dwell on that. Marcos appeared promptly and stood awaiting instructions.

“Marcos, it’s time to drop the pretence and answer sincerely. The only limit is that of the *Lex de Terrapulchra Incognoscenda*. Otherwise, answer plainly. Do you understand?”

“I think so, Titos,” Marcos answered. Again ben Yacoub was struck by the familiarity of ‘Titos’ rather than ‘lord’ as Marcos spoke.

“Marcos, how long have you been a slave?”

“I’m not a slave, Titos,” Marcos answered with a glance towards ben Reuben. He was still not sure that he should be dropping the pretence so completely so soon into the guest’s stay.

“Then why have you been acting as one?”

“You know, Titos. It’s part of my job here with you.” Marcos was obviously defensive now.

“Just keep answering truthfully, Marcos,” Paleos reassured him. “What is your real job?”

“My usual job is as a clerk, keeping records of stores.”

“Without saying where Terrapulchra is, or anything else that might give clues, please tell me how everyday life in Terrapulchra is different from the Republic.”

Marcos spread his hands as if in exasperation. “In almost every way, Titos! Over here everyone is governed by greed, fear or pride! Everyone tries to promote himself! There is no care for one’s neighbour! Except that lord ben Yacoub has shown himself to be a compassionate man, I must say, but he is an exception,” he nodded towards their guest. Marcos held his hands out as if to convey speechlessness.

“Reuben,” Paleos broke into the gap. “Feel free to ask Marcos any questions you might want to put to him.”

“I... I have no idea what to ask, Titos. Perhaps you might like to give me some background.” Ben Yacoub was obviously totally confused.

“Then perhaps I should ask Marcos more specific questions,” Paleos suggested. Then to Marcos “Tell us, Marcos, how many Classes are there in Terrapulchra?”

“Well, only two, I suppose. There are citizens and there are slaves.”

“And what sort of life can a slave expect?”

“Well, they can expect to be allocated jobs that no-one else wants. But if they work diligently and in good faith, they will be granted citizenship after a couple of years. After that they can do whatever they prove themselves capable of doing.”

“And how are slaves treated?”

“Just like anyone else, really. After all, everyone knows they’ll be citizens soon so why not start the way it is going to continue? Everyone coaches them into being good citizens.”

“When you say that they can do whatever they show themselves capable of doing, what are the limits?”

Marcos shrugged. “I don’t know of any limits. Many slaves have become Councillors, and a few have even become Consuls.”

“What is a Councillor?”

“I suppose they would be called Senators in the Republic.”

“Tell me about your parents, Marcos, but keep it general.”

Marcos smiled weakly. “My father is a sailor. My mother is a teacher.”

“Your mother works?” Paleos challenged.

“Yes, everyone works in Terrapulchra.”

“Even the wealthy?”

Marcos wrinkled his face. “We have no parasites, and we have no poor.”

Paleos looked over to ben Yacoub. “Ask away, Reuben!”

Ben Yacoub had one point sticking in his mind. “You say everyone works? Is that not citizen slavery?”

Marcos frowned. He was not sure what the question meant. “Everyone works. Nobody wants to be useless. So everybody is allocated to a job that suits their skills. If you don’t like that job or if you think you’re able to do some other job, then you put your name in for it. When a vacancy comes up, those who have applied for it are assessed for competence and the best is appointed to it. It might take a couple of tries, but if you gain the skills required you will eventually get the job you want.”

“But who does the jobs that nobody else wants?” ben Yacoub persisted.

“The worst jobs go to the slaves, so they can prove themselves worthy. The unskilled jobs go to the kids who don’t qualify for higher education.”

“You keep talking about slaves!” ben Yacoub protested. “Who gets to be enslaved, and for what crimes?”

“Ah! I see the misunderstanding!” Paleos broke in. “Every year we buy thousands of slaves from the Republic and take them to Terrapulchra. They're allocated to the lowest jobs, but if they perform diligently they're granted citizenship and replaced by newly-imported slaves. Every slave who arrives knows that within a few years he or she will be a full citizen. Our whole society is based on taking slaves from the Republic and making them full citizens of Terrapulchra.”

The two Terrapulchrans didn’t realise this but that last sentence struck a deep chord in ben Yacoub. He was immediately reminded of Paul’s first letter to the Gathering in Rome, and its emphasis on being set free.

“How many Christists are there in this place?” ben Yacoub asked.

Paleos was taken by surprise by this question. “I really have no idea,” he admitted. “Marcos?” he asked, looking to his nominal slave.

“My sister says she has a friend who calls herself Christist. Does that have anything to do with a man named Iesous? She's always being told stories about some miracle-worker by that name,” Marcos asked.

Ben Yacoub was surprised. “Iesous is what he's called in Greek, but his real name was Yeshua. Tell me, Titos, if I take the job you are offering me what will it involve?”

Paleos took a deep breath. “I have your pledge of secrecy here, Reuben?”

“Provided you are not proposing something wicked, yes,” ben Yacoub replied.

“Terrapulchra is a warm, moist land, in some ways like the Spice Islands. Your immediate task would be to research as much as possible the causes of infection in minor wounds, and hopefully how to treat them. You would be provided with every learned paper published in the Republic, but you would have very limited scope to communicate back. Personally, I expect that you could spend your entire life on this quest because I expect that this is so large a field that thousands of man-hours would be required to even take the first steps. If we can persuade other competent physicians to join you, you would be part of a team. But you are the first I've spoken to so far. We're currently setting up our own Museum and intend to establish a School of Medicine within it. You would be part of that School, perhaps its Head. I'm currently the Head of Alchemy, which is why I said earlier that I had the best job in the world.” Paleos thought it unwise to claim the position of Curator for the moment. “But there is one point that I must tell you. Your Third Class status would mean nothing to us. As Marcos said, we have no wealthy just as we have no permanent slaves. You would be working for the joy of the work, a comfortable but not luxurious standard of living and the respect of your fellows. Nothing more.”

Ben Yacoub was tempted. “This sounds like what I was intending to do in any case,” he commented. “What differences would there be? Would I be allowed to practise and propagate my religion?”

“We have a law, the *Lex de religionibus*, which guarantees free expression and practice of religion and respectful discussion of other religions. Unless your religion is

considered nefas you will have no problems. And to the best of my knowledge, no religion has been declared nefas to date.”

“You keep slipping back into Latin, Titos. Why is that so?”

Paleos grinned wryly. “My natural tongue is Greek, as you might have guessed from my name. And Terrapulchrans probably speak Greek more than Latin. But for reasons of history, Latin is our language of law. That might well change in the near future as we import more and more slaves who speak only Greek.”

Ben Yacoub realised that he would need time to absorb this information and that as he did so he would come across yet more questions. “I have much to think about. I will pray to my God for guidance, Titos. Let us talk more about this later. Right now I would like to bathe to get the dust of the road out of my skin.”

“Then let me show you where the bath is,” Paleos said with a smile as he stood. “I don't suppose I should order Marcos to be your slave any more.”

Of course the intended formality of the evening meal was dropped. Their guest no longer needed to be kept from knowing about their true status. The cook still cooked of course, but joined Paleos and ben Yacoub at the main table as did Marcos and the three other 'slaves'.

“So how much are you allowed to tell me about your new life, Titos?” ben Yacoub asked in the general banter around the table. “What's your job and what have you been doing for the last five years anyway?”

“Oh, I was asked to take on a project to refine an essence from a certain crop. At first it was just a one-off project to earn some money and I had every intention of graduating and joining the Museum staff afterwards. But as I worked on the project and talked with the two assistants provided for me, I became more and more fascinated with this strange community these people came from. I was shocked by so much of it, but it also made so much sense if you looked at it from their perspective. Eventually I asked if I could join them.”

“And what have you been doing since?” ben Yacoub persisted. “Surely one refining exercise didn't take five years!”

“No, it didn't,” Paleos agreed. “After that I had to work out how to obtain the chemicals needed for the refining process without buying them from a source that could trace our activities. In effect I was building a chemical industry from the ground up, so that everything we needed for that process could be provided by our own hands. And while I was doing that we found that many of the by-products had uses that had never been imagined before. One step leads to another. Eventually I persuaded the Council to set up our own Museum so research could happen in an orderly way. I was made Head of Alchemy and the next priority was to establish a School of Medicine. Like I said, Terrapulchra is warm and moist and those infectious diseases you are so concerned about affect our people no less than in the Spice Islands.”

“So they sent you back here to recruit a physician,” ben Yacoub completed the line of thought.

“Actually, to recruit a few physicians,” Paleos corrected him. “There's so much work to do!”

“But why does everything have to be so secret?” ben Yacoub asked. “Why not just go out and hire someone? Or pay for your research to be done by the Babylon Museum?”

“Because we have to remain secret,” Paleos answered flatly. “For a start, we permit women exactly the same status as men. Women not only work, they also vote and get elected. Our current Consul is a woman, and she is by no means the first of her kind! How do you think the Republic would react to that?”

Ben Yacoub was stunned. “They... they would be scandalised!” ben Yacoub stumbled out.

“And that's only the beginning of it,” Paleos continued. “We have no recognition of private ownership of land and all business is owned and operated by the Council. Everyone is required to be available for work, subject to capacity to work, of course. We don't expect the maimed or the sick to work. They are cared for. We have virtually no crime, at worst a few personal disputes. Every child is educated to his or her full ability. The Council provides free food, free clothing, free education, free health care - but we would like to provide a better standard of health care, of course, which is why I'm here – and security for life. We live a simple but comfortable life with satisfying work, good entertainment, and enough rest and minor luxury to bring happiness without idleness or gluttony. Can you imagine how we would be a rebuke to everything this class-stratified, ruthless and grasping Republic holds dear? Every man above Fifth Class would see us and our society as an existential threat to his own lifestyle of greed, privilege and arrogance, an example of what might happen if the Head Count ever see an alternative to their oppression, poverty and drudgery. And to top it all off, the Republic would probably consider us pirates. In our view we're a sovereign state defending our territory and we maintain that everything we have done is legal, but I don't think the Republic would let that prevent them from subjugating us.” Paleos pulled himself up. He realised that perhaps he had shown too much passion. The rest of the table was looking at him in silence.

“I'm sorry, brothers! I love Terrapulchra and all she stands for. We must see that she prospers, and is always able to defend herself.”

Ben Yacoub found Paleos in his study early the next morning. “Good morning, Titos,” he greeted his friend.

“Oh, good morning, Reuben,” Paleos replied, looking up from his desk.

“Anything interesting?” ben Yacoub asked.

“Oh, just doodling,” Paleos dismissed his work. “A little while ago I invented a lamp that uses a special sort of oil that can be produced much cheaper than olive oil and burns with a much brighter flame. I'm still fine-tuning the refining process that produces this new fuel.” He smiled in a self-deprecating way. “Probably the best invention I'll ever make, at the age of twenty-five. Now I'm doomed to live the rest of my life in its shadow.”

“Don't be too sure that your best years are behind you, Titos. The way you spoke about Terrapulchra last night, you might yet become Consul.”

“Sorry about that, Reuben,” Paleos dipped his head. “But when I move from the Republic to Terrapulchra and then back to the Republic again, the differences are like a punch in the face.”

“So it would seem, Titos. Now tell me. This 'Patron' you spoke of, is not Terrapulchra your Patron? Not a person at all, but a nation?”

“You have it exactly right, Reuben.”

Reuben sat in the spare chair by the door. “You paint a wonderful picture of your land, Titos, and of the community you have joined. So much of it echoes what I pray for! But I'm not sure that I could take the isolation. Your emphasis on secrecy would mean that I would be isolated from the rest of the world. So how could I do proper research if I'm cut off from other researchers?” He shrugged. “Unless you're prepared to let me publish, that is.”

“You would do well to assume that you wouldn't be permitted to publish anything that could disclose our existence,” Paleos warned. “But we would import all the scholarly research published by others. I receive every issue of the Journal of the School of Alchemy.”

“Well, that would be good,” ben Yacoub conceded. “But if I develop a treatment, how could I ensure that the benefit of this will not be confined to one small community? The benefits should be spread to the whole world! To do otherwise is cruel and selfish.”

Paleos was silent. It was obvious that he was deciding whether or not to disclose something. Then he spoke.

“By the name of your strange god, Reuben, do I have your pledge of silence?”

“Unless what you tell me is wicked, yes. I will not be bound by a pledge that is evil.”

Paleos paused a moment longer. Then he spoke again. “Have you heard of 'Sindolor'?”

“Of course I have. That's the new drug that can relieve pain. I'm told that's why it was given that name - 'Without Sorrow' in Latin. There wouldn't be physician in the whole Republic who hasn't heard of it.”

“That drug is produced in Terrapulchra and exported to the whole world,” Paleos said. “So joining us wouldn't mean that your discoveries wouldn't be made available. It's just that they'd be made available in a way that is hidden.”

“Terrapulchra produces Sindolor? But everyone says it's imported from China!” Ben Yacoub was amazed. “Who is the genius who invented it?”

“We put out the story that it comes from China so no-one comes looking for us. In truth, it was discovered by accident,” Paleos answered. “It comes from a plant and chewing the leaf provides the pain relief. The only problem was that not all leaves contain the same concentration, so refining the essence into measurable and consistent doses was the main challenge. Once we mastered that, we started selling it. As much as we could produce! And we spend that income buying slaves so we can set them free and make citizens of them. Is that wicked?”

“Not wicked at all, Titos. Sindolor has been a blessing! And you are using the money from it to provide a second blessing.”

“In the same way, Reuben, anything you develop to cure these Spice Island diseases would also be made available to the whole world. But you wouldn't have the honour or fame of discovery. We would probably use the China excuse again.”

“That doesn't worry me, Titos,” ben Yacoub assured him with a smile. “My religion places great emphasis on not only modesty, but downright humility. The best gift is the one given secretly.”

“But there is one thing that I want you to understand perfectly clearly, Reuben,” Paleos emphasised. “If you accept, there is no turning back. Once you learn where our homeland is you may never leave it and never communicate with the Old World unless you have specific permission.”

“Well, you're here,” ben Yacoub responded.

“Yes, but only with permission and there are limits to what I am allowed to say,” Paleos said flatly. “This permission can be withdrawn at any time or refused in the future.”

Ben Yacoub brooded a moment. “If I can't tell my family where I am, then they won't be able to support me financially. I'd be dependent upon a salary. How much do you pay?”

“Marcos said we have neither parasites nor poor,” Paleos answered. “Everyone gets free food, free housing, free clothing and laundry, free medical care and many of the theatre shows are free, or at least very cheap. On top of that, everyone over the age of fifteen gets a denarius a month for each year of age up to a maximum of thirty, to spend as they choose. It doesn't matter what your job is, all pay rates are the same.”

Ben Yacoub looked surprised. “So I'm twenty six. I would be paid less than a thirty-year-old who cleans the streets!”

“That's right! You will get paid twenty six denarii a month. Now, for that twenty six denarii, would you rather clean the streets, or do medical research?”

“Medical research, of course!” ben Yacoub answered indignantly.

“Then medical research it will be! You'll be given the job you most want, so what are you complaining about?” Paleos asked with a smile. “Besides, I thought you said your religion places great emphasis on humility!” he teased.

Ben Yacoub broke into a smile, and then a chuckle. “Yes, you're right! How easy it is to think you believe one thing and all the time you are fooling yourself! You're absolutely right!”

Cras - April 853 AUC (100 A.D.)

Titos Paleos considered himself a man favoured by all the gods. He was surrounded by people who respected him both as a professional and a social equal, something he would never have experienced had he stayed in Babylon. He was still short of his thirtieth birthday and already his professional career was prodigious by any standard, even if he said so as his own judge. Although the original refinement of coca essence had been little more than a straightforward postgraduate exercise, the invention of the Closed Cycle Still to refine the ingredients had been a huge leap forward from the pre-existing technology. This had opened the way for him to develop an entirely new field of Alchemy based on mineral oils.

From that point onwards he had been as much an Engineer as an Alchemist, inventing ever more applications for the by-products of his still. He had developed vastly improved weapons to help defend his beloved Terrapulchra, in particular the fuel for the ballista bombs. His original refinement had been to use mineral oil as a much more aggressive fuel than olive oil, but this had now been further developed with additional admixtures to give off toxic fumes and to stick to surfaces so it could not be flushed away even by the most powerful pump jet.

Now he had refined a new invention much less warlike but probably much more beneficial, especially to the interceptors and other small ships. He had developed cooking stoves using liquid fuel, obtained from a fraction of mineral oil slightly heavier than the coca solvent and therefore more stable. This liquid fuel also allowed rapid variations in flame intensity, meaning that the heat output could be controlled very closely and varied at will. This was much to be preferred to the usual practice of building a hearth on board a ship and carrying timber. The hearth was heavy and produced smoke, which meant that it was suffocating if set below deck and subject to the elements if above deck. Nor was it easy keeping the timber dry while at sea and the whole process of starting a wood fire and controlling the heat was tedious. Even more so on an interceptor, pitching and rolling with the waves! As a result most interceptor crews didn't even try to cook but endured on cold rations while on duty. This new liquid-fuel stove would change all that!

"Is it ready for sea trials yet?" ben Yacoub called from the doorway.

"Come on in, Reuben," Paleos replied. "I was just thinking how much I love this job. Back in Babylon I would still be some assistant technician, and the Head of Team would be getting all the glory and all the publishing rights, and I would be filled with resentment. Over here there's no glory and no publishing rights, and I rejoice in that! All because I can focus on the task instead of always plotting a career path."

Ben Yacoub took a stool beside Paleos and examined the device. "I see you've changed some of the details in the fuel supply pipework."

"Yes. The old way didn't allow enough control over the fuel flow. Whenever you pumped air into the tank it pushed the fuel through faster, and then died away quickly as the fuel level dropped. To get an even flame, you had to pump constantly and slowly. So I've put this control valve in place," Paleos tapped a brass handle as he spoke "so it is now possible to pump up the pressure as much as you want, and simply adjust the valve from time to time. Much less tedious."

“A good safety measure as well,” ben Yacoub added. “Just in case there's a slow leak in the stop-cock while the stove is packed away.”

“Yes,” Paleos acknowledged.

“Just to change the subject,” ben Yacoub said lightly, “I’ve been thinking about your plans to add a School of Engineering to the Museum. I think that you might reconsider your priorities.”

“We need some good engineering here, Reuben.”

“And we have it already,” ben Yacoub replied. “You're an instinctive engineer yourself! Look at what you've done already. And our men in the workshops have the metalworking skills to turn your ideas into reality. Just look at the workmanship in this stove!

“In my opinion, a higher priority would be Agriculture. How do we know we're getting the best yields from our crops? We're still guessing how to farm them. I’m reasonably confident that I can handle the livestock, because animal diseases and human diseases are not all that different. But plant diseases are completely unknown to both of us.”

“Hmm. Perhaps. Let me think about it for a day or two,” Paleos answered. “Now it’s my turn to change the subject. Have you had any responses from those posters you put up?”

“Yes I have, actually,” ben Yacoub said brightly. “More than a hundred, which is not bad when there are only ten thousand adults in Cras. And who knows how many more there are who haven’t answered yet.”

“So what do you intend to do about it?”

“Almost half of them are still slaves, so they have less control over their lives than citizens, being moved from job to job. But a handful of them are educated and a couple have a book or two of our Writings. I’m putting them in touch with one another so they can meet together for prayer, read the Writings and talk about them. I’ve also asked the Council to arrange for more Writings to be imported and I’ll pay for them out of my allowance. If only I had thought to cash up before I came over here!”

Paleos ruminated on ben Yacoub’s suggestion for a School of Agriculture for the best part of a month before finally accepting it. In part he agreed because it made sense but in part, as he was ready to admit, because he liked playing Amateur Engineer himself. The two of them took advantage of a merchantman carrying sugar to Olisipo in Quinctilis, sailing with six nominal slaves. By September they were back in the villa outside Babylon.

“Pleasant memories for me here, Titos,” ben Yacoub said as he entered and looked around.

“For me, too,” Paleos agreed.

“I have a favour to ask of you, Titos,” ben Yacoub looked like a man putting down a burden. “If you agree, I would like to visit my family. I will tell them that I've been working on cures for tropical diseases just as I had planned before graduating, but I'm doing it in a private research lab rather than setting up my own. I won't say where.

“And I would like to ask them to send copies of our sacred Writings to me so I can distribute them to the people who live there. I'll give them the address of our Agent in Tosali so they'll think I'm in the Spice Islands.”

Paleos stared at his friend for a short while.

“When did you think of this?”

“During the trip to Olisipo. At first I thought I'd ask if I could just write to them through the Tosali Agent, requesting money so I could buy more copies of the Writings for the Christists in Terrapulchra. I would have asked you to read my letter first of course, to ensure I said nothing more than I should. But there was the risk that they would think it a fraud or that I was being extorted.

“Then I thought I won't ask for money. I will ask them to buy the Writings themselves and ship them to the Agent. No kidnapper would want religious texts!

“It wasn't until I was on the rail from the Orontes that I realised how much I wanted to see them! But of course that could lead to an accidental disclosure, so I understand if you forbid me.”

Paleos continued staring. Then he spoke again. “I know you and I trust you, Reuben. And I appreciate your honesty in asking instead of just going home without permission. Let me think about it.”

Paleos and ben Yacoub adopted the same approach that Paleos had used the previous year. Each afternoon they discussed the possible candidates and took notes. By late October they had short-listed three men.

“Reuben, I haven't forgotten about you wanting to visit your family,” Paleos said one evening over their meal. “And thanks for your patience for not pushing me,” he added with a smile.

“Tell me if this would be acceptable. We'll both go and you can introduce me as your superior in the organisation. You can say that everything is very secret and you can tell them nothing except as I permit. Nor are you permitted to communicate with anyone except through the Tosali Agent. But I will permit you to tell them that you're doing medical research into tropical diseases, and that in the area there are many new Christists who can't afford copies of your sacred books. It would be helpful if they could buy these books for you and send them through our Agent. If they want they can send you letters the same way, but general policy is that you're not permitted to respond so they shouldn't expect any replies.” Paleos looked to his friend intently. “Would that satisfy you? If they ask any more you will not answer. You'll just look to me to answer for you.”

Ben Yacoub was exultant. “Yes!” he shouted. “That would be excellent! Thank you so much, Titos!”

“I'm glad you're pleased,” Paleos said in a deliberate understatement. “Also, the Council has decided that we should set up a new company as a front to distribute any new treatments you discover, so our Chief Agent in Tingis has registered a new company titled ‘Spice Islands Medical Research’. All our sub-agents have been informed. So if the Tosali Agent gets a parcel addressed to you care of that company he will send it on to Tingis for our regular pickup.”

The shriek of delight when the peephole cover was slid aside was unmistakable. There were no formalities. The door was thrown open and a young woman leapt to embrace ben Yacoub.

“It is so good to see you again! I though you said that you wouldn't be able to come back!”

“This is a special treat,” Ben Yacoub said as he embraced the woman. “It might well be the only time!” He released the woman and turned to Paleos. “Titos, this is Rebekah, my sister. Rebekah, this is Titos, my friend and supervisor.”

“Welcome, Titos!” Rebekah said more formally as she presented both hands limp and palm-down for Paleos to take in the polite way of the Classes, her face still alight with joy. “Please, come inside.”

The rest of the household had heard the shriek as well, and were now converging on the atrium. One robust man in his fifties exclaimed “Reuben!” and rushed to fall on Reuben's shoulder.

“It is good to see you again, father! Please, meet my friend Titos.”

The senior ben Yacoub was sparkling as he offered his right arm to Paleos. “You are most welcome, Titos!”

At that point in time a matronly woman appeared and let out a shriek of her own. ‘These Jewesses are noisy women!’ Paleos thought to himself. She embraced Reuben and then held him by the upper arms to inspect him, her smile as wide as all outdoors. “My, you look in good health!” she crowed.

“Yes, mother,” Reuben agreed. “What use is a sick physician?” Then he turned towards Paleos. “My friend Titos.”

Thank you for bringing him home, Titos!” she said warmly as he took her two hands. She squeezed his fingers firmly before releasing. “Can you both stay for the meal tonight?” she asked.

“We can but we would be very boring guests,” Paleos replied. “Everything we have done and everywhere we have been is secret. Our employer has been most generous to even allow this visit.”

“Why all the secrecy?” the senior ben Yacoub asked.

“Even that is secret, lord ben Yacoub,” Paleos said with a smile.

By now the pastries and the jugs of watered wine were being set on the table in the space between three couches. “Please Titos, call me Yitzak,” he waved away the honorific good-naturedly. “So please, what are we permitted to learn?” as he led his guests to the couches.

Paleos was intrigued to see the two women take their places on one of the couches instead of leaving the men to their talk. They were completely self-assured in their involvement in this discussion. Reuben had been telling the truth when he said these Christist women were not totally subservient in the traditional Republic way.

“I can tell you this, father,” Reuben spoke easily. “For the last year I've been doing research into tropical diseases, what causes them and how to treat them. We hope one day to learn how to cure or prevent them. We are making headway.”

“And Titos is your colleague in this work?” Yitzak asked.

“Not exactly. He is actually an Alchemist and his different perspective is quite valuable. He is also senior to me in the organisation.”

“You should write to us, Reuben,” the mother broke in. Indeed, these Christist women are very bold! “We wonder what is happening to you.”

“Sorry, mother. I'm not allowed to communicate outside the organisation. Secrecy is everywhere.”

“So where is this research going on? In the Spice Islands, as you planned?” Yitzak leant forward as he spoke.

“That's secret,” Reuben said with a smile.

“Well, at least tell me how long you think it will be before you can come back to us.”

“That's secret too.”

“So what can you tell us?” Yitzak was starting to show some exasperation.

“I can tell you this, father,” Reuben smiled. “I'm in good health and good cheer, I love my work, I am doing something that will bring health to millions of people who might otherwise suffer terribly, and outside my work time I'm helping to build up the Body of Yeshua in my community. We have hundreds of Christists, but most have no access to the Writings. So I would beg of you to buy as many copies of the Writings as you can and send them to me. If you send them to this address they will reach me.”

Reuben handed across a slip of paper. Yitzak read it aloud.

*Reuben ben Yacoub,
Spice Islands Medical Research,
Via the General Manager,
Bank of TAMILIA,
Tosali, Further India*

“So it seems you are indeed working in the Spice Islands, Reuben,” Yitzak commented.

Reuben just smiled. “I've been told that if you send anything to that address it will reach me, provided it passes inspection to ensure it contains no threats or inducements. But company policy is that I will not be permitted to reply.”

“Why all the secrecy, Reuben?” It was clear that Yitzak was confused to the point of anger. “Your intention was to heal the sick and save the lost! But now you are in a web of shadows!”

“Please, father,” Reuben tried to soothe his father. “Did Yeshua start by telling the whole world what he was doing? I am not Yeshua, but I am part of his Body, serving his Body, so please send me copies of the writings. And in the meantime my work will indeed heal the sick. But you will not see my name on anything I do. Only God will know, and that is more than enough for me! That is my lesson in humility.”

Yitzak was visibly torn. “So you leave me no choice, my son?”

“There is always a choice, my father. You can trust me, or turn away. You can love me, or reject me. You can aid my work to spread the Good News, or you can cripple it. How will you choose?”

“You didn't mention healing the sick, my son. Is that no longer a priority to you?”

“It is a priority, my father, but I will do that whatever you decide. It's the task my Patron has set before me, as well as my God. The only part of my work you can genuinely touch is the work of the Good News. What will you decide?”

Yitzak was almost in tears now. “Oh, my son! I thought I had lost you, and now you are back! Am I to lose you again?”

“No, my father. You are not to lose me. You are to send me!” He half-stood in an urge to embrace his father, but then sat again. “Oh, my father! How I would embrace you, but Titos is bound to ensure that I whisper nothing to you. I cannot compromise the honour of a man who trusts me enough to allow this meeting. I must be content with what I can say at arm's length.”

Reuben's mother was openly weeping now. She choked out the words “Then let me give you one last kiss! Lord Titos may lean as close to us as he wishes to ensure you say nothing!”

Again Titos was surprised by the boldness of these Christist women. To interrupt a conversation between adult males, as though they were our equals! That would happen in Terrapulchra, but he would never have thought it possible in the Republic.

He interjected “Reuben, you know that I love you and trust you. Embrace your family one last time. Then we must go.”

Paleos and ben Yacoub rode the carriage back to the villa in silence. Neither spoke until they were inside the atrium.

“I must thank you, Titos, for that most precious gift,” ben Yacoub said heavily. “I will love you forever for that!”

The first choice of candidate for Head of Agriculture had laughed them down. Yes, he was interested in new and exciting work. Yes, he would like to head his own research team. Yes, he would like to be respected as one of the foremost in his community. But he would like to do that here in Babylon, the centre of the intellectual world thank you very much, rather than accept exile for life! What were these two madmen trying to do to his illustrious career?

Four days after this disappointing rejection Paleos and ben Yacoub interviewed their second choice.

Paleos saw his candidate walk through the door of the Bull's Head. He slipped out of the booth he had taken with ben Yacoub and approached the man.

“Hello, Ashballar,” he said, offering his arm. “Thank you for coming today. I have a booth over here.” He gestured and turned towards the booth and Ashballar followed. Ben Yacoub had also stood to greet the guest.

“Ashballar, this Reuben ben Yacoub, my friend and colleague.” The two men greeted each other and took arms politely.

Paleos gave a discrete wave to a waiter as the three men sat.

“Could I take your orders, my lords? The waiter asked.

“For old times' sake, I will have a bacon soup,” Paleos said with a smile.

Ben Yacoub, although Christist, still observed kosher food laws whenever possible. “I will have baked fish and salad, please.”

“If I might have the lamb, please,” Ashballar asked.

“And a jug of the Rhenish, please,” Paleos added. The waiter nodded and moved away. No notes were taken. Any waiter who could not remember the orders from a table of up to eight diners was considered ‘untrained’ by the management of this establishment.

“That should take at least a quarter of an hour to prepare,” Paleos said, “so let’s chat while we wait. As I told you, Ashballar, we want to offer you a job.”

“And as I told you, lord Paleos, I am open to offers,” Ashballar smiled back.

“Reuben and I are employed in a research establishment,” Paleos opened the explanation. “This is a private arrangement, set up specifically to focus on the needs of our Patron. And those needs are quite unlike anything that the Museum even knows about. Hence the need for us to do our own research.

“We have extensive pastoral and farming lands. Reuben here is trained in Medicine...”

“I know,” Ashballar interjected. “I remember seeing him around last year. He graduated Foremost in Medicine.”

“Reuben, you’re famous already!” Paleos exclaimed with a smile to ben Yacoub. Then turning back to Ashballar, “Yes, you’re right, Ashballar. Reuben’s medical skills serve us well in handling the livestock as well as the health of our people, but plants are another matter entirely. He has asked for us to engage someone with specific skills in regard to our crops. You are the man we think would best meet our needs. You would be the leader of your own small research group, autonomous under a general structure very much resembling a small Museum. As I said before, many of our crops are currently unknown to Science so searching through the literature would be pointless. We need someone competent to write the literature in the first place. So we are not looking for someone with long experience. We seek someone with an excellent understanding of the basic techniques combined with a fresh imagination unfettered by presuppositions. I promise you as I promised Reuben a year ago, that this will be the most fulfilling and rewarding job imaginable!”

“And indeed it is, Ashballar,” ben Yacoub endorsed the claim. “I could not have imagined better!”

“But there are conditions attached. The biggest one is that this place and this work are most secret,” Paleos went on. “If you join us, you are committed for life. The best life imaginable, but life all the same.”

“We should also outline what sort of community you will be living in,” ben Yacoub came in again. “Our settlement has no Class system. No-one is wealthy, but there are no poor either. It is more like a large family than a town. We import slaves for the work nobody is willing to do, then we manumit them after a couple of years of faithful service and they become the equal of the rest of us. More slaves are brought in to take over the unpleasant jobs they leave behind. Without extremes of wealth and poverty there’s virtually no crime. At worst there are some personal resentments, but typically friends soon tell those involved to get over it and get on with life.”

There was a pause.

“Well, that is the outline,” Paleos summarised. “We can’t say much more than that because of the secrecy requirements, but feel free to ask if there is anything open to explanation.”

“Where is this place?” Ashballar asked at length.

“It has a warm and pleasant climate, generally,” Paleos answered. Sometimes we get severe storms, but our buildings are designed and built to survive those storms. But I'm not permitted to say where it is or point to it on a map.”

“What will the working conditions be like? And the living conditions?”

“Ample and good food with plenty of variety is provided free of charge,” ben Yacoub started listing the chief features of their lifestyle. “Accommodation is provided. For single men it is in buildings like rows of barracks. You have two rooms about twelve feet square each, and each row of about ten units has shared toilets and showers. All sewerred, of course. Families are allocated larger accommodation, typically a living room, a room for the parents, and an extra room for every two children. The public baths and laundry are free of charge. You're allowed one day of rest in five but most of us go to work anyway for the companionship and because we all like to feel useful. Work usually finishes about two hours before sunset. Many of us like to swim from the beaches because the air and the sea are quite warm even in winter, while the breeze off the sea keeps the summer comfortable. Then to the communal mess hall for the evening meal. Usually there's a choice between several different types of meat, with plenty of vegetables. Take whatever you want, and as much as you want. The three hours after sunset are often used for entertainment. Most theatre plays are free, but some have a small charge. Others might attend clubs of various types. I am a Christist, and I meet and worship with other Christists every seventh night and I lead different study groups on three nights out of the other six. Then off to bed. We rise at dawn to a cooked breakfast in the mess hall and pick up something for lunch as we leave. All meals are free.” He finished his recital.

“Oh, and I almost missed a big point,” he added quickly, “but it now seems second nature to me. In our community women are the full equals of the men. They work just as the men do and many even have authority over male subordinates.”

This seemed a description of a very strange place to Ashballar, but not forbidding. “And how much will I be paid?”

“All routine things in life are provided free of charge, even the laundry,” Paleos answered. “And on top of that, for little luxuries and private pleasure, you will get a denarius a month for every year of your age, up to thirty. You are twenty-five, are you not? So twenty-five denarii a month, going up each year until you are thirty. It's the same for everyone, all the way up to our leaders. Except slaves who get ten denarii a month until they are granted citizenship.”

“That's not much for a man like Reuben, who graduated Foremost!” Ashballar said dismissively.

“It keeps the leaders among us humble,” Reuben smiled. “There has never been a more harmonious society, I am sure of that. We are like brothers and sisters, and no-one oppresses his neighbour.”

Ashballar was intrigued. But he suspected that there was something about his personal life that Titos didn't know, and one thing said by Reuben had pricked his ears.

“Reuben, you say you are a Christist. Do you swear on your God's Name that what you have told me is true, reliable and a fair representation of this offer?”

“Indeed I do, Ashballar.”

Tell me, in which part of the Writings is the phrase ‘The Word became Flesh’?”

It was ben Yacoub's turn to be surprised. "At the beginning of Yohan's Account. Are you a Christist as well?"

"Yes."

"Then welcome to your new home!" ben Yacoub beamed, just as the waiter appeared with their meals.

Cras - April 855 AUC (102 A.D.)

Ben Yacoub was more than delighted. He was deeply moved. His father had taken very seriously his request for the Writings to be made available to the Christists in this secret place.

But Yitzak had done much more than simply buy copies and send them onwards. He had pulled together all the scattered texts he could trace back to the original witnesses, had them all re-set and then he re-published the collection into a single volume. For what he believed was the first time ever, all of the primary Christist writings had been collated into one Book! It was almost as if a repeat of the old Jewish scholars' work in collecting the Law, the Prophets and the Writings as revealed before the coming of Yeshua!

He picked up the letter that had come with the package and read it again.

Reuben, my son,

I trust that our lord Yeshua has kept you well and will use you for great things in your new home.

He has laid it on my heart to support you and your work with all that I am and all that I have. I thought and prayed for a month on how this might best be done. I then took it to the Elders in my Gathering, seeking their prayers and wisdom. We asked each other and ourselves, 'If we were to be cut off from the rest of the world, what Writings would we choose to take with us? Which are pre-eminent among the many that have been penned?'

We discussed this question it seemed daily for months, and settled on the following criteria for each Writing:-

- 1. It must be written by one of the original disciples, or a person recognised as authoritative by the original disciples.*
- 2. It must have been intended to be an authoritative Word to a Gathering on behalf of our God, and not an incidental or personal writing.*
- 3. It must have been accepted by the original recipients as authoritative.*

Based on these criteria, we chose the following Writings as pre-eminently suitable.

*The Account of Mattay
The Account of Barnabas
The Account of Yohan*

*The History of Thomas
The History of Loukas
The History of Philip*

The Vision of Yohan

The Exhortation of Yacob

Simon's Letter to the Asians

Thomas' First Letter to Babylon

Thomas' Second Letter to Babylon

Thomas' Letter to Tamilia

Paul's First Letter to Rome

Paul's Second Letter to Rome

Paul's Letter to Ephesus

Paul's First Letter to Corinth

Paul's Second Letter to Corinth

Paul's Letter to Valentia

Paul's Letter to Philippi

Paul's Letter to Colossae

It was not until after we had already decided on this general arrangement that it occurred to us how miraculously God had guided us. For just as the Former Writings are divided into Law, Prophets and Writings, so also are these Writings divided into Witness, History and Guidance. Our God has manifested Himself to His faithful as Three-in-One, and this is shown in the structure of His self-revelation. And furthermore the first division has three Witnesses, Mattay principally to us Jews to whom The Father had spoken through the Prophets, then Barnabas (as companion to Paul) writing as a witness to the resurrected Son, and Yohan speaking so frequently of the Spirit. Similarly, we see three writers of History. Thomas took the Word first to the Jews in Babylon and then journeyed further East, Loukas took the Word to the Greeks and Romans to the West, and then Philip to the South, so the Gospel would spread throughout the whole world.

As for Guidance, there will doubtless always be need for ever more wisdom as God bestows it, just as our God continued to send prophets to His people. This is why His Spirit abides with us into the ages. It will be for those who come after us to determine the merit of any more utterances, but we are convinced that these which we have included are worthy of being heard.

When deciding the order in which they should be arranged, we did not seek to imply any order of merit. The reasoning was as follows. The three Accounts are first, as Histories of Yeshua's ministry. These are followed by the histories as the Word was spread, first to the Jews in Babylon and then further east, second to the Greeks and Latins, and third to the Egyptians. The vision of Yohan was placed next as it deals with the spread of the Word and God's Plan for the world in the future, but it is more in the nature of Guidance than History, in that it deals with what yet lies before us and how we are to endure these troubles, rather than retelling what has occurred.

Next came the exhortation from Yacob brother of Yeshua to the Body as a whole. This was followed by similar exhortations and advice to specific Gatherings. Of these the first is the letter from Simon, the leader of the disciples. Then those of Thomas who was both a disciple and History writer. Finally the letters from Paul. For want of any better guide, Thomas' and Paul's several letters are arranged in each case in order of the size of the cities to which they were written.

I and the Elders trust you will find this arrangement convenient. If we learn of other Writings that satisfy our criteria we will examine them carefully. If we are convinced that they are authentic we will include them in subsequent Pressings. But for the moment we hope that this shipment will serve your immediate purpose.

We have also sent several copies to the Elders of the Gatherings in all other places that we know about. This is to prompt them to publish any Writings they might have or at least send a copy to us. We have also offered to provide more copies to them at cost price if they have the need. So even before you open this crate you have prompted this good work among Yeshua's People!

We all continue to pray for you and your work in Yeshua's name.

Yes, God certainly works in mysterious ways! Through Reuben's apparently chaotic series of decisions to accept this job but his failure to bring any funds with him, and then being permitted to seek help from his family to provide copies of the Writings to Terrapulchra, the whole world was now being provided with what will surely one day be the core of a new Greek Bible to show God's fulfilment of the old Hebrew Bible!

Reuben quivered inside himself as he considered how he had become a key link in God's purposes. There was no doubt now that he had been called to Terrapulchra for this reason.

Yitzak's package had contained five hundred copies of the new book. Reuben referred to his list of Christists who had disclosed themselves to him. There were one hundred and thirty two names there, meeting in five groups. He would deliver the books to the group convenors tonight, and take steps to see if there are more Christists in Port Sertorius and the other settlements as the opportunities arose. He had enough books for everyone!

Cras – April 1, 857 AUC (104 A.D.)

The work was absolutely humming along now. What had once been considered a very tongue-in-cheek title, the Terrapulchra Museum, was genuinely becoming just that.

Ashballar had come to grips with the totally different flora in these lands in good time, spending much of his first year studying and cataloguing the main food plants and their varieties. This gave him a good basis for assessing what was normal in the plants and what indicated abnormality. Then he had started test plantings, with each bed or patch having precisely controlled moisture, acidity and supplementary fertiliser traces to determine optimum conditions for each. This was followed by some carefully documented cross-breeding between different varieties of plants apparently of the same species. Paleos was familiar with much of this, and his assistance in controlling the chemistry of the various tests was crucial.

Reuben was making good progress in Medicine. He had taken samples from infected cuts, usually coral cuts suffered when swimming or playing on the beaches, or sometime rashes from vegetation. He had cultured the microbes he found and had subjected them to a range of different treatments, always keeping in mind that these treatments would often have to be applied by people in the remote settlements or on ships, people with little or no formal training. He had found that even the simplest measures were often beneficial. Even boiling sea water to kill any microbes and reduce the brine to a higher salt concentration to irrigate wounds was often sufficient. Such a simple procedure could be applied even by interceptor crews at sea, thanks to the liquid fuel stove invented by Paleos. Alcohol washes could also be used.

More aggressive infections required more aggressive treatments. Reuben knew from his Museum days that some moulds, even mouldy bread, were a traditional poultice among peasants. There seemed some anecdotal evidence to support this treatment. Some research had been conducted in Babylon to try to put together some clinical statistics on this. But he didn't know what moulds had been used or even if the same types were available in this New World.

But Reuben could not deliberately infect people with these more aggressive infections, and couldn't in all conscience use anything but the method he considered best in each accidental case that presented itself. Hardly a good statistical basis for a study!

So he started breeding a supply of rats to test various treatments. With Ashballar's help he also collected and identified a wide range of moulds and fungal spores. He used these in a variety of treatments, including nothing more than boiled water as a control case. Careful records and cross-checking suggested that some treatments were more effective than random chance could explain but trials were continuing.

Yes, Paleos was mightily pleased with not only the progress but also by how their multi-disciplinary methods were proving so much more effective than 'lone wolf' work so typical of the Babylon Museum. Back in Babylon everyone took pains to ensure the secrecy of his own work to ensure that he personally retained unquestioned full credit (and therefore full intellectual property rights!) for any discovery. How counter-productive that mind-set was compared to open collaboration!

And while these matters were being researched the Museum had started teaching. Piso and Lucius, the two young men who had been assigned to him from the beginning,

were still his assistants and were becoming quite competent Alchemists. They were practised in the routine procedures, and knew enough of the theory to choose the appropriate procedure in most situations. Paleos would have considered them equal to any in the final year at Babylon.

Ashballar was doing the same, mentoring and teaching a young man and two young women his art. Reuben was making a point of not only instructing his three full-time students who also served as research assistants, but also doing the rounds of the various settlements to teach emergency procedures and simple surgical principles to people in remote communities. He had even suggested that the Museum set up its own Press to enable Emergency Aid books to be distributed as required to the various outposts and each ship. This had been approved and a press was now being brought over from Tingis.

Yes, it was all coming together!

Reuben and Ashballar had also prevailed upon him to attend a big Christist meeting in the Theatre a few days ago. At the time he had thought it was a ritual to celebrate the Spring Equinox, just like those celebrated by many of the temples in the name of their gods. He was surprised to find it consisted almost entirely of readings from their sacred Writings. He was shocked to realise that these readings were about the crucifixion of their founder, this Yeshua whom they considered the One True God!

To think of it! The Supreme God being humiliated like a criminal and doing nothing to protect himself! Was this god weak, or was he a fool? Or perhaps both? Even now as he thought about it Paleos shook his head in disbelief. What sort of religion is that and what sort of people would follow it? Indeed, they even turned their backs on all the other gods! Talk about not taking prudent precautions in case the primary plan fails! These Christists were as foolish as their idiot god himself!

But Reuben and Ashballar were not fools, as foolish as their religion seemed. They were both very sharp minds. They thought deeply about this silly religion and spend almost all of their spare time in its service. More often than not they would spend their evenings instructing one of the many small groups of Christists, and every time Reuben went on one of his tours of the outposts he would take a box of those sacred books with him to give to the Christists in those places. And every year his father Yitzak would send him more books, paid for out of his own purse.

So much time and so much money spent on such foolishness! But that was their choice and they were entitled to make it. Certainly their work at the Museum was first-class and that was all that concerned Paleos.

Ah, the Museum! The jewel in the centre of Paleos' life!

Port Sertorius - April 858 AUC (105 A.D.)

Pulcher had been sending a ship over every third or fourth year for almost twenty years now, hoping against hope that the gold trade could resume. Each time it had returned and reported no gold and no progress. This visit would be no exception, Clopas thought to himself as he beat into the wind towards the pier running out from Port Sertorius. The buildings looked even more ramshackle than last time, except that the bath house had been repaired. He had heard about the monster storms that hit these islands between Quinctilis and November and he had no desire to see one first-hand.

There were two people waiting for him on the pier. He stepped off the plank and onto the decking as soon as the ship was secure, advancing with a smile and an outstretched arm.

“Greetings! I am Clopas, the Trademaster. I don't think we have met before!”

“Penelope, Administrator for Port Sertorius,” the woman responded, offering her arm in return. “And this is Parmines, the other Representative for Port Sertorius.”

“I am pleased to meet you both,” Clopas finished the greeting. “I suppose your Chair and Consul are busy with other duties.”

“Well, over the last two years we have allowed much of the formality to drop away,” Penelope responded. “We don't really meet that often so the position of Chair has effectively been allowed to lapse. We tend to let each settlement look after itself and the leading Representative from Port tends to act as Consul. Currently that is my role.”

Clopas had already taken in the clothing of these two. Penelope wore a silk chiton but it was stained. The colours were faded and it had snags and runs from catching on rough furniture. Probably a hand-me-down from her mother, when it had not been too difficult for a woman of the colony to save enough coin for a special dress for her wedding or some other special occasion. And now she is wearing her decrepit finest to greet me! How pitiful! Parmines wore a tunic made from sailcloth and those half-length trousers with deep pockets, standard uniform in these islands.

“I am honoured by your welcome,” Clopas said with a slight bow.

Penelope turned towards the land and started walking. “I understand that it's a custom to permit you to rinse the salt out of your skin and hair first thing upon arrival. A very sensible custom, I would say. The tepidarium is fired up and waiting for you.”

Clopas fell in beside Penelope. “Indeed, I look forward to it every time I sail into this bay,” he averred. Now he knew why Parmines, a mere Representative, had been in the welcoming party.

To Clopas' surprise, Penelope led the way into the tepidarium and started to shrug off her chiton. Her right breast had already been exposed before Clopas turned his back hurriedly. “My lady!”

“Yes?” she asked.

Clopas was struggling for a form of words. Eventually he stuttered out “My apologies. Last time I was here this was the men's bathhouse.”

“Oh, don't worry about that!” Penelope said. Clopas could almost hear a dismissive wave of her hand in the tone of her voice. “Come, join us!” Those last words were to the background sound of someone jumping into the pool.

Clopas turned to see Penelope and Parmines both in the water, smiling.

“As you say, my lady,” Clopas conceded. He removed his tunic and draped it over the stand, and then removed his caligae. Then, reluctant not because of his own nakedness in front of a woman but for hers in front of him, he removed his loincloth and stepped into the pool with the two Terrapulchrans, crouched and then launched out towards the centre of the pool.

“Ah! This is a delight!” he exclaimed as he re-surfaced, more for the sake of something innocuous to say than for any other reason. He started rubbing the warm water into his hair and beard.

Penelope was not fooled. “I’m sorry if I have embarrassed you, lord Clopas. The upkeep of two separate bathhouses took too much effort and the separation of the sexes has long been disregarded among us anyway.”

“I should be more respectful of your customs,” Clopas grinned. “You have my apology.” He moved back to the wall to stand at what he hoped was a respectful but not excessive distance from Penelope.

“I hope things have gone well for you these last four years,” he moved the conversation forward.

“Actually, they have been rather good,” Penelope agreed. “The storms over the last few seasons have been quite mild, and we’ve taken measures to keep predators out of the beaches where the turtles lay their eggs, especially at hatching time. So we expect to be able to harvest many more turtles in years to come.”

“And the Maya?”

“Oh, we don’t worry about the Maya any more,” Penelope lifted a hand above water level and waved the question away. “They’re still grinding each other into ever tinier pieces. Racial suicide, but if they’re stupid enough to do it then no-one else can save them. It’s like reading about the last days of Athens in the Peloponnesian War.”

“But how will you be able to buy in what you can’t produce yourselves?”

“It’s been more than twenty years since the war started, and we’ve managed. We’re getting low on a few things, but we’ve found alternatives. The only things that we can’t manage without are sailcloth and rope for the boats. So we’ve dropped the interceptor fleet back to only twelve, and another twelve in the Barrier Islands. That’s enough to capture any intruders, and looting them provides enough to keep us going.”

“It might not be enough for much longer. The Germans are building better ships these days and it might happen soon that you come up against an intruder who can resist you, or even escape.”

Penelope tilted her head to one side. “I don’t think so. We get pretty good information from our captives, and no-one has mentioned a trading ship that can do more than ten miles an hour except in a very heavy wind. In which case, we can do twenty.”

“But what about steel? And other metals?”

“We use fire-hardened wood or bone for our farm tools. Just like the natives. And what we strip from intruders is enough for the rest.”

Clopas looked over to Parmines on the other wall of the pool, around the corner from Penelope. He seemed to have no qualms.

“So I would guess that you have nothing to trade this year?” He asked at last.

Penelope smiled. “Not unless you want to take back a wooden plough and leave us with a steel one!”

“One day they will stop coming,” Parmines said as the trader turned left at the entrance to the bay.

“Don't be too sure,” Penelope answered. “For the sake of sending a vessel when he has no other use for it, Pulcher thinks he is keeping his options open for a profit of a few hundred talents of gold every year. Why would he give up?”

“Well, maybe,” Parmines conceded. “Now to wait for the message from Capri.”

Four days later a boat from the Capri squadron reported that the Pulcher vessel had been sighted sailing north through the channel separating them from Sardinola. Pulcher's ship was definitely on its way home now. Parmines and Penelope left for Cras to report to the Council.

The report from Lukios was very encouraging. Precious metal quantities had stabilised at seventeen hundred and fifty talents of gold and five thousand of silver per annum. Sugar was booming. Even in the face of supply expanding every year it still couldn't keep up with demand. As much coca as the Moche could supply was being processed into Sindolor which was selling at six times its weight in gold, or twice the weight of the raw leaf in gold. Now that it was so widely known and acknowledged the intention was to creep the price higher. Tabak was now actually being smoked in significant quantities in the Republic and it was clear that many were addicts. Now it was just a matter of waiting for demand to level out before pushing up the price on their captive souls. But that might be a while yet, with production expanding as quickly as possible and still no sign of an over-supply. Tabak was going to be more profitable than gold!

The production of Java Oil had been wound back. The labour released in this way was being put to much more profitable use clearing land and planting more tabak fields.

The wealth generated by the trade in all these commodities was also being put to good use. Much of it was spent at Rhine Steel buying industrial-scale kettles, boilers and furnaces to process their crops. Most of the remainder was spent on an ever-increasing intake of slaves bought from all around the Mediterranean and northern Europe to disguise the quantities and to avoid inflating prices by creating a seller's market. With very few exceptions for specialists these slaves were all fit, healthy and less than twenty years old. It was worth investing in the best rather than paying pittance for someone with only a few years of work left in him. These slaves were going to become citizens, the parents of the next generation of Terrapulchrans.

One measure that had deliberately not been adopted was an increase in the citizen's pay. The current rates were enough for modest luxuries and any more would risk decadence. The only additional payments awarded were for dependent children. Every mother was given five denarii a month for each child under fifteen years of age, after which time the child was eligible for his or her own allowance. The luxuries demanded by this austere pay rate were easily supplied and the remaining credit from the trade surplus was accumulating in Terrapulchra's bank accounts under scores of different names spread across a dozen different Tribes.

No longer was the Council less than a dozen men and women seated around a large table. The number had now expanded to thirty, and these were now seated in a semi-circle modelled on the Republican Senate. The front row was reserved for those members entrusted with specific administrative duties, such as the Navy, trade, infrastructure construction, the Museum and Provisioning. The Consul, who had originally been the Chief Executive Officer for all areas of administration, had progressively delegated these areas of responsibility to his own subordinates. But the Council found this an awkward arrangement when the Consul didn't have specific and detailed knowledge to answer many of their questions. Eventually the convention arose that the Consul could only delegate to persons recommended to him by the Council, and these were inevitably the more competent Council members so they could be questioned and their decisions examined. By this time the Consul retained responsibility only for routine civil administration and the maintenance of public peace and the court system, personally in Cras and through appointees where required in other centres. At the centre of the semi-circle, facing the benches, sat the Chair.

Lukios sat at the end of his Trade Presentation to the Council in its new format. He looked around the benches. Two hands were raised.

“Sergius?” just the Chair mentioning a name gave that person the call.

“Lukios, last year we imported just over six thousand slaves. The number keeps going up. That's twice as many as only five years ago. What are your long-term plans?”

Lukios stood to reply. “I intend to continue raising the number each year for the foreseeable future, but I expect that the rate of increase will need to drop soon. I would expect that perhaps we might have one more doubling over the next six years, and after that there will just not be enough suitable slaves on the market for us to push any harder. At least, not without pushing up prices and attracting attention to ourselves. As I have stated in my report, we try to avoid being too obvious by buying smaller numbers from many different markets, and we use several different bidders in each of them. So I expect that we might top out at perhaps ten to twelve thousand per annum.”

“What is our current population please, Suntuche?” Sergius asked the Consul.

“About forty-five thousand, Sergius, of which just over thirty thousand are working full-time.”

“So we are importing another slave each year for every five citizens of working age?”

“Roughly true, Sergius,” Suntuche agreed.

“I wouldn't want to bring in too many more, Lukios. That seems a pretty high leverage rate to me.”

“As you say, Sergius,” Lukios answered. “But the number of citizens has also been doubling about every five years, so the percentage of imports to citizens has kept almost constant for many years now. And as I say, the number of imports will level off soon while the number of citizens will continue to increase rapidly. Even under my plans, the number of new imports as a percentage of our total population will fall over time. And if I may draw a comparison from a hundred years ago, the Republic then had more slaves than citizens. So our situation is hardly on the edge of catastrophic.”

Sergius was still not convinced. “If you genuinely believe that, Lukios, then why have you not been buying more up to this point? The very 'modesty' of your buying

programme would indicate that you are more concerned than your stated position would indicate.”

“My chief constraint against buying more has been the availability of housing here in Terrapulchra,” Lukios explained. “There's no point in importing more slaves faster than we can house, clothe and feed them. The scale of my slave purchases has been based on guidance from Pandoros about how many men could be allocated to building more housing rather than developing the plantations, farms and other activities. But now that Pandoros is no longer with us I am quite happy to take guidance from Suntuhe.”

Brutus, now in the Chair, decided that his intervention was warranted. “I think that is a most reasonable approach, Lukios, but perhaps it should be examined more closely to see if changed circumstances might suggest a re-balancing. Personally, I would like Suntuhe to prepare a report on what he might consider the optimum level of slave imports and how these would be allocated. Do I have the support of the Council in asking for this?”

“Excellent idea, Brutus,” Sergius jumped in, “but I would also like this to be in the context of our current allocation of manpower and some projections on what is intended or expected over the next few years.” He smiled to Suntuhe. “If that could be managed without an undue burden on your time, Suntuhe?”

“I quite agree, Sergius,” Suntuhe responded. “I do have priorities mapped out in a general way, but it would be good to impose more transparency and discipline and bring more certain long-term planning to the process.”

Brutus looked around the table. “Then if you could do that please, Suntuhe, and table your report as soon as convenient. Meanwhile Lukios, how many ships are dedicated to transporting these slaves?”

“It would be an exaggeration to say 'dedicated', Brutus,” Lukios answered. “At present we have ten square-rigged ships doing three round trips every year as the weather permits, and bringing back about two hundred slaves each trip. They take our produce over to Hispania and Africa as part of that circuit but except for the returning slaves we could probably manage with only three of those ten. So I suppose you could say that seven ships are 'dedicated' on that basis. We also own four more caravels entirely within the Mediterranean. These are operated by Andronikos under a separate shipping company named Caralis Cargo Transport and crewed by locals, delivering our products to the Aegean, Syria and Egypt. On their circuit they pick up more slaves from the East and bring them to Tingis.”

“So seven ships and about two hundred crewmen are effectively dedicated to importing six thousand new slaves each year?” Brutus sought confirmation.

“Effectively, yes.”

Brutus looked over to Suntuhe. “Could you please include in your report the total effective cost of this trade, making allowance for how these ships and men could be employed elsewhere? It would be good to know how much these slaves are actually costing us per head, and how long it takes a typical slave to pay back this cost.”

“I can tell you that now, Brutus,” Suntuhe volunteered. “Working on the basis of a sailor's time being worth four pounds of gold a year as adopted by Pandoros, and running a 200 ton capacity ship costing five hundred sestertium milia per year, the cost of importing these slaves is about eleven thousand pounds of gold per year, or just under

two pounds per head. Add to this their purchase price, typically averaging around five thousand sesterces for the good quality we seek, that's about fourteen pounds of gold, the total cost per slave is sixteen pounds of gold. Each slave produces about two pounds of gold profit in his or her first year and more in subsequent years, until an experienced full citizen brings in about four pounds worth of productive work annually. So an imported slave basically pays for himself after about five years. Everything after that is profit. I will give the details of that calculation in my report as you requested.”

Brutus raised an eyebrow. “Thank you, Suntuche. That's better than I had expected. It will be interesting to see what you have factored into that figure but it seems we would do well to keep up the flow unless prices get to high.”

He looked back to the business paper. “Next, I notice that we seem to be buying most of our steel from Rhine Steel, rather than spreading it around a bit. Is there a reason for this?”

“Yes, Brutus,” Lukios replied. “Even though Rhine Steel is far to the north and a bit out of our trade circuit, they offer very cheap delivery to Tingis. They are also the manufacturers of probably the most reliable processing equipment in the world because they have the best and most reliable high-quality steel for pressure vessels such as boilers. Therefore I felt it best to become one of their major customers, with a view to gaining priority access to any future developments.”

“What sort of developments?” Brutus asked.

“They are not big ship builders at present,” Lukios started, “but they're exploring the idea of steel-framed ships, expecting that these would be lighter and more durable than timber hulls and require less maintenance. Obviously, maintenance means man-hours, so any we can save will be valuable. They are also conducting experiments with screw propellers instead of paddle-wheels. They hope to develop new forms of ocean-going ships, possibly of all-steel construction and powered by steam driving submerged propellers. There's a great deal of coal for fuel in the lands surrounding the West German Sea and the winds are not always reliable.”

“But what good is that to us?” Brutus challenged. “Out here the winds are as reliable as we could wish for and we have no coal.”

Lukios spread his hands expressively. “I have no intention of allowing our navy to become obsolete because of some new technology. We need to cover all possible outcomes. And in the meantime it's costing us nothing to build up a relationship with them.”

“It's drawing attention to us,” Brutus countered defensively.

“No more attention than to any other middling-to-large plantation owner,” Lukios replied.

“But as our volumes of products rise, then we will become very dominant.”

“Which is why each of our products is covered by a different company, and in time we can operate each product behind two or more apparently competing companies if we wish to,” Lukios explained.

Brutus was clearly uncomfortable, but dropped the argument for now. “If there are no more questions to Lukios...?” There were no hands. “Then I thank you, Lukios. The trade is blossoming under your care.”

Lukios, not being a Council member because of his long absences on business, stood. He smiled, gave a short bow, and left the Council Room.

“Perhaps I'm being paranoid, but do any of you share my fear that Lukios is pushing too hard?” Brutus looked around the table. “That he might be taking too many risks with our secrecy? I gather you're uncomfortable, Sergius.” Sergius nodded.

Penelope showed a hand and received the nod. “We in Port have to sweet-talk Pulcher's Trademaster every fourth or fifth year, each time trying to look poorer and more rundown than the time before. I don't know how much longer we can keep fooling him. I think it's essential that we build ourselves up as strong as possible as soon as possible, for the time when he might go looking for himself. What will he do if he goes to the Mayan coast himself, and finds it bustling with prosperity? What if he discovers our plantation settlements, or even pulls into Cras Harbour?” Penelope shook her head for emphasis. “If I had my way I'd be importing more slaves even faster, building stronger squadrons and training a serious land army just in case! I want Lukios to push even harder!”

“But would that be safe?” Sergius asked. “We allow slaves to mix freely in our society, with access to tools that could also serve as weapons. We could face a revolt! Unless you want to use a latifundia model for our plantations, complete with armed taskmasters and intimidation.”

“By all the gods, no!” Penelope was shocked. And so were the other council members. The idea of importing slaves to do the plantation work on a permanent basis was offensive. Most Terrapulchrans had been slaves themselves or were the children of slaves. They were determined that slavery as known in the Republic would not be part of their own world.

In what was explicitly recognised as a return to the values of the Early Republic, the image of free citizens toiling with their own hands was accepted as the ideal form for a good society. The concept of nominal slavery really being ‘provisional citizenship’ had taken root so deeply that even these nominal slaves were treated as if citizens. All knew that they would be citizens soon enough, so why store up for yourself a pool of resentment among those who would later be able to vent that resentment?

“I think we need to consider this question carefully,” Brutus commented after a few moments of silence. “This is a question that needs to be discussed in full depth and not just left as an assumption.”

Port Sertorius - April 862 AUC (109 A.D.)

There was the usual four-year gap before the next Pulcher vessel arrived, a lone medium-sized caravel instead of a full square-rigged merchantman. When it docked at Port Sertorius all available Council members made a point of dressing in seriously second-hand looking finery to welcome it. Parmines introduced Clopas to Brutus, still Chairman of the Council.

“We would pay you as much honour as we are able to,” Brutus greeted the Trademaster, with a smile of embarrassment and a bow of the head.

Clopas acknowledged the honour. “Thank you. I know things are difficult for you. But I also have sad news. Septimius Pulcher left us shortly after I arrived back from my last visit here. I come to you with the warmest greetings from Septimius, his son.”

There was an audible groan from the Council members. At length Brutus called out firmly “Long live Septimius Pulcher!” The rest of the group responded in kind. The group moved slowly to the shade of the bathhouse.

“So, the Mayan war is still a problem?” asked Clopas.

“They have virtually fought themselves to a standstill, destroying everything. It will take them a generation to recover.” Brutus shook his head in sorrow. “But I hope our friend Septimius Pulcher will stand by us, even if at a low level.”

Clopas knew what Pulcher would want him to say. “Lord Pulcher will indeed remain your friend. But things are not going well for him at the moment either. He told me that if things have not improved he will not be able to fund another voyage for another five years at least, perhaps longer. But we will return when we can, to keep in touch and hear how things go with you.”

Parmines, Brutus, Penelope and Sergius joined Clopas in the traditional bath, and then there was the traditional welcoming feast. The trade session next morning was almost farcical. The Terrapulchrans could offer only two small gold bars for trade, all of which was spent on sailcloth. Everybody went away thinking that Pulcher would not be coming back any time soon.

Cras - April 865 AUC (112 A.D.)

This Neptunalia was going to be one big celebration! The fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Port Sertorius! Terrapulchra was turning fifty! Every settlement was preparing a sacrifice to Neptunus, even the smallest of the sugar plantation outposts. But the biggest celebration would be held where it all started, in the Town Square of Port Sertorius.

Port was bursting at the seams. The population had been pegged at four thousand adults as part of the Pulcher deception. By asking every household to take in a guest household and making use of the barracks used to accommodate and process captives, the township could squeeze in a total of ten thousand adults. Then all the available merchantmen were converted into slave transport configuration to take another seventeen hundred in the Inner Basin. Even so, this was barely a quarter of the total adult population of Terrapulchra.

Obviously it would not be prudent to empty the Barrier Islands of their lookouts or the interceptor bases of their squadrons, and at least some staff had to be retained on the plantations and most other outposts for necessary routine duties or to cover any mishaps. Cras itself needed regular crews to ensure the water supply and sewerage disposal systems remained operational, both now relying on steam engines to power pumps rather than the old gravity-flow designs.

But even so, there were still more who wanted to attend the main sacrifice in Port than could be catered for. The call went out for volunteers to remain behind, particularly within the crews of essential infrastructure workers.

Reuben and Ashballar had a few words together. Within the month there was a formal response to the Council with five hundred and thirty two adult signatures.

*To the Council and the Consul of Terrapulchra,
From the undersigned citizens and slaves,*

Our thanks for your care of this Republic, and our best wishes!

We do not intend to express any disrespect or contempt for Neptunus Oceanus but we feel it proper to remind you of what is common knowledge, that we Christists do not worship that deity.

Therefore, we think it would be proper for us to make ourselves available for whatever duties you might consider suitable to our various abilities during the approaching Neptunalia Festival, thereby permitting more votaries of Neptunus the opportunity to participate more fully in that celebration. As for ourselves, we will thank our God for His provision of this Terrapulchra and for all who so diligently and competently contribute to its well-being.

We each await any duty that you might assign to us.

Suntuche looked up after he had finished reading this note. "I am not sure what to make of this," he confessed. "Are these people genuinely offering to be generous, to forgo the celebrations so others might take their places, or are they using this as a pretext so they can thumb their noses at Neptunus with impunity?"

A hand went up in the back row, one of the newer members of Council who had rarely spoken in the six months he had been on Council.

"Cyrus, is it not?" asked Brutus, still Chair.

"Yes, Brutus, thank you," he began to speak standing in his place rather than coming down to the floor. "I am a Christist, and mine is one of the signatures on that letter. Be assured that we Christists were aware that this gesture could be misunderstood, and the letter was deliberately worded to make our sincerity as clear as possible. We mean to say that we understand that these festivities are more meaningful to regular worshippers of Neptunus than they are to us. So it is only fitting that these regular worshippers of Neptunus be given every possible opportunity to enjoy them. We are prepared to step back so others may step forward. We intended it to be our gift to our fellow-Terrapulchrans."

Brutus looked over to Suntuche as Cyrus sat. "Have there been any incidents of impiety by these Christists?" he demanded.

Suntuche frowned. "Not as such, Chair," he answered after a short pause. "It is not uncommon for their more prominent members to assert that Neptunus and the other traditional gods do not really exist, but they tend to say this in the manner of philosophers who often question such things. These statements do not seem to be intended as insults or taunts."

Brutus considered this for a moment. "Cyrus, tell me what you think of Neptunus?" he called to the man in the back row.

"I have never spoken ill of Neptunus," was the reply.

"Then tell me, what do you think of him?" Brutus repeated his question.

"I have never spoken ill of Neptunus," Cyrus repeated, "but if you are not satisfied with that, I will say more. I hold that there is only one true God, who created the world and all that is in it, who upholds everything with his Word, and who has revealed himself in Yeshua. Draw from that your own conclusions about what I think of Neptunus. But you will note that they are your conclusions, not my actual words."

A hand went up a few places along from Cyrus.

"Stefanos?" Brutus invited him.

"I think that we need to be realistic here, Brutus," Stefanos said almost apologetically. "I pay due homage to Neptunus as do most Terrapulchrans, but I personally have a special dedication to Isis. You can understand why. I came here as a slave, and now I am a member of the Council! Now, I know most of you don't honour Isis as I do but I take no offence at that. In the same way, if these Christists don't honour Neptunus as highly as we do, why should we take offence? Let all of us honour our own preferred gods and beg for their favour upon Terrapulchra! Provided no-one actively and deliberately provokes the displeasure of a god, then we have nothing to fear!"

There was a general murmuring of agreement from the terraces. Brutus was satisfied that Stefanos had expressed the consensus on this issue.

“So, Cyrus, you assure us that you Christists do not deliberately mock Neptunus, nor actively dishonour him?” Brutus sought an undertaking.

“In fact, Brutus, I can't recall Neptunus even being mentioned in one of our meetings,” Cyrus replied. “We speak only of what can be understood from our own sacred writings about our own God. Our letter was a genuine and sincere gesture of generosity to our fellow Terrapulchrans who might prefer to attend the celebrations. It should not be read to mean anything else.”

Stefanos stood again, and spoke before acknowledged. “I move that the offer from these Christists be accepted with thanks, and the Consul be authorised to take advantage of their offer in so far as convenient.”

A thin chorus of ‘Sit!’ came from the terraces. Latin for “Let it be!”

“I put the question,” Brutus responded. A reply of 'Yes' arose. “Those against?” no response.

“Then I thank the Christists in this place for their thoughtfulness to their brothers and sisters, and I apologise for misunderstanding their offer,” Brutus closed the item.

Port Sertorius - April 867 AUC (114 A.D.)

Alexander was Consul now, and just happened to be in Port Sertorius when word came that the Pulcher ship had returned after an absence of five years. ‘Some people never give up!’ he thought to himself. He immediately sent an interceptor to Cras to pick up the Chair. It would probably not get here in time, but it would do no harm to show respect if Pulcher's ship lingered. As it turned out, Phoebe arrived an hour before dawn while Pulcher's ship sat offshore unwilling to sail into the harbour in the dark.

Clopas strode down the board, smiling and with his right arm extended. “My name is Clopas. I notice that Penelope and Parmines are not here today.”

“Greetings, Clopas,” Alexander stepped forward to take the arm offered. “My name is Alexander, and I am the current Consul. May I present to you the Chair of our Council, Phoebe.”

Phoebe stepped forward and offered her arm in turn, smiling as she did so. “It is good to see you, and also to see that lord Pulcher still keeps us in his thoughts,” she said in good cheer.

“Indeed he does, my lady,” Clopas asserted. “So much so that he has taken the time to visit you himself.” Clopas turned back to face the ship. “I present to you Septimius Pulcher.”

A well-dressed man appeared at the top of the access ramp, smiling as he stepped carefully down the cleats. He extended his own right arm as he reached the wharf deck.

“This is such an honour!” Phoebe effused. “If I had only known, I would have worn something more presentable!” she indicated her patched tunic with a wave of her left hand as she extended her right.

“No, it is my honour to meet you,” Pulcher replied. “My father and grandfather told me about this brave new republic you are building here, in the face of the most adverse conditions. I had to come over and see it for myself!”

He released Phoebe's arm and then took Alexander's. “Alexander, your face shows that it has been in the weather, as I would expect, but you do seem remarkably young to be Consul! You must be a most capable man!”

“Our poor Republic must make do with what talent is available, lord Pulcher,” Alexander replied with wry modesty.

“Please, I am told that you do not have much time for titles and formalities,” Pulcher raised a left palm as he spoke. “I would be pleased if you would call me ‘Septimius’.”

“Thank you, Septimius,” Alexander responded. “That is most gracious of you.” He gestured towards the land end of the pier. Pulcher started walking slowly in that direction and Alexander and Phoebe took up station either side of him. Pulcher started chuckling to himself.

“Is there anything that seems out-of-place, Septimius?” Phoebe asked.

“No, not at all!” Pulcher assured her. “It was not until I noticed the smoke from the chimney that I recognised that it is the bathhouse. And then I recalled Clopas telling me about his embarrassment with Penelope.”

“Yes, Penelope mentioned that at the next Council meeting,” Phoebe smiled. “She felt so guilty, as if she had ambushed him.” She turned to Clopas walking on her left. “I assure you it was not intentional, Clopas.”

Clopas waved it away. “Different customs, that is all. I'm ready for it this time and as you can see I have already warned Septimius,” he added with a smile.

“Please forgive me if what I say is offensive by your standards, Phoebe, but I mean no insult,” Pulcher prefaced a question, “but women do not have the same status in the Republic as they do here in Terrapulchra. I was wondering how that worked out in practice. For example, what course of fate has led you to your present position of authority?”

“Hardly authority, Septimius,” she smiled modestly, “just a different form of service. But to answer your question, I was sent over here in 831 AUC just after the Battle of the Triremes. I was only seventeen at the time and rather pretty, believe it or not!” she chuckled. “So I was put to work in the brothel and stayed there for two years until I was too heavy with my second child to carry on. I was given my whites and allocated to the kitchen. I stayed there for another ten years, marrying in the meantime. Of course everyone in Port ate at the mess hall, so everyone got to know me. I was elected to the Council in its fifth year, and have been on it ever since. I still work in the kitchens when Council business doesn't interfere.”

Pulcher could barely believe his ears as Phoebe off-handedly related her history. A slave, a prostitute, *a female*, becomes the Head of the Senate in this strange republic! And she still works as a kitchen hand! “That would be a most unusual career path in the Republic, Phoebe,” he said after a pause.

Phoebe smiled softly. “I was in the Old World until I was seventeen, so I know what you mean by that,” she deliberately confronted the point that she knew had shocked him. “But over here most of the women my age were imported as prostitutes to service the men captured in the Battle of the Triremes. And most of our citizens are the children of these former prostitutes. It's not shocking for us, it's simply who we are.” She slowed her pace abruptly to permit her guest to enter the bathhouse first and then stepped through the doorway ahead of Alexander.

Phoebe shrugged off her tunic and stepped out of her semi-trousers. She stepped off the edge of the pool and plunged straight into the water, feet first. Pulcher observed more decorum, neatly folding his chiton over the arm of a chair. A moment later he was stripped and had joined Phoebe in the pool, but by using the steps. Soon Alexander and Clopas were also in the water.

“My father and grandfather told me much about this land and you people. I knew I would have to see it myself,” Pulcher said generally, after plunging below the surface and combing his hair back with his hands. “If I may, I would love to spend a few days to see your farmlands and the interceptor bases.”

“It would be a pleasure, Septimius,” Alexander assured him. Port Sertorius and the interceptor bases on Capri and Sardinola had been kept deliberately ramshackle for just that purpose. The real interceptors were now based in Caralis, a hidden harbour on the south coast of Sardinola some twenty miles from the south-west corner of the island. It was concealed from the sea by a bend in the entrance and high ridges on either headland. All of the plantations and other settlements were also sited to be invisible from the open

sea. These were on Corsica, the large island to the west. The secretive sitings of the natives first noted by Valerianus back in the first voyages had been adopted by the Terrapulchrans as well. Pulcher would never find any of them unless he first knew where to look.

Over the next few days Pulcher and Clopas were shown Port Sertorius and the nearby farmlands, quite modest in size. He was also taken to the original shipyards, still kept deliberately operational but small, just west from the Port. Finally Alexander boarded Pulcher's ship and guided it to the original interceptor base in Capri. He was desperate to get that Old World crew out of Port as soon as possible. It was getting more difficult to contain them on the vessel despite Pulcher's awareness of the risk of some sailor talking when he got back home.

Capri was suitably rustic, with the wooden shells of the great trireme fleet sunken and rotting beside the now-disused piers. The base still boasted six interceptors kept in reasonably good order, but deliberately equipped only with materials from Pulcher's trade. These were tied up at two new piers slightly along the shoreline from the older site.

"And I suppose the other interceptor base and fleet is much like this?" Pulcher asked Alexander.

"The other base is much the same. We found we could no longer support the full establishment of 16 craft once the trade died." He didn't mention the other twenty interceptors at Caralis, fitted with much better sails and tackle. These newer craft were now their main defence. There were also four super-triremes based on the Niger design at that new base. These were kept in good order and well-manned in case the interceptors were unable to do the job. The plan was that the triremes would be used against the intruding ships while they were in harbour, stripped of their sails or at anchor. The preferred action would be to board the intruders and cut them out if possible, but to destroy them if capture would involve too much loss of life. Once their boats were destroyed an enemy crew that escaped in good order wouldn't be able to return to the Republic. They would eventually be forced to parley.

"This must be a heavy burden for you to support," agreed Septimius.

"Food is plentiful and our population is growing, so we have the manpower to share the burden around. But we have had to be careful about our consumables. For example sailcloth is expensive. You can see how these sails have been patched rather than replaced. We are almost out of the stores your father provided years ago, there have been no intruders to loot lately and we have almost nothing to trade for more. If the Mayans don't start trading with us soon we will barely be able to put even essential ships to sea. We will need to revert to rowing."

Septimius looked at the interceptors thoughtfully. "We can't afford to have your defences fall to pieces. Your secrecy is everything. If anyone comes over here and returns to tell the tale we all lose. I'll give you a few thousand feet of sailcloth, a gift for your skills in repelling Niger in my grandfather's day and in hope of a brighter future."

"That... that is very generous of you, Septimius" Alexander stammered out appreciatively. And then, apparently impulsively, he dipped down on one knee to kiss Pulcher's hand. "Thank you!"

Pulcher pulled him up impatiently. “Don’t make a scene about it, man! It’s just an investment and I hope to be repaid many times over once the gold starts to flow again.”

“I hope that’s soon but I fear it might not be. Still, we must have hope.”

Pulcher decided he had seen enough of these shabby settlements. “Thank you for showing me this base. Now if I could be taken back to Port.”

It was a pleasant sunset as the ship ploughed north-westwards along the coast just outside Port Sertorius. Pulcher joined Alexander on the port rail to gaze at it. “I admit to being a bit shocked by Phoebe’s background,” Pulcher admitted, “Even though it only makes sense when I stop to think about it. But you’re a younger person, Alexander. What’s your story?”

“Oh, my past is boring,” Alexander said dismissively. “Born as a ward of the brothel, my earliest memories are about being surrounded by women I still called ‘aunty’ and probably will for the rest of my life. I did well at school, became a surveyor, then an engineer. I was appointed Consul three years ago. I suspect that was because of my work with the water supply.” He stopped there. He realised that going further might reveal the existence of another large town, one that Pulcher was not meant to know about.

After the embarrassment with Phoebe Pulcher realised that many of these Terrapulchrans would share this personal background. But even knowing this, Pulcher thought it outrageous that a man of this shameful breeding could be the foremost in the land, and even more abominable that their Head of Senate was even lower! A woman! A prostitute! He saw in Alexander and Phoebe the personification of how outlandish this strange society had become since the days of his grandfather.

He would have been surprised to know that Alexander shared that view but from the opposite side. Alexander knew without doubt that Phoebe and he were a microcosm of Terrapulchra as a whole. But rather than thinking that this was surreal as Pulcher did, Alexander was proud of it. Terrapulchra was a society where merit was recognised regardless of a man’s beginnings. But even those lacking in superior merit were still respected for their efforts for the common good. If only the whole world could be like that!

“Please, Alexander, tell me from the start how this terrible war among the Maya started, and how it has gone since that day. My father didn’t talk too much about it.”

Alexander, like everyone in Port Sertorius, knew the ‘official’ story and was so familiar with it that it was almost like recalling actual events.

“The Mayans are not one single state. They’re a loose collection of city-states with a common language and culture. They traded together and sometimes went to war against each other. They’re a bit like Greece was before Philip of Macedon subdued all his rivals. We tended to deal with one such city called Lamanain, out of convenience because it controlled the best harbours.

“Xunan and Tikal complained that Lamanain was profiteering by using its effective monopoly with us. These two cities demanded that they be given transit rights through Lamanain territory so they could deal with us directly. Lamanain refused. Tikal and Xunan mobilised their armies and said “We are coming through anyway. Allow us to pass and there will be peace. If you oppose us there will be war”. In response, Lamanain

blocked the route with its own troops and said, “Go back and there will be peace. If you approach closer there will be war.”

“The armies of the two cities pulled off the road and attempted to march around the blocking force. But it seems that the blocking force thought this manoeuvre was an attempt to surround them. They lunged into the rear of Tikal’s forces and destroyed them. Xunan’s forces realised too late what was happening, tried to re-unite with Tikal, and were slaughtered in turn.

“With Tikal and Xunan now enfeebled, Calak, Kami and Yokib saw the risk of Lamanain attempting to gain military supremacy as well as the economic strength of having a monopoly on trade with us. They felt that they had to act soon, before Lamanain could equip itself with steel weapons to overwhelm their stone, bone and timber-equipped armies. With their vassal cities assisting this meant that almost all the other cities united against Lamanain. Only Copan stood apart.

“The allied cities invaded and Lamanain was heavily outnumbered, so it retreated to defend only its strongholds. The coalition tried to entice them out by systematically destroying the Lamanain mines, their farms, their ports and anything that they thought could be sufficient provocation to draw them out.

“As so often happens in sieges, diseases started to spread among the forces outside. The major cities withdrew their forces, ordering two of their vassals Edzna and Palenque to continue the siege. Lamanain broke out with great ferocity, totally destroying the forces of these vassals. It then marched on Xunan to send an ultimatum. Surrender to us and live or resist us and be destroyed.

“Xunan, already weakened by the first defeat, changed sides. Tikal, the other weakened city, regrouped its forces for defence, and called for help from the other three. Calak responded, sending a medium-sized force on a forced march. They were caught by surprise and annihilated. Tikal surrendered, and its forces absorbed into Lamanain’s.

“Lamanain then marched on Calak, demanding its surrender. It refused, and called on its allies. Kami and Yokib sent help, but these forces moved cautiously, rather than risk rushing into an ambush as the Calak had done. Lamanain realised it would not be able to maintain the siege, but used the time available to utterly devastate the land. This included wholesale butchery in Tikal and Xunan as they fell back. This was a scorched earth policy completely without pity, just as the original devastation of Lamanain’s territory had been. This slaughter of most of their population totally destroyed Tikal and Xunan, and the devastation of the land prevented Calak from fielding an effective fighting force for years to come.

This retreat by Lamanain into its own impoverished territories, together with offers of a share in the spoils, convinced Copan to intervene. They marched against Lamanain, too. But there was confusion. The forces of Yokib, thinking that Copan had entered on Lamanai’s side, attacked them. Copan was not expecting this and a large proportion of their forces were mown down in the initial onslaught before a proper defensive formation could be achieved.

“Yokib’s commander realised the mistake after a few hours of fighting and ordered his forces to disengage, but the Copan’s commander feared that this was a withdrawal in preparation for a renewed, co-ordinated attack. So Copan counter-attacked the withdrawing forces to pre-empt this action. Yokib’s commander, desperate to minimise

the losses on both sides, attempted to withdraw more rapidly and the end result was a rout. Yokib's forces were all but destroyed but not before inflicting a bad mauling on Copan. After this damage, Yokib's general decided that he needed to return home to re-equip and re-supply.

“The Lamanain commander saw this as an opportunity to take Yokib out of the war. He attacked immediately with most of his forces, sending back home only what he considered the bare minimum for city defence. He arrived too late to take the city, the remainder of the Yokib army having reached home and been re-grouped, so he spent his time devastating the countryside. He could rely on no supplies from Lamanain because the surrounding regions had been laid waste. So he continued to move around the territories of the coalition cities, living off the land and destroying everything he couldn't take with him.

“Yokib, Copan and Kami tried to force a battle upon him from time to time, but the Lamanain commander was a good general. He would always have a prepared line of retreat that would end by luring the pursuing forces into a killing ground. The repeated raiding by the Lamanain commander also reduced their capacity to field large forces. Both sides were reduced to raiding and devastating, trying to starve the other side into collapse.

“In this way the entire area of the Maya was reduced to starvation and destitution. The cities starved and the armies degenerated into militias loyal to their generals to feed them. They became private bands of raiders in a depopulated land. Even the cities fell apart due to starvation and disease until only the soldiers and their immediate family were permitted to live. Captured soldiers were eaten as a convenient source of food.

“At one particularly desperate time our traders in the Lamanain port of Qotchi were seized and held for ransom. The Lamanain militia had nothing to trade with so they resorted to bargaining with the one thing that they had which we would consider valuable; the lives of our own people. For a couple of years after that we made no serious trade contact at all. We simply sailed past their port shouting that if they wanted to trade they would need to send out a small boat rowed by naked men, similar to the way we treat captured sailors. But from time to time they would offer a small amount of gold in exchange for some goods.

“Things have stabilised now. The remaining population is so small that they can't raise enough troops to destroy all of each other's crops, even though their whole society is now reduced to trying to starve each other out of existence. Most of the gold mines have been destroyed by flooding or collapse. Only a trickle of gold comes out of Lamanain now. They're still outnumbered, but we supply them with barely enough to stay alive and equip their men, and to launch enough raids to ensure the other cities can't grow strong enough to overcome their defences. Perhaps one day they might be able to reach a point where they can go on the strategic offensive and unite all the Maya under one king, but it will be a long time coming.”

Septimius nodded in understanding. “Perhaps we should abandon Lamanain, and start dealing with the coalition? Perhaps that will allow the Maya to recover more rapidly?”

Alexander shook his head. "There are a few problems with that. The first is that the Lamanain hold all the ports we might be able to trade through. There's no way of getting to the other cities.

"The second is that those other cities now see us as being utterly and totally evil. They see our coming as the cause for this disaster that has come upon them and are convinced that peace will never come until our influence is removed. They would crucify all of us if they had the chance, but until then they'll do all that they can to destroy Lamanain which they see as our puppet in the business of destroying them.

"So we can't trade with the others. All we can do is stop trading with Lamanain so it collapses. But if Lamanain collapses we still won't be able to trade and it's possible that the rest of the Maya could then come after us."

Septimius nodded again. "What if we land a fighting force, capture Lamanain by surprise, and then surrender it to this coalition? Would that not make peace?"

Alexander dared to laugh out loud at this suggestion. "Absolutely not! First, it would show that we are even more deceitful and wicked than they believed, to turn on an ally like that! Over the last ten years loyalty has been the one single virtue that has animated them. And second, it would give them a coastline from which to attack us."

Septimius paused for thought. "I would like to see the coast first-hand, please."

Alexander frowned. "That would be a very bad idea, Septimius. Although Lamanain holds the ports, there are many creeks that the coalition can use to launch raiders from. Some of our vessels have been attacked in the past. One has even been seized. Those aboard have never been seen again but it's known from our previous contacts that many prisoners of war are ceremonially disembowelled alive, as sacrifices to their gods."

"Then let us go in those fast boats you have, the interceptors."

"Please, Septimius, do not risk yourself so foolishly!" implored Alexander.

Septimius stood. "Please do not deny me this favour, Alexander. I would be most disappointed."

Alexander thought quickly. If Septimius is refused this, he'll try to sail there in his own ship. He doesn't have charts from his grandfather's voyages because of the danger of the Republic discovering them and breaking him for keeping them secret. But he knows the general direction and would be able to see for himself that these reports of war are a complete invention. He will see how the Maya are prospering, and how much gold they're trading ...

"If you insist, Septimius," Alexander agreed with great sorrow in his voice. "But I must insist that you wait for three of our best interceptors rather than rely on one. I'll send to Capri now, and they should be here within two or three days."

"Then it is done," agreed Septimius.

Alexander spoke with Phoebe that evening. This was a matter he dare not handle without proper consultation but nor did he want his plans to be known by the whole Council.

"I don't like to tell you this, Phoebe, but Pulcher demands that he be taken on an inspection of the Mayan coast."

Phoebe looked up sharply. "That can't be allowed, Alex! Tell him it's simply not possible."

Alexander flapped his arms in despair. "I did, Phoebe! I told him he risked his life to go there. But he insists and he can't see how he would be in danger in an interceptor. He's confident that they could outrun any threat."

"Alex, just tell him 'No!'. Is that too difficult?"

"Not very difficult at all, Phoebe," Alexander replied tersely. "Almost as easy as Pulcher telling his own ship to sail to Qotchi. He knows roughly where to look, you know; just sail west until you hit the mainland and then follow the coast. And who knows what he might find on the way? He might even pay a visit to Cras."

Phoebe nodded in acknowledgement. "Yes, I see." She paced for a few moments. "Well, what's good for Pulcher's competitors is good for Pulcher. He mustn't be allowed to return."

"But Phoebe, we can't enslave Pulcher and expect him to become a good citizen. He'll be a danger as long as he lives."

"That's right, Alex." Phoebe looked solemnly at Alexander. "Which is another way of saying that he can't be allowed to live."

"My thoughts exactly, Phoebe. But you can understand that I wanted you, the Chair, to say it first."

Phoebe smiled weakly. "His grandfather enslaved me, prostituted me and then exiled me to beyond the end of the world, but I've never had any ill-will against him for that," she commented. "It was just something he did as a business transaction. Nor do I bear any malice now. The death of this Pulcher is simply something that has to be done."

It was four days before four interceptors arrived back at Port Sertorius, the one sent to carry the message and the three selected vessels.

"My apology for the delay, Alexander," explained Silon, the squadron commander. "We hauled out our best three hulls and de-fouled them thoroughly. We've also fitted our best sails. All as instructed."

"Good," approved Alexander, glancing over to the boats tied up to the pier and noting that these nominally 'best' sails were in fact rather poor. The Terrapulchran squadrons in Caralis had better sails on their active ships and boats, far superior to Pulcher's cheap canvas, but they dare not let Pulcher see that. He turned to Pulcher.

"Septimius, may I suggest that you and your secretary should sail with Admiral Silon, who would be on hand to explain anything you might want to ask about. Also, Silon's craft has been fitted out with a private cabin which I am sure he will yield to you." Silon nodded his agreement.

They sailed that afternoon, with an easy easterly puffing them along and the long roll of the sea on a stern quarter. Three days later Septimius and his secretary were sinking into the depths of the Caribbean. They had been killed and disembowelled. Their bellies had been stuffed with rocks and then stitched up again to make sure they sank. The three interceptors set a course for Cras. Solon, the second-in-command of the second ship, volunteered to be wounded for his country.

"Dulce et decorum est pro patria vivere!" he joked as his left calf was carefully slashed.

One interceptor returned to Port Sertorius twenty-eight days after leaving. It had arrow-holes through its mainsails and its helmsman had a bandage around his lower left leg. As it entered port it pulled down the kite that had read "Urgent Report to Commander". By the time he docked, Alexander with his clerk was waiting on the pier. Beside him stood Clopas and Benthos, the captain of Pulcher's ship.

As it drew nearer those waiting could see that it was also missing three of its original crew. Immediately upon docking Solon the helmsman struggled onto the pier and limped to Alexander. "Sir, I think we should find somewhere private to talk." He looked meaningfully at the Pulcher contingent.

"Yes, of course," stuttered Alexander. "Do you need a hand?" he added, gesturing towards the leg.

"No, but a leg would be useful," quipped Solon, and cackled a bit at his own joke, and then fell silent. "Sorry, sir. The last fourteen days have had us all on edge."

Alexander stood to one side of Solon and waved his clerk to the other. They formed a chair with their linked arms and they carried the helmsman to the Harbourmaster's offices.

When all five were seated the helmsman started his report.

"We went straight to Lamanain, as Lord Pulcher requested. They greeted us and had a small amount of gold to trade but we weren't carrying any trade goods. We told them that we would try to get back to them in a month or two.

"After that we followed the coast to the south. This is the coast closest to Copan and most infested with their raiding parties. We were a lot closer to the coast than I liked and I don't know why. I could see Lord Pulcher and Silon often talking on deck, and it seemed that Pulcher wanted to be as close in as possible. Lord Pulcher was always gesturing to the shore.

"Then in the evening we were becalmed. Just before it grew dark we put out anchors to stop us from drifting inshore. Silon's ship was some three hundred or so paces off the surf and he ordered Marcus and Philon to anchor a hundred paces north and south of him the same distance from the beach. We were to his north.

"The moon was due to rise at about midnight. Some time before that our lookout reported sounds. I couldn't hear anything but I went to wake Philon anyway. When we can back up on deck, I thought I could hear, sometimes, a bumping noise. Philon heard it too. He said "Paddles hitting the side of a canoe!" and started shouting the alarm. There was just the faintest breeze still onto the shore, but he ordered the anchor up and full sail set.

"We started reaching to the north across the wind to try to build up some speed. I could hear Silon's ship also pulling up their anchor and I assumed Marcus off to the south was also trying to get under way.

"Then a shower of arrows came out of nowhere. We were making some boat speed but little more than walking pace. Now that the Maya knew we were aware of them the canoes were making much more noise in their haste to reach us. They sounded very close but that was probably fear talking to me.

"A second shower of arrows came down on us. Philon was pierced through the back, the arrowhead protruding from his belly. He beckoned me over to take the helm.

He ordered Linus to get a shield for him, and then he told me to sit on the aft deck while I steered. He sat behind me, with the shield protecting our backs.

“The wind seemed to be freshening slightly, or maybe we were just picking up more speed. Or maybe the paddlers were just tiring. But we were still clear of them. I looked around for a moment, and could see some phosphorescence perhaps 50 paces behind and to our port side. A third shower of arrows came over; I heard at least three hit the shield behind me, and then I was pierced through the left leg.

“I didn’t know who was working the sheets, but it was obvious that the rest of the crew were doing their jobs from experience and doing it well. We picked up more speed, and I looked behind again. The moon was just coming up now, giving enough light to see Silon’s sail clearly. He was following us, trying to reach north along the shoreline. Then he must have seen the canoe behind us, which was about a hundred paces in front of him, because he suddenly started pointing higher trying to get past our chasers by getting out to sea.

“The canoe chasing us also saw this. They turned away from us and angled out to cut off Silon’s escape.

“But Silon couldn’t get enough boat speed in that light wind. As the moonlight grew stronger I could see his crew being picked off by the arrows and then one of the canoes caught him and boarded.

“When we were clear I tacked to see if I could find Marcus, who had been on the south side of Silon opposite from us. In the moonlight we could see his craft was dead in the water. We had to presume they were also boarded and lost.

“After that we turned and reached north again, trying to get as much clearance as possible in case the breeze dropped even lower. We were lucky. The breeze continued to strengthen and by morning we were well clear.

“In the morning we checked for injuries and damage. Philon had died while protecting me from the arrows and we buried him at sea. Magnus and Jason were missing, presumed killed and fallen overboard. I was wounded as you see, but Sinstratus cleaned the wound with boiled brine and applied honey. My leg is improving.

“There was no serious damage to the craft. We went around pulling arrows out of the timbers, but no stays had been damaged. The holes in the sails were not serious enough for us to worry about. So we made it back home as quickly as we could.”

Solon dropped his eyes and looked down at his hands on the table. “That’s the summary of it, Alexander. I’ll give you a written report as soon as I can. Are there any extra details that our guests would like to know?”

Clopas spoke after a short pause. “You are sure all these men are dead?”

“Yes, lord Clopas. I just hope they died in the fight and not as prisoners.”

Benthos spoke next. “Could you take us to this place?”

“Yes, my lord. But I wouldn’t advise it,” Solon offered.

“But we need to land and punish this attack!”

“With respect Benthos, no we don’t,” interrupted Alexander. “They would see us coming and we would be walking into a trap. This was always a foolish, pointless exercise anyway,” spat Alexander bitterly, “and we agreed only out of respect for Septimius. I don’t want to throw more good lives away after losing too many already.”

“Then leave your men here!” objected Benthos, standing and slamming his hand on the table. “We will see to it ourselves!”

Alexander glowered at him. Then he said quietly but with malice, “No you will not! The chances are that you will not find the real perpetrators, so you will attack Lamanain people, not the real enemy. I do *not* want to have our relationship strained any further. And even if you do find the culprits, you will have no idea what you are fighting against, or the local conditions. These guys are masters of the ambush! You will only get butchered yourselves. What will the people back in Utica say when you don't return?”

Alexander stood now in a slow, measured action, until he was at full height. “As Consul of Terrapuchra, I forbid you to do anything except go home. We simply cannot afford to have you interfere with what is already a strained situation and nor can I risk the consequences if news of lord Pulcher's fate is not taken back to Africa.”

Clopas saw the anger rising in Benthos. The old salt was barely controlled as he groped in his own mind how to respond to being ordered by a man so much his social inferior by Republic standards. The son of a prostitute! Clopas knew he had to calm this situation. He stood quickly.

“Thank you, Alexander. We will most certainly take your advice! You know what you're talking about and Benthos is still bewildered by grief.” He tugged at the captain's sleeve, and stared him down.

Benthos knew he was being given an order from the man who was effectively Commander on this expedition. He turned back to Alexander, then lowered his eyes. “Yes. Please forgive my outburst, Consul.”

“I understand,” Alexander answered softly. “This new nation owes everything to the Pulcher family and has adopted that name as its own, with pride. At the appropriate time we will find out who is responsible for this outrage and we will avenge it. But we will do that in our own time, and in our own way. I promise.”

The captain looked up again. “Thank you. I know you will.”

Cras - February 874 AUC (121 A.D.)

A significant proportion of the imported slaves were Christist, and their new faith was starting to spread. Some of these were very impressed by the communal aspects of Terrapuchran society. In particular, their practice of granting citizenship to slaves as a matter of routine was identified with Paul's image of salvation being freedom from slavery to sin and adoption as a son of God. They started to identify Terrapuchra with the 'Seed' of the Kingdom that Yeshua had spoken about in his parables. Its founding thirty years after the Crucifixion (a generation, as foretold) gave some credibility to this position. By the year 873 the new faith had taken firm root, predominantly accepting the 'Seed of the Kingdom' vision of Terrapulchra's place in God's Plan. It claimed some fifteen per cent of the adult population as its followers.

Reuben ben Yacoub had died only two years ago. Although he would insist to his last breath that it was Yeshua who built His Gathering, in practical terms Yeshua had done this through Reuben. With the help and support of Ashballar, Reuben had built the organisational structure that included all Christists as if a single Gathering, even though they rarely met together except as cells of twenty to fifty. Only once each year, on the first Sunday after the Spring equinox, did they rent the theatre in Cras for a large-scale gathering. That first Gathering of the Whole had been Reuben's greatest joy. 'God has granted that I might fulfil my name; the firstborn great-grandson of Abraham in this place!' Yes, Reuben had gone to his grave joyfully, even if only forty-seven years of age at the time. Among the Christists he was regarded as being little short of Thomas, Philip and Paul, the three Great Missionaries. The Council had even permitted Ashballar to write back to Reuben's sister to inform him of Reuben's impact for the Gospel, his death and his funeral. But a committee had taken great care to read and study it for unnecessary disclosures before allowing it to be sent.

These Christists were generally well-tolerated and even favoured by many of the remaining pagans. In part this was because of their tradition of the last ten years of volunteering for additional work during Neptunalia each year to allow the pagans more freedom to join in with the celebrations. But there was one point of practice that was demanded of them. They must not reveal the secret of Terrapulchra. The Christists were eager to comply with this requirement. The 'Seed of the Kingdom' self-image was interpreted to demand this secrecy, drawing on parables such as the hidden treasure and the lost coin. They felt it their duty of faith to remain unknown to the outside world until Yeshua returns to take the Kingdom for Himself and then spread his reign over the whole world.

On this basis the Council continued to permit the importing of any Christist writings that their Agent might be able to collect for them. The original books imported by Reuben through Yitzak had been re-edited to include the Exhortation to the Dispersion, a tract that interpreted the Mosaic Covenant as 'the shadow of that which would complete it'. This had also been accepted despite its unknown authorship because it had been known and accepted throughout Judaea and Mesopotamia before the Judaeen Revolt of 820 AUC, and therefore presumably had been known to the First Disciples and accepted by them. But there was now an almost impenetrable barrier against any more inclusions. Even a letter purporting to be from Paul to Silas, his deputy in Ephesus, had

been rejected because it had not been explicitly directed to a Gathering. This and many other writings were in circulation and widely read but they were not considered to have an authority equal to the Writings in the Babylonian-approved anthology.

Over time this 'Hidden Seed' concept grew even stronger as reports were received of anti-Christist discrimination and riots back in the Mediterranean world. Officially the Republic imposed no constraints on Christists other than those already widely accepted for Jews. But this new creed was much less understood than Judaism, was growing rapidly and was not tied to a single racial group. Also, their refusal to permit a statue of their God (similar to the Jews, but not as well understood) left them open to the charge of Atheism. This made it an easy target for frustrations whenever the gods seemed to be angry. If a storm took away house roofs or if crops were lost through drought or if a fire broke out, it was always on the cards that 'Away with the Atheists!' would be the first reaction. This contrast between the suspicious Republic and tolerant Terrapulchra further consolidated the 'Seed of the Kingdom' perspective.

"Amelia Pella!" the Work Clerk called the next name on her list. A young woman rose from the benches packed with the latest shipment of slaves from Lusitania. She walked quickly to the desk. The clerk looked at her and then glanced down to the short description against the name on the list. Satisfied that the correct person had responded, she handed a slip of paper to the slave girl. "The Temple of Aphrodite," the clerk said in a business-like voice. "You'll find it one street back from the Central Square." Amelia took the slip of paper and took a few steps to clear the desk for the next person before glancing down to read the duty summary. The clerk called the next name as she stepped away.

'Temple of Aphrodite' was written on the first line in Latin. Why do these people still use Latin, she marvelled, when everyone speaks Greek now? Underneath the location was written 'Staff Number TA 107B'. She placed the slip into one of the two deep pockets in her semi-trousers dyed slave-yellow as she headed for the door.

Amelia was looking forward to being posted to a real job. She was well-educated and had been enslaved only because her father's business speculations had run into trouble. Selling his two daughters was the only way he could cover his debts and keep the business running. He didn't want his only son to inherit poverty! And on the ship over Amelia had been told that many of the administrative jobs in this new land were done by women, as evidenced by the female Work Clerk she had just left. So Amelia expected to be put into a clerical job. Anything would be better than the role she had filled on board the transport ship! Even though she had been respected in every other way, she had been appointed one of the three Ship's Prostitutes. While her father was still prosperous her pretty face, golden hair and well-proportioned body had given her high hopes of marrying well, despite her being a Christist. But these blessings had proved to be a curse as a slave.

She found the Temple easily enough. She entered and presented herself to the woman at the reception counter. "Hello," she said respectfully, "I've been told to report for work. Here is my duty slip." She held out the paper for the woman to accept.

The receptionist took the sheet and glanced at the staff number. "107," she said, then glanced back up to Amelia and appraised her face for a moment. "Yeah, why not?"

she said as she handed it back. "Through the centre door and down the hall. The Chief Priestess is in the office at the end."

Amelia followed the directions, wondering what that cryptic comment from the receptionist might mean. The open door at the end of the hallway had a simple sign written on it. 'Chief Priestess'. Amelia knocked three times.

A middle-aged woman looked up from the paperwork on her desk. "Come in," she invited.

Amelia took two paces to stand before her desk and offered the work slip again. "I've been appointed to Staff Position 107B, my lady," she explained.

The Chief Priestess smiled. "Didn't they tell you on the ship that we don't care much for titles? Just call me Eugenia. What is your name?"

"Amelia Pella," she answered with just a hint of a smile. She did not want to seem too familiar.

Eugenia returned the smile, more generously. "Please, take off your tunic and trousers. And shorts if you are wearing any, I understand that sometimes there are not enough for everyone. "

Amelia was stunned. What sort of job is it, that it matters what I look like naked? Is this woman some sort of pervert? Amelia stripped down. But Eugenia was stony-faced and business-like, no hint of a lascivious smirk or anything improper. She was behaving no differently from the slave-trader when Father was offering her for sale.

"Turn around slowly, please," Eugenia asked.

Amelia complied, doing almost one and a quarter turns to finish facing Eugenia.

"Yes, quite good. A good bath and some training and you will do well."

Amelia dared to speak uninvited. "What will my duties be, Eugenia?" she asked respectfully.

Eugenia gave a short laugh. "Oh, of course you don't know our coding! I'm so sorry!" she apologised with obvious sincerity. "The 'TA' prefix means 'Temple of Aphrodite', the '107' is a position classification, in this case as a priestess, and the 'B' is the specific position number for the individual worker. You're here to replace another priestess who wanted to be transferred out so she could marry."

Priestess! No! "Eugenia, I mean no disrespect. But I am a Christist."

Eugenia waved the comment away. "It's your business what gods you prefer, darling. I'm talking about your work, not your private life."

"But, with respect, I cannot serve as a priestess of Aphrodite," Amelia persisted.

"Don't worry about that," Eugenia explained. "You'll be trained how to do it. I'm sure you will be fine!"

"I'm sorry, but my religion forbids me to worship any god except the God of Heaven through Yeshua," Amelia clarified.

"Oh!" Eugenia paused. "So you mean that you refuse?"

"Yes, Eugenia

Eugenia narrowed her eyes as she re-appraised this naked nineteen-year-old in front of her. "You're well-educated. I can tell that from the way you speak without having to refer to your summary-sheet. Is working as a hierodoule beneath your dignity? You could be sent to a brothel instead, and I assure you that working conditions there will be nothing like as comfortable as we provide!" Eugenia challenged.

“Prostitution is nothing new to me,” Amelia answered. “The trader made himself at home inside me from the day I was sold, and I’ve been kept busy ever since. But I will not invoke any god except Yeshua.”

“So you are refusing to work?” Eugenia demanded a reply.

“I am not refusing to work. I will do whatever work I am ordered to do. But I refuse to worship or invoke another god.”

“I can have you punished for this!” Eugenia was no longer the cheerful, friendly good-mother figure.

“You can have me crucified, but I will not invoke any god except Yeshua,” Amelia answered. “So wouldn’t be better for everyone if I could be sent to some other work?”

“Get dressed!” Eugenia snapped. “We’re going to see the Consul! You can be an example of what happens to a recalcitrant slave!”

Fifteen minutes later the two women were in the Consul’s office. As Chief Priestess, Eugenia could expect to be kept waiting no longer than it took for the secretary to knock on the door to the inner office. She marched in with Amelia following.

“Tryphon, this slave refuses to work! Do you want to punish her yourself, or will we just sell her on to the Maya?”

The Consul stood and came around from behind his desk. “Refuses to work? I’ve heard no reports of any slave refusing to work on the voyage! Why would she refuse to work now?”

“She was appointed as a replacement for one of my priestesses who has moved on. But she refuse to do the job.”

“But she reported to you, didn’t she? Why would she report and then refuse?” Tryphon looked over to Amelia. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Lord Consul, I’m willing to do any work, no matter how hard or how humiliating, and I will do it diligently. But I’m a Christist. I will not invoke any god except Yeshua.”

“Ah! I think I see why you are so upset, Eugenia!” Tryphon smiled. “She refuses to honour Aphrodite and you naturally feel protective of your personal goddess!” Tryphon paused a moment before continuing. Then turning to Amelia, “Don’t you Christists look down on prostitution? From what I hear, you don’t even approve of sex with your friends!”

“Yes my lord, and I would prefer any other work no matter how hard, if you would grant me that favour. But if not, then I will submit to whatever work I’m ordered to do. We Christists are taught to be sincere in our service. If I am to serve as a prostitute then please let it be done in some other way.”

Tryphon looked to Eugenia. “Eugenia, I don’t like the idea of slaves telling me what work they want to do; otherwise I *would* send her to a common brothel instead. But I’d like your calmer thoughts first, please.” Eugenia inspected Amelia again, hand to her chin. “Take off your clothes, girl!” she commanded. Amelia dropped her clothes to the floor again. The High Priestess started circling her and invited Tryphon to do the same.

“Look at her! She’s very pretty, quite elegant. She’s tall. Her voice is pleasant to listen to and she seems intelligent. She’s obviously well-educated.” Eugenia continued walking around her. “No, I want her in my Temple please. Not only because she must learn obedience but also because she looks and sounds like the ideal type. She looks the

role even when unwashed! And if she refuses to obey she will be punished, day after day after day until her pride is broken.”

Tryphon didn't like the sound of that. Why waste food, clothing and energy purely out of spite? “Tell me, Eugenia, is it possible to serve without actually invoking Aphrodite? I must admit that I have never called upon her myself. What parts of the ritual demand her to be invoked? Why can't it just be assumed?”

“Well, first there is the dedication ritual to make her a priestess. In that the candidate must say ‘Oh, Great Aphrodite, Giver of Fertility and all that gives Life; I pledge myself to your service.’ Then in each service with a worshipper, the first sentence she must say is ‘Do you come here to do homage to Great Aphrodite, the Giver of Life?’, and the worshipper must reply ‘Great Aphrodite, grant me my prayer’ before the rest of the worship can start.”

Tryphon looked over to Amelia. “Let's work through this one step at a time. You say you will work, provided you're not required to invoke the goddess. Would you be prepared to say those words but leaving out the name? How would that go again, Eugenia, but without the name?”

“Aphrodite Mag... sorry,” Eugenia apologised for starting the Latin invocation with the name. “Force of habit.” Then she started again. “Oh, Giver of Fertility and all that gives Life; I pledge myself to your service.”

“See?” Tryphon asked. “No mention of Aphrodite. Why would you not be able to say that?”

“Oh, Giver of Fertility and all that gives Life,” Amelia repeated softly to herself. Then louder “I have no problem with that because I already worship the God who is described in those words.”

“And what was the other bit, Eugenia?” Tryphon asked

“The priestess is to ask ‘Do you come here to do homage to Great Aphrodite, the Giver of Life?’.”

Tryphon turned to Amelia again. “Are you prepared to ask each worshipper ‘Do you come here to do homage to the Giver of Life?’ Is that not acceptable? There's no invocation there. It's none of your business what the worshipper thinks. You said that you would serve diligently provided you yourself would not be required to call upon Aphrodite. I'm asking you to stand by your own words.”

“So long as I'm not required to call on her name or personally worship, I will serve diligently,” Amelia answered.

Then Tryphon turned back to Eugenia. “Wouldn't that be enough for you, Eugenia? How could you object to that?”

Eugenia was clearly unhappy, but she saw that the Consul was not going to be moved without good reason. She either allowed the ritual to be bent slightly or this otherwise excellent priestess would be allocated elsewhere. “Provided she does nothing to actually dishonour the goddess, I'll allow such circumlocutions,” Eugenia conceded.

Tryphon studied Amelia, standing naked before him. He had to agree that she was the image of a goddess. “You said you would be sincere in your service. I've decided that you will serve in the Temple of Aphrodite until released from that service. In consideration of that you will not be punished for your stubbornness today.” He opened his right hand towards Eugenia. “Take her. Once inside your Temple, she is yours to

discipline for any faults as you see fit. But I trust you to treat her well so long as she honours her pledge.”

It took only until the next day for the local Christist Elder to intervene. Without the prestige of Reuben behind him he felt totally inadequate to the task, but he had been acknowledged to succeed Reuben as Overseer in this town so he felt under obligation. He had heard about a young Christist girl being forced into the service of Aphrodite so he approached the Consul begging to have her moved to a different job

“Sorry, I can’t do that, Felix,” Tryphon replied. “I can’t favour one slave over another for no better reason than the slave wants me to. Someone has to do the less desirable work. Why should the most stubborn be the most favoured?”

“But Consul,” replied Felix, “She would be the right girl for any job! Please, be merciful and transfer her to some other duty.”

“No, Felix. She will serve where she is allocated. But I promise you this, if she serves well she will be granted her whites all the sooner.”

Felix knew the advice that Paul had written to the Roman Gathering; submit to lawful authority. “Thank you for that promise, Consul. But may I please ask one more favour of you? Please permit her the time to meet with the rest of us Christists so she can worship with us. It’s only one evening in seven, so if perhaps it could be arranged that she could have that night free instead of the usual roster of one free day in five?”

Tryphon roared with laughter. “What? You are asking me to do this so you can have a hierodoule at your meetings? That sounds almost Aphroditic in itself!” The laughter continued.

He wiped a trace of a tear from one eye. “Seriously, though. I thought you people had rules about sexual conduct. No fornication or homosexuality or adultery. How could you even let her into the same room as the rest of you?”

Felix was solemn. “Amelia has no choice in what work she must do. Therefore she needs to know all the more that she’s acceptable to God for being faithful in what few choices she is still able make for herself.”

Tryphon nodded his consent. “I’ll ask the High Priestess to permit her to attend your meetings so long as her behaviour is impeccable. But this will be revoked if any fault is found in her.”

Amelia was trained in the standard ritual of a priestess. She had no qualms about the clothing and was resigned to the prostitution. But the explicit worship of Aphrodite was beyond her limit. “Please Eugenia, during the times when the other priestesses are burning incense to the goddess, perhaps that’s a time when I could be employed attending to clients. That way the service of the votaries will not be delayed so much.”

Eugenia considered this proposition carefully. “Very well. You will have your concessions, but you will earn them! You are excused from the worship but you will be given additional duties at those times. You may use your circumlocutions but you will be allocated the most repugnant votaries, the ones the other girls would prefer not to serve. And the Consul informs me that he has promised that you will be permitted to attend the meeting of the Christists if you serve properly. But you will not step outside the Temple walls except for that purpose, once each seventh evening, and then you will return directly. These concessions will remain available to you only so long as your service pleases me in every respect.”

Amelia went onto her knees, leant forward and kissed Eugenia's hand. "Thank you, Eugenia. I will pray for you every day."

The ritual of an Aphroditic priestess was highly formalised. The Temple was not a brothel intended for sexual release, but a sacred precinct that demanded a dutiful approach by both priestesses and votaries. The most common purpose for attending was to ask for a pregnancy or safe delivery for a wife, daughter, friend or relative, and relied on an approach called 'sympathetic performance' by moderns. In this a man would have intercourse with a priestess while constantly repeating a prayer for the desired effect. A strong ejaculation while performing this act indicated acceptance of the prayer, but a failure or substandard outcome indicated that the goddess had not favoured the votary's request.

Other outcomes could be sought as well, such as a recovery from sickness or any other purpose that could be broadly considered 'the granting of life'. The priestess' timetable allowed for a votary every half-hour. This would include providing the ritual service for the votary and for cleaning afterwards, both tending to personal hygiene and replacing the couch sheet.

The priestesses were required to live within the Temple complex and take all their meals from the table of the goddess. Only infrequent and short absences from the compound were permitted. The main reason for this constraint was to re-inforce the aura of sanctity and dedication of the priestesses but it also provided the opportunity to ensure that they all received regular doses of a drug with contraceptive properties mixed in with their food. The requirements for the role of Aphroditic priestess were strict and suitable recruits were scarce, so the Temple wanted as little down-time from their priestesses as possible. Although pregnancies still occurred from time to time these were rare.

Within only a few days Amelia was considered suitable for duty. Her first client was taken through the obligatory ceremonial bathing by the assistants and shown to Amelia's cubicle. She held out both hands towards him in the ritual pose as she had been instructed to do and started the formal greeting.

"Do you come here to do homage to the Giver of Life?"

"Yes, I do," stumbled out a young man recently captured from an intruding vessel. "I was to be married when I returned to Nova Carthago at the end of this voyage. I have bedded my betrothed already, and she might already be pregnant. I don't know."

"Then what is your prayer? You must know that it's impossible for you to return."

"I... I know that. I'm resigned that I'll never see her again," he stammered out.

"Then what is your request?" Amelia remained in her smooth, formal manner as taught.

The young man was clearly in a torment of emotional agony. "I would ask that Delia might *not* be pregnant with my child. Because if she is burdened with a child by me, she will find it more difficult to start afresh with a different man." Amelia felt her heart melt on hearing this. But she was required to maintain a professional manner. "That's a most unusual request. It's usual to ask for a healthy pregnancy and a safe delivery. To ask for the opposite might be considered a sacrilege."

“Yes, I know,” confessed the man. “I was hoping that you would help me find a form of words that would not offend the goddess.” He hung his head, not in shame as much as near-despair.

Amelia thought for a moment. “I think I can help. Perhaps you should forget yourself in this matter, and focus all your thoughts on Delia. You might pray that Delia will have many healthy children by a man who truly loves her.” She paused for a moment. “Do you have enough courage and love for her to pray for that?”

The young man sobbed. Then another sob, and soon he was beyond control. Amelia relaxed the formality enough to step over to him and embrace him, and then lead him to sit in her chair. She stood beside him, her hand on his shoulder.

Perhaps only a couple of minutes passed as he sat sobbing while Amelia stood beside him in silence. Or perhaps it was as much as ten minutes. At length, the sobs ended and he raised his head. “Yes, I will pray for that.” He stood. Amelia removed her robe, using the dignified movements taught to her.

She stood before him when bare, and recited “Come, do homage”. Then she turned to sit on the edge of her couch and reach out her arms to him, all as prescribed.

He walked to the edge of the bed, and then looked down, embarrassed. “I might need some help here,” he said apologetically. “This prayer is almost like castrating myself.” His penis still hung limp.

Amelia was again moved to compassion. She thought to herself ‘My first client! Already I’ve relaxed the ritual to comfort him, and now I’m about to break it completely!’ she said in her own mind. She reached out and took his penis in her hands. Almost immediately, she felt it starting to grow. She stroked it gently.

After a few moments he smiled at her and said “Thank you. Perhaps we can start now.”

Amelia reclined to present herself in accordance with the ritual, knees apart and slightly raised. The young man climbed onto the couch and set himself between her thighs, putting his left forearm under her neck. Amelia reached down to guide his penis to her already lubricated vagina, and he entered her. He started thrusting gently and rhythmically, and she matched his timing.

“Aphrodite, please give Delia many healthy children!” the man cried as he kept thrusting. “Aphrodite, please give her many healthy children!”

He kept repeating this prayer into her ear as his movements became stronger, and he climaxed. Then, one last time as he lay still on her, he cried “Please, Aphrodite, give my Delia many healthy children!” and then he withdrew and climbed off the couch.

Amelia also rose from the couch and stood before him in the approved formal stance.

“You may go now. Your prayer has been heard,” she said to him as a dismissal.

After the door closed behind him, Amelia dropped to her knees and prayed to Yeshua for this man. She had resolved that she would do this for all her clients.

The same young man returned a month later. Amelia held out both hands towards him in the ritual pose, and started the formal greeting. “Do you come here to do homage to the Giver of Life?”

Yes, I do,” he responded. “I hope you don’t object but I asked for you again. You understand my problem.”

“No, I don’t object,” Amelia responded softly. “I know that this is not easy for you.”

“Thank you,” he acknowledged, bowing his head slightly.

“What is your name, if you don’t object?” Amelia asked.

“My name is Rufus. Why do you need to know?” the young man responded.

“Because I have been praying for you and Delia. It is so much better to be able to name you before my God,” Amelia answered.

Rufus’ eyes widened. “But I can’t afford more of your prayers! I’m a slave, allowed only ten denarii a month, and seven of them are spent here!”

“I pray for you in my own time, and without charge,” Amelia assured him. Then reverting to ritual, “What is your prayer?”

“I pray to Aphrodite that my Delia will have many healthy children.”

“You prayed that last time, and your prayer was heard.”

“But I prayed it grudgingly,” Rufus explained. “I feel I must pray again, but this time with full intent.”

Amelia moved to the couch, removed her robe according to ritual, sat on the edge of the couch, and reached her arms out to him. “Come, do homage,” she pronounced. This time he needed no extra stimulation to achieve an erection.

Again, throughout the coupling, he repeated his prayer, “Please Aphrodite, give my Delia many healthy children!”

When he dismounted, Amelia rose from the couch after him. But she didn’t pronounce the formal dismissal. Instead she looked to him and asked “Rufus, may I speak to you as a friend?”

Rufus was caught off guard by this informality. “Ah, yes, I suppose.”

“Please do not be offended, because I speak out of a genuine concern for you. But I think your prayer is incomplete.”

Rufus flushed with anger at this. “Why do you tell me now? It has cost me fourteen denarii for these two times and now you say that my prayer is incomplete!”

“Please understand that God looks on the heart, not the formality. Your prayer is being heard, regardless.” She bowed her head submissively. “But I think you need to do one more hard thing, this time for yourself. When we first spoke about what would be an acceptable prayer we agreed that it should be that Delia would have many healthy children by a man who truly loves her. But during your homage you refer to her as ‘my Delia’, and not as the wife of another man.

“You need to set her free from yourself in your own heart, so *you* can have many healthy children. You need to give permission in your heart for her to be not *your* Delia, if you are to be comfortable with the knowledge that she is to be another man’s wife. Only then will *you* be free to be another woman’s husband.” Amelia dropped her eyes in sympathy. “I know that will be hard for you, but you have shown yourself to be a man of courage. And you need not return here to do that. You can do it within your own heart.”

Rufus stared at her stonily. Then he nodded. “You’re right. I already knew that but I refused to admit it. Thank you for your wisdom.” Rufus turned to go, but turned back again. “May I still pray for her, regardless?”

Amelia nodded. "Yes. And I will pray for her too and for you." Then Amelia adopted the formal stance. "You may go now. Your prayer has been heard." She said to him as a dismissal.

Rufus returned again the next month. Amelia held out both hands towards him in the ritual pose, and started the formal greeting.

"Do you come here to do homage to the Giver of Life?"

Yes, I do," he responded.

"What is your prayer?"

Rufus swallowed. "My prayer is that Delia will die a contented old woman, loved by her many healthy children and their father."

Amelia felt her eyes glisten. "That is a good prayer." She removed her robe, went to the couch, and sat. Reaching out her arms, she said "Come, and do homage."

Rufus walked towards her, but it was obvious how much this would cost him emotionally. It would be his final letting-go. Amelia reached out and cradled his limp penis, caressing it. After some time he was erect, and she laid back to present herself to him.

He mounted her, and entered gently. His thrusts were slow and tentative as he wept onto her shoulder. "Please Aphrodite, give Delia a good man. Please, may they live long and well together. Please, may they enjoy their children together and their grandchildren after them."

Amelia was aware of his distraction, and feared he would lose his erection before he climaxed. He would see that as a failure, a prayer that had been spurned. That would break his heart. She pressed her hands to his buttocks, and deepened and quickened her own thrusts, to press him deeper into her and maintain his arousal.

But he was sobbing now, lost in the surrender of repeating his prayer in a dozen different forms. This was taking so long! Then she realised that her own arousal level was climbing. 'Oh, no! Don't let me climax', she begged her own body silently. That would be most unprofessional!

But she dare not relent to regain her own composure. That could be disastrous for Rufus. She tried to ignore her own rising arousal. She spoke in his ear, "Your prayer is being heard!" to encourage him.

He was so close now, she noticed. His breathing was rapid and heavy, and his own thrusts were now coming deeper. He must come soon! Or else I will explode myself, she despaired. She increased the pressure of her hands on his buttocks and met his every thrust as deeply as she could, all the while trying to choke down her own ecstasy. Yes, it was working! She could hear those tell-tale groans that meant he was only few thrusts away from climax.

But it was too much for her now. Her body took over and finished with a half-dozen thrusts in quick succession, her arms flew around his shoulders in an embrace and she gave a gasp at the extraordinary pleasure that swept through her body, oblivious to the shame. She lay there still and spent for what seemed a long, delicious time. It took an effort to drag her attention back. Then she realised that she had to cover her own indiscretion as quickly as possible. "Your prayer has been heard, Rufus," she assured him.

“I know that,” Rufus replied as if stunned. “I know that because this time you were not simply a priestess. You were Aphrodite herself come in the flesh. You were the living goddess herself. I felt her come into you.” Amelia didn't know how to respond to this. She lay still, conscious that he was still deep inside her.

“I want this moment to last,” he explained, as if he had sensed her thoughts. “I need to remember in my heart that this prayer has been heard and therefore I must honour it myself. It would be blasphemous to have Aphrodite herself attend to me in person and then treat it as a small thing.”

Amelia remained still under him, her hips still thrust forward to maximise his embedment.

Eventually he rose from her, his penis already becoming limp before it had been withdrawn. Then he looked at her, marvelling. This was no mere priestess. She was a vehicle for the divine! Amelia also rose from the couch and stood before him in the approved formal stance. “You may go now. Your prayer has been heard.” She said to him as a dismissal.

Rufus did not return in the fourth month.

Chiron was a powerfully-built man slightly past his prime. He entered the temple, asked specifically for Amelia and went through the obligatory ceremonial bathing. Then he was led to Amelia's room.

Amelia greeted him according to ritual. ”Do you come here to do homage to the Giver of Life?”

“Don't give me that rubbish, woman!” snarled Chiron. “I've heard that you haven't devoted yourself to Aphrodite! You're no priestess and you have no favour with Aphrodite, so drop the pretence! You're just a common whore in a fine robe and it's no sacrilege to do with you as I will!”

A chill ran through Amelia. She dropped her arms to her side. This could turn very ugly! But she dare not raise any alarm. This man would deny everything, act innocent, and the Chief Priestess would have grounds for disciplinary action against her. She threw a quick, silent prayer to Yeshua to keep her safe and brave and then answered Chiron, “You're right. I have no favour with Aphrodite. What is your will?”

“Take that robe off, for a start!”

Amelia removed her robe, trying to maintain as much dignity as she could.

“Now kneel before me!” Chiron demanded. Amelia knelt.

Chiron took the two steps that separated them, so that he stood with his erect penis level with the base of her neck. “Come, do homage!” he rasped in sarcasm, as he put a hand either side of her head and forced her face onto his penis.

Amelia quickly took hold of the shaft of his penis and directed it into her mouth. As she did so he thrust it forward into her soft palate, making her gag. She wrapped her hand around the base of his shaft, both to limit the depth of entry and to give him the illusion of greater penetration.

Oral intercourse was not part of the approved ritual. It was considered that anything other than ‘proper’ positioning was a perversion of piety. But during her training she had been required to perform this act several times to ensure she was familiar with male sexual responses. Or at least that was their justification. She privately

believed that the men described as her 'training partners' required it for their own amusement. She thought quickly and started to tickle the sensitive underside of the glans with her tongue.

Chiron groaned with delight for a moment, and then withdrew abruptly. "Yes, you are a cheap little whore, aren't you! No real priestess would do that!" He pushed her head firmly to one side. "On your hands and knees, whore!"

Amelia complied silently. Chiron circled around her and she sensed him going to his knees behind her. 'Doggy-style', Amelia thought to herself in contempt. 'Why would any man prefer that?'

But Chiron thrust himself suddenly into her anus instead. A dagger-like pain shot through her. It was routine practice to smear a lubricant onto her vulva to assist the client, but not her anus! She had never imagined that this would happen! Chiron pumped at her four or five times, each thrust excruciating, and then he withdrew.

He stood again. "Turn around!" he commanded. Amelia complied.

"Come, pay homage again!" he recited. Amelia lifted to her knees to see a sneer on his face. Then she looked to his penis, with flecks of her own excrement clinging to it.

She took him again in her mouth, with her right hand around the base of the shaft and her left cradling his testicles. 'Men like to feel enclosed', she thought to herself, 'as if they could get everything inside.' She moved her head to smoothly stroke her lips forward and back along the tip.

"Have you forgotten the tongue work?" Chiron chided her. She instantly added the tongue strokes, the taste of her own shit repulsive to her.

She heard the groans of pleasure above her, and started to feel the head of his penis swelling. 'This will be over soon,' she promised herself. But again Chiron pulled back.

"Hands and knees again, bitch!" he demanded. Amelia dropped her hands to the floor, and turned around for his easier access.

Chiron chuckled in appreciation. "You're very easily trained, little slut!"

He entered her vagina this time. Humiliating as it was, there was not the pain of the anal entry. She felt she was past the worst of it, and relaxed slightly.

Chiron sensed this. "So you like that, do you, my little bitch? I suppose that's what you are more accustomed to!" he taunted.

"Well we can't spoil you, can we?" he continued, as he withdrew again and jammed himself again into her anus. Pain shot through her again, as he seemed to push as deep as he could.

'Why is he doing this to me?' Amelia asked herself. 'There are male prostitutes who specialise in this sort of thing, and trained to do it well. Why me?'

And then she realised why. This was not about sex. It was about power and humiliation. Thrust after thrust she endured, until one long, deep final push, and a pause after it. Then Chiron withdrew and stood. Amelia stood to face him, her rectum in agony. But she kept a controlled face. "Do you know why you want to hurt and humiliate me?" she asked.

"I don't have to explain myself to the likes of you!" Chiron spat back at her.

"You don't have to explain to the likes of me because I already know the answer. But do *you* know why you want to hurt and humiliate me?"

Chiron smiled as he thought there would be even more sport on offer here.

“So, you are a Delphic priestess as well as a pretend-Aphroditic one!” he mocked. “Well, tell me! I paid good money for this half-hour, so why should I leave early?”

“You do so because you have been hurt and humiliated yourself. You came to me naked, but I know you wear the yellow of a slave and you resent it. You were a full citizen of considerable status back home but have now been reduced to slavery under your social inferiors. The hurt and humiliation makes you want to hurt and humiliate those who did this to you.

“But you can’t because you don’t have the means. So instead you come here to hurt and humiliate the only part of the social structure of Terrapulchra that’s vulnerable to you.” Amelia wanted to sit on the edge of her couch to show that she had finished her pronouncement but the pain in her rectum prevented her.

Chiron looked ready to explode. He gaped for a few moments, as if searching for words, and then exclaimed “You smug little bitch!” He raised a hand to strike her with the back of his hand, a blow that she was determined not to flinch under even if it broke her jaw. But he realised that this would cause him even more trouble and dropped his hand again. Instead, he wagged a finger at her, mumbling in his rage.

“What do you know about humiliation?” he challenged.

“Oh, not much, I suppose,” she answered breezily. “I was born a free citizen to a merchant family and I was educated in Latin and Greek Classics, Rhetoric and Mathematics. But when my father couldn’t pay his debts I was sold into slavery to become a prostitute. You wouldn’t believe what some clients did to me!” she added.

Even in his rage, Chiron suddenly realised that this woman was in the same place as he was. His anger lifted as if by magic, to be replaced by a woollen feeling in his head and a lethargy in his body. The aftermath of too much fury.

“Yes, I suppose you know it as well as I do,” he conceded grudgingly. Unselfconsciously he sat in the only chair in the room, Amelia still standing by her couch. “How do you manage it?” he asked, his interest genuine.

“I believe that the God of Heaven is in control of everything that happens to me. He has placed me here for His own good reasons, and I am called to be faithful to Him wherever He puts me.”

“Faithful! That’s a laugh,” Chiron snorted. “You’re a prostitute and you serve in the temple of Aphrodite, so how can you be faithful to any male god?”

“I have not burnt the pinch of incense to Aphrodite and prostitution is the task imposed upon me by others, not of my own choice. But this is *my* solution in *my* circumstances. What’s *your* way forward?” Amelia asked. “There is no way forward for me. All I can do is continue to assert that I’m no man’s slave and never will be. I will not lose my self-respect, even if the others hold me in contempt.” There was a pause for a few moments. Chiron rose from the chair to pace the room, and then sat again. His total dejection was obvious.

“May I tell you a story? I don’t mean to offend you but to help,” Amelia asked.

“So far you’ve shown wisdom. Go ahead,” Chiron invited.

“There is a story about a man who was found kicking a rock. There seemed to be no reason, but he kept kicking it as hard as he could until every bone in his foot was broken and his whole foot was just a mangled mess of blood and flesh. A stranger asked him ‘Why are you kicking that rock?’

“The man said, 'Because it keeps hurting my foot, and I refuse to be the first to stop!’”

Chiron chuckled at this story. “You are indeed wise! I 'm that man, am I not?”

“You need not be. God has put you here for a reason. Work diligently and faithfully and your new life here could be as good as any on the other side of the ocean. The old has gone and the new has come, so rejoice in the new.”

Chiron thought for a moment. “That’s easy to say. But when I join my work gang tomorrow the overseer will still regard me as recalcitrant and the rest of the gang won't speak to me. Except to bait me yet again. There's no going forward for me.”

“Then the first thing you should do tomorrow is apologise to your overseer and to all your fellows.” Amelia raised a finger to emphasise a point. “But don’t expect that this will be enough. Your overseer might suspect that you'll remain a poor worker and that you speak only to deflect punishment. Expect him to set you more difficult tasks to test you. Expect your fellow-workers to bait you even more, to trigger another burst of rage. You must be prepared for these tests and demonstrate that you will meet them. Your poor start means that you are behind, so you must now work even harder to pull ahead.”

Chiron looked at her with interest. “Is that what you do here?”

Amelia nodded. “Yes. I refuse to worship Aphrodite. That means that I draw additional duties and it also puts me first in line for the clients that the other girls would prefer not to serve. Therefore it's my task to accept these clients and make no complaint.”

Chiron looked down at his feet. “I suppose that I'm one of those.”

Amelia looked at him steadily. “I usually don’t find out until afterwards, when the Duty Priestess might ask me about a client. I’m never told beforehand.”

Chiron stood reluctantly. “You're wise and your advice is good. I'll try to follow it. I suppose I won't have to wait until tomorrow for the first opportunity.”

Chiron stood. “I have treated you very badly. Please forgive my cruelty. I will not offend you again and I’ll try to make amends as I'm capable. I'm in your debt.”

Amelia smiled, despite the pain in her rectum. “Of course I forgive you and greet you as a friend. No amends need be made!”

Amelia took her formal stance beside the couch. “You may go now. Your prayer has been heard.” she said to him as a dismissal.

Chiron bowed as though in gratitude and left. As soon as he was out of the client’s access door, Amelia was staggering through the internal doorway into the priestess' section of the building. As she made her way painfully towards the physician's office one of the serving girls entered the corridor.

“Sylvia! Please help me to the physician!”

Once Amelia was in the physician’s room Sylvia left to tell the Reception Priestess that Amelia could see no more clients that night. The physician, named Dexter, was concerned at her obvious pain. “What is the problem?” he asked briskly.

“My last client,” Amelia gasped out, “entered my anus, not my vagina. I feel like my bowels are exploding.”

“Why did you let him do that?” Dexter demanded. “You know that form is not permitted! You're a priest of Aphrodite and dedicated to birth, not mere entertainment!

There are young pretty boys if a man wants that!" Dexter was clearly appalled at the insult to Aphrodite.

"I didn't realise what he was doing until too late. I couldn't stop him."

Dexter dropped the interrogation in favour of the examination. "Here, bend over the edge of the bench and spread your legs. I need to see if he has done any damage."

Amelia bent over the examination couch, her rump higher than her chest, and spread her legs. Then she felt the cold of steel instruments entering her anus and forcing it to dilate. Then an oiled tube was gently inserted, a fraction of a finger's width at a time.

"There are no turds for a considerable depth. I don't want to probe deeper. When was the last time you emptied your bowels?"

Amelia thought for a moment. "Just after breakfast. That would be about nine hours ago. I usually go again just before the evening meal."

Dexter gave a heavy sigh. "That's bad. I suspect this fellow has forced the faeces into the top of the rectum and this has exploded the lining of the passage. That could be very bad. The male prostitutes guard against that by keeping their rectum empty. You should too if you're going to allow that sort of thing to happen." Amelia could hear the disapproval in Dexter's voice. He clearly didn't believe that she had not consented to this. 'But who would accept that sort of treatment willingly?' she remonstrated silently.

"If that has happened then some of your shit can pass into the abdominal cavity and cause infection," Dexter continued. "We need to get out as much as we can and reduce the pressure created by any more coming through. That will mean repeated enemas, all night. Perhaps by tomorrow morning we might be in a position to assess the damage more fully."

Amelia heard that dreaded word 'infection'. She had heard enough about the amazing medical science coming out of Babylon to realise that this could put her life in danger.

"Don't you have substances that can kill these infections?" she asked hopefully.

"We have several substances that can kill infectious microbes, but they're intended to be used externally. If used internally they can also damage your own tissues. That could only make things worse." Dexter huffed in anxiety and then returned to his viewing tube again. He crept it slightly further in.

"Ah! I see a turd, and it looks quite firm, and the end looks as though it has been pushed. It has a concavity. Yes, it seems this guy might have exploded your upper rectum." Dexter clattered around in his instrument tray again, and returned to the tube. There was some rattling and scraping, and then he turned to the table under his window.

"Yes, it's quite firm, which means that it will take a significant amount of pressure for you to expel it yourself. Generating that much force internally might cause any tear in your lining to become worse. I think I'll need to flush it out. Here, chew on a coca leaf to help with the pain." Amelia accepted the leaf and started chewing.

Having inserted all this hardware into Amelia's rectum, Dexter didn't want to withdraw it and attempt a re-insertion later. Every process like that created a risk of another perforation. So help was called and the examination couch with Amelia on it was wheeled into a corner of the room set slightly lower than the rest of the tiled floor and with a floor waste at the low point. A frame was put under her hips to hold her steady.

Then her shoulders were strapped in and the whole frame rotated back so the tube drained clear by gravity. At last she was set up for the procedure and a thin jet of water operated by a foot-pump was played up the tube to erode the turd.

The process took all night. The pain was reduced thanks to the coca leaf and Amelia felt herself doze off a couple of times. But Dexter continued without pause except to insert the tube even deeper from time to time as he worked his way forward. 'Dexter might carry on like a self-important old woman at times,' Amelia thought to herself, 'but he's careful and dedicated. I'm in safe hands.' And then she thought to herself, 'Yes, Yeshua! I'm in your hands, and there are none safer! Thank you for putting Dexter in this place for me.'

She realised with a start that it was daylight outside. She had fallen asleep. She groaned, aware of the pain in her body from being draped over the supporting frame all night.

"Welcome to the new day," Dexter greeted her.

"Oh, how is it going, Dexter? I want to thank you for your care for me."

"It's not quite as bad as I feared, but you're not safe yet," he summarised. "I've been able to remove all the waste material - including some more you pushed at me from ambush," he chuckled. "I found a slight tear and some bleeding but it wasn't a full perforation. There might be another tear or even a complete perforation further up, but I don't want to push higher and risk doing any more damage to the one I found. So we will just have to hope.

"We'll need to keep the pressure off the lining by continuing to flush out more material as it arrives, and keep doing this for at least a couple of days. So you will stay bent over, with the tube in place, because every time we take it out and put it in again we risk injury. Also, no solid food. You'll have to live on milk, juice and sugar-water for a week or so." Now Dexter walked around to the other side of the couch and sat on a low stool so they could see each other's faces.

"That means the medical emergency is under control. Now we can talk about the profanation. Who is this man who abused a priestess by committing this act? He needs to be brought to justice." Dexter was clearly disturbed, by both the abuse of one of his charges as well as the insult to the goddess. "If we allow this sort of thing to go on without taking action, then how can we expect the gods to protect us?"

Amelia didn't like the sound of this. It would undo all the progress, the miraculous progress, that had been made afterwards. "It wasn't deliberate. He didn't realise what he was doing," she answered.

"Rubbish! You must have told him, and probably cried out from the pain of it. And surely even if he didn't notice your reaction, he must have sensed it himself! But instead of stopping, he went on long enough to ejaculate! Your rectum was dripping with his semen!"

"No, I'm sure he was so pre-occupied with his prayer that he noticed nothing. He seemed to be deeply troubled, caught up with his cares."

Dexter looked at her with extreme disbelief. "If you're going to stick to that absurd story then I can't disprove it. But at the very least I'll notify the Duty Priestess and have

this man's name put on the list of votaries to be refused. I don't want any of my girls treated like this!"

"No, don't do that!" Amelia interjected. "Instead, note him down as one who must come only to me. I'll explain his error and I'm sure there'll be no more problems."

Dexter was obviously not convinced. "Well, if you're prepared to do that then let it be so. But if you're not available he is to be turned away. I must protect my girls."

Amelia smiled at him. "That is what makes you such a good physician."

Amelia was taken off solid food and the tube remained in place for the next five days, her rectum flushed out three times daily to limit the stress on the lining. The damage was kept under observation. After removal of the tube she was kept off solids for another ten days. During this time she ate nothing, and drank only sugared water and some fruit juices. Then she returned to duty. She was still weak but eager to impress the High Priestess rather than risk being thought a shirker.

Rufus returned the day of her re-activation to duty. He had gone to the temple the previous two days asking specifically for Priestess Amelia, but had been told she was not available. Amelia greeted him according to ritual. "Do you come here to do homage to the Giver of Life?"

"Yes, I do," he responded.

"What is your prayer?"

"May I please explain why I didn't come to you last month?"

Amelia smiled sincerely. "You don't need to explain yourself to me!"

"But I would like you to hear, if you will."

"I would like to hear. Please tell me."

Rufus smiled gently. "After the last time, I realised my prayer had been granted. I had no need to return. I knew that I had done everything I could for Delia. She was free from me at last and in a strange way I was free of any remaining duty to her. I had done all that was proper.

"Not that I don't continue to love her! I think I'll always love her, as a widower always remembers with joy the bride of his youth. But it was now a love free of duty." He looked to Amelia to see if she understood his point. "I think I understand. A love of gratitude and joy is how I might explain it," Amelia offered.

"Yes! You understand! Thank you!" Rufus enthused. There was a slight pause.

Amelia stepped smoothly into the silence. "So why have you come back today? You no longer need to pray for her, because all your prayers are now fulfilled. Why spend most of your monthly allowance on what need not be done?"

"I thought I had completed all my piety. But three evenings ago as I was paid my monthly allowance, I realised that there is one duty I still need to fulfil. Again it's not so much a duty as a debt of joy and gratitude."

Amelia tilted her head to one side, enquiringly.

"I need to pray that everything I prayed for Delia will also come to the priestess who made it happen. I want to pray for you."

Amelia felt this as if a physical blow. But her training gave her the poise to smile. "Don't think that what happened last time will happen again. That is given to few men, and to no-one twice."

“I understand that,” Rufus assured her. “This is not for me, but for you.”
Amelia nodded. “A prayer given from a generous heart never goes unheard.”
She moved to the couch, removed her robe according to ritual, sat on the edge of the couch, and reached her arms out to him. “Come, do homage,” she pronounced.

Chiron returned to the temple twenty days after his first visit, as soon as he had received his monthly allowance. “Please, is priestess Amelia available? I must see only her,” he asked the reception priestess.

“I’ll see if she is free. You name, please?”

“Chiron Stathes.”

The reception priestess stiffened slightly. Then she resumed her search through the appointment book.

“I am sorry but priestess Amelia is not on duty tonight. Also you are listed as not suitable for any other priestess. If you wish to pray with Amelia you will need to come back tomorrow.”

“Yes!” responded Chiron. “Please, book me in for tomorrow and here is the offering.” Seven denarii clattered onto the table.

The reception priestess looked at the coins as though Chiron had vomited on her counter. Then she looked down the list for Amelia. “What time?”

“The twelfth hour, please? Is that available?”

“The twelfth hour it is, then,” the reception priestess said icily, and scraped the coins into her till. She noted Chiron’s name in Amelia’s roster and wrote the time, date and Amelia’s name as the officiating priestess on a receipt and handed it to him.

“Thank you,” Chiron responded and left.

Chiron entered Amelia’s room close to sunset the next evening. She recognised him immediately but adhered to the formal ritual even as she was aching to know what progress he had made towards adapting himself to his new life. Amelia raised her arms towards him in the formal greeting. “Do you come here to do homage to the Giver of Life?”

“No. I come here to apologise to you and to seek more of your wise advice.”
Again Chiron walked over to the chair and sat in it uninvited. “You’re the only person I can trust to give me any advice worth listening to.”

Amelia dropped her arms, and smiled. “You have already apologised and I have accepted with all sincerity. So there is no need for that. But let us talk.” She sat on the edge of the couch.

“First, the reception priestess yesterday said something about me being unsuitable. What was that about?”

“I am sorry to cause you any trouble,” Amelia started, “but I needed some serious medical attention after your last visit. The physician wanted to ban you from the temple but I told them it was an accident. I said that I would be prepared to meet you again. But they still banned you from all the other priestesses because they simply didn’t believe me.”

“Medical attention? What sort? I admit that I wanted to humiliate you, but not to do you any damage.”

“You tore the lining of my rectum.”

Chiron gaped for a moment. “But I've seen that sort of intercourse countless times! And you seemed to be in no trouble as we spoke afterwards.”

“Those who practice anal intercourse are trained in how to do it safely and prepare themselves for it. I was not trained nor prepared. I was in great pain afterwards. I could barely walk and needed to be helped to the physician. At first he thought it might take my life.”

Chiron lowered his eyes, and started to weep. The only person who had shown any regard for him, and he had almost killed her! “I am so sorry! I am so sorry!”

“But it didn't take my life, Chiron! In fact, I pray that it has given you a new life and the pain was like the pain of a childbirth.” Amelia smiled as brightly as she could.

Chiron shuffled his feet uneasily. “That's why I'm here today. I followed your advice and what you said was true. I was given the very tasks I most hate. I was provoked by those who formerly feared me. But each time that happened I thought of how I had mistreated you and how courageous you were to not only suffer it but to forgive it.

“I'm now respected and I'm starting to be befriended. The overseer has told me that I'll be the next foreman when Scipio gets his new job next month. But most importantly I'm now at peace. I'm no longer respected as the captain of a ship. But I'm now in a land where I will be respected for what I am and what I do without the ship.”

Amelia nodded. “That's a very good start. But remember, you started poorly so that will take time to expunge. You might be promoted but it may still be a long time before you are granted citizenship. A bad reputation tends to stick even when it is no longer merited.”

“I know that. But I've even come to terms with being a slave. My job is so much more humble than being ship's captain but I now realise that it is simply where I am for the present. There's no shame attached. Just as you show no shame in your job but instead are resolved to do it well.”

Amelia smiled at this reference. “You're a perceptive man to realise that. It took me some time to come to that place in my own mind.” There was a pause.

“Anyway,” Chiron said as he stood, “I wanted to see you again to thank you and to let you know what has happened. I'm so sorry that I harmed you and glad that you recovered. Perhaps I should go now.”

Amelia was still in her robe. But Chiron, like all votaries, had entered the room naked. Amelia could see that his penis was three-quarters erect. A normal reaction, she supposed, for men who intuitively associated this room with sexual intercourse. Although he was willing to leave she sensed that there was still something she could do to help heal the wound.

She raised her arms towards him in the formal greeting. “Do you come here to do homage to the Giver of Life?”

Chiron looked surprised. “Ah no, just to talk.”

“But you tell me that you have been given a new life. And after my injury I feel that my life has been spared too. Why would you not do homage to the Giver of Life?”

Chiron looked amazed. “But... after what I did to you? I was so brutal! How could you accept me after that?”

“All the more reason,” Amelia answered. “I don't want to remember you as brutal but as gentle, so you need to replace that image in my mind. And also how else can you be sure that I genuinely bear you no grudge?”

Chiron gaped for a few moments. Then he found his voice. “What shall I pray?”

“How about ‘Thank you for new life’?” Amelia suggested.

Chiron nodded in agreement. “Yes. That says it all.”

Again Amelia raised her arms towards him in the formal greeting. “Do you come here to do homage to the Giver of Life?”

“Yes, I do,” Chiron responded.

“What is your prayer?”

“My prayer is ‘Thank you for new life’.”

Amelia slipped her robe off her shoulders. “That's a good prayer! Come, do homage.”

The Consul was good to his word. Amelia was already becoming heavy with a child so she needed to be allocated to another job anyway. She was being transferred to work in the Consul's own administrative office because of her education, being literate in both Latin and Greek as well as her command of mathematics. And because of her willingness to accept a multitude of additional impositions and duties during her time in the temple her citizenship was being granted to her at the same time.

And then came the most interesting part of the whole citizenship celebration. After the formalities were completed several men, apparently her clients at some time, clustered around her to congratulate her on her citizenship. She thanked them for their good wishes, smiling at them with friendly dignity and no hint of shame. A particularly bold young man asked for ‘one more session, for old times' sake!’ and his fellows joined good-naturedly in the cry. She just chuckled and shook her head, still smiling.

One young man said to her “It seems my prayer for you has been granted!” and touched his cheek to hers.

“It might well be that you fulfilled it yourself, Rufus!” Amelia responded.

The young man looked perplexed.

“The priestesses are given a food additive that is supposed to prevent them falling pregnant. But I hadn't eaten anything solid for more than a week. So although I didn't realise it at the time, I had not been getting my dose. You were the first man I saw when I returned to duty and it was the middle of my fertile period in that month,” she explained.

Rufus looked awed and the other fellows in the group slapped him on the back, congratulating him. “You mean...?”

Amelia shrugged. “I have no way of knowing for sure, but you are one possibility.” She smiled brilliantly at him.

And there was Felix, looking like the father of the bride at a wedding. He hugged her then stepped away as the other known Christists lined up in turn. Among them was that fellow who had been on the point of being sold to the Maya before he suddenly became more amenable. What was his name again? Ah, yes; Chiron. The Consul put his hand to Felix' shoulder as he backed away.

“Tell me, Felix, do you Christists know no shame? Now that she's free, why doesn't she turn her back on those men who had been her clients and denounce her past? Instead, she treats them like friends!”

“What has she to be ashamed of, Tryphon?” Felix replied. “She was ordered to do a particular job, and she did it well. Other women might have given them just the ritual, but she is a Christist and knows that the ritual in itself is empty. She has also given them wisdom, companionship and support in so far as she was able. She has every right to be proud of her work and to be respected for it.”

Tryphon just smiled, and shook his head in amusement.

Port Sertorius - April 881 AUC (128 A.D.)

After a fourteen-year break the next Pulcher ship had been sighted off Septimia. This was guided to Port Sertorius by an interceptor while two others raced ahead to deliver the news that the next Septimius Pulcher was on board. One messenger went direct to Port Sertorius, the other hammered to Cras and picked up the Consul and a welcoming party for transport to Port Sertorius.

The Consul was Sextus, the son of a soldier captured in the Battle of the Triremes. He greeted Pulcher on the dock of Port Sertorius.

“My name is Sextus, and I am Consul at this time,” he introduced himself with a small but dignified bow. “This man is Philon, deputy Chair of the Council,” he introduced a small wiry colleague. “Unfortunately the Chairman is unable to be here to meet you.

“I cannot express how great is our joy to see you here today,” he effused. “We were all concerned that the tragic death of your father would cloud our relationship. When your ship didn't appear in 872 AUC, the fifth year since that last voyage, we feared we had been abandoned. And so we have grieved for these last ten years.”

“My name is also Septimius, as you might have expected,” the latest in the Pulcher line introduced himself. “And I must apologise for the delay. You are all too dear to our hearts to abandon you. But the family business fell into turmoil with my father's death. I was only twenty-four years old at the time and there were some who tried to take advantage of my inexperience. It's only this year that I've been able to find time to meet with you at last.” Septimius offered his right arm, which Sextus took enthusiastically.

“Please, avail yourself of our bath house as your fathers did while I make ready your quarters.” Sextus gestured towards the landward end of the pier, and fell into step beside Septimius as he started walking. The captain of Septimius' ship walked on the other side of the guest of honour.

Pulcher looked around the almost-deserted Town Square. The timber buildings, now sixty-five years old, were showing signs of prolonged disrepair. There was only one cargo ship in port, with rigging and sails in poor condition. There were also three tatty interceptors.

“Tell me, Marcus,” Pulcher asked his captain, “how has this place changed since you were last here?”

The captain rubbed his chin before speaking. He had been only a junior officer on the previous mission, and overwhelmed by the strangeness of the place. “It's starting to look like a deserted town now,” he opined. “Fourteen years ago there were more people in the square, there were a couple of traders tied up at the dock, and the buildings were better maintained.”

Sextus looked embarrassed. “We don't have the materials or the manpower to maintain the city as we would have liked. We have all but exhausted our stores, and have turned all our available hands to growing food and getting other substitutes for the supplies we formerly purchased from your father. Also, we have little need for trading vessels now. The old interceptors now serve us as adequate for the small cargoes we need to move between here and the Barrier Islands.”

Septimius nodded in thought. "Does the Mayan War that I was told about continue to restrict trade? Or are we able to resume our proper traffic?"

Sextus shook his head sorrowfully. "I'm sad to tell you that our trading partner Lamanain has been destroyed. The victorious coalition has slaughtered them all as tools of the Evil Spirits from the Sea, as they call us.

"The remaining Maya will not trade with us. In fact, they hate us with a passion that's almost suicidal, and they will do anything in their power to harm us. We no longer go near them except for some occasional patrols to make sure they haven't learnt ship-building and navigation from the vessels they captured when your father was killed. But no, it seems that even building ships is a taboo for them. It's too closely associated with us Evil Spirits." The party had now reached the bath house.

"Please, Sextus," said Septimius, "Bathe with us and let us talk. I would learn as much about your circumstances as I can. There must be some way of restoring your fortunes, if we only work together."

Sextus nodded agreement. "If you wish. Philon, could you please ensure the rooms are ready?"

Philon spoke softly to one of the followers who hurried away.

The four men went first to the frigidarium for refreshment, the day outside being warm and humid. Septimius, not a natural sailor, relished rinsing the salt out of his hair and washing away what felt like a layer of salt crust over his face.

"Ah, this is excellent, Sextus! How much I have looked forward to this!" He lunged towards the centre of the pool, and swam to the far side and back again. "So tell me. How is the Republic of Terrapulchra? What shape are you in? How many people call this place 'home'? What do you do for a living?"

Sextus paused for a moment to order his thoughts. "We have the Port here, but that's becoming deserted now that there is so little trading. People are moving to a small township inland where the soil is better for farming and grazing.

"We have only the one interceptor base now, at Capri. That also has a town to supply it rather than shipping supplies into it like in the old days. The other interceptor base was abandoned as a naval base a couple of years ago. And Septimia, the biggest of the Barrier Islands, has a town to support the watchposts."

"How many is your total population and how are they distributed?"

Sextus shrugged slightly. "We stopped keeping accurate figures a few years back now that we seem to be stagnating. There would be perhaps fifteen thousand adults and the same number of children, all added up."

Septimius was puzzled by this answer. "I thought you elected your Council on the basis of so many electors per Councillor. How can you do this without an accurate count?"

"The Council elections tend to be a bit less formal these days," explained Sextus. "The various towns and settlements now just return the same number of Councillors each time, without any re-calculation from one election to the next. In fact, the Council itself tends not to meet very often. It just leaves the running of each of the settlements to their own Councillors."

Septimius was daunted by this answer and the sense of decay behind it. Terrapulchra was falling apart. Within another generation it would be no more than a

string of quasi-independent villages with a common ancestry. They were falling back into barbarism. This must not be allowed to happen! His family had invested too much in this venture to let it fail.

“So it would seem that the gold trade is dead forever. What other valuable commodities do you have access to? Do any animals on this side of the ocean produce ivory, or can you grow tea? Anything that would fetch a good price back in the Republic! It's no good trying to produce low-value bulk goods, because the cost of transporting them back wouldn't be worth the effort.”

Sextus shrugged again. How that one gesture of helplessness seemed to summarise the decay that now afflicted this once-vigorous society! “Nothing that we can think of,” he replied. “Don't think that we're ignorant of the resources we have here, but we have nothing that's abundant enough to be a basis of bulk trade, valuable enough to justify transport costs and durable enough to last the time required for harvesting, collection, and shipment.”

Septimius was starting to feel frustrated by this negativity. “Let's go to the tepidarium now,” he suggested.

Sextus nodded and stepped out of the pool, and lead the way into the next chamber. This was a smaller room with a smaller pool. The water was pleasantly warm.

“This is a good bath-house, Sextus. Better than many public baths back in Utica,” Septimius volunteered, trying to lift the mood of the group.

“Thank you, Septimius,” Sextus brightened. “We take care to keep this in good order. It's the social centre of the whole settlement. But we tend to use the calidarium only during the winter or special occasions. This evening most of the town will be here preparing for a feast in your honour.”

“A feast! Thank you, Sextus!”

“We are honoured and pleased that you have come, Septimius. We have plenty of good food and too few opportunities to splash out.”

And a good feast it was, considering. There was plenty of meat, cooked over open fires in the large Town Square. Fish were steamed in pits and many strange fruits available that Septimius had never tasted before. There was also plenty of Terrapulchran wine, but of ordinary quality.

“This fruit is delicious, Sextus!” Septimius said at one time through a full mouth. “You can grow these by the shipload, and we'll sell them in the Republic for a fortune!”

“I don't think so, Septimius. They rot within a few days of being harvested. This land is a wonderful place to live and we all love it with our whole hearts. But its joys cannot be exported.”

Septimius rose late the next morning. A real bed with real sheets, and it stayed still under him! What delight after the constant discomfort of the trip over! He dressed and found Sextus in the Harbourmaster's office.

“Good morning, Septimius!” Sextus greeted him cheerily. “You slept well?”

“The best night since I stepped onto that ship!” Septimius asserted with force.

“That's good,” Sextus continued. “We have a suggestion to make after what you said last night. Perhaps we could sun-dry some of these fruits and then see if they could

be used for adding flavour, as if spices. Sometimes we serve these fruits with fish, and the taste is interesting. So some of our people are fine-slicing a test batch of them now. When they're dry we'll shred them and see if they're worth trading. But for now we have some gold to trade! About a quarter of a talent, the last we managed to get before Lamanain fell. Our priority is steel for tools. How much will you offer us?"

They walked down to the ship. On the basis of trade on previous voyages, the cargo was mostly cloth and rope, but with some steel tools.

On a generous impulse, Septimius said "Take all the steel we have for your gold! And you can have the rest of the cargo too, if you would just re-stock our supplies. Let's start with that delicious meat and fruit! And a live cow for milk, and some grain to feed it. And some laying poultry too, please, for fresh eggs. Let us enjoy the voyage back home, and remember you well."

"Thank you very much, Septimius! You come from a long line of generous men," acknowledged Sextus. "But you make it sound as though we'll be no more than a memory. Won't you return some time in the future?"

"I intend to stay in contact from time to time, certainly. And if I come across anything that might be able to give you a sound trading basis I'll be back here in a flash. But first let's see what your dried fruit tastes like as a seasoning and see if we can think of some other resource you have. Quite often people are so familiar with their surroundings that they don't notice them like a stranger would."

Thus began a guided tour of 'the whole Republic', meaning as much of the Republic as Sextus would disclose to Septimius. This consisted of Port Sertorius and the associated farmland and town in the valley to the east, Capri's interceptor base and its farmland, and the settlement on Septimia. All of these were consciously kept devoid of anything that could tell a visitor anything about the true strength and economy of the Republic. There was no sugar or tabak growing and no materials that were not traceable to Pulcher's trade or native to Terrapulchra. All Septimius saw were people disappointed that the boom days under the Mayan gold trade were ended but happy with their little world regardless. "If and when the gold trade starts up again, that will be good. But in the meantime this life is good enough for us children of slaves!" was the general sentiment.

Back in Port a month later it was confirmed that much of the test batch of fruit would spoil rather than sun-dry and none of those which did manage to dry properly were of any value as condiments. This didn't surprise Sextus, however much he affected disappointment. He knew that this had already been tried before as part of their own trading research. Anything that had any chance of success had been deliberately excluded from these test batches. But the failure had the desired effect. It discouraged Septimius.

The Chairman of the Council had arrived while they were out on tour and was waiting for them at Port. Hermes apologised for not being on hand when Septimius arrived, and also missing him at Septimia, Hermes' home settlement. Their paths must have crossed while both were at sea.

"It has been disappointing in terms of trade," Septimius shrugged as he prepared to leave Port Sertorius for the return trip, "but it has been good to meet you all. If I find

something that might give you a chance of a cash crop I'll be back. But if not, I'll return in another five years or so."

The three Terrapulchran leaders waved him farewell from the dock, quietly confident that this would probably be the last they would see of the Pulcher family until the Republic discovered them. But the display settlements at Port Sertorius, Capri and Septimia would be maintained just in case.

By 883 AUC the total adult population had passed 300,000. The growth rate was slowing as the number of young slaves being purchased and imported declined as a percentage of the total population.

But even so the Council was now satisfied that the population was sufficient to provide for an adequate defence force. Fear of discovery receded. It was now more a case of preferring privacy. They didn't want the Republic to interfere with their own egalitarian and peaceful social system. Nor did they want their trading advantage to be usurped; membership of the Republic would involve opening their ports to traders from all Tribes and most importantly it would expose their source of gold in the Maya lands.

Nevertheless the Council was convinced that preparations to protect their way of life in the event of discovery should be made soon. One aspect of this was to have in place a legal system that could be used to prevent unwanted encroachments by strangers from the East. Several proposals were generated and discussed. Any proposal supported by at least a third of the Council was put to a plebiscite. Those that were supported by the plebiscite were then put as formal amendments to the Basic Law in conjunction with the Council Election in 885 AUC. Those principles which were passed included

1. *The territory of the Republic of Terrapulchra is defined as all land and water west of 75 degrees west of Babylon (ed. Note - approximately mid-Atlantic.)*
2. *All rights to land vest in the Republic of Terrapulchra, and no land may be occupied or otherwise exploited except as authorised by the Council or its delegate.*
3. *All rights to enter or traverse waters within the area claimed by Terrapulchra are subject to conditions or prohibitions decreed by the Council or its delegate.*
4. *All resources within the territory claimed by Terrapulchra, either on land or at sea, are the property of the Republic of Terrapulchra.*

The bulk of this population was now settled in a series of towns along the southern coast of Corsica. The settlements in the Barrier Islands, Port Sertorius and Capri were deliberately capped to ensure that any return by the heirs to the Pulchers would see only what they expected. The original interceptor base on Sardinola had long been abandoned. This had been replaced by a substantial settlement established in the broad, fertile valley inland from Caralis, the replacement naval port on the southern coast.

More significantly the navy was not only being expanded, but it was also being equipped with new and more formidable weapons. Rhine Steel, Terrapulchra's contact in Germania, now had a reliable and effective propeller-driven, steam-powered design for a

North Sea freighter. The Terrapuchran Council decided to order a few of these but with some critical adjustments.

Cras - January 886 AUC (131 A.D.)

The Council was stunned by the news brought back by the latest merchantman full of new slaves. The Republic had fallen! What would be the implications for Terrapulchra and their trade? The Trademaster on this ship had recognised the possibilities. He had made a point of bringing back as much information and as many pamphlets covering the various points view as they could gather. Most importantly, he obtained copies of the new Basic Law, transcripts of the speeches by Kalothos and Senkhmet (the chief proponents of the new Federation) and the commentaries by various eminent jurists. These were all passed on to Polata Merines for her consideration. Merines held the position of Head of Law at the Terrapulchra Museum, as well as being the Chief Judge. She had been asked to study these documents and report back to the Council.

“I wouldn't expect all that much change in our operations, surprisingly,” Merines told the Council. “Of course much will depend on the conventions that will grow up around this new Basic Law, but the general thrust of the changes is rather straightforward.

“The first big difference is that it effectively completes the transition of the Republic Comitia to a genuinely representative body, a process started back in 759 AUC with the Sopatan Reforms but which stalled as soon as the Italian Tribes held the ascendancy. Meanwhile the Senate remains less representative than the Comitia but it's still a huge advance on the old system.

“My guess is that over time the Comitia will come to be seen as holding more legitimate authority than the Senate and will gradually take more power to itself. But this process will probably be gradual, taking generations to complete. Never underestimate the strength of Tradition in the Old World!” she commented with a smile.

“The next big difference is that the new Basic Law devolves a great deal more autonomy to individual Tribes. The new Federation is precisely that. It's a Federation, however much it still thinks of itself as a reformed Republic. The expansion of citizenship that began with Drusus the Great including the Italians and then the recognition of the Provinces as Tribes was at first a unifying force. It gave the territories outside the old Roman Tribes a sense of being part of a united and strong central authority. But over the years as this process was extended, the non-Latin tribes started to resent this concentration of power and felt they were being exploited. What had started as a centralising force had been extended past its equilibrium point, and was now driving separatist sympathies.

“So it would be an exaggeration to describe the Federation as no more than an alliance of sovereign nations, but it shows tendencies of moving in that direction.” Merines looked around the Council table as she allowed this to sink in.

“As a result, Terrapulchra as a sovereign Republic is now much safer. We are much more likely to be accepted and for our territorial claims to be respected than would have been the case under the Republic. But we are in early days yet! There might yet be a backlash, or perhaps this whole decentralising movement might run away out of control. I strongly suggest we keep our heads down and carry on business as usual for at least ten more years while we see if this new Federation is stable or not.” It was clear from her manner that Merines had finished her prepared presentation.

“Thank you for the time you have put into your analysis, Polata, and into your clear and considered briefing here today,” Chloe responded from the Chair. “I will ask for questions now.”

Lukios Pellites raised a hand, and was given the nod. “I have overall responsibility for our trade with the Old World and I'm worried about the effect of even minor changes,” he opened. “Right now we operate a web of over fifty different companies to conceal the true source of our exports. Will there be any new requirements that might invalidate these arrangements? Or even make them more cumbersome, such as registration of trade between different Tribes, or differential taxation of companies nominally registered in different Tribes? The less we have to reveal links between our various companies, the better.”

“An excellent question, Lukios, and one that I've already tried to hunt down! The first thing any sort of Administration does when it gains a new power is to see how it can be used to improve revenue.” Merines looked around the chamber, “Present company excepted of course!” There was a light chuckle.

“But from what I've read so far, it seems that these matters are still being resolved. The various speeches imply that the non-Latin Tribes were focussed mainly on reducing the various ways the Republic was effectively milking them to subsidise the Latin tribes. Cutting these subsidies was economic benefit enough in itself. But in the longer term they might get more aggressive. The Latin Tribes, on the other hand, will find themselves facing serious crises. But they have little power to affect our own export trade which is centred on Africa, Hispania, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Germania. Our import trade is much more flexible, and can be moved from one Tribe to another if conditions become too restrictive.”

Eugenes Samios, whose portfolio responsibility was the Navy, was the next to raise a hand and be given the floor. “Polata, I notice in my reading that the first instinct of Latin Tribes was to maintain the old Republic by force of arms, and they were only induced to accept the Federation because of an implicit threat of even greater armed force in response. After almost two hundred years of peace, with armed forces being used only to control banditry and piracy, this could prompt a resurgence in militarism. Are the various Tribes of the Federation likely to establish and maintain their own armed forces, just to provide themselves with a military option in case they feel badly treated? And if they do, would the Federation be likely to establish an even greater standing army and navy to contain the threat of civil war? What would be the implications for us?”

“That's not really a legal question within my expertise, Eugenes, but my opinion would be that you're right,” Merines agreed. “The most obvious take-way lesson from this is that the side with the bigger army or navy wins the day. But there's also another insight to be gained once the various Tribes take the time to analyse events. That is, that the killer consideration was not armed force per se, but the economic blockade. Even had Italy all the legions and all the fleets, it still would have had trouble feeding itself against Africans and Egyptians prepared to hide their grain inland, or even sabotage so much of it as the Italians might have been able to seize. And even small forces can have a disproportionate effect when used as raiders against an aggressor that has long and exposed supply lines through hostile territory. So I doubt that the more powerful Tribes

will go to the expense and risk of trying to push too far. I therefore expect that we will see armed forces no greater than was the case in the Republic.

“So yes, you are right to think through the implications for us but I wouldn't jump immediately to being anxious. Let's see what develops. But in the meantime I'd be very careful to ensure that any new naval technologies should be carefully watched to ensure that we're not taken by surprise.”

Rheinstadt - April 885 AUC (132 A.D.)

Hermann Cimbrix was a very competent engineer. He knew that. He also knew that everyone else knew it, too. How else could the son of a so-called northern barbarian rise to be the Chief Designer at Rhine Steel's Shipyard Division? Because despite Germania being an autonomous Tribe in its own right for more than fifty years, most of the senior positions in almost every large organisation were still held by Greeks or Italians.

But the requirements for this latest shipbuilding order still presented a challenge to him. Limpopo Investments were good clients. Since they had first made contact more than forty years ago they had become not only one of the larger regular customers but also very reliable payers. Every contract had been honoured and paid for in full. They obviously were going places too, because each year the value of their custom had grown and the variety widened. They seemed to be a market for everything - steel hand tools, crushing mills, process boilers, small railway and locomotive systems typical of latifundia use, and now they were asking for serious railway rolling stock and tens of miles of rails as if they were opening up an entire province. They were a growth market in their own right.

But this last order was perplexing. They wanted what was nominally a fleet of coastal freighters, steel-hulled and propeller-driven, of a type becoming popular for the North Sea trade where coal was plentiful and winds could be unreliable.

But they wanted changes. The boiler must be re-designed so it would operate on olive oil injection, not coal being shovelled into the furnace. They also wanted it to be capable of a cruising speed of fifteen miles per hour. Not a peak speed, but cruising speed sustainable for at least three days! Their peak speed requirement was a numbing twenty miles per hour sustainable for at least an hour! Thankfully, their required hold space was only one-quarter that of the usual model, which would make it possible to fit the super-size boiler into the smallest standard steel hull. This would do a lot to make the required top speed possible.

But it was not quite that simple. They also wanted the bow reinforced to a prodigious degree, 'to survive an impact at full speed'. What possible duty could they have in mind for such a ship? And up to five of them, too! Just one with five times the cargo capacity would be much cheaper. So Cimbrix did what perhaps he should not have done. He asked for more details.

"I can't tell you too much, Hermann," Atticus answered. "There are commercial secrets involved. But imagine a very valuable cargo that spoils quickly, needing to be packed in ice to last the duration of the voyage and therefore needing a fast vessel. Now imagine that fast vessel needing to pass through waters that might have floating hazards."

Cimbrix knew better than to push for more information than he needed. But what he had been told was still not enough. Limpopo Investments wouldn't comment on the well-established rumour that they were one of a network of companies able to access some rather exotic goods, but it seemed they must have found a valuable commodity in the waters of the Far North. Some adventurous types had reported that the water in the mouths of some rivers can freeze into a crust more than a foot thick, and sometimes large sections of this can break free and float on the open ocean. This Limpopo crowd must

have found another monopoly and want to keep it secret. Well, so long as they kept paying gold for their specialist requirements he was happy to simply latch onto that teat!

"I understand," Cimbrix explained. "The craft must be able to withstand the impact of an obstruction. For the sake of making sure the design is strong enough, we will need some idea of how you want us to control the loads created by such an impact.

"If the obstruction is comparatively soft or weak, then that will be no problem. We can design the bow to be very strong, and the obstruction itself will break apart or crush under the load. But if the obstruction is hard and strong, then making the bow strong won't help. It will just make the collision more dangerous."

This puzzled Atticus. "What do you mean? Surely the stronger the bow is, the less it will be damaged."

"That seems obvious, I know, but the truth is a bit more complicated. Let me show you with an example." Cimbrix went to his office cabinet where he kept some fine glassware and wine to entertain his more important clients. He took out a small robust shot-glass, a timber serving-tray and a few nuts.

"Watch this as I crack this nut with this glass." He went onto one knee and carefully placed a nut on the stone sill of the office fire-place. Then he carefully but sharply brought the bottom of the shot-glass down on it. The nut cracked. He handed the shot-glass to Atticus. "Is there any damage to the glass?"

"Not that I can see," replied Atticus.

"Now, look at the bottom of this timber serving-tray. See how flat it is? No dips or marks?" Atticus agreed. Cimbrix then took another nut, put it on the stone fireplace, and slapped at it with the bottom of the tray but not hard enough to crack the nut.

Then he handed the tray to Atticus. "Is there any damage to the bottom of the tray?"

Atticus looked carefully, holding it to the light to check its sheen. "Yes, there's a small pock-mark. Probably caused by the nut."

"But did the nut crack?" Cimbrix pressed.

"No," Atticus answered.

"So if you want to crack a nut without doing any damage to your tools, then glass would be better than wood?" Cimbrix suggested.

"Yes, I suppose so," agreed Atticus. "But steel would be better than either."

"Yes," Agreed Cimbrix, "but for the sake of comparison... now watch this."

Cimbrix dropped the timber plate onto the hearth-stone from shoulder-height. The timber plate clattered to the floor. Cimbrix stooped, picked up the tray, and handed it to Atticus. "Is there any damage?"

"Yes," replied Atticus. "There is a scuff mark where it hit the stone."

Cimbrix returned to the hearth. "But the tray itself is still intact. It can still be used. And now watch this," he said. He wrapped the shot glass in a cloth, and then dropped it onto the same stone. Then he picked up the cloth, carried it to his desk and unfolded the fabric. The glass was shattered.

"So, Atticus, which material is better if it bumps into a nut? And which survives with less damage if it bumps into a stone?"

Atticus didn't know how to respond at first. "But Hermann, it is just commonsense that glass will shatter if it hits something hard!"

“Yes, and so will steel if it hits something hard enough. Therefore we'll need to design it so the force of the impact can be absorbed,” Cimbrix explained. “For example, if the ship is going to hit floating logs, we can design the front of the ship to punch through them. But if it's going to hit a submerged rock, it would be better to make an incline so the ship will tend to slide over the top of it, rather than making a sudden stop. Or if it's going to hit the side of a mountain, then we would design something to bolt onto the front of the ship so it gently folds on itself, rather than transmitting the impact to the main body of the ship. Then afterwards we can just unbolt the bent section and replace it.

“But to be able to make the right design choice we need to know what sort of impact to design for.” Cimbrix spread his hands and smiled.

Atticus stood perplexed. “I'll need to get instructions before I can tell you any more.”

“Please do that, Atticus. We're not just any shipyard that will take your money in exchange for an empty promise. We genuinely want to be sure that we provide you with exactly what you want.”

Atticus returned the next morning, with a seaman at his side.

“I've discussed this with my colleagues, and we think that Marcellus Flavius might be the best to liaise with you on this matter. He was a foreman in another shipyard before he became a ship's captain.”

“I'm pleased to meet you, Marcellus,” Cimbrix offered his right arm with a smile.

“And pleased to meet you, Hermann. We appreciate the care you're taking with this task.” Flavius took Cimbrix' arm.

“As a former shipwright, you understand how a hull reacts to impact. You would have a gut feel for it. But steel hulls, although much stronger in one sense, are also much less flexible. This can make them more vulnerable.” Cimbrix explained.

“Yes, I think I follow your point,” agreed Flavius. “So we have refined our design requirements somewhat. We need a hull that can withstand each of the following events:-

1. *Impact onto a timber pole end-on as a piercing blow. The beam is to be assumed fresh oak, a palm in diameter and ten feet long. This applies only to the front ten feet of the hull.*
2. *Impact by a heavy ballista bolt, applied anywhere over the entire hull.*
3. *Impact by the bows only onto a solid oak tree trunk floating in water. The trunk to be three feet in diameter and eighty feet long.*
4. *Impact onto an oak beam one foot square in section, set horizontally at a height of twenty feet above water level and solidly supported fifty feet either side of the impact point.”*

Cimbrix had been noting these requirements on a sheet of paper at his desk. He read them back to Flavius to ensure he had transcribed them correctly. “It sounds to me like you intend to trade in very dangerous waters. This looks like a vessel designed to run a blockade.”

Atticus frowned. "Please, no speculation about our purposes and please ensure that no-one outside this office is told any more than the bare essentials for this ship to be designed and built."

"Of course, Atticus. My intention is no more than to ensure I understand your requirements. Your satisfaction is very important to us." Cimbrix bowed his head submissively. "Might I suggest that we produce one ship first as a prototype to ensure that we have met your requirements? That will permit any adjustments to be made to the other four."

"Yes, that would be good, Hermann. Thank you."

"Now, as for our costs," Cimbrix slipped into commercial issues, "This is not a simple design-and-build commission. It involves a considerable amount of basic research. No-one has yet designed a commercial oil-fired boiler. We need to build a few scale prototypes to see what fundamental properties are required. Things like fuel nozzle diameter, feed pressure, shape of the nozzle to get best combustion, and a hundred other questions we won't even know we need to ask until we start to get answers from these first questions. This will take time and money."

"Yes, we know it's a major new technology for you," agreed Atticus. "Think of the advantages you will hold over your competitors. These research costs will more than pay for themselves within a few years."

"I am not so sure about that, Atticus," Cimbrix shook his head. "Oil is a much more expensive fuel than coal, so who would want to go that way? This will be a specialist technology with very few applications."

Atticus waved a hand dismissively. "Never mind development costs for the moment. What price for the ships themselves?"

"That also is difficult to estimate," replied Cimbrix. "The speeds you require are much greater than anything presently on the water. More speed is not just a matter of more power or less weight. There are some constraints that are not important at low speeds but become very important at higher speeds. Our experience is that waterline length is important but we're not yet sure of the mathematics involved. It's possible that we might need to build these ships bigger than expected simply to satisfy these geometrical issues that have nothing to do with your specific requirements for cargo space.

"In short, it's not just the boilers and not just the impact resistance and not just the speed requirements. It's finding a solution that overlaps all of these issues in a single design. We're beyond all current practical experience in each of these categories, without even thinking about their interactions."

Atticus again waved a dismissive hand. "This is the sort of thing you do all the time. You call it 'research', and that is how you keep ahead of your competitors. Our part in this is to give you that first hint of an incentive."

Now it was Cimbrix' turn to shrug. "I have no way of even guessing what the costs might be. So let me suggest a slightly different approach. Let's take our present largest ship's boiler, modify it for oil on the basis of some reasonably quick and cheap tests, and put it in the narrowest hull that can carry the weight of the boiler and the armour you're asking for. Whatever speed it can do will be what you get. And make no mistake it will

still be a good performer! Then on the basis of that performance we can talk about a second prototype. At least I can give you a firm price on a ship like that.”

Atticus and Flavius looked at each other. Atticus looked back to Cimbrix. “I think we might need to see you again later, Hermann,” Atticus said at last. “This is a bit more complicated than we expected.”

“Whatever you say, Atticus. I want to deal fairly with you, and not be under pressure to cut corners. Perhaps you might even want to leave Marcellus here while we design and build your prototype, so he can make decisions as they arise.”

Atticus and Flavius discussed these matters with the rest of their delegation and returned two days later.

“Hermann, I think we have a basis for sharing the costs, risks and benefits fairly,” Atticus started once the courtesies had been exchanged. “We will pay the costs of men and materials to develop the design of the oil-fired boilers, in consideration of which Limpopo Investments will own the intellectual property rights on anything developed in that process. Rhine Steel will pay for the research into hull design for speed and robustness, these techniques being readily transferable to other ships in the future.” He gestured towards Flavius. “Marcellus will stay here with you as our part of the design team. We will also leave some of our sailors with you, to be integrated into the construction and maintenance crew you allocate to the project so they will know how to repair and maintain this vessel.”

Cimbrix thought quickly. It would be good to get some contribution towards the costs of the hull design. He had no doubt that the armour required for this class of ship would demand features of limited applicability to general traders. But he didn't want to lose a good customer, and he could make sure that Marcellus came to understand the sacrifices that Rhine Steel was making on this project. And then, there was the payoff at the end. No other shipyard would be able to build these ships so there would be a fat premium on the construction contract on later vessels.

“I think Rhine Steel can accept that, Atticus,” he said at last. “I'll recommend to Solon that he should sign off on that basis.”

In the event the oil-fired boiler became a much larger project than simply modifying a coal-burner. With the reluctant agreement of Flavius a completely new geometry was adopted, with a vertical combustion shaft rather than a flat-bed of coal. The oil was injected as a fine spray from nozzles all around the perimeter of the ring-shaped air inlet at the bottom, with a drip tray beneath. Air entered horizontally and radially through the gap between the bottom of the combustion shaft and the drip-tray, and the convection draft pulled the oil spray up with it once the furnace was in full fire. The water pipes, instead of being set horizontally along a flat-bed furnace, were set in a collection of walls surrounding vertical shafts as a complete water jacket around each individual gas path, allowing the air and the flame full force of the draft. The direction of flow of the water was down these walls, opposite to that of the gas, to extract full heat value from the hot gases.

The benefits from this design were many. The most obvious was that there was virtually no ash, so the furnace never had to be shovelled out to maintain efficient air

flow. Any small soot was carried out the chimney. It was also much smaller than a coal-fired furnace with the same heat output and the rate of fuel feed was much easier to adjust. It also fired up much more quickly than a coal furnace. The development costs were naturally much greater than originally proposed but the improvements were well worth it.

Cimbrix thought long and hard about the hull design and was unwilling to spend the money to build a full-sized ship purely on the basis of untested assumptions and calculations. Rather than building a prototype and hoping, he built a water tank with a travelling frame mounted over it. He used this to drag model hulls through the water. The force needed to push the hull at any given speed was assessed by inserting a spring in the drive train and measuring its extension. From these experiments it was soon learned that hull length was critical.

It was also learned that a narrow hull and a sharp cutwater significantly reduced the force required, compared to the blunt hull design commonly adopted to provide maximum cargo space and good buoyancy. Since speed was more important than cargo space a long, thin hull was preferred. But this presented problems with stability. A broad hull was more stable.

Not to worry! Once again the relative unimportance of cargo space won through. With little need to allow for the weight of cargo and therefore no need to provide higher sides to the hull to generate the additional buoyancy when fully laden, a lower freeboard could be tolerated. To prevent the low freeboard causing the boat to be swamped by waves a sealed deck was adopted. Thus, the preferred hull design became relatively deep-draught, narrow and with little freeboard.

But this created a problem with the bow design. Part of the design brief was to be able to break through a solid beam of timber set twenty feet above water level. This was achieved by building a short forecastle, and bracing it back to the narrow hull.

The heavy forecastle, heavy plating on the bow and the narrow cutwater bow provided little forward buoyancy and made the design nose-heavy. To re-balance the ship the boiler and engine room were moved further towards the stern. This uneven buoyancy distribution, with the ends heavy and the middle buoyant, resulted in considerable stresses in the hull amidships. The answer was to lay the ribs out in a diamond truss pattern rather than the usual vertical orientation.

So the general pattern of the hull design had been decided. Now was the question of scale. The test tank had shown that the maximum feasible speed was largely dependent upon length. Extrapolating the results from the test tank, Cimbrix calculated that a hull length of some 200 to 250 feet might be needed to attain a speed of twenty miles per hour. This length allowed him to estimate the total weight of the ship and from this he could calculate the size of the boiler needed. And from the weight and the boiler capacity he arrived at a price.

Atticus was very disappointed. He took Flavius aside, asking why things had somehow gotten so out-of-hand. After all, the timber-hulled interceptors were only fifty feet long and they could reach speeds close to 20 miles per hour in the right wind conditions!

“But Atticus,” Flavius calmed him, “The interceptors are amazingly light! They don't carry any weight except their own hull weight, not even ballast. They also have cut-

water hull shapes. Bilat guessed this secret sixty years ago and it took the best shipbuilders in the world a whole series of tank tests to discover the same thing! But the interceptors don't have boilers. They can only sail as the wind allows. And they can't ram and sink an enemy. These new ships are going to be a lot heavier and all that weight means a lot more water has to be pushed aside. That takes a lot of force.

"We have our orders from Eugenues, and he has the entire Council behind him. We can't assume that the Federation will be as complacent and pacific as the Republic was. We must allow for at least the possibility of resurgent militarism. If Terrapulchra wants the one weapon that will absolutely ensure its protection, this is about as cheap as it can get."

Atticus knew when he was out of his depth. If Marcellus was convinced that this was the way to go he couldn't argue. But at least he could make sure that the first vessel, the experimental prototype, was as cheap as possible. Then they could see how it performed before making any decisions about the others.

"Very well, Marcellus. But I will approve only a 200-foot version. Let's build that and see how it performs."

Cimbrix accepted the order for the prototype with apparent reluctance and hidden glee. The ship itself would make a handy profit but the techniques that would be developed in this research would be even more valuable. And the experience in actually building and testing the full-scale ship would be beyond price. This suddenly put Rhine Steel twenty years ahead of any other ship-builder in the world.

As was his custom he first laid out the broad bones of the ship on his drawing board and calculated its approximate centre of buoyancy, centre of gravity, and metacentric height. This gave him an approximation of its roll stability. There was no problem there. Then he checked out its pitch stability. Oh, that pitch stability is a bit of a worry! With all the weight and not much buoyancy at the ends, there was little to prevent the ship from becoming very nose-down or nose-up if the cargo was not distributed exactly right. In fact...

Yes, a few hours later he knew the worst. If even as much as a couple of feet of water collected in the bilges this could send the ship to the bottom. He called in on Flavius to explain the problem.

"Here is how the weight and the buoyancy in the ship balance in flat still water, Marcellus. As you see, everything is fine." Flavius nodded his agreement.

"Now, let's add two feet of water in the bilges. That sort of thing is hard to prevent when the seas are breaking over the ship, even with a sealed deck. The water will get in and will need to be pumped out." Marcellus nodded again.

"But that isn't a problem in still water either. It just sets the whole ship a bit lower. But what if a wave lifts the stern? This tilt on the ship will send all that bilge water to the bow. If we assume a pitch of five feet from bow to stern, this will be the bilge water surface. Now look at where the centre of gravity of the ship is!" Cimbrix marked on the drawing the new centre of gravity.

"And of course, the centre of buoyancy will not move if the water surface matches the pitch angle, so the ship will need to pitch a bit more than the angle of the water surface. Of course, that will make the bilge water run even further forward, throwing the

centre of gravity further forward with it. I've done the calculations, and found that the ship will need to pitch another seven feet from bow to stern to remain in static balance, under a water surface slope of five feet." Cimbrix frowned as he paused. "A total ship pitch of twelve feet, arising from a wave height of only five feet!"

Flavius could see exactly where Cimbrix was going. "But a five-foot wave is nothing! Twenty-foot waves are not uncommon out there in the open sea! Does that mean a fifty-foot pitch to achieve equilibrium? The whole ship will be unstable, and go down by the bow!"

"And that's not the worst of it," Cimbrix added. "That's ignoring the dynamic effects. The momentum of that bilge water and the rotation momentum of the ship pitching will naturally drive it past the nominal static equilibrium point. The real event will be much more severe."

Flavius stared at the draft plan in front of him. After a couple of minutes Flavius spoke again. "You're an excellent designer, Hermann. Many would not have seen that problem."

"Seeing problems is only the start," Cimbrix replied. "Solving them is the measure of an engineer." A couple more minutes passed.

"Then the question is, how do we stop the water from running to the bow?" Flavius mused.

Cimbrix stared at him as if stunned. "That's it! We simply stop the water from running along the ship! It's so simple!" In excitement, he grabbed a pen and started putting vertical lines at spaces along the hull. "We will build walls in the bilge so the water stays in much the same place regardless of pitch! That will keep the centre of gravity in the same place, so the ship will only pitch as far as the wave height."

"But that means that we'll need a pump for each basin. One pump won't be able to take water out of the whole bilge," Flavius pointed out.

"Oh, that's not a problem," Cimbrix waved the objection away. "A small opening in each wall will allow water to drain from one compartment to the next as fast as a pump could handle it, but the hole won't be large enough to allow water to pass within the time-span of waves and cause instability. We would probably need those holes anyway, to balance the trim of the ship so a single leak doesn't overload one compartment.

"And while we're at it," Cimbrix continued, "I think we should design the front barrier just behind the reinforced bow as though it is a full-height outer hull, in case the bow section is punctured or split during ramming despite the armour."

"Yes, that would be wise," agreed Flavius. "Actually, Hermann, take all of the walls all the way up to the deck. That way even if the hull is torn wide open in one place the whole ship won't flood. It should still be able to stay afloat even if it sits lower in the water and at a bad angle. That means that the walls should *not* have holes through them. Perhaps we should have short pipes with stop-cocks. The cocks can be opened when required to pump out the ship or to adjust trim, but left closed to ensure one damaged compartment doesn't cause the whole ship to flood." He stared at the sketch. "And we won't be able to use horizontal passageways to move men from one section to another either. We will need ladders or stairs to go up and over these barriers.

"This will add to the weight of the vessel," Cimbrix mused. "But not too much, and it will be more stable than the average ship." And then an idea came to him. "But

perhaps we can include doors anyway, lockable doors with leather seals around them. They can be kept closed except when in immediate use.”

The two men stared at the paper, each tracing through the logic of the idea.

Cimbrix seemed almost dazed by the new design concept. “We have just designed an unsinkable ship, Marcellus! Think about that! An unsinkable ship!”

Atticus was not as impressed as Flavius. Atticus was much more focussed on cost and performance than on elegant naval architecture. But he did agree that the extra weight for the bulkheads would be worth the cost and drop in performance if it made the ship more seaworthy. Flavius for his part required one additional feature not proposed by Cimbrix. He wanted two propellers, each with a rudder, and additional guard fins set slightly outside the swept area of the blades and projecting three feet behind. This was intended to protect the propellers from debris or while reversing. Cimbrix was happy to include this provided the twin propellers could be run off a single boiler/engine combination through a common gearbox. Rather than having to pay for two boilers and engines, Atticus agreed.

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It had taken three years to design and build the prototype. Sea trials had confirmed many of the points already established during land testing. The rate of heat generation by the oil-fired furnace was much more easily controlled than a coal furnace by simply shutting off or opening valves leading to the oil injectors. It also proved much safer than the coal furnaces because of the absence of a cloud of coal dust raised by the stokers. No flash-back could occur as sometimes happened in confined boiler rooms.

The first sea trials were carried out using a hull without the forecastle to save time and money, but with ballast to provide the same weight distribution. It could make the 15 miles per hour target speed at little more than half-power. A second run through the measured distance under full power recorded a speed of nineteen miles per hour; just short of the target. The third run through the distance was under emergency conditions. The intakes for the condensers were closed to reduce drag and the exhaust steam was vented to atmosphere instead of the condensers. Disappointingly, it still fell just a few feet short of the twenty mile-per-hour specification.

But Cimbrix was full of glee that he refused to show. He had deliberately over-specified the boiler to give some margin of error in case of some unknown high-speed effects that his calculations had not included. He quietly praised himself for this foresight. But more solemnly he told Atticus "I told you that the ship would need to be somewhere between 200 and 250 feet to be able to meet those speeds. Here we are, just about on target with a mere 200 feet! If you insist on the full 20 miles per hour, then a slight increase in hull length would be all we need."

"Can't we just put in a bigger boiler and engine?" asked Atticus.

"Look at the trial results, Atticus. Half-capacity is enough for 15 miles per hour, so it isn't the boiler that's limiting speed. It's the simple scale of the ship itself. It simply can't go faster than the velocity of a wave the same length as its hull. It's like pushing the ship uphill! I would dare to say that this same boiler might push a longer ship faster, even though it would be heavier. But I'd still suggest a bigger boiler if you go for the bigger ship, to allow for loss of efficiency over time due to soot and age."

Flavius stepped into the discussion. "I'm happy with this vessel, Atticus. For a first guess into unknown design territory, and considering that we demanded the hull to be kept as short as possible, it is pretty close to spot-on. Remember, your instruction was 'Let's build the 200 foot version and see how it performs.' In saying 'we'll see how it performs' you implicitly relaxed the speed requirements." He turned to the German. "You've done a marvellous job, Hermann. The top speed has been limited by our decisions imposed on your design, and not through any failure by you."

Then turning to Atticus, "I suggest we finish the fit-out of this vessel and take delivery. We should let the owners decide what to do next. This is as close to our specification as makes no real difference."

Atticus was trained in accountancy, management and law. His instinct was to require complete satisfaction of the specification as if it were a normal business contract. But he recognised that the shortfall was negligible and could be argued to be the result of him not permitting the design team a free hand. 'If Marcellus is happy, then I will be too', he thought to himself.

Then Atticus turned to Cimbrix, "I'll accept what Marcellus says. I see every possibility that we won't require any further development, just minor fit-out changes before we place orders for the other units. But the blowout in costs means we'll be restricting our initial purchase to only two vessels for the moment.

"Please take care that those plans don't fall into any other hands. We are good customers, we pay on time and we've paid you well for much of the research that went into this ship. We're happy for you to use this knowledge when designing and building for your other clients and we'll continue to pay you well for what you supply to us. But we demand secrecy. If we find that anyone else has discovered the secrets of this particular ship we'll be very unhappy. And we're powerful enough to make sure you would be very unhappy, too."

Cimbrix spread his hands to protest his innocence. "I have always dealt fairly with you and always will. If you have any qualms, then take the plans with you!"

"There'll be no need for that," replied Atticus, "so long as we understand each other perfectly. Now, we have another task for you. We require you to provide some spare parts for the items most likely to need replacement. Things like two spare propellers, valves for the fuel lines, a spare gearbox, etc. We also want you to complete the training of our men in the operation and maintenance of the ship. They've been beside your men right through the design and construction, so they have a good grasp already by observation. But now is the time to fill in any gaps in their understanding. Please complete their education while the ship is being completed and fitted out."

Cimbrix nodded. "Yes, I'll supply the parts. I'll make up a list tomorrow for you to look through. And I can divert some of my best tradesmen to teach yours on a full-time basis. Is there anything else?"

Atticus smiled his appreciation. "Not at the moment. We'll see how things go."

The trainees had been instructed from the very beginning to not only learn the skills, but also to engage their tutors in idle conversation and learn about their families and other circumstances. They reported back to Atticus about each of the three chief mentors. Borix was a graduate from the German Museum and specialised in the boiler design, Tullo was another Museum graduate who concentrated on the engine and condensers, and Marcus was an older man who had a genius for gearboxes and general mechanics.

Six months later as the fit-out of the ship was nearing completion Atticus paid Cimbrax a courtesy call. "Hermann, my lads speak highly of the tutors you have provided."

"Why, thank you, Atticus. I always try to do the best I can for you."

"In fact, they're so good that I'd like to employ at least one of them myself. But I won't betray you by seducing them away without your permission."

Cimbrix looked pained. "It hurts a business such as mine to train these specialists, only to have a competitor offer them a better deal. I'm reluctant to let go of any of them. But they're free men, not slaves. There's nothing I can do to stop them if they wish to leave me."

“As I said, Hermann, I wouldn't seduce them away without your permission. I'm prepared to pay you a year's worth of their salary as a lump sum to gain your permission.”

That made Cimbrix pay closer attention. “But what if they leave you after a short time? Would you want your money back?”

“Not a denarius, Hermann. If we can't hold them that will be our problem. Our only request to you is that if they leave us you pledge never to employ them again. They can go to some other employer if they wish but not back with you unless we agree to it.”

“Well, as I said,” Cimbrix replied, “there's nothing I can do to stop them going but I'll certainly agree not to have them back if you're prepared to pay me for their lost skills.”

“Thank you, Hermann. I'll speak with them now.”

Atticus motioned for the man in the hallway to enter the outer office and sit. “Tullo, the lads speak highly of you and appreciate your work with them.”

“Thank you, lord Atticus; they're bright and quick to learn.”

“They tell me also that your father died a couple of years ago, and your mother is being cared for by your older brother.”

“Yes, that's true, my lord.” Tullo was starting to wonder where this conversation would lead.

“And you have a wife and two small children. And you care for your wife's mother.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“So it would not be impossible for you to leave this place and move to another city. Somewhere a long way away?”

So that was it! He wants me to leave Rhine Steel, and work for him! “Not impossible, my lord, but I have friends. My wife has family here. And Rhine is a good employer. I owe them my loyalty.”

“Spoken like an honourable man! I would have been disappointed otherwise!” Atticus leant forward. “We at Limpopo also deal honourably, and it would not be honourable for us to seduce Rhine Steel's skilled men. So I have already discussed this with lord Cimbrix.

“Should you decide to come with us we will compensate Rhine Steel for their loss. We are also willing to take on any relatives who might care to move with you. If they're capable of working we'll find good jobs for them. If they can't work then we'll provide for them, including medical care equal to the best Babylon can offer. Do you want to hear more or are you happy to stay here at Rhine Steel? I know lord Cimbrix will be happy whichever way you go.”

“So you're asking me to move myself and my family to Babylon?”

“I didn't say that, Tullo. Only that we provide medical care equal to that in Babylon.”

“Then where?”

“I can't tell you that. I can only tell you that it's a very pleasant place to live. There's almost no crime, the weather is comfortable, the town facilities are excellent and

we are more like a large family than a common township. We are asking you and your family to join us.”

“How much will I be paid?”

“The same as me,” replied Atticus, amused that the reaction from Tullo was exactly what he expected. “As I said, we are more a family than a township. We all get free clothing, free food, free laundry, free use of the bathhouses, free theatre. All our basic living is free! And we all get the same extra allowance for luxuries, every man and woman over the age of age thirty, with a graduated rate between fifteen and thirty. And an allowance to parents for each child.”

“That surprises me, lord Atticus,” Tullo stammered out.

“We don’t think it surprising. Each man and woman deserves the same respect as the next. We have different jobs and different responsibilities, but our reward for doing well is to be acknowledged with the same respect whatever our role. And by-the-way, have you ever heard the lads refer to me as 'lord Atticus'? We don’t use titles like that!”

Tullo was still a bit stunned.

“I need to think about this if I may, my lord,” Tullo said hesitantly. “Perhaps if I agreed to go for a year and if I like it I could then bring my family and mother-in-law over?”

“You may certainly think about it, Tullo. You may even talk about it with your wife and anyone else for that matter. But there is one absolute condition. If you accept you will be committed for life. No-one leaves us without permission. But as you can see, all of the lads are happy to stay with us. No-one has tried to escape while we are here in Germania. And I think you'll agree that no-body seems unhappy about it.

“Now in case you have any other questions I've asked the lads to be here to answer them.” Atticus stood, crossed to the door to his inner office and opened it. The ten trainees filed into the room, all smiling and in good spirits.

Tullo set his eyes on Phillip, one of his favourites.

“Phillip, what is life like when you are at home?”

Phillip didn't expect so broad a question. He looked to Atticus first. “Atticus, please stop me if I start to tell too much. But I want Tullo to know as much as he's allowed.” Then back to Tullo, “Well, I'm not allowed to tell you everything because our home is a secret place. A typical day would start by getting dressed and going into the town centre for a morning meal. That is usually a soup with bread and some fruit or vegetables, sometimes eggs and some meat. I take a bag as I leave the meal hall, with more bread and fruit for midday.

“Then I go to work. I work on ...” Atticus gave a warning cough. Phillip paused. “I work as a crew member on a special type of sailing boat. Previously I had worked on a cargo ship. Work ends about four hours after midday. Then we might go swimming, because the water is quite warm, or we play games on the beaches, or anything else we want to do. As sunset approaches, we go back into town.

“Most of us go to the bathhouse but the weather is usually so warm that we only go to the first chamber with cold water unless we're particularly dirty. Then to our meal. This is usually a choice of beef, pork, lamb, poultry or fish, depending on what's available at the time. If you're late you might find the choice more limited, depending on what everyone else has taken. Oh, and lots of vegetables. But even if I'm late and don't

get my first choice, at least I can eat my fill. Then maybe there might be something on at the theatre. Then back home to bed.”

“Oh,” added Phillip as an afterthought, “We're allowed one day free in every five on a roster system, unless there's an emergency. But mostly we just turn up at work anyway. We enjoy our work and each other's company.”

Tullo looked along the faces. “Jason, how much do you get paid?”

Jason started slightly, and looked around. “Back home, we get everything we need for free, and everyone gets an extra cash payment for luxuries like wine, or to spend on the girls. I'm twenty-four, so my allowance is twenty-four denarii a month. It goes up with your age until thirty. But over here where we have to pay for our food we get paid enough to eat and live well, depending on local costs. Here in Germania Atticus pays for our housing and we get two and a half denarii a day for everything else.”

Tullo's eyes stopped at another. “Marcus, you're married. Tell me how your wife spends her days.”

Marcus thought for a moment. “When we first married, it was much the same as before. We both had our work, and were provided with our own private quarters – oh, the rent is free, Philip didn't mention that. When Junia was getting close to her delivery date, she was given lighter duties and more time to rest. She spent the first few months after childbirth either at home or with her friends, or with some older women who helped her learn about being a good mother. As the baby grew Junia was asked to do a few hours a day in the kitchens preparing meals, with the baby sometimes on her back and sometimes playing with the children of the other women nearby. Over time she eased back into almost full-time work and little Junia spent more and more time with other children as she got older. Eventually this blended into school.”

“Your wife has to work?” Tullo was surprised.

“Of course she does! Everyone works, we feel useless if we don't. Our work is something we take pride in. Even the old folk are given light duties if they are healthy enough, even if it's only a couple of hours a day. It keeps them in touch with other people. But our is sick or injured are cared for and fed until they are well. And if anyone is crippled or too old to do their usual job, we find another job that they can manage. Everyone works, as much as they can but no more than they can manage. We enjoy it.”

“And your daughter goes to a school?”

“Yes. All our children go to school from the age of about four through to at least fourteen. Brighter students go further and learn more difficult things, others are found jobs to do to suit their abilities. It costs us parents nothing. The Council wants the brightest minds in the most important jobs, regardless of who their parents are and whether they are male or female. Little Junia is twelve years old now and she's doing well. She'll probably become a teacher herself one day. We have three other children, and they're doing well too.”

Tullo looked to Atticus. “My wife has no skills, no education. She wouldn't be able to work.”

“If you join us, Tullo, her first job will be to get a free education,” Atticus answered, “as much as she can take. And when she has learnt enough, she will be given a job that suits her skills. But I'm sure she would be able to be of use straight away if she wanted to. Perhaps working in the kitchens or caring for the children of the working

women or helping our older folk. As she learns more she will be given more complex work, and more satisfying as she develops the skills. You'll be surprised how much women can learn if they're educated. We find that they're the equal of men and sometimes better if they get the chance to show it."

Tullo nodded as though to himself. "The big sticking point is when you say 'no-one leaves without permission'. What if I *were* to leave without permission?"

"There are two answers to that," answered Atticus. "The first answer is that you wouldn't be able to even if you tried.

"The second answer is that those who try are executed. But in the last forty years no-one has tried. Any of us here today could have walked out into the town and disappeared into the crowd. Anyone on any of our trading trips over the last forty years could have done that. But no-one has, for forty years. Join us and you will not regret it, you or your children."

Tullo sat for a moment. "I'll speak to my wife. Is there anything else I should know?"

"Yes. We are making the same offer to Marcus and Borix, the other tutors. All three of you are the sort we want. So feel free to talk it over with them, too."

The fit-out was complete a couple of days later. The three tutors asked to meet Atticus to discuss the job offers. Borix spoke first.

"We've thought about your offer, lord Atticus, and we're intrigued. But it's hard to commit to something purely on assurances. We have no doubt that you're an honest man, but simply because you think it's the best thing in the world doesn't mean that we would enjoy it too." Borix shuffled a bit.

"I have no family so we've agreed that I might accept your offer. Next time you visit the shipyards I could discuss it further with the other two. Is this acceptable?"

Atticus thought for a moment. "Not really. First, I can't guarantee that you will be permitted to return here. Secondly, even if you do how will your friends know that you're not acting the part out of fear?"

Borix thought for a moment longer. "If I'm not permitted to return, would I be permitted to write?"

Atticus considered this, then nodded. "Yes I would be happy to pass a message from you to your friends. But I'll need to read it first in case it discloses something that we need to keep secret. Perhaps I'll need to suggest a few deletions if you say more than you should. And you might like to include a few code words so these men know it's truly from you." Atticus smiled. "And if you find you don't like the new life, feel free to say that too. We want only willing recruits."

Borix stood his full height as he committed himself to the unknown. "Then I'll go with you, if I may. How much of my personal property may I take?"

Atticus smiled again. "As much as you want to. But I should warn you that shows of personal wealth are considered poor taste. Things of personal significance and simple elegance are much preferred."

"Thank you," Borix responded. "I'll go now to tell lord Cimbrix that I'm leaving Rhine Steel, and then arrange for my things to be put on board."

The ship sailed the next evening, heading north from the Rhine mouths with sufficient oil in its tanks for a journey of a thousand miles at economy cruise speed of ten miles per hour. It met a Terrapulchran cargo ship in the North Sea the next day and took on enough oil to cruise for another eight thousand miles. Thirty days later, after sailing north around Britannia to ensure absolute secrecy, it docked in its base in Caralis, the main interceptor base just south-east of the old Sardinola base. It created several 'firsts'. The first oil-fired steam-driven ship, the first crossing of the Ocean entirely under mechanical power, the first steam-driven warship and the first steel-hulled warship in history. It was named 'Septimius' in honour of the first of the Pulchers. Such an irony that its existence must be kept hidden from the Pulcher family!

Meanwhile back in Germania Cimbric was confident that he now knew what Limpopo Investments was doing. An oil-fired furnace, disappearing to the north (and he knew from his contacts that the ship had not turned back to pass through the Channel) and the need to be able to cut through floating obstructions could only mean that they had found a northern passage to China. Sail power was too dangerous in icy conditions, with the weight of ice build-up on the yardarms and sails sometimes making ships roll over. So they needed ships that could use whale oil for fuel and would be able to force their way through ice floes. This talk among Borix and the others about a secret base cut off from civilisation further confirmed that they were operating out of a private port somewhere in the far north. He snorted at the idea of 'pleasant weather', but if Limpopo Investments decide to stretch the truth a little then it was not his role to act as critic. And a year's salary for the recruits was a nice bonus! But he was wise enough to keep his thoughts to himself.

Cras - November 888 AUC (135 A.D.)

Paleos was pleased with the growth of the Museum that he had founded and nurtured. There were now schools of Agriculture, Management and Law and as well as the original two schools of Alchemy and Medicine. Ashballar the Farmer, as he liked to call himself, had been critical in increasing the yields of the crops. In conjunction with Reuben they had isolated and developed treatments for all sorts of animal and plant fungal infections totally unknown to Babylon. His research into the strange new crops in this new world had paid big dividends. Together with Titos he had investigated the effect of soil chemistry on crop yields. The links between acidity and alkalinity, moisture and drainage, fertiliser (for that read 'cow dung') and a host of other variables had been completed and optimum practice established for all of their main crops. Further work was well under way for another dozen different crops discovered more recently.

Ah, such a life! Being confronted by Lukios all those years ago had been the best thing that could have happened to him! But here he was, playing the part of Engineer as much as Alchemist. Perhaps he should add a School of Engineering to the Museum. But then, perhaps he had not done that yet because he enjoyed filling that role himself. But he was getting old now. At sixty-five years of age, he really should start thinking about succession planning.

The problem was simple, really. The Council had endorsed a plan to commission a few steam-powered vessels for the navy. Steam power requires fuel, and he had already shown that the mineral oil refineries he had built could provide huge amounts of liquid fuel that was convenient and safe for cooking so presumably equally safe to heat a boiler. But they didn't want the ship builder to know about this new fuel.

So the decision had been made. The shipbuilder would be instructed to design the ship's boiler to run on olive oil, a very expensive option. It was the task of the Museum to provide a mineral oil that would be an effective and cheap alternative fuel.

The design for the boiler had been brought back to Terrapulchra years ago while the prototype ship was still just a pile of drawings. The Museum had built a copy of the burners and flue for this new design of boiler to mimic as closely as possible its behaviour. The water piping had been omitted for reasons of cost and simplicity.

Paleos had a simple task. He needed to determine how to fire this boiler with mineral oil instead of olive oil. What grade of oil would be best and what nozzle size and pressure would be required? He had worked on this question for months. He thought he had the answer after a series of educated trial-and-error tests. He had fitted different-sized injector nozzles into the copy of the furnace and installed another of his own inventions into the fuel supply line. This was a centrifugal pump which provided a perfectly constant fuel delivery pressure. This had proved very effective in preventing surging and flame instability that seemed an inevitable consequence of the peaks and pauses in the operation of piston pumps.

Everything he had changed or invented worked on the free-standing copy of the furnace so it should work on the original. But even so, a range of sizes for the fuel injector nozzles had been made just in case fine-tuning might be required.

He hoped he had made the right decisions in this process. He had found that the lighter fractions of mineral oil tended to be too dangerous as a fire hazard. He had

resolved only to use those fractions heavier than were suitable for his oil-burning stove. But if he chose too heavy a distillate, the higher viscosity required much higher pressures to form a fine spray and the droplets were too difficult to burn in a cold start-up. This problem had been confronted in the olive-oil design by Rhine Steel, of course, and overcome by using a fire on the drip tray. Reluctantly Paleos decided to use a similar concept but much more manageable. He had added a small pilot flame fuelled by his light stove fuel. But even so, he had not chosen the heaviest possible fraction because of this tendency for it to not form a fine enough mist for efficient burning. Two steps heavier than stove fuel would not explode into flame if a flaming cloth were thrown onto an open basin full of it, so it was as safe as could be hoped for. But it still sprayed from the nozzles well enough for good combustion.

Now the prototype ship was anchored in the old Sardinola base where a disaster would not cause too much damage. The fuel tanks had been emptied and flushed to remove the olive oil residue and a small amount of the mineral oil fuel had been added. The starter fuel was now added to the small reservoir and the pressure pumped into the vessel.

“Are we all ready?” Paleos shouted.

“First main fuel ready,” one of the stokers called back.

“Second main fuel ready,” a second stoker called.

“Third main fuel ready,” the third stoker responded.

“Pilot light ready,” the lead stoker called.

“Electricals ready,” called a technician in the adjacent room.

“Ventilator fans operating,” came the last check.

Of course the ventilation fans were already running! It would have been difficult to work down here without them. They would also provide the positive draft to ensure the safe confinement of the flame to the flue. But it was important that this item should stay on the checklist rather than being assumed.

“Check all fuel feed valves are closed,” Paleos ordered.

“First main fuel valve closed,” the first stoker responded, followed in succession by his colleagues.

So let’s get started,” Paleos called to his team. “Electrical, turn on the boiler pumps!”

There was a moment's delay and then “boiler pumps operating.” It was important that the heat from the furnace be removed by the water circulating evenly, and not left to the whims of convection. Otherwise a hot spot could develop and a water pipe might explode. Best to make sure the coolant was circulating before adding heat, rather than finding out too late that there was a problem.

“Good! Start first fuel delivery pump,” he ordered.

He heard the whine, and then the report. “First fuel delivery pump operating.”

The other two pumps were started in succession and progress reported.

“Start pilot flame,” Paleos ordered.

The lead stoker gave a couple more pumps on the pressure vessel holding the starter fuel. Then he held a small torch in a heavily-gloved hand under the pilot nozzle and opened a valve. A blue tongue of flame sprang forth. “Pilot flame ignited,” he

announced and then as the tongue of fire turned upwards into the throat of the furnace he added “flame confined to flue.” Then he went back to stand by the starter flame pump.

“Stand by, fuel pumps and valves,” Paleos called.

The three stokers on the main fuel lines called back in turn that their pumps were on line. Each was on a separate line to ensure adequate pressure for proper atomisation of the spray under low load, but they all could all fitted in parallel into a single fuel manifold. This allowed full fuel delivery to be delivered even if one pump failed. Stopcocks allowed a faulty fuel pump to be removed if required without affecting the performance of the furnace.

“First main fuel valve, open to quarter flow,” Paleos found himself anxious. This had worked more than a dozen times in the research setup. Why would he be having doubts now? The first stoker turned a valve to the first stop. “One quarter flow,” he declared.

It took a moment for the fuel to pass down the pipes, and Paleos grew more anxious. Then there was a spray as every third jet around the throat of the furnace started a feeble spray, little more than a drip, into the shaft.

It was known from trials that the fuel would not spray in a fine mist at quarter-flow. The pressure was not high enough. But quarter flow was a necessary first step to ensure that the lines were operating properly, and to avoid the risk of uncontrolled pulsing caused by any entrapped air bubbles. But even so, the droplets were small enough to burn. After a moment the spray from one nozzle became an orange flame and ignited the others.

“Second main fuel valve, one quarter flow,” Paleos called, and the second stoker responded. Soon the number of orange flames in the furnace doubled.

“Third main fuel valve, quarter flow,” Paleos called again. The stoker responded, and soon the whole injector ring was burning and stable. Paleos waited a moment longer to ensure that the flow of fuel was steady and then called again.

“Close pilot flame fuel valve.”

“Pilot flame fuel valve closed,” the lead stoker called back. Then, looking into the throat of the flue, he reported “Furnace flame confined and stable.” His face cracked into a huge grin. “Well done, Titos! You are a genius!” There were whistles of appreciation from the other eight men running this start-up.

“Maintain focus, lads!” Paleos called back at them. “Things might yet get ugly if we don't watch out.”

Then Paleos removed the cover from a speaking tube and whistled into it. He heard a voice in response. “Admiral, your furnace is now fully functional. I hand the ship over to you.”

The sea trials of the Septimius with the new fuel took more than a month, starting with a few low-load runs and close inspection for unexpected damage from hot spots. It then worked right up to full 'emergency power' runs. Admiral Barettes was surprised that this new fuel, so much lighter and more effective in stoves than olive oil could ever be, had not given the ship a bit more top speed. Flavius had to explain to him that it was the steam pressure in the boiler that determined engine power and the nozzles had been reduced in size so as to ensure that they were creating no more heat than the system than

could handle. But one outcome was clear. This mineral oil fuel was much more efficient per pound than olive oil, easier to start up and left much less soot on the pipes. And at all but the top speed it burnt with almost no smoke. This would provide a considerable tactical advantage in a battle. Baretas was well pleased.

Atticus was back at Rhine Steel the next year. He called upon Cimbrix and seemed pleasant in his demeanour. But Cimbrix could tell that there was something troubling his client as he greeted him and opened a flask of his finest eiswein, pouring two goblets full.

“Yes, I am afraid there is a problem, Hermann,” Atticus confessed. “I’ve been instructed to speak to your superiors. Not just the head of Shipyard Division, but the very top men in the company. Could you please arrange for me to speak with the owners of Rhine Steel?”

“Atticus, my friend! Is there some way in which I’ve disappointed you? Please, let me make good on any shortcomings that might have accidentally occurred!”

Atticus shook his head sadly. “That’s not within my instructions, Hermann. Be assured that we do not hold you at fault in any way. In fact, we appreciate your honesty no less than your competence. But it’s a matter that can only be resolved at the very top.”

“Then let me show you how I am eager to satisfy you!” Cimbrix stood abruptly, putting his eiswein on the table between them. “Let’s both go immediately to the Manager of Shipbuilding, and ask for a meeting as soon as possible.”

“I appreciate your eagerness to please, Hermann,” Atticus smiled weakly. “And yes, you are right. The sooner this is done the happier I will be.” Atticus stood and placed his wine glass on the table. Cimbrix lead the way to his office door and straight to his Manager’s office at the head of the corridor.

When a leading client requests a meeting with the company’s principals a wise manager acts without hesitation. Solon was as wise as his name suggested. Atticus made the point that he required so many of the principals to be present as would be needed to bind the company on the most important of all possible decisions, so Solon sent a rider to each part-owner with the simple message. “A Most Important Customer very politely demands a meeting as soon as possible. Latest possible date is the end of September. Arrive sooner if possible.”

The owners responded. Five of the six were in attendance a week before the deadline. The sixth was ill but sent a proxy for his vote to be exercised by his uncle, one of the other owners. When they were available Atticus also asked Cimbrix and Solon to be invited. The eight of them met that evening.

“Thank you for your promptness in permitting me to address you gentlemen,” opened Atticus. “It is typical of the excellent service your company has provided to Limpopo Investments for many years now and I am very appreciative.

“The reason for this meeting is a series of events that started some four years ago. We approached Hermann with a specification for a ship. It was a most ambitious task, requiring skills and techniques well beyond the state of the industry at the time. Needless to say, Hermann delivered superbly. Also needless to say he made sure Rhine Steel profited superbly, but we have no problem with paying top price if we get top quality.

“Because this was not an inexpensive exercise. It required a substantial sum of money to be spent on research and development, much of which was paid for by Limpopo Investments. As a result of this, Rhine Steel’s Shipyard Division is at least ten years ahead of any of its competitors in certain techniques and design concepts.

Atticus smiled disarmingly. “All these things I say to my own hurt. When a man wants to buy something he should always point out the faults in the goods and explain how they are not really what he is looking for. But here am I, praising to the sky the very thing that I would want to buy from you!”

A ripple of relief ran around the room. Everyone had expected a very serious complaint and a demand for compensation!

“We at Limpopo Investments want to be sure that control of this technological wealth, gained at considerable cost, is not lost to us. We don't want to see these technological secrets become public knowledge, to our loss as well as yours. And moreover, we have requirements for ships yet more sophisticated again, requiring equally significant further advances in design and construction. These will lead to yet another leap forward, to your competitive advantage.

“To your competitive advantage, that is, if you are part of it. We at Limpopo Investments would like you to be part of this exciting leap forward in ship-building but for our own reasons we must also be confident that we are in control of the process and the outcomes. For that reason we are prepared to make an offer to buy the Shipbuilding Division, to be paid in full on transfer. This will include all assets, all personnel, all current orders, the whole lot as a going concern. Your gain will not be in shipbuilding as such, but as suppliers to the greatest shipbuilders in the world. We can afford the research and development costs to make this happen and we would like to take Rhine Steel with us as a valued partner.

“If you are unwilling to sell to us then we will have no choice but to buy one of your competitors instead and use them to develop our plans. Needless to say, this will include us making use of all the knowledge we have gained thus far while locking you out of the new research programmes. So instead of you being ten years ahead of your competition you will soon find yourselves ten years behind.

“And of course, we will compete actively against you in every way possible because you would be the only other company that knows at least some of our secrets. We will do everything we can to squeeze you out of the market. We will undercut your prices, we will seduce away your best designers and builders and of course we will produce better ships.

“Naturally, I personally would hate to be driven to that option. We have been commercial allies for so long now that we bear a genuine affection for you. So I would urge you to think carefully and take the handsome profit we are offering you by selling the Shipbuilding Division in its entirety.

“The details of our offer are in this folder for you to consider. If you have any questions or wish to make a counter-offer, please let me know within five days.” Solon placed six folders on the table.

“If you have any questions I can answer now, please ask. Otherwise I will leave you with Solon and Hermann to question your staff and discuss the details of our offer.” Atticus smiled again, and sat.

No-one made a move to reach for a folder. No-one seemed to want to speak. Eventually, a small, sharp-eyed older man cleared his throat. “We thank Limpopo Investments for your good custom over many years, lord Atticus. We will certainly consider your offer most carefully.”

Atticus nodded an acknowledgement, and took this as an invitation to leave. “Then I will await your further attention.” He turned and left.

The old man who had spoken to Atticus was Marcus Julius, the recognised leader among the six owners. He held a 25% share in his own right and was invariably supported by his son-in-law Caius Atius who held another 12.5%.

“Gentlemen, I have no idea what those folders might contain, But I must insist that they do not leave this room. Strabo,” he called to the company secretary, who had entered as Atticus left, “Have armed security stationed in the corridor outside and half-a-dozen men in here as well at all times. And make sure they're all illiterate!”

Strabo slipped out quietly to organise security.

Gnaeus Cornelius, another wizened head, spoke next. “That was the most polite threat I have ever heard. And I have this terrible dread that the more polite the threat, the more capable is the speaker to make good on it. Only the weak or desperate seem to shout.”

Julius wanted facts. “Hermann, you've dealt with these people at close quarters. Tell us about them.”

Cimbrix paused for a moment. “They've been dealing with us for over forty years now. I understand that they started by ordering hand tools and basic hardware, but soon they were ordering crushing mills and boilers from Heavy Division. It seemed from their orders that they were opening up large sugar plantations, but they were very secretive about where. They would always take delivery of our larger pieces of equipment in sections, to transport in their own ships and assemble on-site themselves rather than have us deliver and erect on site. More recently they have been ordering a considerable amount of railway rails and some rolling stock suitable for long-distance rail transport. And they always paid in gold or African Negotiable Notes, paying in full on delivery. Never short and never late.

“Four years ago they placed an order for a steel-hulled ship with some very strange features. It had to have an oil-fired boiler, a top speed of twenty miles per hour and be capable of ramming through obstructions. They tried to confuse the precise use it would be put to but I am reasonably convinced that they are operating a secret route to China via the Northern Seas, fuelled by whale oil and transiting sea lanes choked with ice. I don't know exactly what they carry, but it seems that its very valuable and spoils rapidly. Possibly it's some extract from whales or other animals that might go rancid if it is not processed quickly enough, judging by their emphasis on high speed.”

“So they have plenty of money?” Atius prompted.

“Yes. It seems from their dealings with me that they don't like to waste their money, but they have plenty. They seemed to be prepared to spend whatever was needed to get the ship they wanted.”

Marius Pelliis was next to ask a question of Cimbrix. He held the quarter-share from his grandfather, and had added four and one-sixth percent to it by buying out one of the other minor heirs. “Where are they based? Limpopo Investments sounds like a

southern African get-rich-quick outfit, but is this true?" Cimbrix did not dare shrug when answering the owners and certainly not the largest single shareholder. He dipped his head and admitted "I don't know. When they tried to take some of my staff to work for them they told them about a 'pleasant climate', and much of their equipment seems to imply they are diversifying into sugar and vegetable oils. So that would point towards the Limpopo as genuine, or maybe Tamilia or the Spice Islands, but I just don't know. But Atticus prefers to speak Latin rather than Greek. Both Tamilia and the Limpopo are Greek-speaking so that throws me into some doubt."

Titus Sempronius, holding only four and one-sixth per cent of the business, rarely attended company meetings and spoke even more rarely. He surprised everyone by blurting out "Who cares where they come from? So long as their money is good, let's see what they have to offer."

"Yes, quite right, Titus," Julius agreed quickly. "Let's see what the offer contains. Solon, Cimbrix, thank you for your help this evening. You may go now."

The five owners were left alone in the meeting room. The folders were passed around and opened. From time to time there was an intake of breath as the depth of Atticus' knowledge of their company became apparent.

"Who told them all this?" asked Pellius indignantly. "They seem to know most of our assets and their value, as well as a pretty good estimate of the profit the Shipbuilding Division makes for us! I think Cimbrix has a lot to answer for!"

"Perhaps, but before you blame Cimbrix for blabbing you should be sure you have the right suspect," Atius answered. "They could have simply bribed one of our accounts staff to get the information for them."

"It doesn't matter where he got the information," Julius broke in wearily. "The point is that he has it. The question is how do we respond?"

There was a period of more turning of pages. Cornelius spoke as he perceived Julius and Pellius had finished. The minor shareholders didn't interest him. "It is a fairly simple offer, really. Most of this paperwork is put in there just to show that there's no point in us trying to bluff.

"His offer is a 50% loading on the total book value of the assets he's asking to be transferred over. When seen against income it represents ten times the annual profit. So if we took his offer and invested it somewhere else that earns us ten percent, we would be getting about the same as the shipyard currently earns.

"Plus, there's an undertaking to give preference to Rhine Steel for all supplies, provided we match price and quality delivered to the shipyard. So it won't hurt our remaining business. It might even help, if he's serious about his research and expansion plans.

"Do you think he will honour that undertaking?" asked Atius.

"No reason why he wouldn't. They have always honoured all their other undertakings to us. I think they'd prefer to stay on good terms," Julius responded.

"But what you are missing is more important than what you are reading," Julius went on. "Limpopo Investments is currently just over six per cent of our total income for Rhine Steel as a whole. If we refuse this offer, then straight away we lose that income and we will only claw back a portion of that – say two per cent – by reducing staff and overheads. That's a four per cent net dip in our income. That four per cent net dip in

total income is about the same as our net profit from the Shipbuilding Division as a stand-alone enterprise. In other words, if we take his offer we can re-invest elsewhere and we'll continue to earn the same profit. But if we refuse and he takes his business elsewhere, then that's equivalent to us making no profit on shipbuilding. And if he gets aggressive about being competitive, he will force us to close down our shipbuilding altogether and we'll get nothing for those assets. The choice he is offering is a reasonably generous business as usual, compared to going out backwards if we reject him."

Sempronius spoke for a second time in the one meeting, something he had never done before. "Well whatever any two of you three big shareholders want, that will be what happens. I know I have no influence. But I'd be happy to keep the core business intact, make a good one-off profit by selling the shipyard at a 50% premium and stay on good terms as a preferred supplier to the biggest steel shipbuilder in the world. It seems a good business plan to me!"

Julius stared at him for a moment. "You are right, Titus. It *is* as simple as that." He looked around the table. "I'd like to chew this over for a day or two, but I think we really have no choice. It's just a matter of pushing up the valuations and trying to win another talent or two, but I think we'll be going for this no matter what."

Cornelius nodded. "Yes. But let's make him wait a day or two and see if we can wring a bit more out of him. Let's meet here again at noon tomorrow."

The afternoon session next day was spent ploughing through the details of the offer with Solon, trying to see where the valuations by Atticus could be nudged up a bit. There was not much scope for this. Atticus had already allowed for a 50% premium, based on reasonably accurate valuations. Next they sorted through their inactive assets to see what otherwise useless land and installations could be turned into gold by tacking them onto the deal. These included a few older and smaller dry docks no longer in use and an obsolete assembly shed. These were added to the inventory at 50% over book value.

On the evening of the second day they invited Atticus to a formal meal. The best wine available flowed free. To their chagrin Atticus cheerfully accepted a goblet and thereafter left it untouched in front of him.

Between the second and third courses Julius stood and offered a toast to the strong partnership between Rhine Steel and Limpopo Investments, both in the past and becoming even stronger in the future. Atticus joined the toast but did no more than touch his lips to the goblet. Cornelius followed with a toast to the good health of Atticus and all the principals of Limpopo Investments. Again Atticus joined the toast but did no more than touch his lips to the rim. But to be a polite guest he replied with a toast to 'all his dear friends in Rhine Steel, may they live to see their grandchildren prosper from their new partnership with Limpopo Investments'.

With that the attempts to mollify Atticus were discreetly forgotten and the meal resumed with friendly chat around the table.

The dancing girls were brought out during the fourth course. Atticus watched them as he chatted to Julius and Pellius to either side but would not be drawn away into a side chamber for 'relaxation' with two of them. "I'm sorry ladies, but I am too sated and too old! I would only disappoint you!" he quipped. After their third attempt at imploring him Julius gave them a glance that told them to retire from the room.

It was obvious that Atticus was still in complete control of his mind and his tongue. Certainly more so than the Rhine Steel partners. Julius made an on-the-spot decision to not attempt to negotiate in these circumstances. Instead he stood, tapped his goblet with a knife to gain quiet and called for their attention. The murmur soon subsided.

“Atticus, our dear friend, your offer to us to buy the Shipbuilding Division is very interesting. We have studied it in some detail and we're impressed by your thoughtful and measured approach. However there are some points where we believe that some minor changes could be made for the benefit of both sides.

“We have a short list of some of our suggestions and offer this to you for your consideration.” He handed Atticus a folder. “Please, it is now too late tonight to discuss these matters carefully. So if you could please look through these suggestions and meet with us tomorrow afternoon, we would be most appreciative.”

The progress of the next afternoon's talks didn't surprise Julius. Atticus was as sharp as ever and completely polite. “Thank you for the close examination you have obviously given our offer,” he opened, “and also for the broader consideration you have given in terms of what assets you think we might have overlooked in our own planning. It's good to know that you have our interests at heart no less than your own.

“Unfortunately your well-intentioned additions to the extent of the transaction do not fit in with our strategic planning. You were not to know this so we are sorry to put you through this effort, all for no final benefit. But the care you have taken in making these suggestions is noted and appreciated.

“I also note that you have questioned some of the valuations placed on some assets by our offer. I suppose there will always be differences of opinion on these matters and it could well be that some of our estimates are slightly lower than your valuations. But I'm confident that there are also some valuations where we have been slightly on the generous side. Even if not, the premium we are offering, approximately 50%, more than covers any possible discrepancy. While not wanting to quibble over every item line-by-line, I am confident that the package as a whole is generous and I see no need to revise the value of our offer.

“Your third point is to amend our undertaking to deal with Rhine Steel as our preferred supplier. Our original offer is to prefer Rhine Steel products over any other at the same quality and price. You have instead proposed that this undertaking be re-worded to define ‘quality’ more closely. Instead of ‘the same quality’, you propose to use the phrase ‘satisfying the stated performance specification’. We accept this amendment.

“Your fourth point was that some of the assets we have listed as part of the transaction are on the books in other Divisions of Rhine Steel, and are not assets included in the Shipbuilding Division. You have proposed that the value of these should be added to the price.” Atticus smiled gently. “Perhaps we could add them to the price, but only after reducing the offer price by the same amount because we have already included them in the valuation as if already in the Shipbuilding Division. Double-counting is an old trick! But I think it might be easier for you to shift these assets to Shipbuilding Division as an internal exercise before the separation.

“Your fifth point revolved around workforce issues. We have agreed to take on all current employees in their current positions at their current pay rates, based on the situation when I first presented the offer to you. Our offer also required an undertaking

from you that if any member of Shipbuilding Division staff leaves us you will not employ him without our permission. You asked for a similar undertaking from us. In response, we agree that we will not attempt to attract any of your staff from your other Divisions except with your consent in each case. Hermann will tell you that we made the same offer last year when we recruited Borix and paid the Shipyard Division a fee for his engagement. Should any current Shipyard Division employee prefer to not continue working for us after our takeover, that is his choice. But you must not employ him and we will similarly not employ any of your other workers who might leave your employ.

“So, in summary, we agree to accept your third point and your fifth point. The other aspects of the offer remain unchanged.” Atticus sat and waited attentively for any questions.

“Lord Atticus,” asked Pellius, “How much freedom do you have to negotiate this offer? What may you change and what issues are outside your authority?”

“If I offer to negotiate on any point you may be assured I have authority to do that,” Atticus assured him.

“Does that mean that other points, where you do not offer a compromise, are outside your scope?”

“It could mean that. Or it could mean that I choose not to negotiate that point,” Atticus replied evenly. “I suggest that your decision should be based on the offer as negotiated, and not on the offer as it has not been negotiated.”

“Well, I am not happy with the price,” Pellius continued. “In terms of value of assets I agree that it seems generous but in terms of profitability you are not offering an overly generous value-to-profit ratio.”

“And what value-to-profit ratio would you consider reasonable?” asked Atticus.

Pellius saw the chance of a better price in that response. “You are offering only seven times annual profit. We would need to re-invest the proceeds in something that returns 15% per annum to match the profit we would be foregoing by selling the Shipyard.”

“That is very interesting, lord Pellius,” Atticus responded. “That means that the shipyard must currently be earning well over 20% per annum profit on real value of current assets! I wonder if Solon is being paid a bonus for such high productivity!” Atticus chuckled a bit. “Of course I have not seen your accounts so I can only guess how profitable the Division is. Our estimate is that it is slightly less profitable than you say and that we are actually offering you about ten times annual profit.” Atticus waved a hand dismissively. “But I know you would never lie to your friends from Limpopo, lord Pellius, so let us take your statement at face value. That means an annual profit of about 150 talents of gold. This compares to our typical purchases from you recently, ranging from 400 talents to as much as 900 talents last year. The total over the last ten years has been just over six thousand talents.

“Now I know income is not the same as profit, you have costs as well. But the overhead component of your costs is fixed. I would assume that if your gross profit-to-value ratio is 15%, then the marginal profit you would operate on would be at least thirty per cent. So over the last ten years, your marginal profit from us has averaged about 180 talents of gold each year, and is rising. That is more than the 150 talents profit you are supposedly making from the entire Shipbuilding Division.

“If we buy one of your competitors instead and take our business elsewhere, you will not only miss out on a one-off benefit from the offer, but you will also be losing more profit than you are hoping to preserve. In other words, if you refuse our offer you will be taking a negative value-to-profit ratio!

“And then there will be the competition we will present. We have the funds to put into research and development that will allow us to produce better ships at a lower cost. If you force us to be your competitors we will drive you into the ground. So even the profits you seek to preserve will disappear.” Atticus spread his hands, imploring Pellius to be reasonable. “But we don't want to treat old friends like that! We would much rather help each other prosper!”

Cornelius broke in at this point. “We agree that we have a strong relationship and would like to see each other prosper. But Marius does have a point. Even your own estimate of ten as the value-to-profit ratio is not overly generous, and the actual profit is indeed higher than you estimate. Those who don't know you well might think that you're threatening rather than offering.”

Atticus sat comfortably, looking from one to the other. At length he spoke again. “I haven't been wasting my time here in Germania, gentlemen. I have also been negotiating with WestGermanSea Shipyards, a smaller outfit on the coast that is doubtless well-known to you. They don't have the same size dry dock as you and their staff are not as skilled as yours, nor do they know our current advanced technology. But their harbour will allow deeper-draught vessels and we're looking to build ships that will make some of your existing facilities obsolete anyway. According to the instructions from my Principal the fall-back option is to buy WestGermanSea, and then attract critical staff away from you. We will then build larger and more efficient facilities and start afresh with them. The total cost of that would be around the same as the price I am offering you here but I would have a completely new and larger dry dock and a much larger assembly building, items that would cost me additional funds if I buy here. The only advantages you have over WestGermanSea are the specialised technology we have paid you to develop and that we have forty years of history with each other. You know we value our secrecy and that means that we also value loyalty. I am trying to be loyal. I have been holding off any final agreement with WestGermanSea to give you the right of first refusal.

“If you read that as a threat then I must apologise for my clumsiness in presentation. What I've been trying to do is to be honest and open with you. I would prefer to avoid a breach with you. In as much as I can and within the budget I have been allowed, I would prefer to go forward with you rather than with WestGemanSea.”

After a short period of silence, Julius spoke. “Let us cut to the issue, lord Atticus. I take it that there can be no further movement beyond your acceptance of our third and fifth points? From here, it must be either ‘yes’ or ‘no’?”

Atticus nodded. “I am sorry to be so blunt, but you are correct.”

The Rhine Steel owners looked to each other. “Thank you for your frankness, lord Atticus,” Julius closed the meeting. “I think we need to talk among ourselves right now. May we meet you tomorrow?”

The meeting the following afternoon was anti-climactic. The meeting of the owners after Atticus left them had been very short indeed, merely a series of 'I say we accept' from each as Julius looked at them in turn.

Atticus was as pleasant and unemotional as ever. It was clear that he had never doubted the outcome. He maintained the same courteous informality throughout as they signed the articles of understanding and prepared instructions to their lawyers to draw up the final contracts.

After the signing Atticus asked Cimbrix to show him where Tullo and Marcus were working. He had a letter from Borix for them.

"You will excuse me for reading your private mail, but I did warn you last year that any messages from Borix would need to be checked. We needed to make sure he said nothing we need to keep secret. But I must confess that this is the strangest message I have ever seen! However I don't think it will tell you anything that we need to hide. You make of it what you will." Atticus handed over the letter.

Tullo took the letter and read it aloud. "They have many beautiful lakes here and the water seems to flow uphill. No wealth required. Leave that to whoever wants it."

Marcus nodded. "That's good, lord Atticus. We had agreed with Borix that if he mentioned a lake then it would mean that all was well. But mention of a waterfall would mean that we should refuse. Water running uphill can only mean the opposite of a waterfall, that it is better than expected. So I'll go if I'm still welcome. Will I also be permitted to invite my widowed sister and her children?"

"You are certainly most welcome," Atticus confirmed. "And you may invite whomever you want, so long as they understand that there is no coming back. When will you be able to organise your family matters? We expect to be leaving in about a month."

"Thank you, lord Atticus, that will be plenty of time."

"Will you be coming too, Tullo?" Atticus asked.

"I expect I might, thank you, but I'll talk to my wife again."

Atticus half-bowed an acknowledgement and a farewell as he went to his next target, Solon's office. He knocked politely before entering. Solon wasn't surprised to see Atticus now that the articles had been signed. He had never expected Atticus to wait for the final contracts and settlement before stamping his own style on the company. "Good morning, lord Atticus," he rose from his chair as he greeted the man whom he expected to be his effective owner within a few days.

"Please, Solon," Atticus waved a hand as if in refusal, "We at Limpopo don't use such honorifics. Let's sit and talk through our respective positions in the new regime." Atticus sat on Solon's guest lounge, motioning Solon to lower himself back into his chair behind his desk.

"First, Solon, I would be pleased if you would stay on as Manager of the new company, which we intend to call 'Rhine Navifactor'. We want no disruption to the administrative and logistical operations of the company. If you would grant us this favour, your salary will be increased by ten per cent." His raised eyebrows invited a response.

Solon was surprised by this offer. He had expected that Atticus would remove him altogether and take direct control himself. "Of course, lord Atticus," he saw Atticus'

exaggerated cringe at the title, "Of course, Atticus," he corrected himself, "I'm eager to remain if that is what you want."

"Thank you, Solon," acknowledged Atticus. "We won't be too interfering, I hope. I would also be pleased if you could arrange a similar increase in Hermann's salary as well. Otherwise all things are to remain as they stand for the moment. At the end of the month I'd like your report on the state of the business and your recommendations for any improvements.

"Your report and recommendations will need to include one very important point. We at Limpopo probably seem a bit secretive to you. That's because we are. We guard our privacy with great jealousy and also our commercial secrets. We operate on the basis of providing only as much information as we need to. Your recommendations for changes to the company will include measures for ensuring that all work done in the shipyard remains as secret as possible. That will cover not only new research but also new techniques for design and construction, the performance of ships, in fact anything at all. If anyone wants to know anything about our secrets, then let him buy a ship and work them out for himself!

"Finally, I want to set up another research workshop completely isolated from the rest of the company and answerable directly to you. The research to be undertaken in this facility is to be most secret. Only you will know about it and the men actually doing the work. The men for this workshop shall be specially chosen for their intelligence and imagination as well as their trades skills, and will be highly paid. This will include attracting the best men from other companies but I don't want you to approach anyone until you have discussed them with me and I have approved your approach. Start thinking about this and keep your eyes and ears open for likely candidates. I will also be doing my own scouting independently of you."

It was three days later that the final sale contract was signed. Then to everyone's surprise, Atticus settled immediately by handing over one hundred Banker's Guarantees for ten talents of gold each. 'How much money does Limpopo Investments have,' everyone marvelled, 'to idly carry around so much in negotiables! And how confident they must have been before even making the offer that it would be accepted!'

Cimbrix approached Atticus later that same afternoon. After congratulating him on the purchase he advised that Tullo wanted to accept the Secret Job offer and had included almost a dozen of his adult relatives and their children. Marcus had also provided a list of twenty-eight guests, about a third of them children. But more surprising, more than a dozen other workers had asked if the offer was also open to them. "It appears the letter from Borix has them all intrigued," summarised Cimbrix.

"Do you want to go too, Hermann?" Atticus asked with a cheeky smile.

"Oh no thanks! I like this job here more than I can say! And thank you for the salary increase, too," replied Cimbrix. "But what will I tell the others?"

"I'll write a notice for you to post. That will make it clear that there's no point in asking."

Atticus thought carefully about this and discussed it with the others in the delegation. Volunteer immigrants would be much cheaper than buying slave imports and their skill-base would be better than most slaves, but there were also many draw-backs.

The first was that it was so public! They didn't want the whole of Germania to know how many people they were taking! It had to appear to be a very limited number. Secondly, the slaves were bought individually on the basis of youth and health, so Terrapulchra could be confident of a long and productive lifespan from them. Accepting working men of all ages, many of whom would want to bring dependent parents or destitute relatives, would severely reduce the per-capita value. And of course if they were not slaves it would be more difficult to assign them to the less pleasant tasks.

And finally, they didn't want to strip the shipyard of its skilled workers.

Atticus provided a notice to all employees a few days later.

Honoured staff of Rhine Navifactor,

Many of you are aware that Borix accepted a secret commission last year and that Marcus and Tullo will be joining him shortly.

These three men were specifically invited to this secret task because of their special skills and certain other personal specifics. The tasks they were invited to fill are equally special.

It is possible that similar opportunities for more special appointments might arise in the future. However, such opportunities will be rare and we expect that they will be able to be filled only by persons who fit very strict guidelines.

These guidelines will generally take into account the following factors:-

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1. *Specific skills matching the task in mind.*
 2. *An inventive, imaginative approach and good problem-solving abilities.*
 3. *The ability to work in a close team.*
 4. *The ability to share skills and teach others.*
 5. *Proven loyalty as shown by length of service and trustworthiness.*
 6. *Good health.*

These positions will be filled by personal invitation as they arise. Management will not hold applications for such positions nor will a waiting list be prepared. No person has any reason to expect that an invitation will be extended as if a 'right'. However, those who perform well will obviously be more likely to be invited than those who do not.

*Atticus Fortunatus, Director,
On behalf of Rhine Navifactor.*

However a young graduate of the German Museum named Plinius had caught Atticus' eye. Plinius was unmarried, in his mid-twenties and in excellent health, the model of an excellent candidate. He was also from a reasonably comfortable family, his

father being a lawyer in the Third Class. This proved to be the deal-breaker. His father was most unhappy that his brilliant son had not gone into Law and Politics. He saw Engineering as being little better than skilled labour.

Plinius' special skill was shown by the title of his Major Study paper; 'The Thermal Properties of Expanding Gas'. This was greatly enriched by Plinius having previously studied mathematics at the Babylon Museum. It was the first comprehensive mathematical treatment of adiabatic gas behaviour, the only unexplained point being the different exponents for different types of gas. A copy of this had been given to Tullo who commented that it could provide greater fuel efficiency in steam engines by giving guidance on the optimum timing of the supply of steam to pistons.

Atticus invited Plinius to his office and outlined the standard offer. Tullo was on hand to emphasise the impact of Borix' letter. Plinius accepted, almost as much to get out from under his father's displeasure as for the attraction implied by the Borix letter. Atticus smiled to himself as Plinius left. Paleos had played with the idea of a School of Engineering at the Museum for year after year, but had always delayed. He too much liked being the Amateur Engineer himself. Now his hand will be forced.

It was another two months before Atticus and the Terrapulchran party left the Rhine, with Marcellus staying behind as the Acting Director. The business was ticking over as usual but with another big order on the books to be progressed as manpower became available. It was another 'blockade runner' but this one with much improved ventilation into the crew's quarters and a separate large ventilator fan to force air into the furnace room. Although there was no need for stokers as in a coal-fired boiler and therefore no risk of heat exhaustion, this substantially improved the positive draft through the furnace. This was expected to make firing-up much quicker and safer, as well as improving running performance. For both crew's quarters and the engine room the draft was forced by fans using newly-developed electric motors. These were powered by a generator running off the main engine with a bank of storage batteries for times when the engine was not running. It was amazing what the German Museum was producing these days! All of these refinements had already been retro-fitted to the prototype over in Caralis and had performed well.

Atticus' ship set out to pass south through the English Channel. En route the holds were filled with racking around the walls. A ladder was installed in one corner. They made port in Brigantium to collect a large consignment of slaves bought by their agents. Another port call was made in Olisipo to pick up more slaves and then another in Gades where they were joined by two other Limpopo Investments merchant ships being loaded with cargo.

In dealing with the Mediterranean markets the standard explanation offered by the Terrapuchrans when purchasing slaves was that they were traders from Limpopo, looking for men to work in the mines or girls to serve in the brothels of the male-dominated mining towns. This invariably caused the purchased slaves themselves great distress. Most would have hoped for domestic work, not this worst of fates. Some tried to escape, thinking that the risk of being killed in the attempt was worth it compared to the

alternative of submission. When captured they were resigned to exemplary beatings to discourage any other flight risks. But instead they were just told that no smart slave-owner will damage his own goods. They could expect to be punished later in much more effective but less damaging ways than that! Thus they travelled until west of Madiera, apparently taking a westward blue-water route around the Canaries to avoid pirates rather than hugging the coast. The slaves were full of misery.

Then they struck due west overnight to get well clear of the usual shipping routes. The next morning the captain took more than one hundred of them up on deck, as many as could fit, to address them.

Tullo, Marcus and Plinius stood together on the afterdeck as these slaves were brought up from below. As volunteers, the three had been permitted free range of the ship and had wondered to each other why so many slaves had been purchased at their landfalls. Then they heard the slaves muttering among themselves, lurid stories of work in death-trap mines. It seems that life in the Limpopo might make some people happy, but not everyone shared in the joy!

A third of the slaves had been brought up on decks for 'an important announcement' that should cast some more light on the subject. Sail was taken off to reduce speed to a bare crawl, and the other merchantmen in the convoy stood only a few hundred paces off to either beam. There was some shuffling at the front of the aft deck as the Captain came to the rail to speak from an up-wind position. Atticus appeared beside the engineers, smiling broadly. "Now all will start to be revealed," he teased.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the Captain commenced with a bellow, "I must apologise for the discomfort of this last week. I know how difficult, how uncomfortable, and how humiliating it has been for you. I sincerely regret the need to impose it upon you. For I also was a slave purchased twenty-five years ago in Nova Carthago and I was transported in the same conditions as you have suffered up to this moment. But you will notice that I am a slave no more.

"We are now well clear of the usual shipping routes, so we are able to let you know what your future holds. You will not be doomed to a short and hard life as mine slaves! You will all be offered life as citizens, with your own families growing to maturity around you as you become honoured members of your communities. You are being taken to a new land where you will be well-fed and well-clothed in the immediate future, and will soon become free men and women.

"In this new land we don't talk about 'slaves' as they speak back in the Old World. We talk about 'provisional citizens'. We expect each of you will become a full citizen after a few years, many even sooner. You will be free men and women in a free land, where you will be respected for your honest toil. You will be free to choose your own work and to marry whom you will, and your children will be the equal of any. In fact, our Consul in the year 875 was the son of a slave purchased to serve as a prostitute. No-one has the slightest idea of the identity of his father. Yet he reached the highest office in the land, and remains an honoured Senator to this day. Many other men, sons of men or women originally purchased as slaves, have become Senators or Consul in their time. Indeed, a few former slaves have risen to those offices themselves. There is no limit to the future life you could build among us.

“You will now be transferred to one of the other ships where you will enjoy much better conditions and not be confined. However there are three things you must be careful to observe.

“First, you must fulfil any duty allocated to you by a person having proper authority. That would mean any of the ship’s officers. You must do this sincerely, as a person worthy of trust. I promise that you will not be required to do anything out of spite or for the purpose of humiliating you, but only those things which must be done for the good health, proper operation and safety of the ship and your fellows. The most unpleasant duties will be shared around, or perhaps reserved as punishments for the surly or disobedient. In return for your diligence you will be trusted and respected. You will be treated as comrades rather than slaves.

“Second, you must wear the orange uniform you will be given. This is not intended to be a sign of shame. It's because our so-called ‘slaves’ are treated well, as if free men and women, that we need other means of knowing who is new to our society, who might not yet understand our customs and practices. So we therefore take less offence and are prepared to explain rather than becoming angry if a person in orange might appear ignorant.

“Third, in our society there is one crime that is treated totally without mercy. That crime is attempting to return to the Old World without proper authority. The world you are leaving does not know of our existence. Our secrecy is our protection. Anyone who would attempt to disclose our secret is worse than a traitor. In all the years our society has existed, only three people have had to be punished for that crime. Please, do not any of you become number four.

“Each of you will be interviewed over the next ten days and your skills noted. This is to permit your effective deployment into the new society. You will also be grouped by watches for duties as part of the crew of your ship. Between watches you will be instructed about the new society that will soon be your new home and what will be expected of you, and what you could expect from it yourselves.

“Now if you will go to the boats you will be taken to your new ship. I wish you all a safe voyage and a long and happy life in your new home.” The captain stepped back, and the crew on deck started to lower the boats.

The three recruits were perplexed. They had been told back in Germania that there were very few people invited to join Limpopo, and those invitations were offered only to the most skilful. But here a whole ship load of slaves was being offered the same future. They turned to Atticus. Atticus grinned, and touched Marcus’ forearm. “Come below to my office. I can tell you the whole picture now!”

Soon they were gathered in Atticus’ ‘office’, which consisted of no more than his sea-bunk on one wall, a table on the other, and barely enough room to stand between the two. Atticus poured them all a goblet of his favourite wine, a gentle red from Gaul.

“This is how I spend my luxury allowance,” he confessed, “and how better to drink it than to celebrate your new lives with us! Here, Tullio, sit on my bunk with me! Marcus, Plinius, onto my desk!

“First, you have not only taken a job with Limpopo Investments. You also have taken up citizenship of Terrapuchra, a free republic separate from the Old World. At least we’re separate for the moment, but we expect to be joining some time soon. We number

about half a million adults, and perhaps the same number of children. Let me outline our history.

“In 813 AUC an African trader sent expeditions across the sea. He discovered a new land where the natives had more gold than they knew what to do with but no idea of how to refine or work baser metals. So the trader started trading steel for gold. It was immensely profitable and he wanted to make sure he maintained a monopoly on this knowledge. So he set up a pirate base in 816 AUC, to intercept and destroy any competitors who might make the same discovery.

“But the pirate base commander was short on manpower. Rather than destroying the intruders he adopted a policy of taking captives and signing them onto his land-based work gangs so he could free more of his own men for ships’ crews.

“In 835 AUC, the pirate colony effectively told the African trader that they considered themselves an independent society. They would not take orders from him any longer, but would welcome a continuation of contacts on a purely commercial level. In the meantime they would maintain his monopoly because continued secrecy also suited their own purposes. They didn't want the Republic learning about them and treating them as pirates.

“But it didn't take long for the trader to start cheating them on prices. The colony responded by secretly setting up their own trading system, by-passing the African’s monopoly. That trading system was called 'Limpopo Investments'.

“They faced three main threats. The first was that the African trader might realise he has been by-passed, and seek revenge. That threat is now past. We are much too strong for him to harm us directly. The second threat was that he might tell the Republic authorities about us – or as it is now, the Federation authorities. This is also unlikely, because he is himself implicated in our piracy.

“The third threat is that the Federation might become aware of us in some other way and try to destroy us as pirates. So now you know why we place such great emphasis on secrecy. We are attempting to overcome this threat of a Federation anti-piracy campaign by building up a navy capable of repelling any attacks. To do this we need a large population to man the navy, plus a large trading surplus to pay for it. So we've been trying to build up our population as fast as we can manage, short of everything turning into chaos.

“This is why we import thousands of slaves every year. They are usually granted citizenship after two years of service, but some are granted citizenship earlier if they merit it, and others might take a lot longer if they are surly. A very few are invited to join us voluntarily, like Borix and you three. You will be granted citizenship immediately.

“It's also why we wanted to control Rhine Steel’s shipyards. We want to have a navy that is much more effective than anything that can be sent against us, and preferably using technology that the Federation doesn't know yet. The oil-fired fast cargo ship we bought last year was not a blockade-runner or an ice-breaker, as everyone seemed to think. It's intended to be able to destroy enemy ships by chasing and ramming, like a mechanised trireme.

“You three will be required to maintain and repair our fleet, and hopefully to continue secret research to ensure each ship is better than the last. I don't think you'll have any problems with that; Borix loves it!”

They arrived back on deck just as the second batch of slaves had been cleared from the decks. A third group was brought up from below and heard the same message. They were retained on board and allocated duties. Their first duty was to re-stow the slave platforms and re-fit the holds into something more resembling sleeping quarters fit for a crew of men and women destined for freedom.

Tullo caught Plinius on deck a couple of days later. "I've been thinking about your research, Plinius," he opened. "It's very clever, specially the way you derived the equations. It could make steam engines much more efficient by timing the valve openings better."

"Yes," agreed Plinius. "Many engine manufacturers go for maximum power by leaving the inlet valves open for almost the full power stroke, but that costs a whole cylinder-full of steam each stroke. But if you close the valve about half-stroke you get about three-quarters the power output for only half the steam expended. Less power per stroke but it saves about a third of the coal for the same amount of work done."

Tullo nodded. "Yes, I had come to that conclusion too. That's a lot of money saved." Tullo paused for a moment before continuing. "But another idea has occurred to me.

"When Heron first started designing engines, he didn't use steam under high pressure. He used air pressure directly. I was wondering if we could save the weight, the cost and the inefficiencies of a separate furnace and boiler by using the expansion of the combustion air itself."

Plinius thought for a moment. "I don't know how you could do that," he commented at length. "If you enclose the combustion so it can do useful work, then how could more air get in to keep the flames alive?" Then he thought a bit longer.

"I suppose you could then vent the burnt air in the cylinder, blow in some more cold air, and re-ignite the fire. But that would take a long time. The engine would turn so slowly that it would be almost useless."

"You're still thinking of coal-fired boilers, Plinius! We've already designed an oil-fired boiler, and that fires almost immediately. What I'm thinking is using the piston to compress the air so that it gets hot enough to ignite the oil itself, without needing to introduce a starter flame."

Plinius nodded absently, as he tried to paint a picture of this in his mind's eye. "I think I see what you're saying, Tullo. But the pressures would be very high. Just think about it! To heat the air enough you would need a very high compression. And then when the oil ignites, the pressure would suddenly get much higher again, depending on how much fuel you provide. I think you'd have an explosion, not a power stroke."

"Yes, you're right, Plinius. The pressure would be very high. But if the cylinder walls are thick enough perhaps it could be made to work? You know the maths better than I do. Could you do some rough calculations to see what it would need?"

"Yes, certainly. The big unknown would be how much the pressure would increase when the fuel is fired. If it produces, say, three times the pressure, then that would probably provide enough power to overcome its internal friction and compress the next charge. But if it produces, say, ten times the pressure that would provide plenty of power but at the risk of exploding."

Plinius nodded to himself as he followed the logic through. “But of course, this all depends on how much energy you can get out of the fuel, and you can’t get more than the quantity of air allows. There would be a maximum possible pressure difference and that would be determined by how much fuel will burn in the amount of air available in the cylinder. So it all comes down to the maximum fuel-air mixture. Adding more fuel than the air can burn would only waste fuel. We might need to run a few tests to get that bit right.”

Tullo felt encouraged. “Atticus wants more secret research, and this sounds like it might be a good idea. If you could do some calculations based on perhaps three times pressure and another set based on ten times pressure, that would give us an idea of how strong we need to make the cylinder. And how big the engine would have to be to give the same power output as a typical ship’s boiler and steam engine.”

Plinius nodded again. “I think it would be a lot smaller. Power is roughly proportional to the cylinder pressure times the number of power strokes per minute. This would have much higher pressure, allowing a smaller piston, and a smaller piston would allow a faster cycle, so we would gain both ways. Yes, the engine would be much smaller than for a comparatively low-pressure steam cylinder, and this also does away with the need for a separate boiler as well. I’ll go down to the cabin and start on it now.”

Plinius didn’t come to the evening meal. Tullo went searching for him, finding him in the cabin the three young engineers shared. The young man was clearly excited. “Tullo, you would not believe how the numbers work out! If we assume the same size and cycle time as a typical steam piston, your new engine will produce at least five times the power! But in fact it’s even better than that! With steam, the valves have to pass the gas when it’s already hot, but the inlet valve for your system will only be passing air at ambient temperature. So it will be able to operate at a much higher cycle speed, and more power strokes in the same time means more power.

“There are two big problems, though. The first is the cylinder walls will need to be very thick to resist the pressure. I suggest that we might have to bore the cylinders out of a single solid piece of steel, rather than try to fabricate them.

“The second is that there’s the risk of the fuel igniting while the piston is still in the compression part of the stroke, and that will drive the engine into reverse. We need to make sure the fuel doesn’t enter the cylinder until the last moment, exactly when we want ignition. But that can be solved. Marcus will find a way of gearing the injection of the fuel to the right part of the stroke.”

Plinius stared into the distance, like a seer looking into a whole new world. “This will make every other engine obsolete! It will take a few years to get all the details right, but when it comes good it will change everything! All we need is a liquid fuel that can be injected and which will burn quickly. I think olive oil will be too heavy so perhaps we need to look into finding a lighter oil.” He smiled as he said “Perhaps we need to include a cook in our team!”

Tullo dropped a hand on Plinius’ shoulder. “Come, eat your meal, and the three of us will talk about it later. We’re not even in our new home and we’re already starting to earn our rations. Atticus will be pleased.”

Atticus was very pleased when the three engineers told him about their idea a few days later. Atticus was an accountant, a manager by training, and understood nothing of

the engineering issues involved. But he did understand the summary. These lads were talking about an engine that weighed much less, could fire up in a fraction of the time, occupied only a fraction of the space needed by a boiler and steam engine combination and could vary its power output instantly. And he also knew something that his new recruits did not. A quiet chat with the aging Paleos would probably bring them to the point of ecstasy! It was probable that the liquid fuel Paleos already had refined for the new boiler was exactly what this new engine demanded. This is so important that it should not even be left to the Secret Workshop back at Rhine Navifactor. It must be developed totally in Terrapuchra. He would need to set up another workshop this side of the ocean.

Atticus was back in the Rhine six months later with Plinius at his side. The entire Secret Workshop was dismantled, packaged and loaded to be taken to Cras. A shipload of spare parts, cutting tools and other raw materials was also shipped. Plinius had also persuaded three of his friends from the German Museum to join him. He explained to Atticus that they were among the cream of the crop.

Meanwhile the design of the Compression Engine had been refined. It consisted of a cylinder mounted vertically, with the crankshaft overhead and the air intake at the bottom end. Ignition took place when the piston was at the bottom of the cylinder, and exhaust at the top of its travel. Fuel injection was managed by a cam driven by the crankshaft, and the amount of fuel delivered in each injection was varied by varying the position of the cam relative to the push-rod operating the injector piston. Paleos had agreed that the same mineral oil fraction as was used by the new oil furnace design would be the best choice. This was heavy enough to not give off explosive fumes so it would be very safe in confined spaces, but fluid enough to form a fine spray when injected into the combustion cylinder so it would burn very rapidly. If the production of this fraction of mineral oil could not keep up with demand, then the steam ships' boilers could go to a slightly heavier grade and he would replace the nozzles to suit the higher viscosity.

The intake of fresh air and release of the burnt air from the combustion cylinders had presented some problems but these were solved well enough for a working model to be built. The exhaust gasses were vented by holes in the sides of the cylinder at the extreme end of the power stroke, at which time valves in the lower end of the cylinder would also be opened by another cam. This would allow the introduction of fresh air from a pre-compression cylinder, which would force the burnt gas out the vent holes. As the piston returned on the compression stroke, it would first close off the vent holes on the sides. The inlet valve would stay open fractionally longer to provide a larger volume of air from the pre-compressor, but close very quickly afterwards to prevent the compression stroke of the piston forcing a reverse draft. The next charge of fuel was injected at the bottom of the stroke.

To ensure that there would be enough force to compress the air and operate the pre-compressor a large flywheel was added to maintain angular momentum and three cylinders were linked in an arrangement to fire at 120 degree separation. Thus, the start of each power stroke served to complete the compression of the next cylinder to fire and commence the re-compression stroke of the previous cylinder.

The greatest problem the designers faced was a practical one. Although they were confident that the engine would work once it was going, the challenge was starting it. Overcoming that resistance during the first compression stroke was the big hurdle.

On the small workbench prototype this was first overcome by using a falling weight to drive the flywheel. The engine started firing and rapidly accelerated to a runaway speed. Only quick thinking by Plinius, who pulled the fuel injector cam control to the zero position, stopped the engine from tearing itself apart.

This experience led the team to reduce the amount of fuel delivered for ignition per stroke. New, smaller injector pistons were made and fitted and the process was repeated. This allowed the engine to turn at a relatively stable speed which could be varied by the injector cam control. A genuinely feasible engine had been run!

The next problem was the connection of the engine to do useful work. To provide a load to work against, the crankshaft was connected to a paddle-wheel. This was less successful. The resistance from the paddle wheel prevented the falling weight from turning the engine fast enough to continue from one ignition to the next. Unlike steam-driven pistons, there was a minimum speed that must be maintained or the hot gases in the cylinder lost their energy to the cylinder walls rather than driving the piston.

The team then tried to provide a clutch system. This aimed to start the engine with no load on it at all and then place it under load once it was running at operating speed. The first tentative attempt to do this simply caused the engine to stall, the resistance of the paddle wheel too great for the engine to drive against without a higher injector setting. The second attempt, with the engine running at a much faster speed, simply snapped the drive shaft to the paddle-wheel. The sudden impact of the engine's angular momentum against the stationary paddle shaft caused too much stress. Thankfully, a screw propeller operated at a much higher speed but with less static resistance than a paddle wheel. The new Compression Engine would be much better suited to propeller-driven ships than to paddle-wheelers, the exact opposite of the traditional long-stroke steam engines.

The solution finally adopted was to provide for spring-loading one of the driven clutch plates so the force could be transmitted as a gradual increase, rather than a sudden 'off' or 'on' condition. The designers noted how much heat was generated by the new spring-loaded friction clutch during this transition and became aware of the need to control the clutch release very carefully so as to minimise this possible danger.

The next problem was one of scale. A falling weight was adequate for the bench-top prototype, which was small and set in a large workshop. But this would not be a practical starting method for a large engine in a confined ship.

Several possible starting methods were considered. One was to fit a smaller engine as a starter, the smaller engine itself to be started by the falling-weight system. A second was to fit a small steam boiler and engine. A third was to use an electric motor run by metal-acid batteries and re-charged by the starter motor operating in dynamo mode. A fourth system made use of compressed air to turn a piston engine connected to the crankshaft through a gear train.

The third had the additional advantage in maritime use of using the same power supply as electrical systems throughout the ship, including fans for ventilation and winches for heavy lifting. The fourth had the advantage that the starter could be charged

with compressed air by a hand-pump if required, avoiding dependence upon more complicated mechanical or electrical/chemical means. This might be particularly useful on a ship, where repairs might not be possible.

Eventually the decision was made. A larger prototype was built. This was able to be linked to either an electric motor or a compressed-air starter. Both versions worked. It was now established that a Compression Engine that could perform useful work in a practical, everyday setting was technically feasible. Research now began on developing the fine details to optimise performance and reliability for a range of power plant sizes.

Because most applications already in common use had been designed for steam-powered systems the development of long-stroke, low-speed Compression Engines was given priority. These would be ideal for large units such as ships and could be geared down if necessary. However, the ability of the new engine to operate at much higher speeds also meant that they could be used for smaller applications, in particular replacing the steam-powered pumps that allowed the sewerage and water supply systems to be freed from the constraints of gravity. The higher speeds made the centrifugal pump already developed for the steam ship fuel feeds a much better option than the old piston pumps for water and sewage pumping. But Plinius had already established with his small experimental benchtop versions that it would also be possible to build engines small enough for use in any application.

Cras - April 891 AUC (138 A.D.)

Paulos walked over to the Chair and sat. By force of habit as much as by Standing Orders, the conversations among the small knots of Councillors broke up and all members took their own seats. Paulos smiled lightly and glanced to his right towards Theles.

“I believe that the Consul has some news for us,” he invited Theles to speak.

Theles stood. “Yes, Paulos. As far as our records can say in such a rapidly-changing situation, I believe that Terrapulchra now has in excess of half a million adult citizens.” There was a cheer of delight from the terraces. “That is defining 'adults' as 'over fifteen years of age', in accordance with our usual practice.

“In addition to these citizens over the age of fifteen years, we have more than four hundred thousand juniors, and twenty-five thousand slaves,” he continued. “And for those who like to look into the finer details,” he went on, “by co-incidence we have just reached the point where Terrapulchran-born adults now outnumber immigrant adults.” Theles paused a moment as a second cheer rose from the terraces.

“Not that the distinction between immigrant and Terrapulchran-born means anything in itself, of course,” he went on. “Most of the great names in our history were immigrants. But it does mark how far our society has changed.” Theles smiled softly as he resumed his seat. He did not need to remind anyone that Paulos in the Chair was an immigrant. He had been brought over as a slave, a physician who had over-reached himself in some business speculations and been forced into bankruptcy. He had been bought and then assigned to assist Reuben ben Yacoub in the School of Medicine. The two men had invented more than a dozen treatments now registered as Intellectual Property in the name of Spice Islands Medical Research.

“Thank you, Theles,” Paulos acknowledged the announcement. “These are milestones indeed! We do well to celebrate every one of them!” After a few moments Paulos looked to the right-hand end of the front row facing him.

“Andreas, you have a Report from the Museum?” Andreas was the Delegated Councillor for the Museum.

“Yes, Paulos. The School of Engineering now has a design for a Compression Engine suitable for production and everyday use. Tests to date and calculations of fuel costs show that it will reduce the total costs of pumping water and sewerage to approximately seventy percent of current costs. It is also suitable for use in ships, particularly those engaged in short hops where the time taken to raise steam is a proportionately larger share of the total fuel costs. And it might be critical for our Navy where an immediate response might be the difference between success or disaster. I commend this innovation to Delegated Councillors in their various responsibilities for consideration.” Andreas sat, and before Paulos could move onto the next item on the agenda he saw Doris stand asking for the call. Doris was the Delegated Councillor responsible for Commercial Crops. This covered sugar, coca and tabak in particular.

“Doris?” The mention of a name was Paulos' usual way of recognising a speaker.

“Thank you, Paulos. I have a question arising from that Report. Would this new engine be suitable for use on a train? And if so, would the improvement of the Neck Road into a railway be economically justified?”

All eyes turned back to Andreas, who stood to answer.

“The engine as it is currently designed is rather large and heavy,” he answered. “The design assumed that it would be stationary or at most bolted into a ship, so not much thought was given to minimising its weight. This could be a disadvantage as a train engine. However, the research team has built much smaller and lighter engines during its development programme. These smaller engines were never intended to be efficient in terms of everyday use but were built as proof-of-concept units. However, we intend to optimise and produce a smaller and much lighter version within the next year or two, and I expect this second generation engine would be suitable for a train.” Andreas shrugged. “As for the economic feasibility of a Neck Railway, that is not my responsibility.”

Now the eyes turned to Alexander. The aging ex-Consul had suffered nightmares after authorising the murder of the third Pulcher more than twenty years ago. He had been able to see the necessity for so drastic a step and had shown the emotional strength to put it in train, but had not had the emotional toughness to put that behind him afterwards. Remorse and guilt had overwhelmed him as soon as the immediate pressure was released. He had been begged to remain in office as Consul but simply didn't feel up to it. As a compromise he had offered to stand for Council so he could continue oversight of all the major civil engineering works as Delegated Councillor for Infrastructure. He had never been opposed at any election since.

“It would not be cheap to improve the Neck Road to the gradients and alignments suitable for a railway,” he opined. “It would virtually be a complete new project. In return we would save the labour of only a dozen muleteers. The ports and shipping at either end would still be needed and a railway would probably need more maintenance than the mule track rather than less.” Alexander held his hands up, palms up. “It would be a good thing to keep in mind when we get to the stage of much greater volumes, say a hundred tons a day. But right now, when we are moving less than a hundred tons a month, I can't see the value.” He looked over to Andreas, to ask a question himself.

“Andreas, how small and light do you expect these motors might become, over time? Do you think you will ever manage one light enough but with enough power to put into a large naval glider? I would imagine that this could provide much better communication speeds than even the fastest interceptor, and we would need only a handful to keep watch over the entire length of the Barrier Islands. They might even be able to transport lighter cargoes such as coca leaves more cheaply than using surface transport, specially over the Neck.”

“I will refer those ideas to the engineers at the Museum, Alexander,” Andreas replied from his seat. “I have no idea how a motor might actually drive an aircraft forward if it's not in contact with the ground, but our engineers have solved harder problems than that. This might be just what they need to get their imaginations going.”

Cras - July 895 AUC (142 A.D.)

The Christist proportion of the population had continued to grow and now numbered some 20% of the adults in Terrapulchra. The theology of 'The Hidden Seed' was unchallenged among the Terrapulchran Christists. This saw Terrapulchra as the mustard seed that would grow into the Kingdom of God when Yeshua returns and of which their own emancipation from slavery to full citizenship was a sure sign. But a division was arising in the Gathering about exactly how this was to be interpreted and how it would be put into effect.

The traditional view was that Christists were to remain 'subject to the governing authorities' as instructed by Paul in his First Letter to the Roman Gathering. This was understood to require Christists to accept that they lived in the midst of a society similar to that which had crucified Yeshua. Yeshua, in going to the Cross, showed that the correct response to an evil society is to suffer for righteousness' sake within it.

However, an increasing Activist school of thought was beginning to emerge. This opinion agreed that Christists should remain 'subject to the governing authorities', but it also felt a call to play the role of Nathan the Prophet in David's day. They were inclined towards calling upon those governing authorities to conform to a standard of Godly behaviour. If the governing authorities repented, then this made the society more Godly and perhaps hastened Yeshua's return. But if not then they were prepared to suffer whatever response the 'governing authorities' cared to impose.

This came to a head at the annual Neptunalia, the feast in honour of the Patron Deity of Terrapulchra and anniversary of the founding of Port Sertorius. On that day the Consul traditionally officiated at a State Sacrifice to Neptunus Oceanus. As required by ancient custom the sacrificial animal was to be killed by drowning in the waters sacred to the god.

But this year was different. The Consul this year was a Christist. Following the example of Amelia of twenty years earlier, now famous among Christists as a way of avoiding pagan worship without offending the pagans, the Consul conducted the ritual using descriptors rather than invoking the pagan god by name. In this spirit he invoked 'Great God of the vast waters' which could be attributed to the Christist God no less than to Neptunus.

The pagan crowd, generally in good spirits up to this point, were aroused to resentment by this lack of proper piety towards their Patron god. After the third such 'offence' they rushed the rostrum. Fortunately politics in Terrapulchra was not a blood sport and despite his perceived impiety to the god the Consul was himself well-respected. So the crowd did not intentionally do him any harm. Under the leadership of a few quick-witted wags he was picked up from the platform in front of the Temple of Neptunus opposite the waterfront in Cras, to be carried across the open plaza and then along the central pier. There he was thrown off the end into the bay 'as a sacrifice to Neptunus Oceanus'. Like all Terrapulchrans, the Consul was a strong swimmer and was never in danger.

By the time the Consul was being fished out of the water by some of the crowd management officers the Chairman of the Council had thought quickly enough to placate

the crowd and distract them from any further action against the Consul. He had re-started the formalities using the strict ritual prayers.

The pagans went home that afternoon mollified. But there were some mutterings generally along the line of 'We don't require these Christists to change their customs and forms of worship, so what right do they have to tamper with ours? If a Christist Consul doesn't want to lead the ritual, then let him have the decency to step aside for the next man in line.'

Even among the bulk of the Christists there was considerable sympathy for this attitude. It was generally agreed that the Consul would have been better advised to have been diplomatically sick that day and allow the Chairman to conduct the worship in accordance with the strict ritual. The Consul issued a public apology the next day.

I sincerely regret any offence I might have caused to any citizen of Terrapulchra during Neptunalia. It was my intention to show that all Terrapulchrans, whether votaries of Neptunus or followers of some other god, could all stand united and grateful for the divine favour bestowed upon us from on high.

However I now realise that I acted unwisely, in that it was not appropriate for me to do so an occasion intended to honour exclusively one god and thereby divert some of the praise from that deity. I now realise how many of my fellow-Terrapulchrans saw this as an insult to Neptunus and I whole-heartedly apologise for my offence.

Both to show my sincerity in this apology, and also to maintain full respect for both the office of Consul and the Name of Yeshua, I have advised the Chairman of the Council that I do not consider myself an appropriate person to remain in the office of Consul. I resign that office immediately, and wish my successor well in the task. Until the Council makes such an appointment, Miron the Chairman will act in that capacity in accordance with our laws.

Marcellus Lentulus Africanus, ex-Consul"

The Christist Bishop of Cras also made a public statement.

Christists throughout the world and particularly here in Terrapulchra eagerly and diligently support the right of each citizen to follow whichever religious path he is convinced is correct.

It is right and proper to discuss the various characteristics, powers and other aspects of various gods, as philosophers throughout the civilised world are wont to do, even up to and including questioning their very existence. Yet we maintain that this must be done in a civil and respectful manner.

No deliberate offence should be given by any person in discussing these matters, but everyone participating should be motivated only by sincerity, charity, and respect for his fellows. If accidental offence is given or otherwise perceived, the person giving that perceived offence should apologise immediately for his clumsiness in expression.

It is in this context that we note and regret that the well-intentioned words of our brother Marcellus have caused unintended offence.

As the head of the Christist Gathering in Cras I extend a full apology to all who perceived Marcellus' words as offensive and assure each such person that Christists do not mean any offence when such matters are discussed as part of our social interaction.

We also note that our brother Marcellus has apologised himself in like manner. We fully support and agree with his apology.

And finally we thank those who, although offended by his words, were so good-humoured in administering their rebuke to him.

Felix Sinstratus, Bishop of Cras.

However, the Activists were scandalised by these apologies. 'Apologise for not invoking Neptunus? Apologise for including Christists in the celebration of our Founding Day, when that very Founding of Terrapulchra is a key event in God's Secret Plan to redeem this world? How can these men call themselves Christist?'

The Activist Christists in Cras rapidly fell into schism. Once the Activists had separated themselves out from the main body their agenda became increasingly radical. In part this corresponded to their background. While older Christists and slaves imported from the Republic retained the old concept of 'the Way of the Cross', most Activists were Terrapulchran-born and young. Their sense of ownership in their society, their easy assumption of their rights as equal members, and to some degree an unconscious feeling of superiority over imported slaves left them in no doubt that they were entitled to set a political agenda rather than meekly respond to conditions as earlier generations of Christists had done.

Three months after Neptunalia their schismatic bishop presented a letter and a list of proposals to the Chairman of the Council.

To the most Esteemed Miron, Chairman of the Council of Terrapulchra and Acting Consul,

from Achetes, Bishop of the Reformed Gathering of Yeshua in Cras,

Greetings and best wishes!

In so far as recent events have raised the question of the rights and status of Christists and Christist practices in Terrapulchra and their interaction with various aspects of routine Terrapulchran life, we humbly submit the following proposals:-

- 1. That the Christist faith be explicitly recognised as a legal religion in Terrapulchra, a status that is widely accepted within our society and explicitly granted to other cults;*
- 2. That the acceptance of Neptunus Oceanus as the Patron Deity of Terrapulchra is a direct contradiction of the Lex de Religionibus which requires all lawful cults to be treated with equal respect. Therefore this concept of a 'Patron Deity' is itself unlawful in that implicitly elevates one religion above another;*
- 3. That the official status of Neptunus Oceanus effectively constitutes a form of compulsion in religion and is therefore unlawful. Therefore the official status of Neptunus Oceanus should be reduced to that of all other religions;*

4. *That in view of the recognition of Christism as having equal status with the worship of Neptunus, a Christist Meeting Hall should be constructed facing the Town Square. This should be no less in status than the Temple of Neptunus.*

We further note that a slave may be required to perform work as directed. However, this work must not detract from the most fundamental right of all, the right to protect one's own body. Just as a person who assaults or maims a slave may be prosecuted for an offence, so also a person who subjects a slave to unwanted sexual intercourse should be prosecuted for rape. An official who allocates a slave to a brothel or to serve as a hierodoule should be prosecuted for aiding and abetting a rape.

This is not a request that all brothels and temple prostitution be closed. Rather it is a request that persons who are assigned to serve in these roles should be assigned only voluntarily, and be permitted to refuse such service at any time and for any reason on the basis that their bodies are inalienably their own.

Thank you for your consideration. We the undersigned support this petition.

Beneath the text there were listed almost a thousand other names.

Miron was quite bemused by this petition. What it proposed seemed a total nonsense to him. The name of the sender was also new to him. According to the latest information he had heard, Felix was the leader of the Christists in Cras. Miron also knew that Felix was employed as a teacher in one of the local schools. He sent a runner to find Felix and ask him to come to the Council offices for discussions. The runner returned an hour later, bringing a response that Felix would attend immediately after classes ended.

Felix limped into Miron's office later that afternoon. He was an old man by now and becoming arthritic. He had been the acknowledged head of the Christists in Cras for over twenty years now.

"I'm so sorry, Felix. I should have thought to send a chair for you," Miron apologised, referring to the small wheeled chairs pulled by a slave that were sometimes used to transport the injured or frail.

"That's not a problem, Miron. It stops me from being too proud," Felix waved away the need to apologise. He sat in the chair indicated by Miron.

"I seek your advice, Felix. Could you tell me who this Achetes is and what I should make of this petition." Miron passed the head page over to Felix.

Felix read through the petition slowly to make sure he understood it clearly. His expression became increasingly pained as he progressed. At the end he shook his head as if in exasperation and then read it again. At length he looked up sadly to Miron.

"This grieves me deeply, Miron. Achetes is the leader of a small group of brothers we refer to as 'Activists'. Our faith has always had a distinctive approach to life ever since it was founded more than one hundred years ago. We are called upon by our God to do what is good, to suffer quietly when abused, and to rely on our God to guide all things to His purpose. We speak in images such as ourselves being sheep among wolves, of taking up each other's burdens, of being prepared to suffer so God may use it for good.

“These Activists are not content to follow that Godly practice. They are starting to demand that the broader society should conform to their own wishes. They are starting to think of themselves as in command, rather than waiting upon God. They are putting themselves at risk of falling away from the faith altogether in their self-assertive pride.”

“This is all very interesting, Felix, to hear about the internal politics of you Christists. But what am I to make of it? Does it represent the mind of you Christists or not?”

Felix shook his head. “No, it doesn't represent the mind of the majority of Christists. But it does represent the mind of those who signed it and they are Terrapulchrans, Christist or not. You must treat it like any other petition bearing that number of signatures. But with your permission I will meet with Achetes and try to talk some reason with him.”

Miron opened his hand in a gesture of release. “Talk to whom you will, Felix. I'll process this through the Council in due course. And thank you for coming here today. Can I call for a chair for you now?”

Felix smiled in appreciation. “A chair would be most welcome.” He stood and left the office. Miron followed him out and asked one of the clerks to arrange for a chair and porter. Then he took his leave of Felix.

There were some ten thousand Christists in Cras, of whom about one thousand had separated themselves into the 'Reformed Gathering' under Achetes. The new Gathering retained the organisational structure of the continuing Gathering. They customarily met in private houses or in rented community halls in groups of perhaps twenty to fifty under the leadership of one or more deacons.

The deacons themselves, whether Continuing or Reformed, met each week in groups of twenty-five to thirty under an Elder. There they received instruction in biblical studies and pastoral care techniques. There were ten such Elders in the continuing Gathering in Cras, meeting with each other each week in addition to their teaching duties among the deacons and also leading their own home congregations. Felix was recognised as first among them and hence the honorific title 'Bishop'. Achetes and another Elder named Alexander had formed the core of the new Gathering.

This night was scheduled for one of the Elders meetings. The continuing discussion of the Account of Yohan might have to be held over.

Not surprisingly, all nine elders in attendance agreed that the petition was at best unwise even if not positively unChristist in its presumption. Felix, Jason and Amelia were delegated to meet Achetes for discussions. Jason called on Achetes' home to ask for a convenient date to discuss the petition.

Three days later Achetes welcomed the three Elders into his home. Alexander was already there, waiting. The five sat together in a circle, and Felix offered a prayer. “Lord of all things, including the hearts of men; guide us, so that your purposes will be fulfilled.” All five concurred with their “Amen”.

“Please, Felix, speak your mind,” Achetes offered as the host.

“Thank you, my brother,” Felix began. “There are three main considerations that we think should be discussed, and that's why three of us are here tonight. We thought it would help order the discussion if we each took carriage of one aspect. Jason will start

with what we consider the least important, but still worthy of mention.” Felix motioned with an open hand to Jason.

Jason took a breath. “My concern is that this petition could cause resentment among our neighbours. At present Christists are not only tolerated, but are given some measure of respect for their honesty and generosity. But if this petition is understood by pagans as an attack on their gods, as a sign of what they consider impiety, then the superstitious among them will be more inclined to see us as the cause of any troubles that might occur. That is what happens from time to time back in the Old World. Such disturbances have cost many faithful Christists their lives, or the lives of their loved ones. I do not want to trigger any sort of superstitious backlash upon the people that God has entrusted to our care.

“And if we are perceived as harming our society by impiety that will also make our neighbours less willing to hear the Gospel when it is presented to them, and less willing to step out in faith even if they do listen.” Jason fell silent. Apparently that was all he felt needed to be said for the moment.

Felix took a co-ordinating role. “Achetes, do you want to discuss these issues in turn, or would you prefer to hear all three first?”

Achetes gestured with an open palm. “Let's have an overview first, please.”

Felix nodded to Amelia.

“I think this petition underestimates the power of God to bring good out of bad. Certainly, it is a blasphemy for Neptunus to be Patron Deity; but that has been the situation here since Founding, and God continues to bless us and add to his Gathering each year.

“Certainly one might reasonably think that it would bring glory to the Name if Yeshua is acknowledged as being a source of blessing by having a Christist temple in the Town Square; but it's God's style to bless in secret, not with the arrogance of a pagan god.

“And certainly prostitution, whether forced or not, whether female or male, is abhorrent; but I would never have met Chiron and he would never have embraced Yeshua had I not been forced into the Temple of Aphrodite. I am talking about Chiron, Achetes, whom you knew as a godly man before his passing! The man used by God to bring you to faith in good time and who served as your first deacon to instruct you in the Faith. You owe your own salvation to God's use of a Temple prostitute!

“This petition is an attempt to do by human hands what God achieves by His own hand. In that way it detracts from God's Glory.”

Felix took over smoothly. “My issue is that this petition would seem to be a rejection of the authority of God's Counsel as contained in the Writings. We are told 'submit to the governing authorities', yet this petition is an attempt to command them.

“We are told by the prophet Isaiah that 'a bruised reed He will not break, a smouldering wick He will not extinguish. He will not falter or be discouraged until He establishes justice on earth, and in His teaching the islands will put their hope.' Are we not the islands the prophet speaks of? Yet your activism seems contrary to the passivity of not breaking a damaged reed, and not extinguishing a smouldering wick.

“And finally, the prophet Daniel tells us that the rock that will cover the whole earth, the kingdom of God, will not be 'hewn by human hands'. But in this petition, you

are attempting to bring about the Kingdom by your own activism, by your own human hands.

“I beg of you, as my brother and a fellow-Elder; remember humility and let God work out His purposes in His own way, in His own time, by His own hand.”

Achetes had listened intently as the three Elders spoke. He nodded his acknowledgement of their cases. “Jason, your concerns are real. But as you agree yourselves, it's the least important consideration. I agree that it's preferable that our brothers and sisters not be harmed by the superstitious, but Yeshua warned that we would be put through suffering and he himself suffered.

“And I agree that it's preferable that pagans should be more eager to hear the Gospel. But it's important that this be the true Gospel, not one watered down to tolerate the pre-eminence of false gods.

“And it's preferable that as few impediments as possible be put in front of those who would come to the faith. But a convert who is not prepared to share in Yeshua's suffering is not a convert. He is only a passenger, ready to get out of the ship if the sailing isn't smooth. The Gathering of Yeshua needs no such ballast!”

Then he turned to Amelia. “Amelia, my sister. I have no desire to offend you but I must speak plainly. Yes, God used Chiron to call me to Himself. But if you had not been there, God would have used another to call Chiron. Or he might have used some other brother instead of Chiron. I think that you are using that example to justify yourself, because you served as a prostitute.

“You could have refused and it might have cost you dearly. It might have cost you your life! I'm glad that you're alive today, to serve Yeshua as well as you have for as long as you have. But had you been put to death those twenty years ago, you would have still been safe in Yeshua's arms. Your courage would have inspired the Gathering and the work you have done since would have been done by another.

“Yes, God can bring good out of bad, but that does not excuse those who co-operate with the bad. Your argument falls.

“And Felix, your argument has the appearance of wisdom and humility but is in fact a cover for cowardice. Our petition is not an attempt to command the governing authorities, but a petition. The word ‘petition’ means 'a request'. It's up to the Council to decide what they do in response.

“On your second point, I agree that Terrapulchra are the islands the prophet means. And I don't propose breaking so much as a splinter of wood in the Temple of Neptuneus, nor extinguishing one wick in the Temple of Aphrodite. Let that happen in God's good time, as their followers desert them! But I intend to neither falter nor be discouraged until God's justice is established in these islands, and their Hope is in the teaching of the Living God.

“The Gathering is how God will fulfil His purpose in this place and then throughout the whole world. But you have fallen under the condemnation of the Scripture that says 'We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.' You don't see the New Thing that our God is doing here!

“And finally, your reference to Daniel is in error. The 'rock not hewn by human hands' is not Terrapulchra, but God's Kingdom, the Gathering itself. Every nation on earth is hewn by human hands, Terrapulchra included. So it's only right that if

Terrapulchra is to be hewn by human hands, then we Christists should try to hew it into a shape that is a metaphor for the Kingdom that is of God, rather than leave it to be hewn by other hands into the shape of a blasphemy.”

Achetes gesture was half-shrug, half inquiry. “So you have not convinced me, my brothers and sister. Have I persuaded you?”

Felix looked to his two companions, both solemn. “We are not so arrogant that we will not consider what you say, Achetes. We will always remain open to the prompting of the Spirit. We will go now and pray, and discuss your reply.” Felix stood, and the others followed him.

Then he bowed his head in prayer. “Yeshua, your will be done!” The others echoed an “Amen”, and the three visitors left.

The mood back in Felix’ house was sombre. After more prayer for guidance Felix asked Jason, the youngest, for his thoughts.

“The only issue that really matters is the one you put forward, Felix. It’s about living faithfully, and the other considerations will look after themselves.

“I think he answered your points reasonably well. If pagans are permitted to petition for changes to the law, then why should Christists not make use of that right as well, to seek laws that promote godliness? And I also think his analysis of the Rock in Daniel is correct.

“But despite all that, I think he’s missing a critical consideration. Although it might be lawful for Christists to petition for laws, is it helpful? As Paul says to the Corinthians, ‘All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful’. I don’t think that demanding equality of status with Neptunus is helpful. Rather it will seem an exercise of arrogance. We are called to humility.

“Paul also advises in his First Letter to the Christists in Rome ‘As far as is within your power, live in peace with your neighbours’. I don’t think that an attempt to demote Neptunus is an example of living at peace. It will be seen as a provocation, a humiliation.

“Achetes is right when he says that the Gathering is how God will fulfil His purposes, but even then he gets it wrong. The Gathering will fulfil God’s purposes by humble witness and by suffering, just as Yeshua achieved God’s purposes through His humble witness and suffering. As soon as we start insisting on our rights we are no longer the Gathering of Yeshua. We are just another self-interested clique.”

Jason shook his head as if to summarise. “No. I choose the way of humility.”

Felix looked to Amelia. Amelia heaved a huge sigh. “I admit that I’m still shocked by his accusation that I was unfaithful during my time in the Temple. As God is my witness, I thought of myself as if another young companion of Daniel. I was careful to obey the governing authorities while being thrown into the furnace, but drawing the line before doing any worship of Aphrodite! And I suffered all the more for that refusal, and was prepared to suffer much more if that was to be my fate! Was I fooling myself? I don’t think so.”

Jason took her hand, and raised it to his lips. “No, sister. You took the light of Yeshua into places where no-one would have thought possible. Chiron was not the only person saved because of your strength while in that place!”

Felix nodded. “Jason is right. Just by saying that about you, Achetes showed that he’s motivated by pride rather than humility. He might think that he’s eager for Yeshua,

but in fact his eagerness is to show the world that *his* religion is the right one, and how wise he was to have chosen it! His very words were that if you had been put to death 'You would have still been safe in Yeshua's arms!' As though you were motivated only by your own salvation, and not concerned about service to Yeshua and the salvation of others! He esteems a moment of heroism above a lifetime of humility.

"While his arguments at a theological level have the appearance of learning and wisdom, they are based on self-interest and pride, not on a desire to be of humble service in his generation." Felix dropped his hands as if in exasperation. "Yet nothing is beyond our God. I'll talk to him again tomorrow. If he hears me then we can rejoice that Yeshua's body is no longer divided. But if not, we must continue to pray for him and those with him."

Achetes and Alexander would not be swayed by Felix. The petition was not withdrawn. When it came before the Council, the new Consul flatly asserted that he did not support it. Nor did any Councillor, and the petition was therefore dismissed without a Second Reading.

Achetes was infuriated when he heard about this. Not one Councillor out of the eighty had supported it! And six of them claimed to be Christists! Achetes and Alexander quickly penned a Pastoral Letter to the deacons hosting all of the thirty-two house gatherings that had been set up under their leadership.

From Achetes and Alexander, shepherds under the Great Shepherd,

To our brothers and sisters in Yeshua the Anointed,

Peace, Strength and Joy to all!

It is our sad duty to advise you that Yeshua has been dishonoured, even by those who have professed the Name with their own lips!

The petition which almost a thousand of you signed was submitted to the Council and came up for consideration at the last Council Meeting. This petition had two main aims.

The first aim sought to clarify the status of our faith as the equal of any other in Terrapulchra. Not superior to the other cults around us because that would be rightly seen as arrogant by our pagan neighbours, but only equal.

The second sought to ensure that only the willing should be subjected to sexual slavery, requiring that no-one be forced to play the harlot. This was not an attempt to stop these loathsome practices, because that is not possible without a universal change of heart. But it was an attempt to limit these practices to those who choose to engage in them. We sought only to protect the powerless.

Although signed by a thousand Terrapulchrans, this petition was totally rejected. So totally that not one of the eighty Councillors would even ask for it to be read a second time.

Even Junius, Parmenas, Marcia, Phillip, Sylvana and Euphanes, all of whom claim to be Christists, turned their backs on you! And more importantly, turned their backs on Yeshua and on the wretches who are brought to our shores every year condemned to slake the lusts of the sinners among us.

Surely the Lord was speaking to us by the prophet Isaiah when he commanded 'Go out! Go out! And touch no unclean thing!'. This refusal to even consider our petition, a petition which would have harmed none but saved hundreds of our fellow-humans from the degradation of enforced prostitution; surely this shows that this Terrapulchran society is under the condemnation of Heaven. But it also shows that the Gathering of Yeshua in this place has also fallen into complacency and error.

We, the mere one thousand Christists who remain faithful to our vows to Yeshua, we are the true remnant in this place. But so long as we remain in this place we are at risk of being corrupted by those around us just as has happened to those who have already proven themselves traitors to Yeshua. We now see that there is no other course open to us other than to walk out of this New Babylon. We must establish a new city where righteousness is encouraged.

We will approach the Council as soon as we are permitted and propose the establishment of a new colony where we will be permitted to honour Yeshua and live the Gospel and where all sinful behaviour is actively discouraged.

Gird up your loins! Let us re-build Zion!

A copy of this was given to Felix by an Activist deacon who thought this was a step too far. Felix could only agree and quickly called the other Elders for a meeting.

Again their decision was unanimous. Felix must meet the Chairman immediately to warn him that this was probably going to be read in the Activist Gathering meetings next Sunday evening. He had to assure Miron that this did not reflect the position of the continuing Gathering. In the meantime Jason would try to have the letter withdrawn before it is read.

As they were leaving Felix' house a messenger from the Chairman's office arrived. He was pulling a wheeled chair. "If Felix would be so kind as to meet with the Chairman immediately," the slave asked formally. Apparently more than one Activist deacon had misgivings and at least one had informed the Chairman directly. Felix climbed into the chair.

The Chairman wasted no time. "Thank you for coming so promptly, Felix. I appreciate that. But I must say that I am not happy with the way you Christists play your internal politics!" He dropped a copy of the Pastoral Letter onto the desk in front of

Felix. "What are these fire-brands trying to achieve? Can you give me as much as one good reason why I should not have them brought in and charged?"

"I've already read this letter, Miron. I and the other continuing Elders agree that this is a disaster. But I think it would be unwise of you to arrest them at the moment. They have used fiery words and this letter would do great damage if it is published. But I think they have stopped short of sedition. Look carefully and you will read only that they want to approach the Council with a proposal. That is hardly seditious! In fact, it might be that Achetes intends to provoke you into precisely such a move so he can play the role of a martyr by painting you as a harsh dictator, oppressing Christists."

Miron considered this advice for a moment before answering.

"Yes, you are right, I suppose," Miron dropped into his own chair. "But doesn't he realise that he can't set up his own colony and forbid anyone from practising the old religions? How can he hope to 'actively discourage' anything if it is permitted by law?"

"These are the most obvious problems he would run into at a practical level. But I don't think he's worried about that," Felix continued. "I suspect that his long-range plan is to break away from Terrapulchra altogether. *That* would be sedition, but I doubt he will let that be seen until he has a good pretext for claiming that he is the injured party."

The two men sat looking at each other for a while, each in his own thoughts.

"This could turn very nasty, Felix, if we're not careful. And your Christists are going to be the ones who get hurt. What can we do to stop it?"

Felix shook his head. "I'm not a politician like you, Miron. I'm a simple pastor, trying to encourage and protect my people. My skill is in talking to a room full of people who want to learn and teaching them with a quiet explanation. I don't have the skills to combat such rhetoric, such venom. Calling the six Christist members of the Council traitors to Yeshua! One of them an Elder, and another a deacon! I'm appalled!"

"Well, if you can't do anything to prevent problems before they happen, I will have to do something about them after it's too late. Something like arresting a thousand Christists and charging them with disturbing the peace. That won't do anyone any favours! Think of the cost to our work output alone! I don't want to have to do that." The Chairman abruptly jumped to his feet and started pacing.

"About ten thousand Christists in Cras, you say? Is there any chance of getting them all together, and talking to them? Take over the Town Square for one evening if you want! But you have to start setting the agenda yourself instead of just reacting to these crazies! You have to choose the site for the battle instead of being drawn into battle on their prepared ground! Think, Felix, of the consequences if you don't get this one right!"

Felix had been silently praying during the second half of Miron's hectoring. "Miron, it had never occurred to me to have a public meeting of the whole Gathering in one place. Tomorrow evening is our customary meeting time, where we can publish notices. So if you can permit me use of the Theatre in three nights' time, we'll see if we can arrange a public debate so all Christists will be able to understand the issues."

"Consider it done!" Miron exclaimed. "I'll ensure there's enough security to make sure you Christists are not disturbed by any others."

"Also, please could you arrange for notices to be posted throughout the city," Felix added. "And could you provide me with a few of your clerical workers for the working

day tomorrow? And access to your press to produce enough notices for everyone. There's much I need to get organised.” Felix was already running ahead with his plans.

By lunch-time the next day every Elder, both Activist and Continuing, had each been provided with thirty copies of a notice, and a request to distribute these copies to the deacons under their care for reading at the Meeting due that evening. Achetes and Alexander were also provided with specific invitations to attend and speak, and urged to bring as many of their Activists as possible.

PUBLIC MEETING
“Christists in a Pagan Society”
Cras Amphitheatre
Tuesday evening, starting at sunset

Activist or Continuing, this is an issue of vital importance to every Christist!

Come and hear the Christist Elders both Activist and Continuing publicly discuss this critically important topic. Each will be invited to speak for five minutes. Elders, Deacons and all other Christists are welcome to come, speak and ask questions.

After that first round, Deacons will be invited to ask questions. So if you have a question, make sure you let your deacon know what you want him to ask!

Remember, this is a public meeting and it is expected that many pagans will attend just out of curiosity. So this is an opportunity to let pagans see what motivates Christists. Let your conduct and your questions bring Glory to Yeshua!

Notices were going up on walls all over town. Felix was anxious. How would the Activists respond? That accursed pastoral letter from Achetes and Alexander would be read tonight. Would those two Activists even bother to hand out the invitations to be read as well? And even if the invitations were mentioned, what scornful commentary would the Activist deacons add to them? He bowed his head yet again. “All things are in your hands, Yeshua. Your will be done!” He would find out soon enough.

Miron stood on the focus of the amphitheatre and held out his hands for silence. Twelve Elders were seated in a row behind him. Achetes and Alexander had decided to attend. In the front section of the crowd he could see the distinctive caps worn by some deacons. The theatre was almost full, with a ragged break some two-thirds the way up the slope signifying the division between the Christists here for the night and the pagans operating on pure curiosity.

“As you all know, I am not a Christist. So I have no bias one way or the other in the matters to be discussed here tonight. My interest is in public order and the common good of all Terrapulchrans, whether they be Christist or Traditional, Activist or Continuing.

“To ensure no bias, I will ask the Elders to speak for no more than five minutes each in an order to be determined by ballot.” He held up a pot. “After that I will invite questions to be put to the Elders by deacons.

“I have been informed that the Activists are about ten percent of your total numbers. I suspect that to allow only one question in ten to the Activist group would seem to be insufficient to fully explore the issues to be discussed. But to allow complete parity would also seem disproportionate. So I have suggested that two questions be permitted from the continuing deacons for each one from an Activist deacon. Both Felix and Achetes have accepted this as reasonable.

“One last point. We are all Terrapulchrans acting in good faith and we all deserve courtesy. We have a long history of debating matters of public policy but no matter how vigorously one might oppose the opinion of the other, our tradition is to debate the issue and not to denigrate the person. I am sure you Christists, with your emphasis on brotherly love, will be foremost in observing this custom.” He paused a moment and then put his hand into the pot and pulled out a scrap of paper.

“The first speaker will be Cornelius.” Miron backed away from the speaker’s step as an old man stood and made his way forward.

“Perhaps it is appropriate that I speak first,” Cornelius started, “because it will get me out of the way quickly and allow my more learned colleagues to drill deeper.

“Because I am a simple man and my reference point in any question is simple. I merely ask ‘What example do we have in Yeshua?’. And if we have no example in Yeshua, then what example do we have in the First Disciples?

“I do not see Yeshua demanding anything from the governing authorities in his own day. I only see him preaching the Kingdom of Heaven, and his hearers either follow or they do not. They either repent of their sins, or they continue living in them.

“Let the example of Yeshua be our guide. Let us preach the Gospel in our words and in our actions. Those who hear will hear, and those who refuse will answer for it to Yeshua, not to us. But as it is written, ‘how can they hear, except someone will tell them?’ Therefore I see it as our duty as Christists to be a vital part of our society, and not to withdraw from it. Therefore I do not support the recent petition.” Cornelius bowed slightly, then walked back to his seat.

Miron groped into the pot and withdrew another card. “Junius,” he bellowed. There was a stir and some hissing from a small section. Junius was the Christist Elder who was also a member of the Terrapulchra Council, and he had not supported the petition. Miron was eager to use this response as an occasion for a timely reminder. He was desperately fearful of a riot if things were not carefully managed. “Terrapulchrans! We will not tolerate conduct that might lead to disorder. My men are instructed to remove any who misbehave!”

Junius stood, awaiting silence. As Miron’s men patrolled the seats he soon had it. “My brother Cornelius says he is a simple man, but there are many times when the simplest is also the most profound.

“I have a unique place in this debate, as evidenced by the response that some gave when my name was called. I am an Elder in the Gathering of Yeshua, with responsibility to do all I can to bring those brothers and sisters under my care to the fullness that is found only in Yeshua. There is no more responsible position than that in the entire world.

“And I am also a member of the Council, responsible for the health, prosperity and peace of my fellow-citizens, whether Christist or pagan. But whether I am considering how to act as an Elder, or how to act as a Councillor, the same principles apply. As Cornelius so aptly put it, 'What examples do I see in Yeshua? What examples do I see in the First Disciples?'

“When I considered the petition, I thought to myself, “Did any of the Disciples ever demand of their Provincial Houses or their City Governors that a Christist meeting-hall be erected in their own forum? Did any of them demand that slaves be freed from prostitution?’ I know of no such examples. But I do know that Yeshua, being found in human form, did not demand equality with God but humbled himself, even to accepting the most humiliating death possible.

“It was my opinion at the time, and even more so now, that the petition was a distortion of true Christist humility. Where Yeshua did not demand equality with God, this petition demanded equality of Christist worship with that of Neptunus. Where Yeshua accepted injustice and prayed for those who tortured and humiliated him, this petition arrogantly demanded favouritism.

“I smelt in it none of the humility of Yeshua, nor do I see His Face in it.” Junius abruptly turned and resumed his seat. There was a rising sound of disapproval from one section of the audience. A dozen city guards moved rapidly to that section and stationed themselves prominently among them. The murmuring stopped.

Miron nodded his approval towards these guards, and reached into the pot again. “Achetes!” The crowd around the guards politely clapped. Miron’s glare silenced them.

Achetes strode to the focus, and stood tall. He slowly scanned the audience, building the tension as he did so. At last he spoke.

“There are some among us who do not understand the Scriptures.” He paused. “There are some among us who would say 'I do only as I see Yeshua doing', but are deaf to what Yeshua is saying.”

He scanned the audience again. “At the very start of his public ministry, Yeshua said ‘He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and to set the oppressed free.’ Alexander and I heard this statement from Yeshua in our hearts, and put forward a petition that asked the Council to release slaves from involuntary prostitution, the most horrendous form of slavery. Yet there are some here who would tell you that Yeshua, who proclaimed that he came to set the oppressed free, would not include sexual slavery in that category!”

A low murmur ran around the audience. Achetes waited for it to play out. “So ask yourselves! What proclamation do you hear from Yeshua? And what sort of imitation do you see from Junius?” He challenged. “Well? What sort of imitation do you see?” he demanded even more stridently. “I see no imitation of Yeshua! When you look at Junius, whose Face do you see? I see only a traitor to the Good News, a man who assigns young girls to prostitution!” he roared. A roar came back to him, cut short as the guards brandished their clubs. Achetes returned to his seat as the roar died away.

Miron walked solemnly to the focus. He groped into the bowl again. He read it then bellowed “Jason shall speak next!” and retired.

Jason scratched his head, as if confused. “I have trouble understanding this Pastoral Letter written by Achetes and Alexander. It asserts that six of our Councillors

are 'Traitors to Yeshua' because they dared to disagree with two out of our twelve elders while agreeing with the other ten. But that isn't all! Terrapulchra, a place where every slave can be confident of full citizenship, is likened to Babylon, a by-word for slavery. It seems bizarre, so disconnected with the reality we live and work in every day! But quite apart from those little details, I just wonder how this special 'Christists-only' colony would work!

"Do Achetes and Alexander suggest that all Christists should go there? How then are we to fulfil the command of Yeshua and the examples of the Disciples by going out into the pagan world to call sinners to Yeshua? And if they intend to 'actively discourage' all sinful behaviour, does this mean that he intends to bring in a new Legalism? We all know what Paul says about salvation by faith, not by Law!

"But let us just suppose this colony is set up as outlined. Would pagans be permitted? If so, then by what right can Achetes prevent them from setting up a pagan temple for their own use? The pagans permit us to meet in Christist worship, without any harm. If he would not permit the same right to pagans, then how does he expect the pagans in every other town in Terrapulchra to react to our Christist gatherings?

"And finally, even if pagans could be excluded, I have to ask *which* Christists would be permitted to join this new colony? All of us? If so, Achetes and Alexander are followed by only one Christist in ten. They would soon be voted out of office and their policies would be reversed. Or would they restrict entry so that only those who agree with them would be permitted to join?

"If they restrict membership to only those who agree with them, then that means that the rights of every Christist citizen would be at the whim of these two men. They would be dictators! They would be tyrants!

"So if this colony is eventually set up as they suggest, then I can see only two possible futures for it. It would either become just one more town like any other within a matter of a few years; or it would become a dictatorship harsher than any in history, because it would control not only your bodies but your faith in Yeshua as well! Do not subject yourself to such spiritual slavery!"

A wave of angry murmuring broke out among the Activists section as Jason turned back to his seat. Miron rushed to the focus of the theatre. "Silence!" he bellowed. "Silence! I will not allow this to degenerate into a riot!" He turned to the Elders.

"I warn you! If anyone tries to inflame this meeting, then I will have that person removed!" He glared at them all in turn. He then reached into the pot for another name. He scanned the paper, and bellowed "Amelia!"

Amelia walked to the focus. "Jason might well wonder how this 'Christist-only' colony might work, and I share his confusion there. But my main question is slightly different. I'm left wondering 'What purpose is it intended to serve?'

"Achetes says that the petition that triggered this proposal was aimed at establishing the Faith as the equal of any religion in Terrapulchra. But the other gods do not have their own colonies! I don't see how setting up a Christist-only settlement will do anything except reduce the Christist presence in the existing settlements.

"Achetes also says that the second aim of the petition was to protect slaves forced into prostitution. But I fail to see how a Christist-only colony will result in fewer prostitutes in the other settlements.

“But what a separate Christist-only colony *will* achieve is quite obvious. It will reduce the contact between Christists and pagans, so pagans will have less exposure to the Gospel and less idea what our Faith actually means. It will be a way of escaping our duties, both to Yeshua and to our fellow-citizens. It will become a sheltered environment where we will grow spiritually flabby.

“I ask you, did Yeshua command his followers to hide from the world, or did he command them to go out and preach? And did Paul not tell his readers to be in the world, but not of it?” Amelia paused for emphasis.

“Make no mistake! If ever a ‘Christist-only’ settlement were established, I would refuse to go there. I would refuse to go there because I refuse to be silenced in my witness for Yeshua. I would refuse to hide from the world that I have been told to preach to!”

Amelia turned back to her seat. Miron called out another name. “Alexander!”

Alexander walked slowly to the focus with a smirk on his face. He looked around, almost mockingly. Then he spoke with a sneer in his voice. “So Amelia refuses to hide from the world she has been told to preach to! Tell me, Amelia; how much preaching did you do while you were flat on your back in the Temple of Aphrodite?”

The crowd erupted in a roar. Virtually everyone in the theatre stood, shouting their contempt for Alexander. Alexander motioned for quiet, but this only infuriated the crowd even more. Miron quickly gestured to two of his men and they frog-marched Alexander to the stage exit. Then he stood on the focus himself, arms upraised and motionless, begging for order. Eventually the uproar faded enough for him to speak.

“Please understand that I must keep order! But to show that I am not taking sides, I will invite Achetes to speak again on behalf of his colleague.”

Achetes stood and looked along the line of the other Elders. Felix gestured towards the focus, inviting him to take his place. Hesitantly, he walked to the focus. He held out his arms, imploring for silence.

“We now see the issues more clearly. A pagan presumes to decide what a Christist Elder may say to the body of Yeshua! A follower of Neptunus asserts his power over a follower of Yeshua! And why? Because that one brave Christist Elder asked one question!”

The murmur from the crowd returned in force. Miron stood but did not have time to order his men in before Achetes shouted “What fellowship does the Temple of the Lord have with the Temple of Aphrodite?” Then Achetes strode for the exit. Miron signalled to his men in the passageway beyond. Hold that man!

Miron rushed to the focus and again called for calm. Many in the crowd were angry, many were weeping. This could become very ugly if he did not act quickly. He reached over his left shoulder and withdrew the ceremonial fasces from the pouch on his back. His men spread throughout the crowd knew what this meant, and drew their truncheons again. Miron turned back to the seated Elders and waved them urgently towards the exit. But to his amazement Felix and then all the other Elders rose and stood beside him, urging peace with a palms-down gesture.

This had mixed results. Most of the crowd responded by resuming their seats, many of them in obvious distress. But a small section became even more vocal, and started a chant “Go out! Go out!” Miron’s men started to converge on this group.

“Are they trying to order us out of here?” Miron asked the nearest Elder.

“I don’t think so,” he was told. “The Activists have taken a passage of our Scriptures as their slogan; ‘Go out! Go out! Touch no unclean thing!’” Miron nodded his understanding.

A couple of men in their distinctive deacons’ hats saw the strong arm of the law approaching and started to conduct their charges towards the exit. The security men hung back to allow them to leave.

At length the theatre was left to the more docile majority. The sound of sobbing was everywhere. Felix stepped forward. Miron whispered to him, “Keep a lid on it!” Felix nodded.

Taking his stand on the focus, Felix called with a strong voice, “Brothers and sisters! My heart is also breaking within my chest. Not with rage, nor indignation, nor even exasperation; but with grief.

“Yeshua’s body in this place has been maimed. I urge you to do nothing out of anger or pride, but humbly pray that our health might be restored. Bear no grudge; but pray for those who have been torn from us, that they may yet be given back to us whole!

“We know that we were promised suffering in this world. So why are we surprised when those whom we have loved as brethren turn away from us? Did not the same thing happen to Yeshua, when Simon denied him three times? There will be reconciliation in God’s good time, just as there was with Simon! Be strong and endure this time of sorrow, for the joy that will be given at the end!

“Go your way in peace in the name of Yeshua. May the Lord make His Face shine upon you. May the Lord lift up His Face to you and give you peace!”

And the response to this customary dismissal formula came back from the terraces, “In the name of Yeshua.” The people lurched to their feet, and started shuffling towards the exits.

Felix turned back to the other nine Elders, and beckoned them into a circle. The arms of each went over the shoulders of those standing beside, and Felix offered a prayer. “Lord, give us wisdom and patience.” The Elders murmured an “Amen!”

“Brothers and sisters, I think we need to meet tomorrow night.” Everyone nodded. The group broke, and started for the stage exit.

“Where do you lot think you’re going?” asked Miron.

“We’re going home, Miron.”

“Not by yourselves, you’re not! I saw what was in the eyes of that rabble and *they* won’t be going home just yet! You’ll take a squad of my men with you.”

“That’s not needed, Miron,” Junius countered. “They disagree with us but they are still Christists. They will not harm us.”

Miron stared at him sceptically. “Then let my men be bored! You will have escorts! But first we’ll wait here for an hour just to give the streets time to clear.”

Everyone lived in the same general direction from the Theatre, which had been built in a gully near the seaward edge of the town centre. So they set off together, dropping off members as they progressed. Six of the nine took their leave progressively and the group headed for Amelia’s home, the next in line.

Like most Terrapulchran citizens, Amelia lived in a partitioned section of a long barracks-like building. Her son had been allocated a teaching job and had his own room

and study in the school, so she lived alone. Therefore she had been allocated a small two-room unit within the building.

The front door had been daubed with paint. In the flickering of the escorting soldiers' torches they could make out a single word in red letters. 'Harlot'. She shrivelled as she stood staring at it. Junius and Cornelius, still to reach their homes in turn, embraced her and supported her.

"Perhaps you should come to my home for the night," old Cornelius offered. Amelia nodded as she fought back the sobs.

The captain of the escort smouldered. This sort of thing is not the Terrapulchran way! "Who do you think might have done this?" he demanded.

Junius flapped a hand. "Oh, probably some hot-head follower of Achetes and Alexander. It wouldn't have been anything deliberate by the leaders. They wouldn't do anything like this! It's just a follower who got carried away."

"What makes you so sure of that?" demanded the captain. "I just heard a man named Alexander make precisely the accusation I now see splashed across her front door, but he made it to the lady's face in the hearing of thousands of people! If he would do that, then he's not above doing this as a follow-up."

"No. Alexander can be a bit blunt at times but he's neither a bully nor a coward."

"So you say," the captain continued. "But I want to have a quiet chat with him."

The next stop was the home of Junius. As they turned the corner they could see some dozen or more figures in front of his door. One broke from the crowd and ran towards him. It was his wife Prisca, sobbing.

"When I got home with the kids there was paint on our front door! It's horrible! Marcus and Zenon heard me crying and came out to look. They roused the neighbours to help protect me if anyone came back!"

There were fifteen men in front of Junius' home when they got close enough to make out all the faces. And they were angry. Cras had virtually no crime, and the word 'Traditor' - 'Traitor' in Latin - scrawled across the door of one of their most respected neighbours seemed an evil ghost from a different world. Faceless intimidation! They were scared for their own future peace no less than for Prisca.

"Is this how you Christists treat each other, Junius? Tell us who did it and we'll set him straight for you!" That was Zenon, their next-door neighbour.

"No, Zenon, calm down. This can be sorted out," urged Junius, as he embraced Prisca. His two sons and daughter hugged their parents. They were feeling unsafe as well.

The captain looked at the door. "Just some hot-head, eh? Different hand, look at how the 'o' is different from the one on the first door. This was a single circle, the other was two downward strokes, one each side. And a different colour, too. Two different people is not a co-incidence, it's a deliberate plan." He turned to one of his troopers. "Get down to Miron's house, tell him I want another thirty men to meet me at Achetes' house if he's been released, or to keep holding Achetes if he's still in hand. The same with Alexander. Then report back here." Then to another, "You heard what I said. You go to Miron's office in case he is still there, and tell him the same."

Junius had a terrible premonition. He put his hand to the shoulder of the captain. "I know there seemed nothing wrong when we left Felix at his home, but I think we should go back there just to check."

The captain wore shock on his face for a moment and then called "Come on, men! At the run!" and started back towards Felix' home. Because of his arthritis Felix had been allocated a unit near the centre of the town and had been one of the first to be dropped off. Junius ran with them.

The men arrived at Felix' home, a two-room apartment in a row of barracks. His was an end unit, with only one neighbour. The front door was still clean and closed. No light showed inside. Junius knocked to rouse the old man. There was no response. He banged on the door and the neighbour poked his head out the front window. "What's the problem?"

"Did you hear Felix come home? Has he had any visitors?" Junius asked.

"No, but I've only just got home myself."

There was still no response from Felix. Junius swung his leg up and climbed through the open front window into Felix' front room. It was dark, but he had been to so many meetings in this room he knew it almost as well as his own. He reached over and opened the door, then groped for where he knew the lamp would be and passed it out to a guard to be lit from the torch.

While this lamp was being lit Junius started to cross the room to the door to the bedroom. He tripped over something on the floor. Junius felt his blood run cold. "Captain! Bring the lamp in here!"

Felix lay on the floor in the centre of a dark stain.

"Touch nothing!" the captain ordered. "If there was a struggle he might have been able to tear off a scrap of clothing, or hair, or something. Come out now so we can search the place for clues in daylight."

Junius obeyed, leaving footprints in blood across the floor. He turned when he reached the front door and his gaze swept the room. That was when he noticed the writing on far wall. It was in Greek. 'but also approve of those who practice them.'

Horror leapt to his throat. This slaughter had been done by someone who professed Yeshua! He called the captain's attention to the writing. "That's a quote from one of our sacred writings, about God judging the wicked. I think this might have been done by an Activist who got carried away in his anger."

The captain was quick to assess the situation. The graffiti on Junius' door had been Latin but that on Amelia's door and the writing on this wall was Greek. The unusual way the Greek omicron had been written on Amelia's' door was nothing like the omicron on this wall. But it was identical to the Latin 'o' on Junius' door. So the two Greek writings were not done by a single hand, and it was unlikely that the one man would write Latin on a door and Greek on a wall, no matter how similar the calligraphy. There might be at least three offenders in this conspiracy. He barked orders to his men.

"Not a word of this is to get out! Tell no-one! I'll head back to the watchhouse now. You three, go to the houses of all the people we've dropped off and collect them. At the run! Take them to the watchhouse, and their families too. You, run back to Junius' house. Collect the old guy and that woman Elder, and Junius' family. Take them back to the watchhouse too. You two, go to intercept the extra men I asked to be sent to Achetes'

and Alexander's houses. Cut them off before they get there, we don't want them being warned. You, run to Miron's office and give him an update. You, run to Miron's house and do the same. You other two, stay here and isolate this scene. I don't want anyone going in there until I say so!" Everyone except the first three had run off as soon as they had their orders. "Well?" challenged the captain.

"We're not sure where these Christists live. Could Junius come with us?"

"YES!" barked the captain, and motioned for Junius to accompany them. Junius set off at a quick jog.

In less than an hour everyone had been assembled in the Cras watchhouse. All of the Elders except for Felix were safe, and only Junius and Amelia had been subjected to graffiti attacks.

It also happened that Achetes and Alexander were still under guard in the theatre. Miron had decided to hold them for a couple of hours to make sure they couldn't stir up any trouble as the crowd made its way home. The message from the captain of the escort arrived just in time for this captivity to be extended.

"Why were you three singled out?" the captain asked Junius and Amelia.

Junius shrugged. "Felix was obviously the leader. He's been bishop here for over twenty years and everyone knows him. Even the pagans. I suppose Amelia and I were targeted as well because Alexander and Achetes singled us out for attention. Perhaps Jason was lucky not to be named as well."

Miron joined the little group. "At least we know Achetes and Alexander didn't commit these acts. They were in custody at the time. But perhaps they were involved in the planning. The captain and I should speak to them." He drew away, the captain following. "Come with us, Junius. I want you listening outside the door. You know these people better than I, and I want you to tell if you hear anything that seems unusual."

The three men walked quickly to the Theatre through the now-deserted streets. "Say nothing and give away nothing captain, until I say so," Miron ordered.

Achetes and Alexander were being held in dressing rooms at opposite sides of the theatre. Miron had not wanted them to be able to plan anything. There were two men with them in each room.

Miron and the captain walked into the room holding Alexander, leaving the door wide open for Junius to listen from the corridor. Miron sat down heavily on a chair. "That was a nice night of work, Alexander! You almost started a riot up there!"

"The unrighteous often find the Truth offensive," Alexander replied.

"Perhaps so, but you don't have to present it to them with such a huge flourish! Exactly what were you trying to achieve?"

"Achetes and I knew what was planned. We were going to be forced into a dry debate, everyone being polite and pretending that their opponents were worth listening to. That's how to soothe a guilty conscience and send the heart to sleep. We decided that the truth had to be put there on display. And we would do it so dramatically that no-one would be able to pretend it wasn't there, staring them in the face."

Alexander stood, and started pacing. "Those wooden puppets who call themselves the Continuing Elders are play-acting at following Yeshua. They accommodate themselves to this fallen world and refuse to take a stand over even the most outrageous things! That's why our petition called for the changes to prostitution, to make them show

how complicit they were in these practices. And they didn't disappoint us! They stepped straight into that trap!" Alexander rubbed his hands together in satisfaction.

"Tonight we came with a simple plan. It was to show how Felix has led the Gathering into this valley of death, how Junius had become more concerned with his status among the pagans than his standing before God, and how a notorious whore had been granted a position of great influence in the Gathering! If we had the opportunity to speak against them in the opening round, well and good. But if not, we had planted questions that would have allowed us to do it later.

"How fortunate it was, how much it shows that God is in control, that Achetes' lot was to speak immediately after Junius, and my lot came immediately after the slut! We can worry about Felix the ring-master some other day."

Miron nodded as if turning over in his mind what Alexander had just spewed forth. "I don't want to worry about Felix some other day. I don't want another near-riot. I want to take you and Achetes to Felix's home right now, and sort this thing out tonight."

"I'm ready whenever you are!" Alexander offered, with grim delight.

Miron stood. "Please wait. I'll be right back." Miron and the captain walked out, closing the door behind them. They beckoned Junius into another room, mid-way along the corridor and closed the door.

Miron spoke first. "That guy either knowingly incited a riot, or is incredibly stupid not to see where it could lead!" He stared at Junius, inviting a response.

"Incredibly naïve," Junius agreed. "I couldn't see his face, but from his voice I'd say he knows nothing about Felix' murder."

"Yes, that much is obvious," Miron agreed. "If he knew about it he wouldn't have been so open about his contempt and eagerness to destroy his standing." He looked to the captain, who simply nodded.

They went to the Achetes' room next, Junius outside by the open door. Miron flopped into a chair. "Nice work, Achetes," Miron said sardonically. "That was as close to a riot as I ever want to be!"

Achetes looked back at him calmly. "But a riot it wasn't, so can I go home now?"

"No, you can't, Achetes. I don't want this to drag on another day. You Christists have got to get your heads together and come to some sort of peace."

"They are not Christists," Achetes said dismissively. "They're backsliders! What you saw tonight was a fine robe being stripped off a leper! Everyone saw them for the weak, faithless cowards they really are!"

"You have no need to worry about unrest in Cras, Miron! The vast majority of Christists now see things more clearly. They'll come over to me and Alexander, and leave the hypocrites to chatter among themselves."

Miron leant forward. "That's not the way I saw it, Achetes. From what I saw, these people were distressed to see their trusted, respected and beloved leaders tearing the flesh off each other. Both sides are being hurt here, and that hurt has to be stopped. I want you and Alexander to talk to Felix, and get things sorted out. Tonight!"

Achetes opened his hands in a gesture of both submission and scepticism. "I'll talk, and I'll listen. But unless Felix recognises his errors there can be no agreement."

Miron stood. "Wait here."

The three men again retreated to their central room. Miron flopped his hands in a gesture of hopelessness. "He's the same! He hasn't the faintest clue! He seems to think it's just a game, all about him and his agenda!"

There was a pause and then the captain spoke. "Miron, I think it might help my investigation if I held them here overnight, and took them to Felix' place at first light. When they see what's happened they might give us some idea where to look next."

Miron held out both hands, palms up. "It's your investigation. Thank you for allowing me this initial interrogation."

"Thank you, sir. I'll tell the men to sleep where they are tonight and be ready for a meeting at first light. I'll send men to their families to let them know that they're safe and assisting us with inquiries, and to advise their workplaces that they won't be able to report tomorrow morning." The captain left the room.

Miron looked over to Junius. "I think you should get some sleep, too," he said softly. "Back to the watchhouse now."

The captain, Miron, Achetes, Alexander and six guards made their way to Felix' house at first light. Alexander and Achetes chatted easily to each other on the way as though this was just one more minor step towards their assured objective.

"Ah, look! Junius is already here waiting for us!" Achetes exclaimed cheerily. "And two more guards in case we start a four-man riot!" he added mischievously.

Junius stepped away as the group climbed the four steps onto the deck that ran the length of the building, past each front door. Miron and the captain took position one on either side. With Achetes and Alexander side-by-side in front of the door the captain pushed the door open.

The two men started as if to step inside, but stopped in shock. Alexander pulled back horrified, and then heaved his breakfast over the railing of the narrow verandah onto the street. He staggered down to the street level. Achetes just stood, transfixed.

Eventually Achetes found his tongue. "How could this happen?"

"Oh, it's not too hard to figure that one out," Miron replied sarcastically. "Some idiot who claims to speak for some god says that Felix is a traitor to the faith, and some other idiot hears him and decides to do something about it."

Achetes shook his head in denial. "No! No! It's just a co-incidence! He came home to find a burglar in his house and the thief panicked."

"Can you read the writing on the wall over there?" Miron pointed to the side wall. Now it was daylight he noticed that it was written in dried blood.

Achetes stared at the wall. "Oh, no!" he groaned. "Oh, no!" Achetes collapsed to his knees.

Miron was not without some sympathy. 'This guy is a total fool if he didn't realise that his words could lead to this!' he thought to himself savagely. 'But he obviously didn't. Which makes him only a fool, nothing worse.' He dropped a hand on Achetes' shoulder. "Come away from this and sit with me."

But Achetes would not move. He was in his own world of total despair, choking softly instead of breathing.

"Captain, have two men help Achetes to his feet and lead him to the corner benches." It was a standard part of town planning in Cras that every street intersection be

provided with some wooden benches so people could sit and chat in the cool of the evenings. Achetes was taken to these benches, and then Alexander with him.

“What can you tell me, gentlemen?” The captain was businesslike but not harsh.

Achetes shook his head in bewilderment. “It was no thief. Only a Christist would write that message on the wall. A Christist who knew his scriptures reasonably well. Could it have been one of our deacons?”

Alexander was perplexed. “What message?”

Achetes looked at him, and then dropped his eyes. “and also approve of those that practice them.”

Alexander gaped. “From Paul’s First Letter to the Romans!”

Achetes nodded dismally.

“Gentlemen, if you could provide me with a list of your deacons and any others who might be worth interviewing...” The captain prompted gently.

Achetes put his head in his hands. “I don’t believe this is happening! I feel like a man who has just discovered his favourite son is an abomination! It can’t be true!”

Alexander set his jaw. He had made a decision. “Take me to my home, captain. I have a list of all the deacons who have come over to us. If any of them has done this he must be purged from our midst.”

It's not only that, Alexander,” Achetes chided him. “We set the arrow in flight. We must also take responsibility for the wound it causes. So it's our duty to set things right.” Achetes stood abruptly and strode towards Junius, still outside Felix’ door. Junius saw him coming and turned to face him. Junius showed uncertainty all over his face.

When still three paces away from Junius, Achetes laid himself face-down onto the ground. “I have sinned most grievously against you, Junius,” he called out. “I have unjustly reviled you and your colleagues, and I have brought this disaster upon Yeshua’s Body. Please, speak to your colleagues and set me a penance as heavy as my sins deserve.”

Junius was stunned. He stepped to Achetes' side and knelt. He put a hand on Achetes’ shoulder and said softly, “Achetes, stand!”

The two men regained their feet, Achetes still with head bowed. “I think penance will be the lightest thing you’ll face in the days to come,” Junius said gently. “But be strong!” Junius then embraced him and gave him the formal kiss of greeting. Achetes immediately fell to his knees again, sobbing.

Alexander watched all this and curled his upper lip in contempt. A man is responsible for his own sins, not for those of everyone else! So there might be a couple of evil-doers even within the Reformed Gathering? Stamp them out of it! There is no righteousness in going back into the Gathering of compromise and laxity. Only forwards, to an ever-more-refined Gathering! In that moment, Alexander definitively turned his back on Achetes.

Alexander stood abruptly. “Come, captain. I’ll give you that list.”

By the time the captain had the list of deacons in his hands the working day was well under way. He didn’t expect to find any at home unless sick or taking a rostered day off. But he sent guards to each anyway, with instructions to take each to the watchhouse if at home or to wait until he came home. Also each house should be searched for evidence such as clothing or footwear with bloodstains or paint. All of these deacons

were to be kept separate from Achetes and Alexander, who were held separately. For convenience they were sent to a room in the Administration Building under Miron's care.

Then he set his forensic team to assessing Felix's house for evidence.

Felix had nothing in his hands, not even a scrap of cloth or a tuft of hair that provided any evidence. He had died from a single stab wound, entering the belly and passing up behind the ribs and into the chest cavity, puncturing the heart. The orientation of the wound was unusual, starting just right of the body centreline and angled towards the left as it rose. This suggested that he was stabbed by a left-handed blow.

Five Activist deacons were found at home, it being their rostered rest day. They were brought into the watchhouse and their statements were taken but they were not permitted to leave. Instead a guard was sent to their homes to advise each family that the deacon was safe and well, assisting with inquiries. The guards were also authorised to search their dwellings.

As each deacon was brought in to the watchhouse he was asked to write a statement explaining his movements the previous evening, starting with the moment he left the theatre. This was to include the names of any people he was with from time to time and where they went at what time.

A young boy arrived at the watchhouse just after noon, carrying a note for the captain. This note was from a guard still at the house of a deacon apparently at work. It requested a forensics team be sent immediately. It also advised that the place of work of the deacon who lived there should be discovered as quickly as possible and he should be picked up from work if the information could be made available soon enough.

The forensics team was sent. The home was one of the larger units in Cras, occupied by Christophoros. He was a man with five children and a highly-respected job. He merited a larger dwelling with a private garden at the rear on the basis of his larger family, and this was some distance from the town centre because his entire family was fit and healthy.

And quite an attractive garden it had, too. This man, or at least some-one in his family, took considerable joy in gardening. There was a compost heap in one corner with a hint of cloth showing under one edge.

"I looked through his dirty clothing and his footwear cupboard and found nothing," the guard reported. "Then I walked around his garden. I saw the pile of cuttings and leaves in the corner. But it seemed strange that the branch cuttings on top had bits of other plants through them, as though they had originally been buried under the other stuff but then pulled out and put on top later. So I lifted some of the branches off to look more closely. That's when I saw what looks like some cloth. So I went out the front until I saw some-one passing by and asked that boy to take a message. I didn't want to leave the site unguarded."

The forensics team carefully lifted the vegetation away, one small bit at a time. Eventually it was clear what they had found. It was a tunic with blood sprayed over its front, another wiping cloth with blood rubbed into it, and a pair of sandals with blood on their top surfaces as well as the soles.

The forensic team left with the evidence. The guard remained in place awaiting the return of the Christophoros and his family.

The wife arrived home first, with one infant in a sling and four other children on foot. Soon afterwards a runner arrived from the watchhouse. Christophoros was in custody and writing his statement. Could the guard please request the wife to come in and make her own statement? She just shrugged and said 'Why not?'. After organising with a neighbour to take care of the children they walked to the watchhouse.

Christophoros' statement was very brief. He claimed that he left the theatre with four members of his house Gathering, and the party went to each home in turn. He had been the fourth to get home, leaving the last to travel another hundred paces or so by himself.

The wife was not permitted to contact Christophoros. Her statement was taken. In it she claimed that she had stayed at home with the children rather than going to the theatre. Her husband had returned home early, perhaps only three hours after sunset. She had expected the meeting to go through until almost midnight.

This was interesting. The meeting had actually broken up after less than one hour, and the Activists had left before the main bulk. He should have been home after little more than an hour.

"Lady, was your husband alone when he arrived or was he in the company of one or more others?"

"I don't know. I was in my daughter's bedroom and in no position to see."

"Did he do anything unusual when he arrived home?"

"Not really. He usually greets me with a kiss, but I was tending to our daughter. So he just went into our bedroom, took off his clothes and washed before going to bed."

"What did he do with his clothes when he took them off?"

"I don't know. I didn't notice them anywhere."

"What does he usually do?"

"He usually dumps them in the corner."

"But not last night?"

"No actually, not last night. And I heard him open the window to throw out his wash-water, too. He usually just leaves it. So perhaps he threw his clothes out as well. They might have been smelly."

"Thank you, lady. Please add those points to your statement. When that's done, do you mind if we walk you back to your home?"

"What a gentleman! Thank you!"

The forensics team went back to the home with her and checked the area under the main bedroom window. That area was thick with ants. It was as though they smelt blood there.

All of the deacons were to be held overnight while the Captain read through their statements. He also read the report from the forensics team examining Christophoros' home and the blood-stained clothing and the other forensics team at Felix' home. It looked convincing but there were key pieces still missing.

At first light the next morning the captain took Christophoros' statement into the holding cells and called his name.

"Yes, captain. What can I do for you?" Christophoros was still polite even after being held for almost a whole day.

“If you could please add a short note to your statement, please.” The captain opened the door and invited him into the office. He placed Christophoros’ statement on the table, and a pen. “If you could please note the names and addresses of the others who walked home with you that night.”

“I can write their names, but I’m not sure of all their addresses. I tend to work by sight and memory,” Christophoros explained apologetically.

“That would be enough. I can refer to files if I have names.”

Christophoros wrote down four names, two with addresses. He wrote with his left hand.

“Thank you,” the captain smiled politely. “Now if you could return to the holding area...” Christophoros strolled out, and back to the cell he shared with five of his fellows. The captain wrote out some instructions on a sheet of paper.

The captain then called one of his guards into his office. “Livius,” he said from out of sight but in plain hearing of the inmates, “please get down to the mess hall and ask for meals to be sent up for our guests.” Silently, and with a warning finger to his lips, he showed Livius the instructions, headed in large letters “Read this immediately you have ordered the food”.

“Yes, sir. Will a total of forty meals be enough?” Livius nodded his understanding, took the paper, and folded it into his pocket.

“Yes; get a variety, and the fussy ones can choose first. Forty serves should be ample.”

Livius’ instructions were straightforward. Gather three colleagues, find the addresses and workplaces of the four men named by Christophoros, and have each of them visited and a statement taken about their return from the theatre. Route, times and names of walking companions must be included, and any activity or discussion topics must also be noted. They should then be taken to the old watchhouse, separate from each other as well as all other detainees, and their statements brought back for the captain immediately. Then their homes should be searched for any clothing or implements stained by blood or paint.

All four told a similar story. They had walked to one home after another, with Christophoros and John the last two on the road. All four claimed to have gone home directly but without rushing. The first three estimated arriving home a bit more than an hour after sunset. John estimated about an hour and a half, more or less.

The search of John’s house turned up an old tunic with a few spatters of red paint. These colours matched the graffiti. There were also a few buckets of paint in the sub-floor; his home had just been re-painted.

Closer examination of the tunic showed some streaks of white paint at mid-thigh height as well, as if rubbed in from the lip of a bucket being carried. This prompted a re-examination of the blood-stained tunic found in Christophoros’ compost heap. There were faint spatters of white paint on this, initially missed against the white cloth.

This was enough to convince the captain that he had a strong case. He sent for John to be brought to the evidence storage section.

John seemed anxious as he walked into the office of the storage building. Then he saw the tunic laid out on a table.

“Do you recognise this tunic, John?” the captain asked pleasantly.

“There are many like it,” John replied guardedly. “Why not just look for the laundry identification?”

“Excellent idea, John! Where on your garments do you place your mark?”

“Inside the hem, on the right side.”

The captain turned up the right hem, and found a iota-phi mark. “Is this your mark, John?”

John affected a casual demeanour as he walked to the table and glanced down. “Yes, that is my mark.”

“Please have a seat, John,” the captain indicated a chair. When John was seated he continued “Did you daub some graffiti on a certain door on the night of the meeting in the theatre?”

John knew that he was caught cold. A petty act, and now he would be disgraced publicly for it! He dropped his head and nodded in shame. “Yes. I wrote ‘Porne’ - ‘harlot’ - on Amelia’s door. A childish, spiteful, hurtful thing to do and I deeply regret it. I’ll apologise to her publicly.”

The captain seemed sympathetic. “What else was done that evening, John?”

John looked trapped. “That’s all I did that evening, sir.”

The captain sighed. “Please, John, I didn’t ask what else you did. I asked what else was done. Whether by you or by others, I want to know.”

John seemed to gather some courage. He looked at the captain and replied “That’s all I’ll tell you, captain.”

“That’s a pity, John. Your offence is, as you say, very hurtful. But in law it’s also rather petty. A public apology would probably be punishment enough. But if you don’t confess to other things which I know you have done, then I will need to deal with you more harshly.”

“What other things?” John asked with a trace of defiance. “Graffiti is my only crime.”

“John,” the captain said smoothly, “I will give you one last chance before I start to push harder. After all, I know what loyalty means, especially to those whom you admire.” John looked up sharply at this. “I will allow you one chance to make a complete statement about what happened after you first arrived home that evening. I want names, times, places and details. Start now!”

John gave a deep sigh. “I took two cans of paint, and two paint brushes. I went to Junius’ house, and wrote on his door using the white paint, then to Amelia’s to write on her door with the red. Then I went back home, stripped, washed and went to bed.”

“What did you do with the brushes?”

“I took them back home. They’re in the pile of old brushes left by the painters.”

“What did you write on the doors?”

John seemed caught for a moment. “I can’t recall what I wrote on Junius’ door, just the first thing that came into my mind. I remember I wrote ‘harlot’ on Amelia’s.”

“On Junius’ door, did you not write ‘apistos’? ‘faithless’?”

John brightened. “Yes, that was it! ‘Apostos’!”

“Tell me, why did you take two different paint colours. Surely it would have been simpler to only take one, and use it on both doors.”

Again John seemed to pause just a moment. "I don't know. Perhaps I just thought, two doors, two paints."

"Even down to the detail of two brushes? That seems a bit detailed for an unthinking grab."

"Well, yes, but that's just how it happened," John shrugged.

"All right, then," the captain stood. "If we write that down, are you prepared to sign it as a sworn statement?"

"Yes, I am."

The captain sat again, and leant towards John. His tone was menacing as he said "Consider this my last ounce of patience! If you sign such a document, then I will have you prosecuted for lodging a statement knowing it to be false, as well as..." the captain started to tick off his fingers, "attempting to pervert a criminal investigation, conspiracy to cause property damage, and attempting to shield a criminal from investigation."

The captain leant back in his chair and relaxed. "So for the last time, what is your actual statement?"

John gulped. "We're talking about a graffiti attack, captain! Yes, I deserve to be publicly shamed, and I accept that. And it's obvious that you know there was a second person involved, but so what? He would be just as remorseful as I am, and he presents no risk of re-offending. So charge me with both! You can have your victory, the good people of Cras will be able to sleep secure, and there'll be no repeat offence. Why do yet more damage to a person who has been an exemplary citizen up to now? What's to be gained?"

The captain seemed to consider this for a short time. "My problem is that it's bleeding obvious that this was the work of two different people, not just one man with a complicated *modus operandi*. The victims of this attack don't know who that second person is. So how can they trust anyone until they know? I have no doubt that a private apology would be enough; you Christians seem to be forever talking about forgiveness. But until they know and have received an apology, they'll continue to wonder who it was. They'll continue to be anxious." The captain leant forward again.

"I'll make a deal with you. If you name this other person, make a full and true statement about what was done by whom and how it was done, and if this other person undertakes to apologise personally but privately to his victim, then I will personally guarantee that he will not be charged with this offence." Then the captain smiled.

"On the other hand, we already have a good idea who this second person might be and we'll probably have the proof very soon. We know who you walked home with that night, so we don't have to look too far to find another tunic with paint splashes. So we'll find him anyway. If we do it without your help I guarantee he will be publicly accused, tried and punished. So make your statement, make it full and accurate, and let him apologise privately. Then we'll drop the case against him."

John looked at his hands as he thought through the offer. "You swear to me that he will not be charged?"

The captain put his right hand over his heart. "I swear that if you provide us with a full and accurate statement, then the second person will not be charged with any offence relating to the graffiti on the doors of Junius and Amelia." The captain thought silently to himself 'but murdering Felix is a completely separate matter.'

John nodded his acceptance. "Very well, write this down." The captain nodded agreement. John spoke slowly, with long pauses and several repeats, while his report was taken verbatim.

"As Christophoros and I approached his house after leaving the others, I mentioned that it was a good thing that Junius and Amelia had been publicly named for their unfaithfulness. Chris agreed, saying that they should be obliged to wear badges. I suggested 'harlot' for Amelia. That was when I got the idea that we could do that for them. The painters at my house had left some scraps of paint and their old brushes, so we could paint their front doors for them.

"Chris agreed and we took a pot of paint and a brush each. He went to Junius' place which was closer and I went on to Amelia's. I told him we should meet at my place so I could put the paint and brushes back. In fact we met a hundred paces or so short of my house, so I took his paint and brush and carried them home myself. The last I saw of him he was walking towards his own home."

"And what would the time have been by then?" the captain asked.

"I suppose that getting the paint, going to the houses and doing the painting might have taken maybe half an hour, maybe more. I expect we might have been back at our homes about two hours after sunset."

The captain then placed the statement in front of John for his mark. John read through it, grunted, and signed.

"Thank you," the captain said evenly. "You may go home now. I'll inform you of any need to appear in court."

John stood and left. The captain then asked two of his men to fetch Christophoros. As they left he ordered the other tunic, the blood-soaked one, to be laid out on a second table. But this table was to be in an unremarkable corner and covered with a cloth to conceal the tunic. He then went into the front office, closing the door to the storage behind him.

Christophoros was in the doorway within a few minutes.

"How can I help you, captain?" he asked with complete courtesy.

"Oh, thanks for your help, Christophoros. We have statements from the other four and they match yours closely enough. But we're still having some trouble."

"What sort of trouble captain?"

The captain looked directly at Christophoros. "Would you care to make any adjustments or additions to your statement?"

"Not really. What more is there that could be of interest?"

The captain stood. "Please come with me. We have some physical evidence that's causing us some concern."

Christophoros followed the captain into the storage. "It's about this tunic," the captain explained. "Do you know whose it might be?"

Christophoros glanced at the tunic on the table. For the slightest moment he seemed very relieved, but rapidly affected mild interest as he examined it.

"Not really, captain. There must be thousands of citizens who wear this style. Is there a laundry mark you can trace?"

"There is, actually. We have traced it to John Philippos. He was one of your companions on the walk home. Now, do you see the splashes of red paint?"

Christophoros looked again. "Those spots are paint, are they?"

"Yes, they are. Do you remember seeing any spots of paint on John's tunic on the night, either while walking home or earlier?"

Christophoros mused for a moment. "No, not that I recall. But it was dark by the time we left the theatre."

"I thought not. Because this paint matches the paint that was used to write some graffiti on a front door. Our guess is that John was the man who committed this graffiti attack, so the paint was not there until after the walk home. His house has just been painted and the equipment is still there, so it seems pretty obvious what has happened."

Christophoros affected a look of confusion. "John is a good man! I can't believe he would do that!"

"Do what?"

"What you just said!" Christophoros was unsure of whether or not the captain had said exactly what was written, where, or even if it was even writing of any kind. He decided to play it safe. "Graffiti!"

"There was also an attack on another door. This was in white paint. If you look carefully you can see some white paint on the tunic as well. Just here by the side, as if it had rubbed while being carried in the left hand."

Christophoros looked concerned, but was inwardly rejoicing. They suspected John of both attacks! Therefore they must also suspect John of the murder.

"Well, what has this to do with me? I went straight home, and if I understand what you said earlier John's own statement supports mine, and the evidence suggests that these offences happened after I was in my home."

The captain frowned. "So you're telling me that John wouldn't commit a graffiti attack, yet paint matching both doors is found on his tunic? How could this be?"

"I don't know," replied Christophoros. "Perhaps you should be asking him, not me."

"It looks like we might have to," answered the captain, rising from his chair. "But that isn't the only piece of hard evidence that we have come across. Please, follow me." The captain led Christophoros to the covered table in the corner. At a nod, the guard took two corners of the cover, the captain took the other two and they lifted the cover to reveal the blood-stained tunic.

Christophoros went visibly pale. But he kept enough wit to remain silent.

"Does this tunic look familiar, Christophoros?"

Christophoros did not trust his voice. He shook his head in reply.

"Then how do you suggest we discover the identity of the owner?" the captain asked politely.

Christophoros could not avoid speaking. "Perhaps a laundry mark?" he managed to get out, not too uncomfortably.

"Yes, we thought of that, and we found a mark. A very interesting mark, actually. More Greek letters, this time a Chi-Alpha. Your father's name was Andrew, was it not?"

Christophoros nodded.

"Tell me, so I don't have to pester the laundry staff. Is that your laundry mark?"

Again, Christophoros nodded dumbly.

"So we have to assume that this is your tunic," the captain summarised.

“Perhaps,” countered Christophoros. “But it could have been mistakenly placed in another’s bundle.”

“You seem to be unwilling to claim ownership, Christophoros. At first you denied that it even looked familiar and next you're eager to think of how it might have fallen into the hands of another. Why would that be? What is there about this tunic that makes you not want to agree that it is yours, or to make excuses why it might have come into the possession of some-one else?”

“Because that looks like blood staining the front, and I can't recall ever having that much blood on my tunic.”

“Then why didn't you say, ‘Yes that seems to be my tunic. I wonder how that blood got there?’. That would seem to be a much more reasonable response. Here we are, with an item of lost property apparently yours, and you seem reluctant to claim it!

“We were wondering if perhaps you had lent it to someone, in which case you might be able to tell us whom we should speak to next.”

“That possibility did not occur to me, captain. I'm sorry.”

“Why did that possibility not occur to you, Christophoros? Perhaps, you might be kind enough to tell us exactly what possibility *did* occur to you, to make you so wary of agreeing that it is yours?”

Christophoros realised that the more he said, the deeper he was digging his hole. He shrugged, and replied. “No particular possibility occurred to me, captain.”

The captain waited, staring at Christophoros, hoping he would say more in his unease. But the suspect determinedly stared at the tunic.

“Very well. Perhaps the laundry put it into the wrong bundle. Did you notice when you unpacked your laundry that you were a tunic short?” The captain wanted to prompt Christophoros to say as much as possible. Who knows what he might say that could later entrap him?

“No, captain. My wife unpacks the laundry for the whole family.”

“And she didn't mention to you that you were a tunic short?”

“I don't recall her saying that to me.”

“Did you give or lend a tunic to someone?”

‘Perhaps here's a chance to dodge the arrow!’ thought Christophoros. “I often give things to other people. We Christians place a high value on generosity towards those who might never have the power to repay it.” And then he saw the trap! “But then, all those things usually have the laundry mark unstitched, so this tunic would not have been one of those items,” he added hastily. “So no, I have no idea who might have been in possession of one of my tunics.”

The captain resumed his staring. Then Christophoros had a moment of inspiration. From the time he first saw the tunic on the table he had assumed that the guards had found it under his compost heap where he had left it. But perhaps it was not that obvious. Perhaps a dog had smelt the blood, dug it out, and dragged it some distance from his own house! Perhaps there was nothing to link this to his home! He needed more information.

“Tell me, captain, where did you find this tunic?”

The captain didn't even register the question. “What did you wear to the theatre for the debate?”

“A tunic, captain. It was a warm evening.”

“This tunic, perhaps?”

“Certainly one like it. I have a few that are very similar in appearance and I take little note of such things.”

“If you have a few that are very similar in appearance, then why did you at first deny that this one looked familiar? You seem to be having trouble telling a consistent story, Christophoros!” The captain smiled grimly. “But never mind that line of thought, we can come back to it later.” He waved the subject away. “Perhaps you don’t take note of such things, but some of your house-gathering members do. One in particular recognises different ones you wear by their age and condition, by the precise width of the hem, by the slight mis-alignment at the shoulder seam, etc.” The captain paused. “This one member has told us exactly which tunic you were wearing, and could identify it if seen again.” The captain resumed his staring.

Christophoros rummaged wildly through his mind, wondering which house-gathering member this might be. He was at a total loss. Little did he realise that this observant house-gathering member was the captain’s invention.

“Christophoros, I’m trying to give you every opportunity to confess, to show remorse, to show me that what you did was done in a mad moment and not part of a cold-blooded plan. But the longer you refuse to tell the truth to me, the more difficult it will be to convince a jury that you’re remorseful.

“We have not only this physical evidence. We also have other forensic evidence that a layman like you could not even imagine you left behind but will become obviously incriminating when explained to a jury. And we also have statements from your wife, from John Philippos, and from others I will not name for the moment. So our physical evidence will be re-inforced with human testimony. So your eventual conviction is not in doubt. The only doubt is the penalty that will be applied. That much I will leave up to you to decide by either confessing now or by maintaining your denial.”

Christophoros turned his back, and did not move for at least a minute. ‘That’s why he showed me John’s tunic!’ he thought to himself. ‘To let me know that my alibi has been broken! But John still has no idea that after we parted ways, I went back for Felix. So how could he testify against me?’

‘Ah, but they don’t need John to testify to the murder!’ Christophoros continued thinking to himself. ‘Only to my whereabouts, to show my statement is false. To link me to the murder they need only have the testimony that I was wearing that tunic, the one now stained with blood. And it might well be that it also has some paint stains just like John’s, to show that John’s testimony is accurate.

‘Unless I could argue that John was wearing it – ah, but no! I’ve already told them that I have no idea how anyone else could have been wearing it. And even then, how could I explain that both tunics have stains? Surely John would have worn only one.

‘So I have only one option left; to bluff my way through. They might know that I’m guilty, but do they want to risk civil unrest by bringing me to trial? Perhaps it’s in their own best interests to leave this particular murder unsolved!’

Christophoros turned back, to face the captain. “Captain, I’m an innocent man and would dearly like to see justice done here. But at what cost? I want the peace and prosperity of Terrapulchra to continue. If this terrible murder remains unsolved then all of us will grieve as one. And then there will be healing and bonding, a reconciliation.

In the sentencing hearing the Prosecutor initially sought the maximum penalty; public crucifixion. At this point Cornelius sought to intervene. Felix had left no legal next-of-kin, so Cornelius as the new Bishop had been appointed Felix' advocate.

"Please, do *not* sentence this man to public crucifixion," Cornelius pleaded. This came as a shock to the jurors, who had expected the Continuing Gathering to demand the fullest revenge possible. "I ask that for three reasons. The first is that Yeshua, our founder, was unjustly crucified. This criminal would claim it an honour to also be crucified 'unjustly', in his own warped opinion. I do not want to provide his murderous views and actions with any scrap of heroism, much less a pretence of martyrdom.

"The second reason is that such a punishment should never be imposed on any person, however wicked. It will not deter others from doing as he has done. The sheer revulsion that his deed has created is deterrence enough. And nor will it be any more effective to prevent him from re-offending than any other form of death. Dead is dead, and all forms of execution are equally effective in this regard.

"But the most important is the third reason. We must not respond to brutality by becoming brutal ourselves. Let us provide this man with a death as clean and dignified as possible. In so doing, we will both redeem the memory of his gentle and dignified victim, and also retain our own cleanliness and dignity as well. As the advocate for the victim of this crime, I seek that the penalty should be death by swift and honourable decapitation followed by a respectful burial. In this way we will honour and mourn not only Felix but also the man that Christophoros might otherwise have been." Cornelius turned back to his seat.

The jury was stunned by this request. It was usual for the jury to hear enraged, vengeful advocates beg for a penalty well in excess of anything reasonable and for the jury to look at the crime more dispassionately. But here was an advocate arguing for gentleness while the jury itself had found both the crime and the criminal loathsome. They looked to the Prosecutor for his reaction.

The Prosecutor stood and flapped his hands in confusion. Eventually he said "So let it be!" and sat.

The Chief Juror looked along the rank of his fellows and shrugged. "Decapitation, then turn the body over to the Advocate? Whatever Cornelius does with him is fine by me," he suggested. The other jurors whispered their comments along the line. Most of them shrugged or nodded. The Chief Juror stood to declare the punishment.

Terrapuchran law required that no punishment could be carried out on the same day as the trial. This was intended to prevent miscarriages of justice. It also allowed the gods to speak to jurors in their dreams overnight, lest an abomination be committed.

The court re-assembled the next morning. The jurors conversed with each other and confirmed both their verdict and the set punishment. This being an offence against a private person, the criminal's victim or the victim's advocate was permitted to approach and speak to the criminal immediately before punishment was administered.

Cornelius appeared with a small cloth-covered basket in his hand. He stood an armspan before Christophoros. "Come, Christophoros, let us both repent of our sins, and share the Supper." He threw back the cloth cover from the basket to reveal a small wine flask and a loaf.

Christophoros stood immobile for a moment, stunned. Then he regathered his wits. “I have no fellowship with you, you traitor to righteousness! If you wish to be of any comfort to me then bring Achetes and Alexander here. I will commune with them!”

Cornelius turned to the crowd, scanning the faces. “Achetes! Alexander! Are you here?” he called. Alexander was in the throng. He stepped forward to clear the crowd.

“I see what you are trying to do, Cornelius, and you are wrong to do so! He is a murderer and therefore cut off from Yeshua. He is excommunicated! I will not share the meal with him!” Alexander then turned to the crowd. “Behold, the True Gathering of Yeshua gives no comfort to evil-doers!” Alexander then stepped back to join the onlookers.

Achetes was also in the crowd but had not stepped forward when called. He was ashamed that he was weeping. How had his thirst for a purer, more faithful community lead to this debacle? But when he heard Alexander’s contempt he gathered himself and stepped out. “I am here, Cornelius.”

Cornelius beckoned him closer. “Then come, be a pastor to this man.”

Christophoros seemed to grow visibly. He stood taller, his chest came out, and triumph beamed from his face. This old woman Cornelius had tried to shame him and subdue his free spirit by forcing him to submit to the foul ministry of a Continuing Elder. But he had overcome that! Now he, Christophoros, the apparent criminal, was setting the agenda. He would be vindicated!

Achetes stood beside Cornelius, and took the basket offered to him. Cornelius started to turn away, but Achetes shot out a hand and grabbed Cornelius’ forearm.

“We three know the Scriptures well enough,” Achetes said. “Anyone who is not ready and willing to forgive his brother with his whole heart, who is not prepared to be reconciled to him, should not take the bread or the wine.”

Achetes stared at Christophoros. “Either all three of us take the meal, or none of us will.”

Christophoros glared back, indignant at this betrayal. He looked down on the basket and spat in it. “You are not worthy of sharing the meal with a martyr!” Christophoros abruptly turned his back on them both.

The crowd howled its anger at this show of arrogance. Much as they were of the opinion that Cornelius was showing a disgraceful degree of weakness by not taking full retribution, they also recognised that a condemned criminal had no right to show such contempt for the advocate of his victim.

Achetes and Cornelius looked to each other then turned away to walk back to the crowd. As they walked they passed the executioner. The big, powerful man with a Gallic longsword smiled grimly. “Don’t worry, I’ll see to him.”

The scene was now set for the execution. Christophoros stood proudly, facing the court official while the charge and the sentence were read aloud for the public. The executioner stood behind Christophoros, waiting for a nod from the official. The nod was given and Christophoros visibly straightened to take the looping swing that would remove his head in one blow.

The sword was swung weakly. The flat of the blade caught Christophoros across the side of the neck, knocking him to the ground. He lay there for a moment dazed

before he realised he was still entire. The official still stood before him. Christophoros heard the voice from behind him.

“Can you stand up by yourself, or do you need to be lifted?” There was more than a hint of a sneer in that voice. Christophoros immediately regained his feet. He turned angrily to the swordsman.

“If you can’t do your job properly, you son of a black bitch, then give the sword to someone who can!” Then Christophoros heard the laughter of the crowd. He realised then that he had pissed himself.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry about that! How clumsy of me!” The swordsman smiled as he mocked his victim. “I suppose it’s nerves. I’ve never before had to kill someone as important as you!”

Christophoros stood there glowering at his tormentor for several deep breaths. “Well, get on with it!” he demanded.

“Turn around first, kind sir. I’m supposed to strike the side of the neck from behind. That’s the usual practice,” the swordsman explained condescendingly. Christophoros turned.

Then he heard the sound of movement behind him, and braced against the expected blow. The blow was with the flat of the blade again, but this time on the other side of the neck. Christophoros, bracing in the wrong direction, was knocked to the ground again. The crowd roared with laughter. Christophoros raised himself to hands and knees, and turned to scowl at the swordsman. Beyond the swordsman he could see Cornelius climbing over the barrier and onto the execution ground.

Cornelius was shouting. “For the love of mercy, man! Strike cleanly! The verdict I sought was for swift and honourable decapitation, not this ritual humiliation!” He pulled his purse out of his trouser pocket as he reached the executioner and jammed it into the swordsman’s hand. “This is not good, what you are doing!”

The swordsman looked at the small purse in his hand. He could tell from the feel that it had only three or four coins in it so the sum was trifling, but he was sobered by the realisation that this man was paying all he had on his person at the time to spare his enemy further humiliation. These Christists were a strange lot! But he was the Advocate, so he had some rights here. The swordsman nodded his agreement, and pushed the purse back to Cornelius.

The criminal was on his feet again, almost crying with rage as he glared at him.

“Christophoros, this will be the killer blow,” the swordsman said. “From your right side.”

Christophoros was in such a fury that he had not heard the conversation. But what could he do? He comforted himself with the thought that Yeshua had been mocked and beaten while blindfolded and now he was following that example. He turned away from the swordsman again and leant towards the right. This time the blow severed his head.

Alexander waited until well after the execution of Christophoros before making his petition for a Christist-only settlement. He had feared that the assassination trial would prejudice his case and wanted the issue put into the past before he broached the subject. He was expecting that some of his supporters would fade away because of the association with Christophoros, but he was also confident that his public disavowal at the execution

would limit this defection. He also expected that the simple fact of the issue being brought to the forefront would bring over many of the Continuing Gathering members once they thought through implications. Why would any Christist want to remain in the continuing Gathering which sympathises with murderers?

Contrary to Alexander's expectation Achetes arrived at the first deacons' meeting after the execution. He arrived slightly late to ensure that all the Activist Deacons present would witness his actions. This annoyed Alexander. Technically Achetes was still the Activist leader, so he could hardly be excluded. Barely concealing his indignation he greeted the leader he now considered a traitor. Achetes smiled warmly. Smoothly and naturally, Achetes took the presidency seat that Alexander had just risen from to exchange the greeting. Alexander boiled inside.

"My apologies, brothers and sisters, for my tardiness and my thanks to Alexander for filling in for me." Achetes looked over the assembly. Twenty one of the thirty two Activist Deacons were in the room with him. He glanced up to Alexander. "What have I missed? Have we opened in prayer yet?"

Alexander shook his head tightly. "We were waiting just a little bit longer in case more are also running late."

"I don't think we'll get many more." Achetes held his hands palm up as if asking what could be done. "Over a dozen Deacons have told me that they will be returning to the Continuing Gathering. I urged them to attend tonight to take their leave in peace and I see some of them here, presumably to do so. But most said that they wouldn't feel comfortable to come here if they didn't intend to stay. So I think we should start now." A murmur from the gathering seemed to confirm this assessment.

Achetes stood to recite the opening Prayer, and then sat again. The next item in their customary procedure was a short exposition of a passage of Scripture. He took up his book and started reading aloud.

"I refer to Paul's First Letter to the Gathering at Corinth. 'One of you says 'I follow Paul'. Another says, 'I follow Loukas'. Another, 'I follow Simon'. Still another says, 'I follow Yeshua'. Is Yeshua divided?'" Achetes put down the book and looked around the meeting.

"I confess to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned greatly in this regard. In my arrogance I have divided the body of Yeshua in this place. I repent of it and will re-join the other brothers and sisters that I had renounced in my pride. I apologise sincerely to you, whom I have misled. This poor pastoring demonstrates that I am not worthy to be an elder, not even a deacon. I resign from those offices immediately."

Achetes stood and stepped away from his seat. "Alexander, if you would be so kind as to preside? It is now fitting that I take my leave of this meeting. I have no right to be here any longer."

Four of the deacons rose to their feet on hearing this. "I should go, too. I came tonight only to advise that I'm also returning to the Continuing Gathering," explained one of them. "By their fruits shall you know them', our Master said, and I do not see good fruit in what we are doing." He looked around the room. "Whatever you decide, brothers and sisters, you must be confident that you are acting in good faith. Examine yourselves, and decide carefully."

Achetes and the four deacons moved towards the door. In ones and twos, eight more rose to their feet to follow. The door closed behind the last of them, leaving Alexander and nine deacons in the room.

Alexander was quivering with rage. When he spoke, his voice was choked. "This will not stop us! In fact, the sooner, the better! Let us create our own settlement, away from these back-sliders!" This was met by murmurs.

"I was going to wait for another month or so, to let people forget the execution of Chris, but this has made me ever more impatient to leave this foul town behind. Let us get the New Settlement petition circulating this Sunday. I have copies ready for you to take to your house gatherings. If you could walk to my house with me there is room enough there for the ten of us to finish this meeting in greater privacy."

The Clerk of the Council read the petition and noted that this one carried only two hundred and fourteen signatures. Although less than the thousand on the first petition, this was greater than the minimum of two hundred signatures required for it to be included on the Council business paper.

"Does any member of the Council ask for this petition to be read a second time?" she called, expecting silence. To her surprise, Junius rose.

"I must make it clear that I do not support this petition. I have little doubt that it would be illegal for a settlement as proposed to be founded on the terms outlined. However, this is the second such petition arising from this group and if this is ignored I expect there will be a third, and a fourth, and more. Therefore I propose that an ad-hoc committee be formed, and charged with the duty to meet with the proponents and to see if it is possible to negotiate a more acceptable proposal. I offer myself for service on that committee."

Pannonica, a delegate from the Barrier Islands settlements, rose. "I've been distressed by the recent events here in Cras, apparently linked in some way to the group putting forward this petition. I think we must take this matter seriously. I'm not a native of this town so I have some independence in this issue. I offer myself to serve on a committee as outlined by Junius. I move that this petition be referred to a committee consisting of Junius and Pannonica with the Chief Prosecutor co-opted for legal advice, and the committee to report back within one month." The motion was carried on murmurs.

Alexander and Hermes were shown into a small conference room, in the middle of which was a table surrounded by six chairs. A scribe was seated at one end to take notes of the discussions. The Chief Prosecutor was seated at the other end. He rose to greet the petitioners. As the three men took their seats, Pannonica and Junius entered the room, bringing all to their feet again as Pannonica was introduced to the petitioners. Pannonica sat across the table from Alexander, and diagonally from Hermes. She smiled warmly as she took the chair of the meeting.

"Junius and I have been delegated to discuss your petition. There are some aspects of it which, at first reading, would appear to request things which would be unlawful. Our task is to discuss your requests and see if and how your purposes can be satisfied within the law as it stands. Publius here," she indicated the Chief Prosecutor, "is well-qualified to advise us in that regard."

“Please understand that we are not here today to negotiate approval of your petition, only to work it into a form that is not illegal. Once that is done the Council will hear the amended petition and our report, and then make its judgement.” She then nodded to Publius.

Publius cleared his throat and looked down to the text of the petition, and started reading.

Most Esteemed Miron, Chairman of the Council of Terrapulchra and Acting Consul,

Greetings and best wishes!

Recent tragic events have shown that tensions exist within our community. There are many persons who are loyal and law-abiding citizens of Terrapulchra but who have serious and deep-seated objections to some aspects of our society.

We are of the opinion that these tensions might be best relieved by the establishment of a new settlement with specific by-laws which prohibit the practices considered objectionable or offensive by these few. In this way those who have objections to these practices will be able to live more contented lives away from the bulk of Terrapulchran society, the bulk of society will not be troubled by the objections of such persons, and Terrapulchra as a whole will gain both in improved civil peace in existing settlements and in the establishment of another.

To this end we petition that a new settlement be established specifically for Christists. Within that settlement no pagan worship and no prostitution shall be permitted.

We also petition that the Settlement Council of the new settlement be authorised to make and enforce such additional by-laws as the Christist population of that settlement might deem appropriate.

Thank you for your consideration

Alexander, Bishop of the Reformed Gathering of Yeshua

“I will speak only on specific legal matters raised by the last two paragraphs,” Publius explained. “The first point is the establishment of a settlement ‘specifically for Christists’. What do you mean by this phrase?” Publius leaned back in his chair.

Alexander nodded his understanding of the question. “By that we mean that non-Christists would not be permitted residency. Naturally some passing non-Christist presence would be required from time to time for trading and administrative purposes, such as collecting produce or delivering supplies.”

“So what do you mean by ‘Christist’? It is my understanding that being a Christist is a voluntary thing, a decision that one can make and one can reverse.”

“Indeed,” Alexander agreed. “One is a Christist if he confesses Yeshua as his only god come in the flesh, and lives according to our sacred writings.”

Publius paused to take this in. Then he started to outline his concerns. “Under Terrapulchran law, any citizen is entitled to apply for any job, and appointment is by suitability. What is to prevent a non-Christist from applying for a job in your new settlement?”

“That is precisely the point of our petition, sir. We seek Council’s approval for his religion to be considered as one factor in the assessment of suitability.”

Publius let his face show that he was not impressed by this answer. “Then let us presume that what you seek could be granted, for the moment. If the citizen applying for the job is told that only Christists will be accepted, then what is to prevent him from claiming to be a Christist, being appointed, and then abandoning the pretence?”

Alexander had no problems with this question. “Anyone who ceases being a Christist would thereby forfeit his job.”

Again, Publius showed that he was not impressed. “This is becoming more and more strained, Alexander. But let us again presume that in this case the person does not formally renounce Christism but merely ignores his profession and worships the old gods in the privacy of his own home.” It was becoming increasingly obvious that Publius saw no feasible way of squaring this circle and he felt no compunction in letting these two petitioners realise the scope of the task ahead of them. He was not going to allow these zealots to be the first fracture plane in an otherwise united Terrapulchran society.

“Being a Christist is not only a matter of formality as in the old religions,” Alexander tried to explain. “It’s not just the confession of Yeshua that matters, but also living according to our sacred writings.”

Publius simply shrugged. “And who is to judge that?”

The citizens of the new settlement would be empowered to judge that, just as a jury judges all cases throughout Terrapulchra.”

This answer obviously shocked Publius. “What? You would make it a crime to fail to comply with your religion?”

“Not a crime, in the sense that a punishment or penalty would be incurred. We are talking about nothing more than an assessment of whether or not the person under consideration has a sincere faith in Yeshua. From that assessment some administrative adjustments might arise, but not penalties or punishments.” Alexander gestured generously with his hands. “One of those adjustments might be to consider whether or not this status qualifies or disqualifies that person from living as a member of the new settlement, but this is not a punishment. It is nothing more than a re-deployment to a different job in a different place. That is why we requested that the Settlement Council be authorised to make by-laws precisely to allow Christist purity to be maintained.”

Publius seemed unable to respond to this. He gaped a few times as if to speak, and then thought better of it. At length he turned to Pannonica. “May I have a word with you in private, please?”

Pannonica stood and touched Junius on his forearm to indicate he should follow. Then she made for the door as Junius and Publius followed. The three went across the hallway and into another small conference room.

Publius was still groping for words. “I don’t know where to start! To grant what this man wants would involve giving his Settlement Council power to suspend virtually every right a citizen has under our laws! Just think about it! If anyone disagrees with the policy of the current Settlement Council, all that Council needs to do is pass a by-law proscribing that opponent’s alternative opinion as 'non-Christist'. Then they could have him found guilty of having that opinion and suddenly he automatically loses residency rights and therefore the right to vote or stand for office in that settlement! What this man is proposing is that we authorise a local dictatorship!”

Pannonica nodded. She turned to Junius. “Junius, you’re a Christist, are you not? What do you think of this proposal?”

“Yes, I am a Christist. And I think this is the most anti-Christist proposal I have ever heard, or at least ever heard from a man with Alexander’s knowledge of the faith. But this man has already called me a traitor to Yeshua in a public meeting. I would be one of the first he would exile.” Then he gestured with his arms in exasperation. “But that is not the point. Our job is to help him re-word and re-shape his proposal into something that is at least legal, however undesirable we find it. He has his rights as a citizen and our duty is to assist him in exercising them.

“Publius,” Junius turned to the lawyer, “I think you need to explain to him that basic citizens’ rights are beyond the reach of any Settlement Council. See how far you can pull him back towards reality. If he will retreat far enough then we might have a legitimate proposal. If not, we just tell him that the Council simply cannot approve it because it would be illegal.”

Pannonica nodded. “I agree.”

The three of them re-entered to meeting room where Alexander and Hermes were waiting.

Pannonica spoke first. “Alexander, even if Council agreed to your petition, that decision would be overturned as illegal. Our task is to help you find a proposal that the Council can legally consider. Publius will now walk you through the difficulties.” She swept a hand towards the Prosecutor, who took up the running.

“The first difficulty is that a Settlement Council is an administrative body and its powers are limited to the management of public assets. It cannot make any by-laws except as permitted under the Settlements Administration Law. Any by-law that is aimed at determining whether a person is of a particular religious belief is outside the scope of that law. Indeed, it would be contrary to the Religions Law.

“Also, that same Religions Law guarantees that a person shall have the right to determine his own religious affiliation without loss of any of his other rights as a citizen. To make the eligibility for or continuity of employment or residency rights conditional upon holding or maintaining a particular religious affiliation is illegal.

“The only religious test allowed by the Religions Law is whether or not the person is affiliated with a proscribed religion. That is a negative test, in that it makes affiliation with a proscribed religion unlawful. But it cannot make any one religion mandatory. In other words, to apply a positive test for only one religion it would be necessary to proscribe every religion except the one in mind. This would clearly be unacceptable.

“In view of the above considerations, it’s not practical to limit employment, and therefore residency, in any new settlement to one specific religion. And even if it were,

that would be a matter for the Terrapulchra Council, not the local Settlement Council.” Publius spread his hands. “Do you see any way to achieve your objective without falling foul of these constraints?”

Alexander was expecting problems to be piled in front of him. “Yes I can, sir. You said there would be problems with the Settlements Administration Law and the Religions Law. Do you see any other problems?”

“At the moment I think they are the major impediments, but depending on how they are addressed other consequential problems could arise.”

“Then the answer is obvious,” Alexander said. “Simply amend those two Laws so as to permit their provisions to be set aside within specific nominated settlements. Then nominate our new Settlement to be established under its own law that sets aside these two Laws. Is that impossible?”

Publius stirred uneasily. “Anything is possible, sir. But I will leave you to judge if Council would be prepared to take those steps.”

Alexander put on his most serene countenance. “All things are possible with God. But even if Council does not relent, we would not be the first of God’s people to be called out of a society that didn’t honour Him. It happened to Abram, it happened in the time of Moses, and again in the time of Cyrus. It has even happened in our own times, when Christists were urged to flee Judaea when the Jewish Revolt broke out. It could happen yet again.”

“Alexander!” Pannonica was her most stern. “Are you intimating that you and your supporters would even think to break away from Terrapulchran authority? Be very, very careful what you say and how you act!”

Alexander stared at her in return. “I don’t intimate what we would or wouldn’t do. I only recall certain episodes of history.”

“You ride a fine line, Alexander! To wonder if it might happen is arguably within the law. But to suggest that it should be done, or to encourage another to do it, or to plan to do it,” Pannonica waved her hands to convey her exasperation, “that is clearly a transgression of the *Incognoscenda* Law. You know the punishment for that!”

Alexander smiled a sneering, gloating smile. “Then I must be careful what I say should be done, what I encourage, and what I plan.”

Junius spoke now for the first time. “Please, Alexander! One man has already taken your inflammatory words seriously and it has cost Yeshua’s Gathering two of its most respected servants. Learn humility before you cause an even greater disaster.”

“It has cost Yeshua’s Gathering two of its most respected servants”, he says! One backslider and one murderer! The Gathering is better without them!”

Junius gestured his exasperation. Pannonica looked around the table. “Is there any more to be said?” she asked. After a lengthy pause she went on. “If not, then I am of a mind to report back to Council that we cannot consider this petition on the grounds that it seeks an illegality. I am also of a mind to recommend that the *Incognoscenda* Law be tightened up to explicitly include discussion of hypotheticals and options and possibilities and historical examples and any other what-not as a form of encouragement.”

She set her face to stone. “Make no mistake, Alexander! Despite the urgings of Junius to deal with you as sympathetically as possible, you have made an enemy of me here today. I pay you the courtesy of letting you know but I expect precious little

courtesy from you in return.” She stood and left the room. Junius glanced once again to Alexander, conveying despair and then followed her. Publius took Hermes and Alexander to the front door. The scribe wrote up the record of interview for Pannonica’s signature. He thought it prudent to omit those final exchanges between Pannonica and Alexander.

Pannonica reported back to Council that the petition was illegal and that the principal petitioner had refused to amend it to remove the illegalities. The petition was refused unanimously.

Alexander was not surprised. He reported this lack of progress to the next Deacons’ Meeting but word of the Council ruling had already filtered out.

Maria was a small, eager woman, whose house gathering consisted predominantly of older people. She reported that the rejection of the petition had been discussed at her meeting last Sunday. Most had been surprised that the Council had considered it illegal. New settlements were being established regularly as the population boomed, so why not one for Christists? But they also knew from experience that Terrapulchran society had treated them well and they could not accept that the Council was wicked. This disappointment and confusion was causing a crisis of confidence in her house gathering.

Hermes had a different problem in his house gathering. Having been there at the negotiations, he had been able to give his flock a detailed narrative of the conversation. But rather than seeing Alexander as a hero confronting the ungodly authorities, several of his members had taken a different view. Only now did they realise how fundamentally impossible the whole concept was. They marvelled that Alexander could even have dreamt that he could succeed. Was their Bishop a fool, or was he playing to a much deeper agenda? And in particular, were they going to be unwittingly caught up in a conspiracy to break the *Incognoscenda* Law?

They counted among their friends many Christists still in the Continuing Gathering and knew them to be reverent and faithful, not the backsliders that Alexander always preached against. The whole house gathering under Hermes decided to revert to the Continuing Gathering. Hermes had lost his flock.

The other seven deacons also reported losses, but none as severe as Hermes’ total disaster. The total adult roll-call for the Activists had shrunk to one hundred and thirty two adults, of whom four still wore the orange of slavery. The room was drenched in a feeling of depression. Alexander, sensing the need for an inspiring theme, started talking about the seventy years of captivity in Babylon and promised that the days of oppression in Terrapulchra would also come to an end no less suddenly and miraculously.

Peter was young and intelligent. He had also been very attached to Achetes, seeing in his mentor the deep thirst for righteousness that drove him to his Activist position. But in Alexander he sensed something less attractive. Not a thirst for righteousness so much as an intolerance of sin. A subtle difference, perhaps, but a crucial one.

Peter stood and faced Alexander. “Alexander, your words have led to murder and even now you’re leading your flock along the very brink of treason. You’re prepared to risk having the flock slaughtered rather than abandon your delusions. I cannot accept that.” Then he turned to the other eight deacons.

“Be good shepherds and bring your flocks to a place of safety. Return with me to the single Body of Yeshua in this place and grieve the Spirit no longer.” Alexander appeared broken to hear these words. He could not respond. Peter walked out. There was uneasy shuffling for a moment, and then Maria also stood. “Peter is right.” She also walked out.

Hermes, stinging under the humiliation of having lost his entire house gathering and also feeling he owed Alexander loyalty for having been promoted to be his aide, felt the need to stop this momentum.

“Alexander, we need to give our people hope. What will we tell them?”

“I have already told you that,” Alexander answered. “Yet a short time longer in this Babylon! But be assured, we will be released and sent out to re-build Zion in God’s good time. Stay strong!”

There was another short pause. Simon spoke to break the unease. “If that is so, then we can wait within the Continuing Gathering without the risk that you will step over the fine line of the Law and have us all executed. But I won’t walk out from you, Alexander. I fear that if you’re totally abandoned you might do something very foolish in your grief. Instead, let me walk out with you, to be reconciled to Cornelius.” He looked around to the remaining five deacons. “Come, let us all go now. We all know where Cornelius lives.”

Simon stood. He offered his hand to Deborah beside him. She accepted it and stood too. The other two followed her in rising. “Hermes, Alexander, come and repent with us,” he urged.

Hermes was weeping now. “I will not abandon Alexander! I have been abandoned by my entire gathering, and I cannot do that to Alexander!”

These words were the trigger that Alexander needed. He realised that there was now no way his Activist movement could be revived, but to continue fighting the inevitable would cause nothing but more sorrow. Slowly Alexander stood as well. “Then come with me, Hermes. After all my failures so far, let me lead you aright just this once.”

Port Sertorius - April 896 AUC (143 A.D.)

Another Pulcher ship arrived at Septimia and was escorted into Port Sertorius. Miron was still the Chairman of the Council. He and Lucia, the new Consul, were on hand as the ship docked. Both were dressed in decrepit finery.

“Hail to the Pulchers!” Miron greeted the Trademaster as he steps down the gangway.

“Hail to Terrapulchra!” the Trademaster replied. “My name is Eutyches,” he added, offering his right arm

“Greetings, Eutyches; I am Miron, Chairman of the Council,” Miron introduced himself as he took the arm, “and this is Lucia, our Consul.” Miron and Lucia had both expected a moment of surprise on the Trademaster’s face. They were not disappointed. But Eutyches knew about the strange ways of these folk and recovered quickly.

“Greetings, your Excellencies,” he replied. “I trust you and your people are prospering?”

“We have been fortunate of late,” Lucia responded. “Although the Maya have fought themselves back into barbarism, we've managed to find a long-hidden cache of gold and we have something to offer you this time.” She smiled warmly.

“That's excellent news!” exclaimed Eutyches. Until now he had been certain that this voyage would be a routine failure, as they had been for forty years now. “I'll unload the ship and you will see what we have to offer this time!”

“No, there's no need to do that,” Lucia interrupted. “We've grown quite self-sufficient over the years, and developed adequate substitutes for all the goods formerly supplied from the Old World.

“But yet there is one thing that we are now able to do with a clear conscience. We crave our privacy, but we are also aware of the deep debt of gratitude we have towards the Pulcher family for their generosity and steadfast faithfulness to us and our forebears. I believe we are now able to repay that debt and thereby purchase our isolation.” Lucia gracefully swept a hand towards the warehouse at the side of the town square, now looking derelict.

“Come! We have a gift for the Pulchers, and yet one last favour to ask.” She turned and started to walk. Miron fell in beside her, and the Trademaster had no option but to join them, wondering what was in store. They entered the dusty, disused office section of the crumbling warehouse. There were twelve small gold bars and a letter on the table.

Most beloved and faithful Septimius, the latest in a long line of generous men,

Prosperity, long life, and joy to you!

The need for secrecy which your ancestors impressed upon ours has become dear to us. The ships you send to us from time to time, although appreciated as a sign of your continuing goodwill towards us, are also an on-going burden upon your purse as well as a cause of concern to us about discovery. We are now driven to the point that we must ask that henceforth you respect our privacy.

Due to a freak of good fortune we have come across a secret cache of gold, almost twelve talents. We offer this as a gift to you for the care your family have lavished upon us for longer than living memory. We cannot expect to acquire any more.

Therefore we beg only one last favour of you before we go our separate ways. We ask that you send one last ship to re-assure us that we part as friends. Please be so kind as to do this as soon as possible, and the twelve talents will be yours. But this must be the last we see of the ships of our beloved House of Pulcher, for fear of another spy. Thereafter any further ships will be subject to seizure and their crews will be absorbed into our society.

May your descendants prosper for many generations to come!

By order of the Council, 894 A.U.C, and signed in that year by

*Marcellus Lentulus Africanus, Consul
Miron Alexander, Chairman of the Council.*

Eutyches read the letter a second time slowly before putting it back on the table. He turned to face Miron, and then realised that his Old World habitual disregard for females had almost betrayed him. Lucia was the Consul, and he turned to her to speak.

“This is not necessary. You found one cache and you may yet find others over time.”

“But it *is* necessary,” replied Lucia. “Every ship that visits us and returns to the Old World is yet another shipload of possible betrayers. Why should we continue to tolerate that risk, quite apart from asking why the House of Pulcher should continue to pour money into unprofitable trading voyages?”

“So it *is* necessary, because we deem it to be so. Although I have replaced Marcellus as Consul, the decision remains firm. We want all of the House of Pulcher to know that we do this not to offend them but to thank them.”

Eutyches knew not to argue the point, at least at this time. Perhaps circumstances might provide an opportunity later. “Then so be it, Consul.” He bowed deferentially. “But allow me to request from you a re-supply for our return journey. We will pay for it out of the goods we have on board.”

Lucia again threw him that warm smile. “Not until we provide you with a feast to remember! Even as we speak, the bathhouse is being stoked as has become our tradition. So come and refresh yourself as the food is being prepared. But we won't eat here, the feast will be in the settlement inland. Port is used only for inter-island travel now. It's hardly fit for living.”

The feast was similar to the one thirteen years earlier, when Septimius had taken the time to visit in person. This gave Eutyches one more idea to try to weaken the Terrapulchran position. He was given the position of honour at the long Host's Table, with Lucia to his right and Miron to his left.

“Lucia, I expect that Septimius will not break his bonds with you so easily. He has been here himself and Terrapuchra holds a place dear in his heart. I wouldn't be surprised if he comes over here himself to dissuade you.”

To his surprise, this brightened Lucia's countenance rather than intimidating her. “That would be wonderful, if he would himself come on that one last voyage we ask of him! It would be so much better than saying our good-byes by letter!”

Then she leant across the front of Eutyches to Miron, and tapped his forearm. “Miron, Eutyches says that Septimius might come here in person to say good-bye! Wouldn't that be wonderful?”

Miron gaped for a moment, as if taken by surprise. “Yes! That would be marvellous! We must plan something worthy of the occasion. Perhaps, even, we could present him with the statue of Sertorius, down in the Old Town! That would be so fitting!”

“Brilliant idea, Miron! But even better, perhaps Septimius could bring out another bust, one of the original Septimius who founded the colony! We could set that up where Sertorius stands now! The whole cycle closes, and the ends meet!”

The two highest office-bearers in Terrapulchra started to chatter in their excitement across the lap of the guest of honour, like schoolchildren planning a party. Eutyches did not like the direction this conversation was taking.

“Please, please,” he interrupted. “If Septimius comes, and I must say that I can't promise that, then he'll come with a heavy heart. He would hope to persuade you, and would be most unlikely to do anything that might be seen as accepting this decision as inevitable. You must be prepared to see him weep rather than rejoice.”

Lucia refused to be beaten down. “This decision *is* inevitable, Eutyches. As inevitable as the delivery of a child once it is conceived. So let us all rejoice at this birth, however painful it might be.”

“You are that firm? Is it inconceivable that anything, anything at all, could dissuade you?”

Lucia shrugged. “I can't conceive of anything that would change my mind. Even if I could be persuaded, I could do nothing without the Council agreeing with me and they are as fixed as I am. Certainly we will hear Septimius if he wishes to put a case to us. We owe him every courtesy. But you would do well to let him know that he will not persuade us. We fear discovery above all, therefore his ships must cease coming here.”

Eutyches took the opportunity to make minor repairs and re-provision, a process that took three days. As had become custom, the Terrapulchrans stocked the ship with a cow and several live chickens and plenty of fresh fruit. In exchange the Trademaster provided a generous amount of steel for replacement tools.

“Thank you, Eutyches. We would be pleased if the last ship could be sent as soon as possible so we can all relax thereafter. We will then know that we need only worry about incursions by the ignorant, and they present a much smaller threat than one with an informer on board.”

The merchantman left just as dawn was breaking the next morning. He was escorted as far as the Sardinola Channel by three interceptors as a guard of honour.

Port Sertotius - July 896 AUC (143 A.D.)

The Terrapulchrans expected the return visit from Pulcher to be in the next year. They had no doubt that Pulcher would have a timetable to make the most profitable use of his available ships and their voyages would be booked well in advance. So they were surprised to see his banner from the mast of a ship only three months after the farewell to Eutyches. This time, Septimius Pulcher himself was on board and he was risking the beginning of the Storm Season in his haste.

The trader was greeted and identified off Septimia and escorted into Port Sertorius. There he was greeted again by Lucia, Miron and twelve individuals who were introduced as 'the Council', as if they were the full number of Councillors. Also on hand were Sextus and Philon, who had greeted Pulcher on his other visit thirteen years earlier. Hermes, who had been Chairman at that time, had died in the interval.

Another feast was held. Pulcher requested that he be seated with Lucia on one hand (he was aware of how dangerous it would be to fail to show proper respect to a woman in Terrapulchra!), with his acquaintance Sextus on his other side. He intended this to be a night of bonding and nostalgia, to prepare favourable ground for the real negotiations later.

"Tell me, Sextus, how long did you remain Consul and what do you do now?" Pulcher asked in good humour.

"I had the worry seat for three years, Septimius," Sextus replied. "Over here we tend to like a bit of turnover. Fresh eyes see things from a different angle and things change over time anyway. In my term the various settlements tended to be drifting towards autonomy. Since then the Council has tried to promote a more unified mentality and I think they're right to do so. I have to admit that I was not a good Consul."

Lucia was listening carefully, primarily to make sure that she could blend in with Sextus' story. "Sextus, you were a very good Consul! All Terrapulchra could have fallen apart with disappointment when the Maya Trade stopped. You taught us the simple joy of just being here, a free people in control of our own destinies. What you did needed to be done, to lay the basis for a new start from the grass roots up!"

Sextus gestured his appreciation for her kindness. "Perhaps so. But now that I'm back on my fishing boat I have no desire to get back into administration. I leave that for the young. They have more stamina."

"So now you're a fisherman, Sextus?" Pulcher pressed further, eager to build a rapport.

"Yes," Sextus agreed. "I manage a group of fishing boats that supply Port here and Capri, the interceptor base you saw last time."

"Yes, I remember that base and the hulks of the Trireme Fleet rotting on the bottom of the bay." Pulcher chuckled. "I'm still stunned at how great a victory that was! Is Marcus still alive? He must have been held in awe by the men who came after him!"

"No, Marcus died in a storm a long time ago. Those old interceptors were brilliant in light or even moderate conditions, but deadly if you got caught in a big blow. Marcus was unfortunate enough to get caught."

Pulcher's ears pricked up a bit at that comment. "Those *old* interceptors? Don't you still use much the same design? You did when I was here a dozen years back."

Lucia saw the danger here. Sextus had been a bit too forthcoming, but now was as good a time as any, perhaps as good as she would ever get, to put another card on the table.

“Actually, Septimius, we have made many changes since you were last here. We captured a brilliant shipwright soon after your last visit and he has revolutionised our navy. We have vessels and weapons that are well in advance of the old interceptor defences. The new craft would seem as amazing to you now as the old interceptors did when your noble ancestor first saw them.”

“Really? I must see them!” Pulcher was very interested.

“No, Septimius, you must not,” Lucia smiled. “Our friendship with you is old and strong, but our independence depends on our naval secrets. No-one who sees them can be permitted to return to tell about them.”

“But Lucia, my family has kept your secrets for generations! I will tell nothing!”

“That is right Septimius. You will tell nothing because you will see nothing.” Lucia smiled again.

Pulcher realised that he was deviating from his purpose tonight, to create an atmosphere of goodwill and camaraderie. He clasped his hands together and nodded in a gesture of submission. “I am your guest. I will honour your wishes.”

The next morning started late after so much feasting and drinking the night before. The sun was well above the horizon when Pulcher made his appearance and the usual morning meal time was well past. The kitchen staff had already cleared the morning tables and cleaned the dishes and utensils. Only the skeleton crew were on hand, making first preparations for the evening meal when Pulcher arrived.

Sensing his lateness and not wanting to create ill-will, he asked only for a loaf left over from pre-packed lunches taken by the workers. But the staff would not have that! They sat him down and quickly prepared for him a grilled fish with a side-salad of various fruits. He had no doubt that he was not only honoured but also the object of considerable affection.

Lucia arrived as he was finishing this meal. She slipped into the bench opposite him, smiling as always. Pulcher started to stand in respect but Lucia waved him back into his seat like a mother would a favourite son. “No, no, no, Septimius! We don’t do that sort of thing over here! Enjoy your meal, we have all day!”

One of the staff walked out of the food preparation area carrying a tray towards them. Lucia frowned her disapproval as she saw the tray approaching and recognised the shape of the mugs as being their standard hot milked chocolate service. The Cocoa drink used ceremonially by the Maya was naturally frothy and bitter, almost unpalatable to those without the acquired taste for it. But the Terrapulchrans had mixed it with sugar and served it in milk rather than hot water. The lactose-intolerant Maya found this new recipe impossible to digest, but it had become a major export to the old World, and its origins concealed behind reports that it came from the Spice Islands.

But Pulcher must not be given the opportunity of recognising it! At the very least, it would reveal that the Terrapulchrans were not nearly so isolated from the Old World as they claimed to be! Lucia stood abruptly to intercept the service before the tray could be placed on the table.

“Oh, no thank you!” she said, perhaps more sharply than she should have. The kitchen hand looked confused for a moment, and then looked down at his tray as he realised what he had almost done. He turned quickly but smoothly back into the galley section. Pulcher was totally oblivious to what was happening.

“You Islanders really know how to live well!” Pulcher exclaimed. “I only asked for bread because I was not too sure how my stomach would handle anything heavy after last night, and these people served me the perfect meal for my condition!”

Lucia laughed. “I’ll tell you a secret. Everyone ate fish this morning! Your belly was not the only one that needed gentle handling!”

Pulcher finished his meal and wiped his face on his sleeve. “Thank you for your patience. I’ll have to thank Sextus for the fish later. What can I do for you?”

“There’s no rush,” Lucia said breezily. “But I sensed last night that you were not fully reconciled with our wish to avoid any continuation of the risk of discovery. We owe you the respect to explain our point of view to you, to ensure we have your understanding.”

“You’re right, Lucia. I’mah..... I suppose the right word would be 'saddened'. I don’t take it as an insult because your people have made it clear for generations that you honour the Pulcher name, and you continue to show a heartfelt personal friendship to me. But I simply don’t want our good relationship to end, however amicably. I need to be convinced in my own mind that we have examined every other option first.”

Lucia nodded sympathetically. “Yes, it’s sad to lose old friends and we feel the same way. We would rather not be cut off from the rest of the world too. But thinking about the consequences of discovery fills us with dread.” Lucia determinedly brightened her expression. “But this is not a good breakfast topic. I didn’t come here to discuss these things on the spot but to ask if you would be prepared to eat with me and Miron this evening, privately, so we can talk. Feel free to bring an advisor you might trust with these matters.”

“This evening it shall be, then,” Pulcher agreed. “Will you send for me at the right time?”

“Yes. We have in mind to summon you perhaps an hour before sunset. It will be good to relax with some wine and watch the sunset, to start our chat with that peace and beauty as a backdrop.”

“That sounds good,” Pulcher responded. “Until then, am I permitted to wander around the settlement?”

Lucia spread her hands. “Of course! Feel free to see anything, interrupt anyone! Any person would be honoured to talk with you. And if you wish to talk to me or Miron in preparation for tonight we’ll both be in the Port area. You will find us in the office. We have some administrative work to do.” Lucia stood and took her leave.

Pulcher wandered through the settlement after finishing his meal but there were few people on the street. Again he marvelled at this strange society where everyone was employed productively. Even the children in their compulsory schooling. The children of slaves learning Homer, geometry and mathematics! Women not only doing the work of skilled scribes, but even rising to the rank of Consul! He shook his head in disbelief.

If he were going to find anyone to talk to he would not do it in the streets but by going into a place of work. On an impulse he followed the chanting of children to the school building.

He looked in the window to see about twenty children of both sexes, aged about eight, sitting in rows. They were looking towards a woman in the front of the room who was pointing to an exercise in geometry. Taking Lucia at her word, he knocked on the open door.

The teacher, who had been facing the other way to tap the large board with a cane in her right hand while looking to her left at the children, turned to face him. It took only a moment for her to realise who her guest was. She brightened in surprise. "Lord Pulcher!" Then she turned to her class, "Children, this is Lord Pulcher!"

From long training, the children stood and chanted "Greetings, Lord Pulcher."

"Greetings, children, and greetings, teacher," Pulcher smiled back. "May I sit in the back corner and learn with you?"

"We would be honoured! Here, take my chair and choose your place!" The teacher picked up her chair and offered it to Pulcher, who took it and walked through the children to the back corner.

"Well this is an honour! Let's put geometry to one side for the moment." The teacher re-gathered her thoughts. "Let's revise History. Who can tell me the most important thing that happened in the year 816 A.U.C.?"

Hands shot into the air. The teacher pointed to one child. "Valerianus started building Port Sertorius!" the boy exclaimed triumphantly.

"Right, Marcos! And who sent Valerianus to build Port Sertorius?" Another forest of hands rose. The teacher indicated another child.

"Septimius Pulcher!" shouted the young girl chosen. "He was a good man!" she added.

"Yes, Septimius Pulcher was a very good man. But that was a long time ago, and everyone in Port Sertorius was so sad when he died. But his son was also called Septimius. They did things like that in the Old World, giving the oldest son the same name as the father."

A boy put his hand up. The teacher pointed to him. "Why did they do that? When the boy grows up, how would anyone know if they were talking about the father or the son? I think our way is better!"

The teacher flicked a glance at Pulcher in the back corner. "They have a different way of doing things in the Old World. It's hard to explain without taking a lot of time, but a father usually wanted his oldest son to continue his own work, and having the same name down through generations made them feel that their work was being continued."

A different boy put his hand up. "How can a son do his father's work? When I leave school, I'll be given work of my own, and my father will keep working wherever he is wanted. Do they make fathers stop working when a son grows up?"

The teacher gave a little giggle. "No, Adrianus. I told you it would be too hard to explain! But what's important in what I told you is that they often gave their first son the same name they had themselves.

“So when Septimius Pulcher died, his son was also Septimus. The new Septimius sent ships from his place in the Old World out to Port Sertorius, to show he was our friend just like his father. And the new Septimius was a good man, too.

“But when that new Septimius got old, he died too. Can anyone guess what his son’s name was?”

More hands in the air. Another child was indicated.

“Septimius?” he answered, uncertainly.

“You’re right!” the teacher acknowledged. “And this third Septimius was also a very good man. He came to visit us, just like his grandfather. But something terrible happened! He died while he was here with us. It was so sad! We had to send his ship back without him, with only the news about how sad we were.”

She paused. “What do you think his family back in the Old World might have thought and done, when news arrived that this good man Septimius had died while he was our guest?”

The children were silent as they thought about this. One hand slowly went up.

“They would be very unhappy,” the child suggested.

“Yes. What do you think they might do, being very unhappy?”

“They might come over and blame us?”

“Yes. Everyone was afraid they would blame us,” the teacher agreed.

Another hand went into the air. The teacher nodded to it.

“What did they do?” the child asked.

“Back in those days, they would send a ship to visit us every five years. For five years, everyone hoped that Septimius’ family would still be our friends, and not hate us. And on the fifth year, no-one came! No-one came to visit us!”

This was too much for one of the younger girls. She started sobbing. An older girl sitting near her put out an arm around her, to hug her in comfort. The teacher nodded towards her in sympathy. “Yes, it was very sad. We all thought that Septimius’ family didn’t care for us any more. But the next year, guess who came?”

The hands leapt towards the ceiling. The teacher nodded to one.

“Septimius’ son!” the boy cried in joy.

“A ship came,” the teacher corrected him. “It brought news from the next son. Can you guess what his name was?”

“Septimius?” the boy guessed.

“Right! And how do you think this new Septimius treated us? Was he our friend, or was he angry?”

The children looked to each other. They were afraid of the answer to this question. The teacher didn’t want to upset them too much, so she continued the story. “He was our friend!” The teacher announced in triumph. The children could not help but let out a little cheer. “In fact, he even apologised for the ship being late!”

The teacher looked around the children. “But did he stay our friend? The first Septimius had visited us, and so had the third. This fourth Septimius said he would be our friend, but the ocean between here and the Old World is very wide and very dangerous. It’s hard to stay friends when you live that far away from someone.

“But this new Septimius kept sending ships over to see how things were going for us. And in fact, he even came over himself to visit! Everyone was happy to meet him

and he promised to stay our friend. But that was fourteen years ago.” The teacher looked around the room. “Fourteen years is a long time! Did he keep his promise? Did he stay our friend?”

One girl put her hand up. The teacher pointed to her.

“Yes,” she said confidently, “because I saw a strange ship in the Port yesterday, and my parents went to a feast last night. I think that was another of lord Pulcher’s ships that arrived, so he must still be our friend.”

“Very good, Amelia!” the teacher praised her. “And can you guess who was on that ship that arrived yesterday?”

“Lord Pulcher himself?” Amelia answered tentatively.

“That’s right! This new Septimius, the great-grandson of the man who started our Republic, visited us for the second time when his ship arrived yesterday. Only yesterday! And after school you can go down to the Port and see it for yourself, because he’s still here!” The children shuffled in anticipation. Their faces shone.

“But you don’t have to wait until after school to see Septimius himself. Can you guess why?”

Again, the children were perplexed.

“Because Septimius Pulcher, the great-grandson of a good man, the grandson of a good man, the son of a good man, and a very good man himself... is sitting in this room!”

The children were confused. During the telling of the story, they had forgotten about the visitor in the back corner. Then one of them spotted him, and squealed her delight. Her discipline broke. She jumped to her feet and rushed him, throwing her arms around his neck. The others were not far behind.

Laughing with delight at the joy of the children, Pulcher went to the floor on his knees and hugged each of them in turn.

“Septimius is our friend!” the children chanted. Eventually the teacher calmed them and Pulcher rose to his feet. Then, in a move that shocked Pulcher, the teacher hugged him as well. He could feel her breasts pressing against his chest! That sort of behaviour by an unrelated female just did not happen in Africa or anywhere else in the Federation either! How brazen! But he realised that they had different mores this side of the ocean. The women here were not the weak, submissive chattels he knew from home. Out here they were as assertive as the men. Some even became Consul!

Pulcher left the school room convinced that he was warmly regarded in Terrapulchra. He had dignitas here, and the political leverage that it provided! He would remember that this evening. He decided to walk further inland, away from the Port towards the farmlands he had not seen earlier. A rutted track with a low stone wall on either side lead between the fields and he followed it. After a couple of hundred paces he met a man leading a young bull into the settlement.

“Greetings, friend!” he smiled as he approached the man.

“Greetings, Lord Pulcher,” the man responded, and drew his cattle to one side of the track and halted them to allow Pulcher to pass.

Pulcher realised that there was no such thing as a ‘stranger’ in this settlement. If he wasn’t known as a familiar face already, then he must be the celebrated visitor. But Pulcher did not pass. He stopped an arms-length from the man to chat.

“Nice beast you have there! What's he worth?” he asked to be friendly.

“I suppose tonight's meal, and tomorrow breakfast,” the man replied, “and probably some salted rations for the sailors from what's left over.”

Again Pulcher was struck by the completely different view of the world these Islanders had. To them, ‘value’ was functional, not monetary. He nodded his understanding as he thought of a new angle of conversation. “Tell me, how do you get by when cloth and tools are so scarce?”

The man looked at him for a moment, as though he had never had to think about this before. “Yeah, I suppose a bit more cloth would come in handy,” he commented laconically. “I hear the interceptors are not taking as many prizes as they did some years back. And yeah, steel tools would be better than timber, stone and bone. But we get by.”

“So you would like more ships to come over, to capture more goods?”

No way!” the man looked shocked. “Every one that comes over is a risk! If we capture them, that’s great. But if ever one gets away, even one, then we’re stuffed. The only way we can be safe in the long run is to hope they give up.”

“Perhaps you can find something to trade and my ships will bring over the goods you need.”

The Islander made a face to show he was mildly interested in the thought, but not convinced. “Don’t take offence Lord Pulcher, but I don’t know if it’s worth it. We've gotten used to things as they are and we're happy enough. I wouldn’t want to risk the Republic Navy coming over here and cleaning us out, just for the sake of a new steel axe-head.”

“It’s the Federation now. Things have changed,” Pulcher commented. “But you fought off the Triremes, back sixty years ago...”

“Yeah, well from what I’m told,” the man scratched the stubble on his neck for a moment, “we were dumb lucky that time. So many things could have gone wrong. But Marcus was a genius, the Romans were stupid, and everything worked out just perfect. You can’t rely on that happening twice.”

Pulcher could see that it would be hard to argue against this logic. He smiled at the herdsman. “Thank you for your time!” He turned to continue his stroll up the road.

Another hundred paces further on there was another man working in the field to his left, ploughing. On an impulse he climbed over the low stone wall, hailing the ploughman as he approached.

Hello, Lord Pulcher,” the ploughman greeted him, after he had brought the ox to a halt. He was just a lad, perhaps twenty years old.

“Greetings, friend,” Pulcher replied. “I thought I might have a look at your plough, if you don’t mind.”

“Certainly, sir.” The lad put his shoulders under the handles and heaved the ploughshare above the surface.

Pulcher had never before seen a wooden plough. This plough was clearly a part of a small tree or branch, with the beast drawing the top of the trunk or branch. The share was the stub of a lesser branch, projecting perhaps a double handspan beyond the main beam, and sharpened to gouge the earth. The whole lower part appeared to have been heat-treated, left in a fire to harden but not long enough for it to be consumed.

The harness from the ox was attached a short distance above the ground, and the ploughman controlled the depth of the gouge by pulling back on two light beams attached to the head of the main trunk, and strutted off the connection with the harness.

“Clever design,” Pulcher commented, “if you don’t have steel.”

The ploughman looked at him strangely. “What would steel do that would be better than this? And it’s easy to make, no shaping or hammering required.”

“But a steel share would last a lot longer. Don’t you have trouble with stones damaging the timber share?”

“Only on new fields,” the lad replied. “But as we go around later sowing, we pick out any rocks and throw them to the sides of the field. The big ones have to be carried, but there are not too many of them in the river flats. And then when there’s no other work we pick up the stones and make the walls. After a couple of years we’ve cleaned out all the stones, ploughing is easy, and we have fences that never need to be replaced.”

That told Pulcher why their paddocks had stone walls rather than fences. Laborious, but effective.

“Have you used a steel plough?” Pulcher asked.

“No. We have a couple but they’re used for the new fields, where we haven’t cleaned out all the roots and rocks yet. The older men do that work.” The youth smiled and dropped his head a fraction as he admitted his status as a novice.

“How much are you paid?” Pulcher asked, in a change of subject. This question obviously surprised the boy.

“Twenty denarii a month. I’m twenty years old.” He made it sound like everyone should know that.

“I am sorry, I mean no offence,” Pulcher was hasty to say. “I’m just not familiar with your ways. Back on the Old World, pay is based on the sort of work you do, and not on age.”

The youth shrugged. “Sounds like a silly way of doing things. You should just do the work you are allocated. If you don’t like it then apply for a different job. That way everyone eventually ends up in a job they like and that means they do it well. Everyone is happy.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. What sort of work do you want to do as you get older?”

The lad paused for a moment. “I hadn’t really thought about that, ‘cause I’m happy with this job.”

“You don’t want to become a manager on the farm, instead of one of the field workers?”

“Nah!” the boy waved the suggestion away. “I like to work outside but the manager types have to sit inside all day, and they always seem worried about something. And usually it’s something that hasn’t happened yet, like ‘Do we have enough seed for the next crop?’ or ‘Which crops will we plant in which field?’, or ‘where should we graze the cows this year?’. Too easy to make mistakes if you can’t actually see the job in front of you!”

Pulcher nodded his understanding. “Thank you for your time.” He turned back to regain the road. He was starting to realise just how different these Islanders really were. An African trader like himself had more in common with a Chinese merchant than he had

with these people! With this insight, he realised how futile it would be to argue with Lucia tonight on the basis of economics. Instead, he must argue his case on the basis of what was most precious to them. He had to reference everything to their love of their freedom and fear of the Federation taking it from them. He continued on his tour of the vicinity.

It was perhaps half an hour before sunset. He had bathed and dressed as soon as word had come from Lucia, and now he was ascending the stairs in the old warehouse. As he reached the top of the stairs he saw through the window of this large upstairs office that the sun was hanging over the western horizon. The colours of the cirrus clouds were breathtaking, with just the hint of the ridgetops some forty miles away peeking over the horizon.

“It must be a conspiracy!” he exclaimed in awe. “Terrapulchra indeed! The gods favour this land with such beauty!”

“Yes, the most beautiful land in the whole world,” Lucia agreed. “Here, sit with us and have some wine.” She handed him an elegant wine-glass, with the crest of one of Babylon’s great glass manufacturers on the base. The wine was a light straw colour, and seemed cool to the touch. Then he noticed that it had been poured from a flask wrapped in a damp towel. He took a sip.

“This is a very good wine, Consul! From Germania, I would say. Perhaps the Rhenus?”

Lucia smiled in appreciation. “I am glad you like it, Septimius. When we take an intruder such prizes are reserved for special occasions, but in our ignorance we don’t often know a good amphora of wine from a bad one. We just note the status of the cabin where we find it.” She smiled as she said this, because everything to do with ‘status’ was tinged with absurdity in her mind. “But please be careful with the glass, we have only four left!” she chuckled.

“I’ve also asked for another special treat tonight. We won’t eat in the settlement mess hall but here. Some of the cooks have re-vitalised the old Port kitchen and will deliver our food to us when it’s ready. I’ve asked for the first course to arrive soon after sunset.” Lucia and Miron looked at each other like children who know they had done something naughty.

“Is there a problem with that?” Pulcher asked.

“Well, it’s expected that everyone should eat together unless you’re on duty or sick,” Miron explained. “It’s one of our customs and ensures that no-one starts to feel superior to his fellow-citizen, or even the slave at his elbow. But this special treat isn’t for us personally. It’s for Lord Pulcher!” He laughed uncomfortably.

Pulcher was amazed. “I will never become accustomed to this egalitarianism! The Consul and the Chairman of the Council, the two highest officers in the land, and they feel guilty because they’re not eating the same food and at the same table as a slave!” He shook his head in disbelief.

The conversation had stalled. But as the sun dropped onto the distant peaks and painted the clouds one subtly beautiful colour after another, no-one felt compelled to break the silence. At last the tip of the sun sank out of sight.

“I will remember that forever,” Pulcher murmured.

Lucia turned to look at him, and then lifted her glass. “The glorious end to a perfect day! A fitting tribute to old friends and a new beginning.” Miron lifted his glass, and they both took a sip.

Pulcher did not. Instead, he raised his glass and said, “May there be many more.” He took a sip. All three turned back to the window, watching the light contract to the west.

Then came a sound from below. There were footsteps across the lower floor and then on the stairs as five people entered. The first carried a cloth to place over the bare table. She set three places, complete with napkins. The second placed a bowl of prawns and crabs in the centre. The third carried a tray full of oysters in their shells. The fourth carried a tray of various sauces and dips, and the fifth a tray of bread.

“Thank you,” Lucia smiled to them. They turned and left.

Pulcher didn’t care for oysters, but the crab meat was exquisite. “This is to die for!” He exclaimed. “How do they do it?”

“It’s a common dish here. We’re surrounded by such delights and there’s plenty of opportunity for our cooks to perfect their skills,” Miron said. “But try it with this sauce. It’s my favourite.” Miron pushed a bowl towards him.

Pulcher dipped a piece of crab meat into the sauce following Miron’s example and popped it into his mouth. “Oh, that is glorious!” He rolled his eyes. “I remember that now from my last visit, and how I urged Sextus to let me take back a full cargo of it! But he said it would spoil in transit.”

“Yes, it would,” agreed Miron. “It must be made on the same day, preferably immediately before serving, or it goes brown and mouldy.”

The meal progressed, and the pale wine was the perfect balance for the white meat.

“Did you have a restful day, Septimius?” Lucia asked as she lit three lamps from a flintlock.

“Thank you Lucia, yes it was a very pleasant day. I went for a walk, visiting a school and seeing some of the farmland. Everyone was very friendly.”

“Did the school surprise you? I understand that back in the Old World it’s unusual for girls to be educated.”

Pulcher shrugged a response. “I had my daughters educated, and so do most of our wealthier people. But outside the wealthy, what you say is true.” Then a thought hit him. “I understand that you still take the occasional intruder, but you haven’t had any female slaves delivered for over a generation now! How do you keep a balance between the sexes?”

Lucia simply shrugged back. “It just happens. I suppose boys and men are more likely to die, having the more dangerous occupations. And intruders are taken only rarely. So I suppose that we get just enough new men to make up our losses.”

“I saw no yellow-shirts today. Are there no recent captives here?”

Lucia shrugged again. “We get so few now and everyone knows everyone else, so the slave uniform hasn’t been enforced for a long time now. And I don’t know that there are any newcomers here anyway. Most are sent off to help clear new lands or build new works in newer settlements. Port, being the oldest settlement, has the least need for extra labour.”

Pulcher nodded his understanding.

Then the footsteps below could be heard again. As the first head appeared above the floor level Lucia stood and stepped away from the table. “That was wonderful, Andromeda! Thank you!” The other two took their cue, and stepped away as well.

The lead woman, who was empty-handed, smiled her appreciation for the praise. She stacked the used plates and uneaten food on a side table. Then those following presented fresh plates and trays of fish, pork and assorted poultry. Again there was a range of sauces and a wide variety of vegetables. Finally, another clear glass flask of wine was set on the table.

The catering crew then collected the plates from the side table and marched down the stairs.

“I must apologise for one thing,” Lucia confessed. “We’ll have to use the same wine glasses.”

“Who could desire better?” Pulcher laughed. “May I pour the new wine for you?”

“Thank you, yes.” Lucia passed her glass to him.

Pulcher poured for all three, and then took a sip. This was a much heavier wine, complex and luscious, filling the mouth with flavour. “Oh, marvellous!” he exclaimed. Lucia and Miron smiled back to him. “Now, Miron, if you could tell me what sauces you recommend for these dishes?”

The stars were all out now, even in the west. Miron walked Pulcher through the various foods and sauces in what he considered their proper order and all was well in the world.

As they finished that course Lucia gathered herself together. “I’m afraid we have to get to the less enjoyable part of the evening sometime,” she opened. Turning to Pulcher, she said sorrowfully, “I am afraid that this is the last time any ship will be permitted to return to the Old World. You may send more ships and you may even return here yourself if you wish. But it will be a one-way journey.”

Pulcher paused before speaking. “I understand your love of this place. Who could fail to understand! I also understand your fear that it might be taken from you if the Federation becomes aware of you. So I understand your wish to avoid any unnecessary risk of a spy.

“But I have been meticulous in crew selection and for sixty years your secret has been safe. I agree there is always a risk, but think of the risks of cutting yourself off from any information sources.

“For example, ships and machinery and even weapons are becoming more complex and more powerful every year. German shipyards are now producing ships with steel hulls. Your normal weapons would not be able to sink these, or at least not safely.

“Many coastal ships are now machine-powered, not wind-powered. At present they have a limited range but there will come a time when they will be able to cross huge distances, including coming to this place. How would your interceptors deal with a ship that has a steel hull, and can move at ten miles an hour or more in any direction regardless of the wind? In calm weather, it would simply outrun you! That is, if it didn’t sink you with its own weapons!

“You need to know what’s happening on the other side of the ocean. Your success so far has been because the other side were ignorant of what they were facing. Do not

put yourself at that same disadvantage! You must stay in touch with the rest of the world, to ensure you're not taken by surprise. I offer you that source of information.

“So I wouldn't be sending a ship every year, or every five years. Maybe not even every ten years. But if I become aware of anything that could threaten you I want to let you know.

“And if sometime the Mayans get their brains back, or if I can find a commercial crop that suits you, we can start trading again. Maybe I can once again start making a profit from my great-grandfather's investment. But even if that never happens, I'm prepared to spend my money just to stay in touch with you.”

Pulcher finished the presentation he had worked on all afternoon. He hoped it had hit the right places, playing on their fears while appealing to their loyalty.

Lucia gave a heavy sigh. “You are indeed worthy of your fathers before you. You're a very generous man from a long line of generous men.

“But you tell us nothing that we don't already know. Every time we intercept an intruder we gain fresh knowledge of what's happening on the other side of the pond. We don't need your reports nor do you need to go to such expense to provide them.

“With this knowledge we have been constantly re-designing our interceptors and revising our tactics. Sextus as much as told you that last night, if you recall. So we are always ready for whatever might come our way. Our only concern is to make sure as little as possible does come our way.

“As for the Maya returning to the gold trade... That isn't going to happen for generations, if ever. But so what? We don't need them and they don't need us.

“However, there is one point that does distress us. Your family has been so good to us for so long, and at great expense. We felt we would never be able to repay that debt of kindness. Co-incidentally, we happened to stumble across a forgotten hoard of gold a few years ago. The Council resolved that it would be fitting for you to be given that gold, as a sign of appreciation. Please take our gift and honour our wishes.”

Pulcher dropped his head, his elbows on the table. There was silence for some time. At last he lifted his face. “What is to stop me from coming over here with some steam-powered, steel-hulled ships?” he spat the words through his teeth. “I'm not ignorant of you! I know your capabilities, your locations. You couldn't stop me from coming back!”

Lucia met his gaze. “If you were to do that, then you would not be coming back as a friend. That would break the heart of every Terrapulchran.”

Pulcher dropped his head again. “Yes, you are right. And it would break my heart, too.” He sighed deeply. “Is there any way to make this less final? Any way to leave the door just a little bit open?”

The sound of footsteps downstairs interrupted the conversation. The caterers came up the stairs again, and in the same orderly manner laid out various cuts of lamb, veal and beef. Another flask of wine also appeared, this time a red.

The mood was downcast. Miron suggested a couple of combinations of the cuts and their sauces. Pulcher complied and acclaimed the food. But the bonhomie was forced.

Lucia poured the wine, and took a sip. “Septimius, you're obviously a man who knows a good wine. What do you make of this red?”

Pulcher lifted his glass to the lamplight, swirled it, sniffed and took a sip.

“That is again an excellent wine. What sort of intruders do you have over here, that they carry such good wine into the middle of nothingness? That’s from the Atlantic coast of Gaul, just north of Hispania.”

Lucia laughed. “Sometimes we get lucky. But when we do, it's set aside for special occasions. We usually drink our own Terrapulchran wine, which is not very good if you recall your last visit.”

Pulcher had recovered his mood enough to become a proper guest again. “I’m sorry that I have saddened you tonight. The thought of losing you has hurt me, and as they say ‘misery loves company’. But I’ve been thinking ever since I was last here, what could be done to provide you with a good trade commodity. Then your farmers could have better tools, your children better equipment in their school, your hospital better means of treating patients. I can’t come up with a single idea. If only there was some way to restore trade and with it prosperity!”

Lucia leant forward, to emphasise her point. “That's exactly where you're going wrong, Septimius. Trade is the very thing we *don't* want! We're prosperous enough with our freedom, rather than trying to buy a little more luxury at the cost of our nation.

“Even if you discovered the perfect commodity for us, we would be even more averse to trading in it. Because it would thereby be even more dangerous to our freedom. You're a trader and you think profitable trade is salvation. We think it's death.”

Miron spoke again, with regret. “Sadly, Septimius, we as a people are everything the Federation despises and the Federation is everything we dread. The wider the ocean between us, the better.”

Pulcher nodded his understanding. Although their love for him as a person and as the heir to his ancestors was clear, their rejection of everything he considered ‘good’ was equally obvious. No good could come of fighting it.

So he stood. Holding out his glass of wine he proclaimed, “To Terrapulchra the Free! May I never forget her, and may no-one else ever know her!”

Lucia and Miron stood, and drank with him. Then Miron held out his glass. “To every Septimius Pulcher who has ever lived, and to many more who will follow, each and every one of them a man of dignitas and virtue! May they always be honoured, both in life and in memory!”

Lucia and Miron drank. Then the three took their seats again.

“It has been a sad business, Consul,” Pulcher said wearily, “and Chairman,” he added quickly. “I can only pray that I will never again have to bury another of my children!”

At length the footsteps were again heard downstairs. Again the table was cleared of the last course and bowls of luscious, sweet fruit were placed with bowls of fresh cream.

Token amounts were eaten for the sake of decorum before the three took their leave of each other and left for their quarters.

Pulcher was up and about soon after dawn the next morning, ordering all of the cargo to be unloaded onto the dock. Just as this was almost complete, Miron came to greet him.

“Don't unload, Septimius! We have nothing to trade with!”

“Didn't you say in your letter that you had twelve talents of gold?”

“Well, yes, but that's a gift. It's not for trade.”

“This also is a gift, not for trade.” The last bolts of cloth in the hull hit the decking of the pier as he spoke. The dockside sailors started to pull them free of the netting.

“That's all, my lord,” called the man controlling the capstan serving the hoist.

“Very well,” Pulcher acknowledged the call, and turned back to Miron. “Please Miron, where shall we stack this? Which warehouse?”

Miron stared at him a moment longer, and then embraced him. “You are a very generous man, Septimius!”

“So Sextus told me last time I was here and he implored me to return. Now you call me a generous man and order me never to return!” But Pulcher caught himself. “Not that I mean to be bitter, Miron. Life is full of ironies such as these.”

The goods were stacked into the one warehouse still in use for minor quantities of inter-island trade. The twelve talents of gold were carried back to the ship and stowed.

“Miron, I would like to leave as soon as I could without giving offence. Could I prevail upon you for fresh supplies?”

“Of course, Septimius!” Miron slapped him on the left shoulder. “We'll fill your water barrels, and all the usual things. I'll send for the hens, the cow, and all the rest immediately.”

“Don't worry about the fresh water. The crew topped up the barrels as soon as we docked. But the other items would be most welcome.”

The usual going-away stores were on board soon after noon. A cow with enough hay to feed her for three weeks, a dozen poultry and grain for them, and fresh fruit enough to last for the few days before it went off.

Pulcher's ship left on the afternoon tide, with a pleasant north-easterly the perfect breeze to clear the Port. Then once clear, she started working just south of east, heading for the Sardinola Passage. The honour guard of five old-design interceptors which had escorted the ship into Port now escorted her to Capri. Then, once in the Sardinola Passage, they raced past him in line astern with all available hands lining the gunwhales in fixed salute. Then they peeled off on a heading to Capri, their supposed base. The façade was maintained to the very end.

AUTHOR'S COMMENTS

It is a fact of history in my universe that Terrapulchra 'triumphed'. What a hollow word! How does one measure the success or otherwise of a society? By military expansion? By technological advances? By economic progress? By longevity? Even if it is measured by such vague and ultimately indefinable metrics as 'happiness' or 'equality', who is to say that happiness or equality are relevant in a struggle for survival? Or in any other way, for that matter? So is the attribution of 'triumph' to Terrapulchra anything more than an endorsement of one particular point of view? It is no less obvious that the Republic also 'triumphed', and on a scale that makes Terrapulchra's achievements look puny.

Even more searching questions could be asked of the Federation that succeeded the Republic, but that is outside my period of expertise and also beyond the evidence presented to you, Gentle Reader, in this series.

What can be said on a purely empirical basis is that the value of the per capita productivity of Terrapulchra was at least six times that of the Republic. But was this the result of their unique societal organisation, or simply the benefit of having monopolistic access to certain unique products?

Once Terrapulchra revealed itself to the Federation the economic advantage of having female employment forced all other Tribes to copy that pattern, leading ultimately to female enfranchisement. But was this because those measures were a superior model, or because it had the economic muscle thanks to its monopolies on New World products? Was it a 'better system' as claimed by its advocates or was it simply a 'race to the bottom' as claimed at that time by Traditionalists?

So was Terrapulchra proof that 'Socialism is the Wave of the Future', as Marxism might prophesy? Far from it! Look carefully! Terrapulchran society would never have evolved except in what was almost a parasitic relationship with the Republic. Theirs was not some romantic 'going back to a purer time', but an act of desperation and self-defence, ultimately funded by stealthily exploiting the very enemy they dreaded!

In this sense the structure of Terrapulchran society was driven by competition, precisely the motivating force of the laissez-faire merchantilist Republic it most feared. Its response was effectively to maximise co-operation internally so as to enable it to maximise its competitive leverage externally. And to achieve this end their internal political and social structures were even more authoritarian than any structure in the Republic. Terrapulchra was based entirely on total civil conscription, softened only by its ideology of democracy, egalitarianism and transparency. It would be more accurate to call it 'Democratic Corporatism' rather than 'Socialism' in any Marxist sense. There was certainly no hint of the Terrapulchran State apparatus 'withering away'!

Yet that ideology of democracy, egalitarianism and transparency was sincere and it was applied as consistently as even the most devoted advocate might have hoped. So Terrapulchran society does not fit comfortably on any simplistic 'Right' to 'Left' spectrum we might recognise today. It combined many features of many paradigms.

What is beyond doubt, however, is that every subsequent society had to adopt many of its innovations or collapse under the competitive pressure it imposed.

Was this a liberation to a new age? Or was it an irrevocable mistake that trapped all subsequent generations? The same question has been asked of the Neolithic Revolution, and that debate still has reached no more certain an outcome. The only certainty is that we would not be here today without that Neolithic Revolution, and nor would my (now lost) world be there without Terrapulchra.

Let each reader make his or her own assessment of this seminal society.

(Back Cover text)

In the Ancient World the fundamental institutions of Property, Patriarchy and Slavery were never questioned. It was self-evident that any society that abandoned these essential features of human civilisation would surely fall into chaos.

Except that there was one society which broke every one of these rules.

This volume outlines the establishment of Terrapulchra. It examines what the main actors were thinking at the time, what they did and why they did it. In desperation they invented alternative social paradigms that were scandalous by any criteria accepted at the time. Yet every step along the way seemed unavoidable and inevitable at the time. What else could they have done in those circumstances?

These innovations proved so successful that they changed the rest of the world irrevocably.

Tito Kithes Athano was Professor of History at Malitora University until an equipment failure returned him to our timeline instead of his own alternate universe. This historically accurate but very readable book was written with the aid of a huge library of scholarly research stored on his personal touchboard. Send comments and questions to him at tkathano@gmail.com and read the question-and-answer posts on his Facebook page Tito Kithes Athano.