

A woman with long braided hair is wearing a grey, pointed hood and a brown shawl with a patterned border. She is looking slightly to the right. The background is dark.

CARAVAN TO PATALIPUTRA

BY
MICHEL POULIN

CARAVAN TO PATALIPUTRA

HISTORICAL FICTION NOVEL

BY

MICHEL POULIN

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS HISTORICAL FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF VIOLENCE AND WAR, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. WHILE THIS NOVEL DEPICTS SOME HISTORICAL PERSONS AND EVENTS FROM THE PAST, THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION AND WORDS OR DEEDS ATTRIBUTED IN IT TO PERSONS WHO EXISTED DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT HISTORICAL REALITY.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to my earlier novel NAUCA – DAUGHTER OF THE STEPPES and follows the adventures and travels of Nauca, a young Sarmatian woman who was born north of the Sea of Azov, in the Caucasus, in 80 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era). Living first as a nomad with her family in the plains and forests east of the Borysthene (Dniepr) River, Nauca lost her family to a band of robbers at the age of twelve but got her revenge by hunting and killing those robbers before deciding to go to the Greek commercial outpost of Tanais, situated on the delta of the Tanais (Don) River. There, she was helped and supported by a Greek merchant and hunted and trapped furs for him during periodical expeditions out of Tanais. Seeing caravans from the distant East coming to and going from Tanais, Nauca decided to take to the roads with a caravan, in order to see more of the World. Going with her first caravan to the city of Samarkand, Nauca then joined another caravan and travelled all the way to China before returning to Samarkand. Now, Nauca is ready to travel again, this time to India and the city of Pataliputra.

OTHER BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

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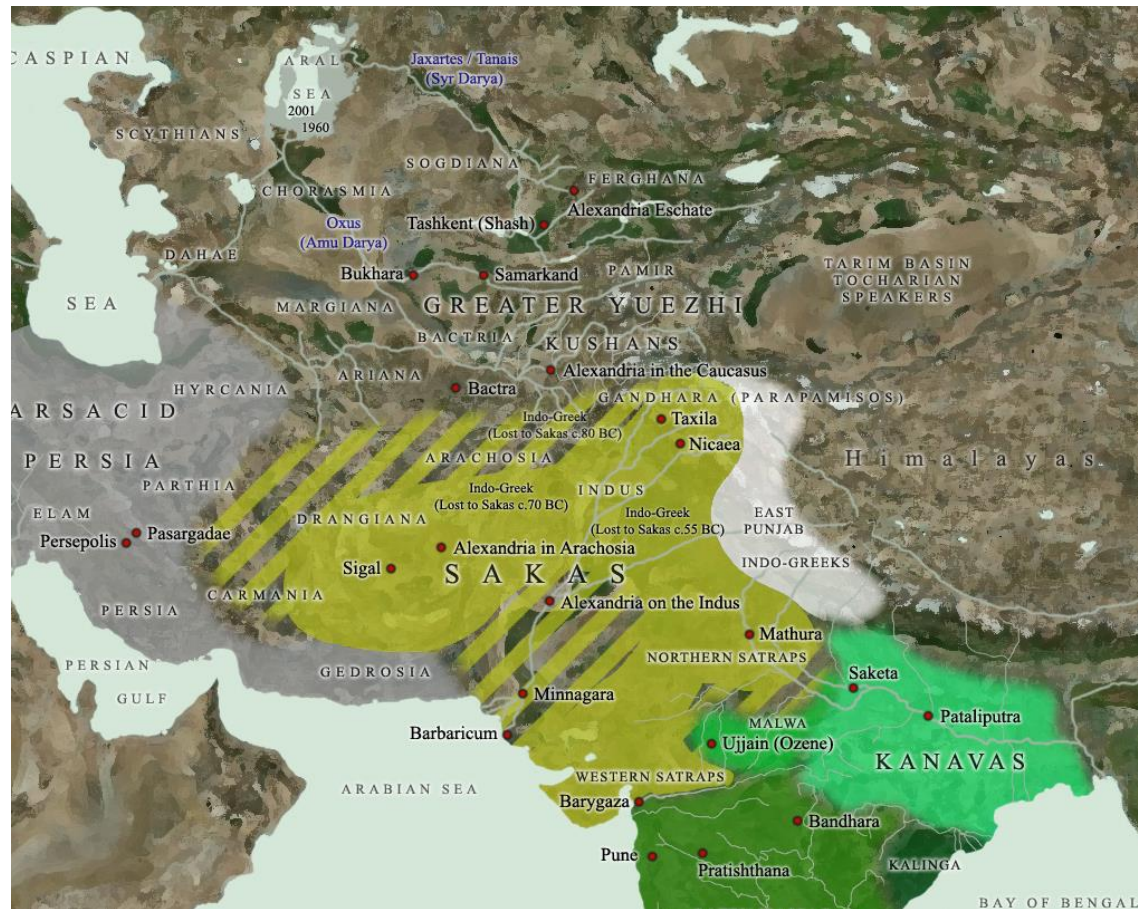
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Map of Sarmatia, 1st Century B.C.E. Red arrow: birthplace of Nauca. Yellow arrow: Tanaïs Emporium.



Map of Central Asia and India circa 50 B.C.E.

CHAPTER 1 – SAMARKAND



Ancient Samarkand (pre-Islamic).

09:18 (Central Asia Time)

Thursday, February 22, 61 B.C.E.

Family caravanserai of Hiram and Yurkan

City of Samarkand, Sogdiana

The secure deposits house in the family caravanserai belonging to Hiram and his brother Yurkan was, if anything, built even stronger than the storage building where the merchandises brought in by their caravans or bought in advance of another caravan trip were kept. For one thing, it was built with stones rather than with clay bricks. Also, the high but narrow windows of the deposits house, located at a height of two meters, were too narrow to let even a small child crawl through them, compensating their narrowness by their numbers in order to provide sufficient light inside. A thick, iron-reinforced wooden door guarded at all times by two armed men and locked with two locks completed the external protection of the building, itself situated at one end of the walled caravanserai's compound. However, even if thieves succeeded in entering it, they would then still not be able to take anything of value from it. In a system that Nauca thought of as brilliant, the caravan merchants associated with Hiram and Yurkan kept

their valuables, like gold, silver, gems, jewels and rare spices, in large individual chests made of thick wood reinforced with iron straps and locked by large key locks. What was brilliant about those secure chests was the fact that their bottom was lined with lead plates that made them extremely heavy, thus near impossible to be moved unless you could open them and take out those lead plates. As a good friend, employee and associate of both Hiram and Yurkan, Nauca had been using one of the secure chests to safeguard the valuables and money she had either earned or had received as gifts while traveling with the brothers' respective caravans. Nauca, a tall, 21-year-old Sarmatian girl with reddish-brown hair and brown eyes, led Hiram to the chest she used to safeguard her valuables and, extracting the key she always kept suspended from her neck by a chain, opened its big lock. With Hiram watching on, she then opened the cover of the chest and took a flat bronze box from inside it before opening it and presenting it to Hiram.



“This is what Emperor Xuan gave me as a gift in order to reward me for protecting Lady Zu and her daughter from that renegade Chinese general in Khotan.” Hiram, a medium-sized man in his early thirties with a short black beard, opened his eyes wide at the sight of the magnificent tiara and matching set of jewels contained inside the bronze box.

“But...those would be worthy of a princess or even a queen, Nauca.”

“I am a simple Sarmatian nomad girl in your employ, Hiram, and I don't intend to let this gift get to my head. I will now show you something else that is most precious to me, but you will have to promise me not to tell anybody about it, even to your brother or your wife.”

“Uh, okay!” said Hiram after a short hesitation, intrigued by such mystery. Closing and putting back the bronze box inside the chest, Nauca then picked up another box and opened it, exposing a gold and jade cup inlaid with emeralds, rubies and turquoises, along with a full set of gem-inlaid jewels. Hiram's brain nearly boiled over as Nauca calmly spoke.

“This is another gift that is most dear to me and that I will never sell away. It was given to me by no other than King Mithridates after we met in the Taiga forest, near Tanais.”

"King Mithridates? The King of Pontus, who fought the Romans and lost? Why did he give you such a fantastic gift?"

"Because I invited him to my campfire in the Taiga and sheltered him while he was traveling during the Winter months, even though he was for me at the time nothing more than a simple traveler who was part of a small troupe of travelers."

"So, King Mithridates would be still alive?" asked Hiram, overwhelmed by Nauca's revelation. She however shook her head slowly at that question.

"At the time of our meeting, many years ago, he was already a very old man and he probably has died since then. However, the fact that I met him in the Taiga must stay secret: if the wrong persons learn about this, they could then try to hunt him down and find him, in order to steal his gold. Those same persons would also probably have no compunction in torturing me to get me to tell them everything about our meeting."

"Then, why reveal this to me, Nauca?"

"For two reasons, Hiram: first, I respect you and have full confidence in you; second, this is one way to show you that, while I have become an associate merchant of you and your brother, it is not the desire to become rich that makes me travel with your caravans, but rather the desire to see the World and live adventures. By all common standards, I am already rich. While I will keep an occasional footing in your Samarkand's caravanserai, I will always stay a nomad woman at heart, and this to my dying day."

Giving a last look at the jeweled cup and set of jewels, Hiram then looked into Nauca's eyes, feeling renewed respect for her.

"If I ever needed a proof of your absolute honesty, then this is it, Nauca. You can count on my silence about this."

"Thank you, Hiram."

Letting her put her box back in the chest and then close and lock her chest, Hiram followed her out of the safe deposits house, then locked back its door before walking a short distance with her and stopping. His expression was both sober and serious as he pivoted to face her.

"Nauca, you may not be motivated by profit the way us Sogdian merchants are but you should strive to at least not get fleeced every time you will conclude deals or exchanges while traveling with our caravans. Yurkan told me that, while you have already learned quite a lot about the business of trading, you are still weak in the art of haggling. I intend to teach you more about that art, with the help of Xiao, my expert in

gem trading. I understand that you have been concentrating on the acquisition of gems, along with that of silk and spices, correct?”

“Correct! I prefer to deal with those kinds of merchandise because they are the lightest and thus easiest to transport, while they have very high values. That way, I can carry a lot of value while keeping light the loads on my two camels and my pack horse.”

“A most reasonable and logical strategy, I must say. Do you intend to sell here in Samarkand all of the merchandise you brought back from China?”

“All, except for a few select gems and small quantities of selected spices, which I intend to keep for my personal use. Since we will go next to India, there is no point for me to bring with me spices and gems that are found in abundance there. That would make no good commercial sense. In your opinion, what kind of merchandises would interest potential customers in India?”

Happy to see that she had already acquired a fair common sense concerning trading, Hiram thought for a few seconds before answering her.

“Good, strong horses are always in demand in the East, mostly because the eastern races of horses tend to be much smaller than the horses you raised in Sarmatia. That was one main reason why I went regularly to Tanais, to buy horses there. Another thing from the West that is in high demand in the East is slaves. However, like you, I dislike this slaving business and tend to avoid it. Unfortunately, slavery is a universal institution as far as I know and demands for good working slaves and for pretty slave girls never seems to go down.”

“And did you buy slaves during your last trip to Tanais, Hiram?”

Nauca’s pointed question made the caravan master hesitate before he answered her while averting her eyes.

“Yes, I did buy a few slaves in Tanais. The Romans who are now in Tanais have brought with them slaves of their own and also expanded the slave trade there. As you must know, Romans are big slave users, with most of the prisoners they take in their wars then turned into slaves. I sold on arrival in Samarkand nearly all the slaves I bought in Tanais, except for three girls, whom I was planning to pass on to Yurkan, so that he could bring them with him on his next trip to China.”

Nauca stared at him somberly for a moment, trying to decide how to react to this. Personally, she abhorred the institution of slavery and those who profited from it or abused slaves. For her, freedom was a sacred notion and she had vowed to kill herself rather than ever be enslaved. However, she realized that slavery was a reality in this

world, a sad and cruel one but still a reality that could not be denied or ignored. Nauca knew that Hiram was not a bad or cruel man: he was just a typical merchant of his time who traded what was considered to be legitimate merchandise everywhere. She finally patted his shoulder while speaking to him in a neutral tone.

"I understand that trading in slaves is a legitimate business and that you did not do this out of cruelty, Hiram. Could I see those three slave girls?"

Hiram snapped his head up in surprise at that question.

"You want to see those slaves? Why?"

"You will see. Just bring me to them."

"Er, okay!"

Hiram led Nauca to his family's house and entered it. Encountering his daughter Dinkha, he asked a question to her.

"Do you know where the three slave girls I brought from Tanais are, Dinkha?"

"Yes, Father: Mother told them to clean the camels' stalls."

"Thank you!" replied Hiram before leaving his house to walk towards the row of stalls where the camels used by his family were sheltered. Seeing three girls at work with pitchforks and shovels in one stall, he called up to them in Sogdian and signaled them to join him and Nauca. The latter eyed with a mix of curiosity and interest the three girls who then got out of the stall and lined up in front of Hiram. Due to the near freezing temperature of February they wore woolen capes, along with soft leather shoes, but were otherwise naked except for loincloths. Nauca was not surprised by that, as slaves were commonly kept nearly naked in order to save on their clothing. That however allowed her to more easily evaluate their physical state. The tallest girl, as tall or even a bit taller than Nauca in fact, also looked strong and fit and had to be around fifteen years old. She was very pretty and most feminine already, with blond hair and blue eyes. The second girl was slightly shorter but also looked fit and of about the same age as the first one, but wore brown hair and had gray eyes. The youngest one, which was also much smaller, was barely in her early teens and definitely had a Greek look to her and had long black hair and brown eyes. Hiram then pointed in turn at each of them while speaking to Nauca.

"The girl to the left is named Igrid. She is from the Germanic tribe of the Bastarnae and was captured by the Romans when her tribe and other people around Dacia and Macedonia recently revolted against the Romans but then lost their war."

“The Bastarnae? I heard about them before, when I was young and still living on the steppes: their tribe was our neighbor to the West, across the Borysthene River. They had a reputation of being fierce warriors.”

“That’s what I was told too about them. The girl in the middle is named Talya and is from Dacia, along the northwest coast of the Pontus Euxinus¹. The younger one is named Amara and is eleven-year-old. Both Talya and Amara were enslaved by the Romans after their people revolted against Roman rule.”

“And for how much were you planning to sell them, Hiram?”
Hiram was temporarily stunned by her question before he finally understood what were her intentions concerning the slave girls.

“You want to buy them in order to free them? But what would they do then, without money and not knowing the local language in a city that is totally foreign to them? They would quickly fall back into servitude...or prostitution.”

“Yes, I want to free them, but not to simply abandon them afterwards. I will take them as salaried employees and they will travel with me and with your caravan. I am sure that they can then prove themselves to be useful...without the threat of a whipping or maltreatment.”

The youngest girl, Amara, looked stunned on hearing Nauca, who had conversed in Greek with Hiram. Seeing that, Nauca approached her and gently caressed her head with one hand while smiling to her.

“Do not worry about me, young Amara: I only want to be good with you and the two other girls. Know that I am a Sarmatian from the tribe of the Roxolani and that I prize freedom above everything else. In fact, I hate slavery and am buying you only in order to free you and offer you a paying job.”

The Bastarnae girl named Igrid snapped her head towards Nauca when she heard the words ‘Roxolani’ and ‘Sarmatia’.

“Roxolani?” she said before saying a few words that Nauca could barely understand. Nauca then smiled to Igrid and nodded once her head, speaking in Sarmatian.

“Yes, I am from the Roxolani. I was born near the eastern shores of the Borysthene River, next to your tribe’s territory.”

¹ Pontus Euxinus : The ancient name of the Black Sea.

Igrid smiled in response, having visibly understood the words 'Borysthene River'. Turning towards Hiram, Nauca then repeated her question.

"So, how much for all three of them, Hiram? And give me a price similar to what you would ask from a Samarkand merchant."

"Uh, the tall one, Igrid, would be considered a prime slave, due to her strong body. The same could be said of Talya, while young Amara would fetch the standard price for a house servant. All in all, I would have asked for a total of 800 drachmas for these three girls."

"Then, I will pay you 800 drachmas for them. Could you prepare a contract and emancipation declarations for them while I go fetch some of my gold?"

"Sure! Give me a moment, please."

"Of course! I will be in my room with those three girls. Follow me, girls!"

With little Amara following her at once and with Talya and Igrid imitating the Greek girl, the four of them went into the caravanserai's inn and climbed the stairs to the upper floor, where Nauca had her room.

Once inside her room and with its door closed and locked, Nauca gently took off the capes worn by the three slave girls, so that she could examine their bodies for traces of past bad treatment. While little Amara had no visible scars or bruises on her young body, both Igrid and Talya bore old whip marks on their backs. Nauca sadly eyed the scars and pointed at them while saying a single word.

"Romans?"

Both girls nodded their heads in response. Nauca wanted to say more but didn't know how to be understood by Igrid and Talya. That was when the latter one surprised her by speaking in a broken but understandable Greek.

"I can speak Greek...little."

"You do? Great! That however leaves me with a problem about how to speak with Igrid."

"She speaks Dacian." replied Talya, smiling, making Nauca smile as well.

"Great! Cascade translation: from Greek to Dacian and back. Still, that could work, until you could all speak a proper Greek. Look, girls. I intend to travel soon to India as part of Hiram's caravan and I want to bring you with me on that trip, not as slaves but as paid employees and partners."

"Partners?" said Talya in a disbelieving tone. "To do what?"

“Well, it will mostly depend on what kind of skills you possess, each of you. Do you know how to use a weapon, Talya? And could you ask the same question to Igrid, please?”

The two older girls spoke together in Dacian for a moment before Talya looked back at Nauca.

“Igrid can shoot a bow, throw a javelin and fight with a knife. She also knows how to ride a horse and care for it and can also drive a chariot. As for me, I am good with a sling and a javelin and can ride a horse. Before being enslaved, I was a sheep shepherd.”

“That would certainly explain your level of fitness, Talya. This is actually better than I hoped for. Tell Igrid that I would like to hire her as part hunter and part camp guard during our trip to India. As for you, you can help care for my camels and horses.”

“What about me?” asked in Greek young Amara, making Nauca smile to her.

“And what can you do, young one?”

“My mother showed me how to cook, make bread and wash clothes.”

“That’s a good start, Amara. In turn, I can teach you how to use various spices in a range of recipes I tasted and learned to like during my travels. Well, with this said, we better go get you some new clothes: you can’t stay half-naked like this around a bunch of caravan men. As soon as I will have paid Hiram for your acquisition and will have your emancipation certificates, we will go together to the central market to buy things for you three.”

That declaration made little Amara come and hug her tightly, tears in her eyes. Both Talya and Igrid then joined the little Greek girl in hugging Nauca, who then held all three girls in her opened arms, more moved than she wanted to show.

About one hour later, with her debt to Hiram for the slaves paid and with their emancipation certificates made and signed on parchment, Nauca lent three of her wool undershirts to the ex-slave girls, so that they would not go around topless, and left with them the caravanserai to go to the city’s central market. There, Nauca spent over 500 drachmas to acquire a decent and practical travel wardrobe for her three new employees and for various travel items, like water flasks, haversacks, belts, purses and bedrolls. She also bought a good quality horse with a saddle and bridles for Igrid, so that she could more efficiently act as a guard and hunter. In a move that both stunned and greatly reassured the three girls, Nauca also acquired weapons for them, buying a bow

with arrows, two javelins, a battle-axe, a dagger and a small buckler shield for Igrid, a Chinese crossbow, a pair of javelins plus a dagger and a sling for Talya and a javelin and dagger for young Amara. The three ex-slaves had big smiles on their faces when they returned to the caravanserai after their shopping trip.

Their group dined together that evening in the inn of the caravanserai, surprising many of the caravan men and associates who had become Nauca's friends during the last two years, but also pleasing the wives of Hiram and Yurkan, who approved of her generosity and compassion. With all the rooms in the inn already taken, Nauca elected to keep all three girls with her in her room, which was thankfully one of the bigger ones of the inn. Like her, the three girls undressed before going to bed, keeping only their loincloths on, and with all four lying close to each other in order to share their body heat during the fresh night. However, that awakened in Nauca souvenirs about her past steamy nights spent with Artemisia during her time with her in Tanais. She was tempted for a moment to pass an arm over Talya's torso, in order to cup one of her breasts, but decided to leave her alone: this could have appeared to Talya as an attempt by her to profit from her status over her. She also didn't want Talya or the other two girls to have reasons to fear her or her motives towards them, for any reason. Keeping her hands to herself, Nauca then went to sleep in the dark room, hugged by the bodies of both Igrid and Talya and with little Amara sandwiched between her and Talya.

CHAPTER 2 – ON THE ROAD TO INDIA



India around 50 B.C.E. Red arrow points to the location of Samarkand.

07:23 (Central Asia Time)

Friday, March 29, 61 B.C.E.

Courtyard of the caravanserai belonging to Hiram and Yurkan

City of Samarkand, Sogdiana

It took long minutes before Hiram regretfully unglued himself from his wife Seda and from his children, Dinkha and Jakand, who had come out to say goodbye and wish him a good trip to India. With a last kiss to them, he then got on his horse and gave the signal to his fifteen associates/camel drivers/guards, plus the three ex-slave girls, to follow him. A total of 39 horses, ten of them mounting riders, and 23 camels filed out of the caravanserai, Hiram and Nauca at their head and with Timur and Gorudos guarding the tail end of the caravan. Igrid, mounted on her new horse and proudly carrying her weapons, trotted just ahead of the first camel, near the center of the caravan, while Talya and Amara rode on the two camels belonging to Nauca. The long procession,

with the camels and the horses destined to be sold tied to individual spots down a long rope, went down the streets of Samarkand at a slow pace, heading for the westernmost gate of the city. On their way they were cheered on by the citizens of the city, most of whom owed their livelihood to the caravan trade, with the riders happily waving back at them. Once out of the city walls, Hiram made his caravan veer southwest, taking a well-used trail heading towards Bactra², the first destination on their long journey. With most of the Winter's snow and ice already melted, that trail was quite muddy but still practicable and would become more so in the coming days and weeks as the fierce Sun of Central Asia dried up the land.

At the head of the caravan, Nauca was trotting side-by-side with Hiram and took that occasion to ask him a few questions.

"So, this road is supposed to lead us to Bactra, Hiram? Are there connecting roads on it that we have to ignore?"

"There are in fact quite a few other roads connected to this one, but it is the most-traveled one by far. We just need to follow it while skirting the foothills of the Pamir Mountains, then will cross the Oxus River near Termez and will then continue due South to Bactra. That portion of our trip should take us about a bit over three weeks. We could get there faster if we pushed our horses and camels but we are on a journey which normally takes five months at the best of times, so there really is no need to push our beasts needlessly."

"Understood! We discussed yesterday our travel strategy and my role in it. Do you still agree with me taking some advance ahead, both to detect possible ambushes by highway bandits and to hunt a bit?"

"In this portion of our trip, which is a fairly safe one, I won't mind if you gallop away ahead of the caravan. However, in certain, more dangerous spots, I will prefer that you stay close, to provide us maximum mutual protection."

"Like in which spots, Hiram?" asked Nauca soberly.

"Like in the Khyber Pass, which is situated on the road linking Kophen³ and Purushapura⁴. That mountain pass has a well-earned reputation as a nest of highway

² Bactra : Modern-day Balkh, in Northern Afghanistan.

³ Kophen : Modern-day Kabul, in Afghanistan.

⁴ Purushapura : Modern-day Peshawar, in Pakistan.

bandits and cutthroats and more than one caravan was attacked and dismembered there. We will have to be especially vigilant while camping at night inside that pass.”

“What about the soldiers of the local rulers? Can’t they provide at least some security for passing caravans and travelers?”

Somehow, her genuine question made Hiram laugh briefly before he answered her.

“Many of these local rulers, while claiming the contrary, are actually in league with some of the bands of thieves infesting the Khyber Pass, who are by the way also the local inhabitants. Our best bet to stay safe during our passage there will be to join up with one or more other caravans, in order to deter bandits via our sheer numbers.”

“And those bandits, are they good archers?”

“A few of them are but the bows they use are less powerful than yours and you will thus be able to outrange them by a good margin. Just make sure that you have lots of spare arrows handy then.”

That left Nauca with food for some thought then as she mentally reviewed some possible tactics to be used against such bands of thieves. Thankfully, her three previous caravan trips, one from Tanais to Samarkand and two made between Samarkand and China, had given her plenty of practical experience in that matter. And that was on top of her experiences from life in the steppes, when she was still a young girl living with her family.

Thankfully, that day’s travel proved to be quite uneventful and the caravan was able to set camp near a small stream before nightfall. Telling little Amara to go help Askhat, the old caravan’s cook, prepare supper, Nauca then asked Talya and Igrid to start putting up their tent while she led their beasts to the stream in order to let them drink. Selecting a spot amid an area filled with long grass and bushes, Nauca planted a long steel pike in the ground and then tied her horses and camels to it via long ropes, so that they could graze around without wandering away. With that done, she took a sentry position behind a small tree, careful not to be backlit by the campfire her associates had lit for their supper. Some half an hour later, Timur came to relieve her, so that she could go eat supper. Once she had eaten, she returned to her post, with Timur going to catch some sleep before taking his own guard shift past midnight, with Gorudos due to replace him in the early morning.

That night passed peacefully and the caravan was able to continue on its trip shortly after daybreak. While keeping the foothills of the Pamir on their left, the caravan followed the road for the next two weeks before arriving in sight of the Oxus River, the main tributary of the region. It was also an obstacle to cross before they could continue on towards Bactra, something that a caravan always had to plan carefully to minimize the risk of seeing some of its beasts and their valuable cargo being washed away by the current. Thankfully, another caravan that was traveling in the opposite direction and had just crossed the river was able to inform Hiram about a shallow fording point they had just used. Hiram was too happy to make a small gift then to the master of that caravan in exchange for that precious information. In turn, that information proved correct and his camels ended up with having no more than half a meter of water to cross, relieving a big worry for Hiram. With the Oxus River now behind them, the caravan continued on, approaching its first destination, Bactra, after a bit over three weeks of travel.

13:09 (Central Asia Time)

Town of Bactra, Kingdom of Tocharistan

North of the Hindu-Kush Mountains

As their caravan was approaching the northern gate of the town of Bactra, Nauca slowed down her horse in order to let Hiram get level with her and then asked him a question.

“Hiram, do you know what language they speak in this town? I was wondering if we will be able to get understood here.”

“Well, while I never went to this place before, I did speak many times with merchants and caravan masters who went through it and I was told that most merchants and shopkeepers here will be able to speak Sogdian or Greek, or both. Sogdian is widely used as a common trading language in this part of the World, while Bactria was until a few years ago part of the Greek Seleucid Empire founded by the conqueror Alexander the Great some 250 years ago. In fact, our next stop after Bactra will be a place called Alexandra Caucaso⁵, one of the many places named after Alexander the Great.”

⁵ Alexandra Caucaso : Modern-day Bagram, in Afghanistan.

Nauca, who had heard about the history of the conquests of Alexander the Great while living in Tanais, nodded her head slowly at that.

“That Alexander was indeed a great conqueror, from everything I heard about him. Do you know what we could find here that would be worth buying?”

“One thing I know is that copper is mined in this region and that there are many places in the Hindu-Kush mountains where much precious gems and stones are produced. One of the main stones of value to be found in this region and beyond is lapis lazuli, which I believe you saw specimens of before.”

“Yes, I have: a truly beautiful stone. If it is being mined in this region, then we should be able to buy some at a good price, since we will be avoiding many intermediaries in its trade.”

That remark made Hiram smile at her with satisfaction.

“I see that you have started to learn the cardinal rules of trading, Nauca. Going to the source in order to avoid many layers of intermediaries, each of whom would be hiking the price in order to make a profit, is one of the more important rules. That is why I intend to stay a few days at our next stop, Alexandra Caucaso: it is close to many mines which produce such precious stones as aquamarine and turquoise, on top of lapis lazuli. There are also rumors that some nice emeralds and rubies were found in small quantities by local prospectors.”

Nauca, who had made the buying of gems one of her main goals for this trip, felt immediate interest about Hiram’s information.

“Then, I shall keep an eye for gem merchants in this town.”

“Don’t neglect those merchants who would be selling copper, Nauca: copper is very important for those who produce bronze items and can be found only in a few rare places.”

“Point well taken, Hiram. Thanks!”

Four city guards posted at the gate then made the caravan stop, time to collect the local toll demanded from passing caravans by the local ruler. In this case, that toll proved reasonable and Hiram paid it without fuss. He also took that occasion to ask to one of the guards where was the local caravanserai, with the guard answering him in fair Greek.

“Continue on the main street beyond the gate for about 200 paces. You will then encounter the caravanserai of Taksir on your left.”

"Thank you, my good man." Replied Hiram, at the same time he threw a silver coin to the guard, who quickly caught it in flight before smiling and bowing.

"And I wish you good luck during your trip, merchant."

Hiram then signaled his associates to follow him inside the town before trotting through the opened gate. The information from the guard soon proved to be accurate, with the typical walled compound of a caravanserai appearing after a bend. However, Hiram made his caravan stop before it could enter the compound and dismounted, then entered the caravanserai on foot: he had no wish to go to the trouble of marching in with his whole caravan, only to be told that the place was already full. As if trumpets had called him out, a fairly overweight bearded man nearly ran out of the main building inside the compound and went to Hiram, a big smile painted on his face.

"Aah, another intrepid caravan master seeking refuge in my modest caravanserai. Welcome! I am Taksir, owner of this establishment. How many riders and beasts do you need to lodge here, my friend?"

In response, Hiram politely bowed to the caravanserai master.

"My name is Hiram, from Samarkand, and I came with a total of eighteen other riders, 39 horses and 23 camels. Do you have enough space available to accommodate us all?"

"I certainly do, Hiram of Samarkand. I charge the usual fee for lodging: one drachma per person and one drachma per beast per day, including the feed for the beasts. However, you will have to pay separately for your meals, depending on what you choose to order and eat."

"That is indeed a fair price for a caravanserai, Taksir. Let me get my caravan inside your compound while you open stalls for my beasts."

As Hiram went back outside to tell his associates to ride in, Taksir loudly clapped his hands and shouted orders in a local language, making his stall attendants open the gates of 32 of the forty stalls contained in his barns. Taksir however showed some surprise on seeing Nauca, then Igrid, Talya and Amara pass in front of him.

"You have women and girls as part of your caravan, Hiram? That is rather uncommon."

"That is indeed uncommon but I can assure you that they didn't come with me to entertain my associates. The first one past you was Nauca, a Sarmatian girl who is an associate of mine and who also is one of my caravan guards. She is about the best

archer I ever met and is a first-class hunter as well. The three other girls are with her and help with various tasks when my caravan camps for the night in the open.”

“Then, you should know that the inn of my caravanserai is a popular drinking spot for the local men of Bactra, some of whom have, uh, rather rough manners if you see what I mean. Your girls will have to be careful not to attract the wrong kind of attention.”

Instead of being irritated by that information, Hiram chuckled briefly and patted Taksir’s shoulder.

“I believe that Nauca and her girls are well able to protect their asses from wandering hands, my dear Taksir. As you could see, they are all armed.”

“You are right, by Mithra! The first one could certainly pass as one of the fabled Amazons from Greek legends.”

“Taksir, Nauca IS an Amazon. She is a nomad girl warrior and hunter from the steppes north of the Pontus Euxinus and has already killed many men in combat while defending my caravan. And contrary to what the Greek legends say, those Amazons did most of the ass-kicking when fighting with Greeks, not the other way around.”

Taksir opened his eyes wide and looked at Nauca with new respect.

“I will certainly remember this, my friend, and will tell my young sons to be careful about the way they will do advances to her and the other girls with her.”

“And how old are your sons, Taksir?” asked Hiram, amused.

“The older one is nineteen, while the younger one is sixteen.”

“A prime age indeed for chasing girls. I will ask Nauca to be understanding about them.”

“That would be appreciated, my friend. My sons are very precious to me. After all, they will be the ones running my caravanserai once I will have retired...or died.”

Hiram nodded soberly at that, which was an all-too common occurrence in life. Accompanied by Taksir, he then went to supervise the dispersal of his beasts among the stalls and the storing of their merchandise in Taksir’s secure storage building. Asking young Timur and Igrid to stand guard temporarily in front of the doors of the storage building, he then led his caravan members inside the inn, so that they could get their rooms. While the furniture in the rooms proved rather rudimentary, it was well within the standards expected from rooms in a caravanserai. Once everybody was properly lodged, the caravan members eagerly sat in the main hall of the inn to eat a late lunch, their last meal having been over seven hours ago. Despite the lack of previous warning,

the kitchen of the inn was able to provide a good goat and vegetable stew, served with fresh bread, that easily satisfied the appetite of the travelers. Eating quickly, Nauca and Gorudos then went out to relieve Timur and Igrid, so that they could also eat.

Some fifty minutes after having replaced Timur, Hiram came to the door of the storage building with Timur and Igrid.

"Alright: Timur and Igrid will now continue to guard this door until nightfall. Then you two will take over for the night. Nauca, I am going to visit the town's market to see if there is anything of interest to buy there. I would like you to come with me, both to allow you to look as well for interesting merchandises and to provide me with an armed escort. This town is new for me and I am not sure how safe it is in terms or pickpockets and robbers."

"I will certainly go with you, Hiram. Let me just go to my room to collect some gold and silver coins from my reserves."

"Go right ahead, Nauca."

Nauca ran to the inn and climbed the stairs to the upper floor, where she knocked on the door of her room.

"It's me, girls: open up!"

After a few seconds, she heard the noise of a safety bolt being pulled and the door opened, revealing an armed Talya behind it. Little Amara, her javelin resting on the floor next to her, sat on the mound of hay that acted as their collective bed. Leaving her long Kontos lance to lean against a wall, Nauca went to a part of the pile of hay and dug into it, uncovering the pair of saddlebags which contained her reserves of gold and silver, meant to be her money reserves for this caravan's trip. Opening one of the bags, she grabbed one of the large leather purses it contained and firmly attached it to her belt, then covered the purse with part of her cape. Closing back her saddlebag and piling hay back on it, she then looked at Talya.

"I am going in town with Hiram in order to see if we can find something worth buying or trading. Make sure that you always keep this door locked and open it only for me, Hiram, Timur or Gorudos. Tomorrow, I will escort you, Igrid and Amara in town, so that you can do some shopping of your own with your travel pay."

"We will keep a good eye on your money, Nauca." assured Talya, who was armed with a javelin and a dagger. Reassured, Nauca left her room but waited to hear the noise of the safety bolt being pushed back in position before going down to the main

hall, where she joined up with Hiram. They then walked out together and crossed the courtyard of the caravanserai, soon emerging on the street running past its gate. Nauca gave a critical look at the small crowd of beggars and prostitutes that had gathered along the walls of the caravanserai at the news of a new caravan being in town. She was not worried about the prostitutes, some of whom were shockingly young, but the male beggars were another matter: some of them, particularly the younger men who were apparently healthy, could well turn into purse snatchers or robbers in an instant. Her eyes narrowed when she noticed that a bearded man in his late twenties had a knife that was poorly hidden by his clothes. She then pointed at him and spoke to him in Greek.

“You! I don’t trust armed beggars. Go beg somewhere else or I will have the caravanserai master chase you away.”

An angry glare appeared at once in the eyes of the ‘beggar’ but, realizing that Nauca’s threat was serious, got up and walked away while throwing a last dark look at her. Hiram nodded his head in approval while watching the man leave.

“Good call, Nauca! I will have to warn our people about this man and his ilk. Well, let’s go to the market.”

“Just give me a second, Hiram.” replied Nauca before opening the belt purse she kept visible at her side, which was much smaller than the one she was hiding under her cape. Grabbing a few silver coins from it, she then distributed them to the remaining beggars and also to the prostitutes, making the lot thank her profusely. Now feeling better, she then walked away with Hiram in the direction of the center of the town. Hiram couldn’t help smile to her as they walked together.

“Decidedly, you will always be the generous type, Nauca.”

“I was once in distress, after my whole family was killed by bandits. Then, a kind man in Tanais helped me and supported me. His example convinced me that generosity is always worth practicing...except when haggling for a business deal, of course.”

“Of course!” replied Hiram, amused.

As Hiram had expected, they found that the town’s main market occupied the center of Bactra and consisted in a collection of tents and temporary stalls, many of them mounted in the back of chariots. Ignoring the stalls selling food items and asking a few questions around, Hiram ended up being directed to an actual house built next to the market, where an ageing man sat on a chair set in front of the house’s door. Hiram then bowed politely to him and spoke in Greek.

"Are you Pharnaces the gem merchant?"

"I am! You are looking to buy gems? I stock many types of the most beautiful stones to be found in Bactria and I get them directly from where they are mined."

That please at once Hiram: less intermediaries meant lower prices for him and also higher future profits.

"Me and my associate are definitely interested in buying gems, if the quality and the prices are to our taste."

"Then, follow me inside." said the old man before getting up from his chair. In doing so, he revealed that he wore a long dagger at his belt but Nauca thought nothing of it: a gem trader had good reasons to be armed at all times. She and Hiram followed the man inside, with the latter bringing in his chair before closing and locking his door. He then led his visitors into a backroom lit by two narrow windows reinforced by iron bars. There, he unlocked and opened seven small bronze safety boxes chained to a table, exposing a collection of varied gems and semi-precious stones. Nauca, who had gradually become a knowledgeable amateur on gems during her travels, watching and learning from old Xiao, the caravan's expert on gem trading, eyed with intense interest the content of the boxes, each of which contained a specific type of stone. She recognized lapis lazuli, aquamarines, turquoise, spinel, amethysts, emeralds and rubies, all apparently of at least good quality. While there were only a few emeralds and rubies in their respective boxes, the box containing lapis lazuli was much larger than the others and was also full.

"As you can see, my largest collection of stones is made up of lapis lazuli, which is by far the most important stone produced around Bactria. Lapis lazuli is a truly beautiful stone and also a very popular one, used for both making jewels and making decorative items, like cups and vases."

Both Hiram and Nauca then looked in turn at individual stones, haggling with the gem merchant about their price after each stone was weighed on a small precision weight scale Hiram had brought with him. While Hiram ended up buying a varied assortment of stones for a total of 210 drachmas, Nauca, who preferred to concentrate on light and small but valuable items, ended up spending the large sum of 660 drachmas, acquiring in exchange a good collection of mostly lapis lazuli, plus a few choice spinels, amethysts, aquamarines and a pair of splendid emeralds and rubies. Gathering the stones she had just bought, Nauca put them inside a small leather purse suspended from her neck by a bronze chain and hanging just under her breasts, making it both hard to spot or grab.

The satisfied gem merchant then escorted his customers to his door, bowing to them before they left.

“Thank you for visiting my humble shop, Hiram of Samarkand and Nauca. Do not hesitate to visit me again on your way back from India: I may have more beautiful stones to show you then.”

“And we will certainly stop here by then, Pharnaces.” replied Hiram, who was sincere about that, having found the prices asked by the merchant quite reasonable, while the quality of his gems was undeniable. He and Nauca then left the house and walked away, looking for a shop where they could buy some copper, a crucial metal used in the manufacture of bronze, a popular alloy widely used all across the known World. After a few minutes, they were directed to another house where a merchant dealt in copper ingots. This time, it was Hiram who spent the most, buying enough copper ingots to force Nauca in helping him carry part of it. With both of them heavily loaded down with copper, the pair then returned to the caravanserai, where Hiram was able to drop his ingots with his other merchandise, letting out a sigh of relief once unburdened.

“Oof! This copper may bring me some good profits but it sure is heavy to carry around. Next time, I will bring a horse with me. In comparison, the gems you bought are like feathers.”

“That is one big reason why I trade mostly in gems, spices and silk, Hiram: that leaves my two camels plenty of carrying capacity for provisions of grain, food and water for my trip.”

“A sensible policy indeed, my good Nauca.” recognized Hiram.

The caravan ended up spending another day in Bactra, time to buy new provisions for their trip and to let its beasts rest a bit from their nearly month-long trip. Nauca, like Hiram, was most satisfied with that stop in Bactra, having made what she considered good deals and with her three ex-slave girls also happy, after being able to do some shopping with the help of the pay Nauca gave them. Then, it was time to hit the road again, heading towards Alexandra Caucaso and Kophen.

CHAPTER 3 – INTO THE INDO-SCYTHIAN KINGDOM



15:20 (Central Asia Time)

Wednesday, May 15, 61 B.C.E.

Mountain pass, nine kilometers from Alexandra Caucaso

Kingdom of Tocharistan (part of Yuezhi Kingdom)

“Alexandra Caucaso is within sight, at last!” said Hiram on seeing the mountain pass his caravan had been following starting to enlarge into a fertile valley ahead. Those last twenty days of travel had been tough ones, being mostly in mountainous terrain and while following narrow trails along often steep gradients. Now, he could hope to be able to sleep in a real bed tomorrow night. A loud shout of alarm then came from Gorudos, who was positioned at the tail end of the caravan.

“ALARM! A LARGE CAVALRY COLUMN IS APPROACHING FROM OUR REAR.”

That was enough to make Hiram and Nauca, who had been riding point, gallop at once down the line of horses and camels to join up with Gorudos. Stopping next to the

grizzled guard, Nauca concentrated her eyes on the large cloud of dust approaching rapidly along the trail, coming from the direction of Bactra.

"This is indeed a very large column of riders, Hiram: that troupe must count at least a few hundred cavalymen."

"A FEW HUNDRED?" nearly shouted the merchant, shocked. "Who could they be and why are they coming this way at such speed?"

"That, I believe, must be some kind of army on the move. Do you know if there is some war going on around here, Hiram?"

Hiram was silent for a moment, trying to remember all that he had heard about this region in the last few months.

"Well, this whole region belonged until a few decades ago to the Indo-Greek Kingdom of Bactria, but was progressively taken over by the Kushans, a tribal group part of the Greater Yuezhi Kingdom, who by the way control Samarkand, among other cities of Sogdiana. The Kushans have been pushing south lately in order to take control of more territory from the Saka's Indo-Scythian Kingdom, which itself had been pushing eastward the remnants of the old Indo-Greek Kingdom of the Greek Seleucid. We could well be heading towards some war-thorn territories, which is not good at all for us. If those incoming cavalymen decide to replenish their supplies at our expense, then there will be nothing that we will be able to do to stop them. If we resist, then we will all be massacred in short order."

"I agree!" said Gorudos, while Nauca nodded her head. "Stopping a band of bandits is one thing: to resist a whole army is another thing. What do we do, Hiram?"

"We get off this trail and free it for the use of those cavalymen. Let's stop our beasts as far away from this trail as we can and let's all stay calm. With luck, those soldiers will ignore us and continue on without stopping."

While Nauca was not sure that this would be enough to avert a disaster, Hiram's suggestion was unfortunately the only one that made sense right now. She thus trotted back towards the head of the caravan, telling in passing to the merchants and camel drivers to go to the narrow flat band of ground to the right of the trail, where some long grass and bushes grew.

The whole caravan had finished moving to the band of ground only minutes ago when the head of the approaching column of cavalry appeared at a bend of the trail.

Hiram, standing next to his horse, focused his eyes on the newcomers and spoke after a few seconds.

“They are Kushan cavalymen alright and they seem to be in a fair hurry. Somebody must have been calling for some urgent reinforcements somewhere to the South. Hopefully, they will not pay much attention to us.”

Every person in the caravan held its breath as the cavalry column started passing by on the trail. Hiram couldn't help shiver with fear on understanding that the column counted thousands of cavalymen rather than hundreds: he and his caravan was now at the mercy of whoever commanded those soldiers. It took nearly half an hour for the whole column to trot past the caravan and disappear down the trail in a big cloud of dust. Hiram then let out a deep breath in relief.

“By Ahura Mazda, that was one scary encounter! Well, I believe that we should set camp here for the night: the more distance we will leave between us and that Kushan army, the better.”

Nobody objected to that and the caravan men promptly formed a sort of square with their camels along the rocky slope to the right of the trail, with the horses corralled inside that square and with the unloaded bundles of merchandises lined up to form a sort of rudimentary defensive wall for the beasts. Next, a work party, in which Nauca and her three girls participated, went down to the small mountain stream running along the trail, some twenty meters from it, armed with buckets that they then filled with water. An hour later, with the beasts having drank water aplenty and having been given rations of grains, their riders finally took the time to erect their tents and start a fire.

With Nauca's conical tent up and with the girls' things inside, Nauca decided to go to the stream to see if she could catch some fish, taking Talya with her while bringing a fishnet shaped like a large bag. Stopping on the shore of the stream, Nauca and Talya eyed the waters running past them, with Talya soon shouting out happily.

“A FISH JUST SWAM DOWN PAST US!”

“Then, let's take off our boots and pull up our pants and let's go stand in the water with our net deployed.”

The water of the stream, not surprisingly, proved quite cold at once, making Talya shiver as she cautiously walked on the polished stones at the bottom of the stream.

“Yikes! This water is really cold!”

“Come on, Talya, don't be a soft one. Those fish will be our supper, remember?”

"I know, but it is still cold."

Standing some four paces apart, Nauca and Talya then held firmly to their ends of the net while the waters flowed through it. Maybe a minute later, they were rewarded by a sudden movement and extra weight inside their net.

"Yay! We have one fish!"

"It's a good start, but we need a few more fish in order to feed all of us."

A few more minutes of patience brought more fish into their net, with the two of them finally walking out of the stream after some fifteen minutes, nine big fish inside their net and with their feet half-frozen. Leaving the net and its trapped fish a few paces from the stream, Nauca then quickly dried Talya's feet with a scarf, then vigorously rubbed them with her hands to revive circulation in them. Talya then returned the favor before they put their boots back on. The two of them returned to the campfire while proudly carrying their net full of fish, attracting a concert of happy exclamations and comments when they lined up their fish near the campfire under the satisfied look of their Kazakh caravan cook, Askhat.

"Excellent! If you could get little Amara, I will then teach her how to eviscerate and prepare fish."

"I'll go get her!" volunteered at once Talya. As the teenager ran towards their tent, Nauca smiled to the cook.

"I could spare some of the spices I have in order to make those fish tastier, Askhat."

That made the Kazakh cook grin with contentment.

"Nauca, if you didn't exist already, Ahura Mazda would need to invent a girl like you. You are priceless as a member of this caravan."

"I do my best to be helpful, Askhat, but I will never be as good a cook as you are."

"Am I? Those cruds I feed keep complaining about everything and anything concerning my food."

That attracted a concert of weak protestations from around the campfire, along with a chuckle from Nauca.

10:45 (Central Asia Time)

Thursday, May 16, 61 B.C.E.

City of Alexandra Caucaso, Kingdom of Tocharistan

"Thank Ahura Mazda that the city is intact: I was afraid that there would be a battle for its possession between the Kushans and the Saka-Scythians. Let me ask one of the gate guards to see if he knows where that Kushan army went."

Pushing his horse, Hiram then galloped towards the open city gate of Alexandra Caucaso and stopped next to one of the four guards there.

"I am sorry to bother you, good man, but my caravan saw a large cavalry unit pass by its camp yesterday and I was afraid to find this city burned down to the ground." The response of the guard, who wore a lamellar armored vest and was armed with a sword and a lance, was to give him a reassuring smile.

"You did not need to worry about that, merchant: this city belongs to the Kushan, while that cavalry unit you saw was also Kushan. It simply stopped for the night here and replenished its supplies before leaving this morning."

"Is the road beyond this city safe? My caravan is heading towards India, via the Khyber Pass, and I have no wish to be caught between two fighting armies."

"An understandable worry, merchant. However, I can't say how far this road will prove to be safe for your caravan...or for anybody. The word around is that a Saka army was on its way to try to retake this region from us."

"Well, in view of the mass of valiant Kushan cavalymen I saw pass yesterday, I gather that this Saka army is going to hit a big bump in the road."

Hiram's declaration, calculated to make the guard sympathetic towards him, made the guard briefly laugh.

"A very big bump indeed! Your caravan is welcomed to enter our city, merchant...after you will have paid the usual toll, of course."

"Of course!"

Hiram then searched into his purse and paid the toll the guard asked for, then waved at his caravan to come forward and enter the city.

Finding a caravanserai with available space for his caravan promised to be easy, the city being on the main road leading to Persia and India and seeing many caravans pass through it. In turn, those caravans constituted the lifeline of the city, something that had stimulated the establishment of many caravanserais. While trotting at the head of the caravan with Hiram, Nauca was able to appreciate the large size of the city and its apparent prosperity and said so to Hiram, who nodded his head in response.

"Alexandra Caucaso has been an important town since the conquest of the region by Alexander the Great, who made this city the capital of the Indo-Greek Kingdom, populating it with his soldiers and their families nearly three centuries ago. It also benefits from being close to the most productive mines in the whole region. We should be able to make some good deals on gems and precious stones here."

"Good! In turn, I don't think that the local merchants will spit on my amber."

"Amber should indeed be an item of interest for the locals, since it can be found only in northeastern countries far from here and has to come via the steppes. Aah, I see a caravanserai ahead. Let me just check it out to see if it can lodge us."

Pushing his horse ahead, Hiram entered the said caravanserai's courtyard, where he met with a tall and thin bearded man in his forties who greeted him in Greek.

"Good morning, traveler! Do you seek lodging at my humble caravanserai?"

"I indeed am! Do you still have enough space to lodge a caravan with over sixty beasts and close to twenty riders?"

The contrite smile the caravanserai master then made raised at once questions in Hiram's mind.

"I have plenty of space available for your caravan, as my caravanserai is presently empty."

"Empty? In a city of such trading importance? How so?"

"War!" said the bearded man, as if spitting a bad word. "The Sakas have been trying to retake some ground they lost to the Kushans during the past years and were coming in from the South and Southwest. As a result, they have blocked many of the more important roads, preventing caravans from India and Persia from reaching this city for a whole month now. Business for my caravanserai and for the other establishments in the city has thus been quite difficult."

"Meaning that I will be in a good position to bargain a good price for lodging here." thought Hiram to himself before speaking out loud. "Then, I will tell my caravan to come in...if your price is right."

A short session of haggling for the price of lodging followed but the caravanserai owner proved to be quite accommodating, most probably because he was desperate for getting paying customers. Hiram was thus able to negotiate a price that was nearly one third lower than the standard prices expected at caravanserais. With the price settled, Hiram then called in his caravan, which soon trotted into the courtyard and started occupying the numerous empty stalls of the establishment. Hiram was about to lead his own horse

into one of the covered stalls when he heard a concert of female voices coming from the upper windows of the local inn. Looking up, he was mildly shocked to see over twenty young women and girls waving at his associates and camel drivers and inviting them to go see them. The caravanserai master, whose name was Theophilus, made an apologetic smile to Hiram while shrugging his shoulders.

"Since the caravan business was so poor, I decided to let prostitutes lodge in my inn for the time being. In return for having a decent roof over their heads for a change, they give me a portion of their earnings from the clients they attract. I hope that this will not be an inconvenience for you, Hiram?"

Hiram shook his head in amusement in response.

"I bet that my associates won't object to that, Theophilus. Uh, do you by chance have a bath establishment as part of your caravanserai, or is there one nearby? We really could use a hot bath, plus the services of laundry girls."

"Do not worry, Hiram: I have all of this right here. In fact, your men will be able to soak in hot water while in the company of girls, who will then be able to rub them aplenty."

Hiram couldn't help chuckle as he mentally pictured that scene.

"Well, I am no prude and my men do need to relax after all those days and weeks on the trail. I am sure that they will provide some excellent business for your prostitutes. Your girls are clean, I hope?"

"Of course!" replied Theophilus in a nearly offended tone. "They are all clean and in good health. I could even get a few young nice boys if your men would need some."

Hiram shook his head, amused further: Greeks had an old reputation about liking the company of boys, so he patted in a friendly matter the left shoulder of the caravanserai master.

"I do have four girls with my caravan: two of them act as guards, while the two others help with my beasts and with cooking. I don't think that they will mind the presence of boys around."

"Then, I will have four boys come for your girls. Even if your girls do not use them to the fullest, those boys could still help rub their backs while they bathe."

Hiram again shook his head in amusement: tonight promised to turn into one memorable group orgy. But what was the worth of living if you never engaged in some good fun?

When Hiram's caravan left Alexandra Caucaso after two memorable nights, Nauca felt as sexually satisfied as her male associates and as her two older ex-slaves. That satisfaction was however tempered partly by the discovery that young Amara had been raped by the Romans when they had enslaved her. The young, prepubescent boy who had 'played' with Amara had then told Nauca that Amara had not been a virgin before she had entered the big bath reserved for the female customers of the bath house. While that was less than surprising about an ex-slave girl, the thought that grown men could abuse such a young girl had angered her, raising the already high dislike she had for the Romans, with their apparently limitless greed for power and riches. Trading-wise, those two days in Alexandra Caucaso had also been fruitful, with Hiram, Nauca and the other merchants making good deals on precious gems and stones, including a few top-quality emeralds and rubies. Judging that the Kushan army which had passed by them was far enough ahead, Hiram had then decided that it was now time to get back on the road and go to nearby Kophen, where Hiram decided to bypass it rather than entering it, intent on gaining back some of the time spent in Alexandra Caucaso. The caravan then took the main eastward road going from Kophen to Purushapura⁶, their next destination.

⁶ Purushapura : Modern-day Peshawar, in Pakistan.

CHAPTER 4 – THE KHYBER PASS



The Khyber Pass.

09:19 (Central Asia Time)

Monday, June 3, 61 B.C.E.

The Khyber Pass, northwest of Purushapura (modern-day Peshawar)

Initially within Indo-Scythian territory

The caravan was negotiating a bend on the road following a valley flanked on both sides by steep mountains and hills when Nauca, who was trotting a good 400 meters ahead of the column of horses and camels, saw something that made her stop cold her horse, Tamat: dozens of vultures were flying circles over an area of the valley that was still out of her direct sight. To her, circling vultures meant one thing: dead carcasses, either animal or human. In this case, the large numbers of vultures in the air over a particular area meant lots of dead bodies. In view of the fact that the Kushans were at war with the Saka, that translated into a probable battlefield littered with dead

soldiers. Reversing course, she galloped to rejoin Hiram, who was riding at the head of the caravan, and stopped next to his horse.

"I see vultures, lots of them, ahead of us. I am going to go forward to see what it is about. You better tell our associates to be ready to defend themselves, in case that I encounter trouble ahead."

Without waiting for Hiram's reaction to her words, Nauca then reversed her horse again and started galloping eastward down the road, keeping her speed until she passed a last rocky slope that had been cutting her vision ahead. What she saw then made her slow down, then stop her horse before contemplating a most sinister sight: thousands of bodies, mostly of men but also of horses, lying in an often-thick carpet all over the valley floor. Hundreds of vultures were in the process of feasting on the corpses, while more vultures flew in circles above, waiting for their turn to eat.

"By Ahura Mazda! What a sad sight!"

Pushing her horse forward at a trot, Nauca approached the nearest bodies in order to identify who they had been. They actually turned out to be a mix of Kushan and Saka soldiers, with a few dead horses intermixed with them. Trotting further forward, Nauca saw that the ratio of dead Saka to dead Kushans progressively got higher, a good sign that the Kushans, after breaking the Saka front lines, had then gained the upper edge in that battle. As she continued forward, it progressively became a field of mostly dead Saka warriors, many of them having been killed by arrows in their back.

"Those Saka held the line at first, then the Kushans broke through, with the battle ending in a mad retreat by the Saka, with the Kushans in hot pursuit. There must be over 3,000 dead men in this valley."

Seeing some movement a few meters away, she cautiously approached a Saka soldier lying on the ground and moaning softly.

"W...water, please! Water!"

Not thinking twice about it, Nauca stepped down from her horse and, holding Tamat's reins with one hand, approached the wounded soldier, who barely moved. Kneeling next to him, she gravely contemplated the man's face as she took out her water flask and unplugged it. Gently raising his head with one hand, she then presented the flask to the man's lips. The Saka had time to drink maybe two pulls of water before starting to convulse and then die. Gently putting the dead man's head down, Nauca closed his eyelids and got back up while plugging back her water flask. She looked down with sadness at the dead man for a moment: that Saka could not have been much more than

twenty years-old and had been in his physical prime before being pierced by a lance. Looking up and around, she slowly shook her head while surveying the thousands of dead.

“And they say that war is a glorious thing...”

She now had to go back and tell Hiram about this, so she got back on her horse and galloped back to the caravan, again stopping next to Hiram.

“A large battle occurred ahead, maybe one day ago. The field is littered with thousands of dead Kushan and Saka soldiers, plus many horses. It is not a pretty sight, Hiram.”

Hiram took a moment to absorb those words, his expression sober.

“Did you see any living soldier or man roaming that battlefield, Nauca?”

“No! I found one wounded man asking for water but he then died as I gave him water. From the pattern of dead soldiers, I would say that the Kushans won that battle and are now pursuing the remnants of the Saka army which fought this battle.”

“Then, as distasteful as this could sound to you, we should take the purses of these dead soldiers before local bandits do. Those dead men won’t need that money anymore anyway and it is better that we are the ones who will do this rather than some cutthroat bandits.”

Nauca nodded slowly her head at that: while it definitely sounded awful, the sad truth was that it would be stupid to leave that money lying around this valley. If left on the dead, those gold, silver and copper coins could trigger disputes and fighting between future looters, ending up causing more deaths.

“I agree! I will post myself at the end of this valley, to watch for any returning troop of soldiers. Tell our people to work fast but also to not keep their loot in evidence. If we are caught looting those dead, then we may end up as dead as those unfortunate soldiers.”

“A judicious counsel, Nauca. Don’t worry about your share of the loot: we will gather together and count everything tonight, then will split the loot evenly.”

Satisfied by that, Nauca then galloped eastward again as Hiram started giving orders to his associate merchants and camel drivers.

With Talya, Amara and their cook staying with the camels and unmounted horses of the caravan, the Sogdian merchants spread out in a long extended line and started advancing slowly across the battlefield, taking the purses of the dead soldiers, along with

the few personal jewels, like rings and pendants, they carried. That process quickly produced a large quantity of purses and jewels, despite the group having covered only a small portion of the battlefield yet. Some, like Igrid, Timur and Gorudos, also grabbed the better-quality weapons and pieces of armor they could find and which would help them improve their equipment. The merchants and guards ended up having to do frequent trips to their horses and camels, in order to empty their bulging haversacks into the packs carried by their animals, before continuing their sweep. After some three hours of this and with the camels' packs now bulging with coins, jewels and top-quality armor and weapons, which by themselves were worth a fortune, Hiram decided to cut the looting short and to leave the valley before someone caught them in the act. They had anyway already gathered enough of a fortune to make them all rich men...and girls.

Hiram made his caravan cover another ten kilometers, time to leave that valley, then led his associates off the main road and down an old side trail that went towards a small forest of coniferous trees, where he stopped his horses and camels behind a curtain of trees which hid them from the road and was also close to a small mountain stream.

"ALRIGHT, LET'S ERECT OUR TENTS HERE AND BUILD A CAMP FOR THE NIGHT. HOWEVER, NO FIRES! WE DON'T WANT TO ATTRACT BANDITS TO US TONIGHT. WE WILL EAT COLD RATIONS."

With the camels and horses assembled in the middle of their camps and with ballots of merchandises forming a rudimentary low wall inside which tents were erected, the caravan was ready for the night as the Sun was still up. That allowed for a quick triage of their loot, with the gold, silver, copper and bronze coins separated by type of metal before being weighed with the help of the scales carried by the caravan. While every associate merchant, caravan guard and camel drivers ended up with equal portions of the coinage, little Amara got a half portion. That amounted to a rough value of 1,900 drachmas per portion, enough to buy a nice house or two top-quality horses. On her part, little Amara was left speechless when she got her 950 drachmas half-portion, which represented nearly fifteen months of salary for a skilled worker.

"But...what am I going to do with all that money? I can't even lift that much money!"

“Don’t worry about that, Amara.” said softly Nauca to the little girl. “I will help you carry it and we will then exchange it for gems, which will be a lot easier for you to safely carry around.”

That made Amara hug joyfully Nauca.

“Oh, Nauca, you are so nice to me. How could I ever repay you for everything you did for me?”

“Easy: by living a free and happy life while being kind to others around you.”

“I will do that, Nauca. I promise!”

Hiram, who was nearby and listening discreetly to them, smiled to himself and mentally promised to dedicate a prayer tonight to Ahura Mazda, the Zoroastrian God of Good, in the name of Nauca. The Sarmatian girl may not have been a saint but her heart was certainly at the right place.

05:48 (Central Asia Time)

Tuesday, June 4, 61 B.C.E.

Valley of the Khyber Pass

Nauca, who was approaching the end of her guard shift, was about to go wake up Gorudos, her designated replacement, when her ears caught on a growing noise in the distance, coming from the East. Deciding to go see what it was, she walked quickly through the curtain of trees hiding the caravan’s camp from the main road and hid at the edge of the treeline. The noise grew gradually to that of a numerous troop of riders travelling westward on the main road. Nauca was finally able to see who those riders were and stiffened in alarm: they were the Kushan cavalrymen who had passed them in the mountain pass close to Alexandra Caucaso. However, that cavalry unit was now distinctly smaller and counted at most a bit less than a thousand horsemen, some of them visibly wounded. Nauca then understood what was happening. The Kushans, after their initial victory over the Sakas and their pursuit of their surviving enemies, must have then hit a fresh Saka force, getting mauled in the process. Now, the Kushans had apparently had enough and were retreating back into Kushan territory. The big question now was if the Sakas were pursuing them, in which case Hiram’s caravan certainly didn’t want to encounter that fresh Saka army on the road to Purushapura. Waiting until all the Kushans were out of sight, Nauca then ran back to the camp and went to wake up Hiram

in his tent. It took a couple of shakes to wake the caravan master and make him look up at Nauca.

“What is it, Nauca?”

“That Kushan army that passed us near Alexandra Caucaso: it just retreated back westward. They were much less in numbers and some of them were wounded. My guess is that they encountered a second group of Saka warriors and were repelled.” Now clearly alarmed, Hiram sat up on his sheepskin and rubbed his eyes in order to fully wake up.

“Are those Kushans gone now?”

“Yes, they are! As for the Sakas, there is still no sign of them and I don’t know if they are pursuing the Kushans or if they simply held their positions east of here. What do you want us to do, Hiram?”

The latter thought for a moment before answering her while getting up.

“I think that we should stay here, hidden out of sight, for another day or two. If we take to the road again right away, the Sakas could have hard questions about how we went through the Kushan lines with such apparent ease. What do you think, Nauca?”

Nauca was flattered to see that Hiram was asking for her advice on such an important thing, as it clearly showed the confidence he had in her.

“I would also wait for a couple days and stay in hiding. If a Saka army is following those Kushans westward, then the best thing for us would be to continue our trip after the Sakas will have passed through this valley. That way, the road would be mostly clear of large groups of soldiers.”

“Then we will stay here and keep a low profile until I will believe that it is safe to resume our trip towards Purushapura. I will go pass the word around to our people. You may now wake up Gorudos, so that you can catch some sleep.”

Nauca simply nodded her head at that and left Hiram’s tent to go wake up Gorudos, hoping mentally that they could steer clear from those battling armies. Once again, war was proving to be the biggest obstacle to caravan trade.

After another two more days spent in hiding and with no signs of pursuing Saka soldiers, Hiram finally decided that the way was clear for his caravan to resume its trip eastward. His decision to leave was further proved correct when another caravan, that one traveling westward, passed on the main road as Hiram’s own caravan was about to

start moving. Still, Hiram did not take chances and sent both Nauca and Gorudos to gallop ahead in order to check how safe their itinerary was and be able to give an advance warning of any potential problem lying along the road to Purushapura.

CHAPTER 5 – PURUSHAPURA



Peshawar (Purushapura) Valley in modern times.

16:08 (Central Asia Time)

Sunday, June 16, 61 B.C.E.

Two kilometers west of the city gates of Purushapura (modern-day Peshawar)

Indo-Scythian Saka Kingdom

“HALT! WHO ARE YOU AND WHERE ARE YOU FROM?”

Hiram hid his frustration at hearing again this challenge, this time from a Saka officer commanding a checkpoint along the ancient road known as the Grand Trunk Road. With the walls of Purushapura now a mere two kilometers away, his caravan had been obliged to go through no less than three other such checkpoints during this last day of travel, all manned by strong groups of suspicious Saka warriors. However, he had no choice but to paint a happy face over these irritants and to stay polite with those Saka warriors. So, Hiram bowed his head to salute the officer and answered him in a calm voice.

"I am Hiram, from Samarkand. Me and my associates are Sogdian merchants and our caravan is heading to Pataliputra, where we hope to make some good trading." The officer appeared half satisfied by his answer but then pointed an accusing finger at Nauca, who was riding behind Hiram's horse.

"That girl looks like a Yuezhi! What is she doing with your caravan?"

"That girl is a Sarmatian from the plains north of the Pontus Euxinus, and not a Yuezhi. She is one of my associates and also acts as one of my caravan guards."

"Fair enough! What is your caravan carrying?"

"We have horses, amber, copper, some gems bought along our way and coinage meant to buy merchandises in Pataliputra and also to pay for our lodging, food...and prostitutes along the way."

Hiram's joke about paying for prostitutes finally seemed to relax the officer, who smiled at those words.

"Well, I can personally vouch that we have some very pretty girls in Purushapura, merchant. Your caravan may enter the city."

"Thank you!" replied Hiram, adding to his head bow a gold coin tossed to the officer, who promptly caught it in flight. Hiram then signaled his caravan to follow him and made his horse trot towards the city and past the Saka control point.

As they were approaching the walls of Purushapura, Hiram slowed down his horse, in order to let Nauca and Kasim, another of his associates, catch up with him and be able to have a conversation together.

"This business of an active war between the Kushans and the Sakas is really worrying me. Apart from severely disrupting trade, it could well end up cutting off our return road to Samarkand. If that happens, then we would have no choice but to take an alternate return route."

"Since we can't predict what will happen in the coming months or know how bad this war could become, why not decide right now about a new return route to Samarkand?" said Kasim, making Hiram nod his head once.

"You make a lot of sense, Kasim. We will have to discuss seriously tonight about the possibilities open to us."

"I agree with Kasim." added Nauca. "War is too unpredictable a business and, if we come back this way only to have to turn around, that would cost us dearly in lost time and money."

“Then, I will meet with all my associates after supper. Pass the word around, Kasim.” said Hiram before pushing his horse to return at the head of his caravan.

If anything, the fact that numerous Saka archers were manning the walls of the city, with a good dozen soldiers armed with spears posted at the western gate of Purushapura, was enough to show to the Sogdian merchants and to Nauca how tense the situation in the region was. After paying the usual gate toll and getting information about the caravanserais located in town, Hiram led his caravan inside the city and trotted a few hundred meters before entering the opened gate of a walled caravanserai, where he was happily greeted by the owner of the place. Judging from the nearly empty covered animal stalls lining the inside of the walls of the caravanserai, business had to have been meager lately, something that explained the happiness of the owner on seeing Hiram and his caravan come in.

“Welcome to Haram’s caravanserai, my good friends!”
Hiram couldn’t help smile on hearing the owner’s name.

“Haram? My name is Hiram and I am from Samarkand. Such a coincidence must be some kind of sign from the gods.”

The owner, equally surprised, was however quick to rebound.

“Well, Hiram, consider yourself at home here. How long are you planning to stay?”

“Maybe two to three days, time to replenish my food and animal feed supplies and do some trading in the city. Do you have a bath house in your caravanserai? The road has been hot and dusty indeed.”

“I have a nice bath house, with equally nice girls to help scrub your back...if you want to rent their services.”

“We will see later. Right now, what me and my associates need the most are a good meal and a clean place to sleep.”

20:24 (Central Asia Time)

Hiram’s room, caravanserai’s inn

Purushapura

Once all of his fourteen associates, camel drivers and guards were in his room, which was lit only by a few torches and oil lamps at this late hour, Hiram started speaking to them in a sober tone.

"My friends, we have an important decision to make concerning our future return trip to Samarkand. You all saw how tense the situation is in this region, with the Kushans and the Sakas battling each other for control of this territory. While that war does not implicate us directly, it does make things more difficult and dangerous for our caravan and there is a real possibility that hostilities may cut off our return route to Samarkand via Bactria. This city we are presently in could also be under siege by the time we come back here, something that would make it nearly impossible for us to pass by it. We thus need to discuss possible alternate return routes which do not go through the Khyber Pass and Bactria. While this is my first trip to India, I have spoken in the past with other caravan masters who traveled to or from India. Two things I know from those conversations is that, past Pataliputra and Tamralipti, on the Bay of Bengal, the only possible road is by sea, either eastward or southward. To the North of Tamralipti, we have an immense chain of mighty mountains and high plateaus which is nearly impossible to cross and would take us months to go through...if we do not succumb to cold and exhaustion on the way. If we go South by boat, then we may have to leave behind our horses and camels, something I am not ready to do. Besides, such a long boat trip is liable to cost us a fortune, which would erase most or all of the profits we will have made during our trip. As of traveling eastward by land towards Southern China, that would imply crossing thick jungles full of diseases and fevers. All this leaves us only one viable option: to return through the Taxila-Gilgit-Kashgar road, which goes through the Karakoram Mountains and its passes. That is the road used by Indian merchants who want to go to China via Khotan and the Silk Road. The Karakoram road is arduous and dangerous, but still practicable for caravans. What do you say, my friends?"

"But we never went through that way and don't know the road, Hiram." objected at once Demosthenes, one of the associate merchants. "We could easily lose our way in those mountains and die of cold and starvation."

"We always could hire an experienced guide for that trip, though." added Kasim, making Hiram nod his head.

"A possible solution indeed, Kasim."

"Why not instead link up with another caravan that has experience in crossing the Karakoram?" said Nauca, making all heads turn towards her. "That way, we would

not need to pay for a guide and we would also be safer from bandits, due to our higher combined numbers. When I passed through Khotan as part of Yurkan's caravan, we met other caravans that had just arrived from India via the Karakoram Pass. We could thus stop in Taxila on our return trip and, if the fighting is too hard to the West of it, could wait for a caravan travelling to Khotan and China to show up and then link with it for the trip."

Hiram, liking her suggestion, looked around at his other associates.

"Nauca's idea sounds eminently practical and feasible to me, my friends. Does anyone have objections or questions about it?"

Hearing no objections, Hiram then slapped one hand on the floor.

"Then, that's what we will do once we return from Pataliputra. Hopefully, the way through Bactria will still be open by then, but the Karakoram road will be our option if war cuts off our way westward. Thank you for coming, my friends. Tomorrow, we will refill our food and feed grain supplies and will also see if there is some worthwhile trading to do here. Xiao, Nauca, could you stay for a moment more?"

Once the other members of the caravan were gone and Hiram was left alone with Xiao and Nauca, he spoke to them in a low voice, in order not to be heard by occupants of adjacent rooms.

"Sorry for being so secretive now, but what I want to discuss is quite sensitive. Both of you favor trading in gems and spices because of their high value and ease of transportation. You, Nauca, also learned about gem trading from Xiao, so you do make a natural pair when gems and precious stones are concerned. What I am talking about is diamonds. They are very valuable and highly prized gems which are very easy to carry due to their small sizes compared to their value. They are also very rare outside of India, which is as far as I know the only place where diamonds are mined. I myself intend to buy some diamonds once in India, in order to maximize my chances of profit from this trip. I believe that you two should concentrate on buying diamonds, on top of buying a few emeralds and rubies, of which India is among the best places to acquire them. Thankfully, the loot we gathered on that battlefield inside the Khyber Pass gave us plenty of gold and silver coinage with which to buy gems. We thus could buy many nice stones with that coinage and, at the same time, get rid of the rather heavy load for our horses and camels represented by those coins. The one thing I want to ask you is to

advise me if you find a good provider of diamonds, so that I could buy some diamonds of my own.”

“I will certainly be happy to keep you informed about what we will find, Hiram.” replied Xiao. “I could even buy some diamonds for you at the same time that I buy some for me. You would then only need to reimburse me at cost for those stones.”

“Even better, Xiao! I may be a fair dealer in gems but am still a beginner compared to you in that matter. Even Nauca seems to be at least an equal to me when time comes to haggle for gems.”

“Thanks for the compliment, Hiram.” said Nauca, grinning. “Coming from you, that is high praise indeed.”

“I am simply giving the proper dues where they are earned, my friend. Well, with luck we will find a few good gems here in Purushapura. If not, we should find plenty of them once in India proper. Thank you for listening to me and have a good night.”

The next two days, spent in Purushapura, proved busy ones for the merchants, who refilled their supplies of food and animal feed grain and also explored the markets of the town, either buying, selling or bartering various merchandises. While Nauca and Hiram were able to sell at good prices the horses that they had brought with them, thus freeing them from having to further care for them and also bringing to them more gold and silver coins, they and Xiao didn't find gems truly worthy of buying locally. They already had plenty of lapis lazuli and aquamarines bought in Bactra and thus decided to wait until further east on their trip. Three days after their arrival in Purushapura, the caravan left the city and resumed its eastward trip towards Taxila, Indraprastha, Mathura, Prayaga and Pataliputra.

CHAPTER 6 – A ROUGH ROAD TO MATHURA



16:13 (Central Asia Time)

Wednesday, July 31, 61 B.C.E.

Forested area northwest of Mathura

Northern Satrapies of Indo-Scythian Kingdom

“Damn! I wish that this rain would stop.”

Nauca could only agree with Hiram’s annoyed remark: the last two weeks of travel towards Mathura had proved to be wet ones, with at least one day in three seeing torrential monsoon rains, making for an oppressive, hot and humid temperature that was quite debilitating. The saving grace for the caravan was that it was traveling along a road running on a flat plain, making it easier on their beasts and allowing them to go faster. The fields bordering the road looked very fertile and they had seen many small villages sprinkled around them, surrounded by cultivated fields. The caravan had also gone through quite a few forests along the way, in sharp contrast to the arid, semi-desertic and mountainous terrain of Bactria. Presently, the caravan was entering yet another dense forest, following the ancient road leading to Mathura, still some two days

away. Nauca, always vigilant and on guard against possible dangers to the caravan, suddenly saw something that she didn't like and pointed at the sky ahead.

"Vultures! Quite a lot of them. They are flying in circles over a point ahead of us, next to the road. This could mean possible trouble, Hiram. I will need to go ahead and check that out."

"Go, but take Timur with you, just in case."

Nauca nodded her head at that before waving at Timur to come with her, then pushed her horse to a gallop.

With Timur galloping a few meters behind her, Nauca kept a sharp eye on both sides of the road, scanning the dense foliage for possible ambushes while keeping track of the spot the vultures were circling over. With that heavy rain pouring for a number of hours already, she had kept her bow inside its protective gorytos,⁷ as rain could damage her composite bow. If she ended up in a fight, then she would have to use either her Kontos long lance, her javelins, her sword or her battle-axe. Due to the suffocating heat and humidity, she didn't wear her armored vest or helmet and wore only a light cotton shirt and trousers, plus leather boots, but carried her large rhino hide shield strapped across her back. Finally, she wore a Chinese conical straw hat to protect herself from the heavy rain and which also had the benefit of not being hot to wear. As for Timur, he was similarly dressed and equipped.

The duo soon arrived at the spot over which the vultures were circling. Seeing nothing on the road itself, Nauca then scanned the woods to the right of the road, over which the vultures were flying. Seeing some movement between the trees, some twenty meters from the road, Nauca jumped off her horse and unsheathed her sword.

"I'm going to check out the woods to our right, Timur. Keep an eye on my horse and be ready to gallop back to the caravan if this turns out to be some sort of ambush." Timur simply nodded his head at that and made his horse trot forward, so that he could grab a hold of Nauca's horse's reins. While he fully realized how dangerous this situation could turn out to be, he knew that Nauca's choice of action was the right one: as caravan guards, they were expected to run risks in order to prevent the caravan from falling into an ambush. Still, the young steppe nomad felt anxiety as Nauca disappeared

⁷ Gorytos : Combination quiver and bow carrier used by ancient steppe nomads.

among the trees and bushes: he felt strong emotions about that brave, skilled and also most pretty young woman.

Making as little noise as she could while advancing slowly and cautiously into the forest, Nauca soon arrived at a sort of small clearing where only long grass and bushes grew. A horrible stench struck her nostrils as a dozen vultures, surprised and scared by her arrival, flew off as one. The origin of the stench then became too obvious to Nauca: the bodies of at least fifteen men lay around the clearing. Cautiously approaching them, she saw that they had been stripped down to their loincloths, probably by bandits intent on taking anything of value. Fighting off her urge to throw up, she examined more closely each body in turn. From their state of decomposition, she judged that they had been killed only two or three days ago. As for their wounds, they were consistent with either arrow strikes or slashes by swords. Many of the dead had also been finished off with knives. Encountering the body of an older man with gray hair and beard, she looked at his hands and saw that he had previously been wearing a number of rings on his fingers. The fact that they were now gone confirmed what she had initially thought: this was the work of a large group of bandits, which in turn meant that the caravan was now facing a serious threat. As she finished reviewing the bodies, she stopped on seeing the naked body of an old woman. Like the dead men, she appeared to have been of local stock, with brown skin and black hair. Unlike the men, her loincloth had been removed. It was too easy for Nauca to understand why: she may have been old but the bandits who had killed her had still taken the time to rape her before killing her. Anger filled Nauca as she examined her naked body, trying to find some possible tattoo which could help identify her later on with the help of the local authorities. Something about the bodies then struck her: their age categories. Most of the dead men looked young and fit and could have been guards or servants, while only a couple of men were of a more advanced age. The old woman was also the lone female victim of the group. This didn't look at all like the members of some caravan or small merchant party, but rather like a small party of possibly rich people traveling with servants and guards. After a last, sad look at the dead, Nauca returned to the road, where she examined the surface of the muddy road, hoping to find some telltale footprints as Timur looked on.

“What did you find in the woods, Nauca?”

"Seventeen dead men and one dead old woman, all stripped of anything of value, including their clothes. They looked like local people and I don't believe that they were traveling merchants."

"Maybe they were on some kind of religious pilgrimage? We saw many temples along our way, either Buddhist, Hindu or Zoroastrian ones."

"That is actually a very possible thing, Timur. Nice thinking! However, the main thing of importance for us is that this means that there is a large band of bandits operating in this region, possibly from within this forest. Many of the dead men looked like guards, which would mean that the band that attacked them was either numerous or skillful, or both. We have to go back and warn Hiram about this."

Mounting back her horse, Nauca then made Tamat pivot around before starting to gallop back towards the caravan.

The torrential rain stopped as abruptly as it had started at about the same time Nauca and Timur joined up again with the caravan, where Hiram questioned her in a worried tone.

"From your expression, I would say that you found something I won't like, Nauca."

"And I would say that you are right, Hiram." replied Nauca before taking a minute to tell him what she had found. As she spoke, Hiram's expression grew more and more somber.

"By Mithra! Camping tonight inside this forest now sounds like suicide to me. Those bandits, especially if they are as numerous as you believe, would have an easy task of surrounding us and then swamp us before we could defend ourselves properly. We should get out of this forest now and camp for the night in an open field, so that we could see any bandits approach from a distance."

"I believe that would be the prudent thing to do, Hiram." agreed Nauca.

"Then, let's turn the caravan around and get it out of this forest."

While it involved a bit of a complicated maneuver, they soon had the caravan retrace its steps and emerge from the forest. Continuing on the road until they were a good 300 meters from the nearest patch of woods, Hiram then made his caravan form a circle with its beasts in an open field adjacent to the road. By the time that their tents were set up and their beasts had been unloaded, night was about to fall. Nauca, Timur,

Gorudos and Igrid were about to discuss who would take which guard shift when Nauca's piercing eyes caught on a faint point of light from deep inside the forest where she had found the bodies.

"Look! There appears to be a campfire somewhere deep in the forest: its light is reflecting on the top of the trees."

"You're right, Nauca." said Gorudos after looking for a few seconds in the direction pointed by Nauca. "However, that campfire seems to be fairly distant, maybe about ten stadiums⁸ away."

"Which is not very far from the spot where I found the bodies. Those bandits may have just shown us where their camp is." replied Nauca, attracting a remark from Igrid.

"So? What are we supposed to do about them?"

"Let's go speak with Hiram about that." answered Nauca in a firm voice.

21:41 (Central Asia Time)

Forested area northwest of Mathura, near a clearing

Nauca, followed in single file by Gorudos, Timur, Igrid and Talya, was advancing as silently as she could through the forest, orienting herself on the light of the campfire, which was now less than fifty meters away but was still half hidden by the trees. Bending to a crouch once within thirty meters from the clearing where the campfire was burning, she signaled by hand for her companions to deploy in extended line on each side of herself. All of them but Talya had their bows in hand, while Talya held one of the Chinese crossbows acquired by the caravan to arm its camel drivers and merchants and thus improve their prospects in defending against bandits. While shooting at a much slower rate than a bow, those crossbows had the benefit of being easy to shoot accurately, and this with very little training, while becoming a good archer took years of constant practice. Young Talya also carried two javelins, plus her sling, with which she had more than proved during the past months to be an excellent shooter with. This time, contrary to when they had been traveling with only light clothes on during the day, the

⁸ Stadium : The Greek Attic Stadium was a measure of length equivalent to 185 meters. A Roman mile was worth 1,480 meters, while the Chinese Li was worth between 350 and 550 meters, depending on the time period.

five of them wore helmets and armored vests, with Nauca also having her large rhino hide shield, carried across her back, to supplement her scale mail armored vest, Hastaghna steel left forearm and hand protector and her bronze helmet. Thanks to them looting those dead Saka and Kushan soldiers in the Khyber Pass, all of them wore about the best types of armor one could buy around these days. In contrast, the bandits Nauca could see wore no armor and many acted and shouted like drunken men, which they probably were right now. She had a mean smile at that, as it could only make things easier for her and her companions. She went on all fours to cover the last meters of forest left before getting to the clearing, finally taking position behind a tree that could provide her some substantial protection. As she took off her large round shield and placed it at the vertical in front of her, her companions also took positions behind trees and readied their three bows and one crossbow. Now having a good view of the camp, Nauca counted 31 men visible around the camp, many of them sitting around the campfire and apparently telling each other stories while drinking from large flasks which probably contained wine. Then, she saw something that both shocked and enraged her: a nude teenage girl was attached to a tree, with her arms raised up and tied and with her front exposed. The reason for her position and state of dress became too apparent when one of the bandits walked to her and started raping her, making the girl cry in despair and humiliation. Making signs to her companions to be ready to shoot, Nauca then pulled her bow's string before saying a single word in Greek.

“Shoot!”

Aiming at a bandit who was standing away from the fire and thus could disappear from sight quickly, she let go her first arrow, hitting the man in his upper chest and dropping him. Three more arrows and one bolt flew in the air at nearly the same time, each hitting squarely a bandit. Using her nearly thirteen years of practice as an archer, Nauca then shot arrows at a rate of one per three seconds, with the short range and light from the campfire helping her to pick up her targets. The bandits, either drunk or tired, or both, took some precious seconds to realize that they were being attacked and were thus slow to react. Many of them had to run to their tents and shelters in order to grab their weapons, since most of the bandits around the fire had only knives on them at the time. That cost them dearly, as half a dozen of them got hit in their back by arrows. The bandit raping the tied up teenage girl was one of the first to fall, killed by an arrow shot by Igrid, while the apparent leader of the bandits ended up with an arrow through his open mouth as he was shouting orders and trying to rally his men. Nauca and her four

companions showed no mercy to the bandits, shooting them down or, in the case of young Talya, knocking them down with her sling, as long as they were visible. Only a handful of utterly panicked bandits managed to run into the forest and disappear, leaving their equipment and weapons behind. Getting up from behind her tree, Nauca put her bow back inside her gorytos and grabbed both her shield and her sword before running into the clearing and going to the naked, sobbing teenage girl. First making sure that her rapist was dead by plunging her sword through his throat, Nauca then cut the ropes tying the girl's hands to the tree. The teenager immediately hugged her with the strength of despair while crying and speaking in the local language, which Nauca could not understand. In response, she gently patted her back and spoke softly to her in Greek.

"Don't worry anymore, girl: you are now safe with us."

To her surprise, the teenager then spoke again...in fair Greek.

"Thank you, whoever you are."

While surprised by that, Nauca lost no time in asking questions and went to a nearby tent, where she grabbed a blanket and wrapped it over the shoulders of the teenager, covering her nudity. Using her shield to protect the girl, she led her next to the treeline from where she had emerged and made her sit against a tree.

"Stay here and don't move: we still have to make sure that all these bastards lying around are dead. Once we will be finished here, we will escort you to our caravan, which is camping outside of this forest. Are you from this region?"

"Yes! I am from Mathura and was going to visit a temple further west when our group was attacked and massacred by those bandits."

"Then, you are in luck: our caravan is heading towards Mathura. We will thus be able to bring you home soon."

"Where are you from?"

"Our caravan is from Samarkand."

"But you? I never saw a female warrior before."

"Well, you would see many of them if you were in the plains and forests of Sarmatia, girl. I am what the Greeks called an 'Amazon'. I hope that you have heard about Amazons before."

"I was read stories about them by my preceptor but I thought that they were only legends."

“Oh, we are much more than a mere legend, girl. However, we will be able to talk further about that later on, after we finish the job here. Again, stay here and don’t move until I return.”

Nauca then joined her four companions in scouring through the bandits’ camp, giving the coup-de-grâce to the wounded bandits, retrieving their arrows which were not damaged, grabbing the bandits’ own stocks of arrows and searching their tents. Then, Timur found something he had not been expecting behind one of the tents, where a number of horses were tied to trees: a sedan chair. Calling Nauca and Gorudos to him, he then showed them the chair, which was heavily ornamented and had to have cost quite a lot of money to build.

“Only rich or powerful people can afford such luxurious sedan chairs. Who were those people that you found dead, Nauca?”

“I don’t know but I did suspect that they were not merchants and the girl told me that she was traveling to a temple west of here. I guess that I will have to ask her a few more questions once back at our camp. Let’s pack the weapons, armor and valuables lying around this camp and load them on those horses. We should also rip open these tents with our knives. I don’t want the bandits who survived to be able to find anything of use or value if they come back here after our departure. As for that sedan chair, we can rig ropes to make two of the horses carry it.”

“A good idea!” replied Gorudos. “I will take care of that. Timur can help me as well.”

“Excellent! I think that we did good tonight. Now, our caravan will be safe from those bandits.”

Some fifty minutes later, the five of them, with the teenage girl put atop one of the horses and the sedan chair lifted and moved by two horses, left the camp and walked to the road, which passed some 200 meters away. The girl was quite nervous at first, spooked by traveling like this at night on a dark road inside a forest, but she calmed down once they were in the open, with the caravan’s campfire in sight. On arrival at the camp, the caravan men there, who had been anxiously waiting for their return and praying for their safety, gathered at once to greet back the group. Nauca, who had progressively become the natural leader of the guards, spoke in a sober tone to Hiram when the latter came to her.

"We found the bandits' camp and served them a lesson the few survivors are not about to forget, Hiram. We saw 31 of them, out of which less than five managed to flee in utter panic. We found at the same time this teenage girl, tied naked to a tree and being raped by the bandits. She is a local girl from Mathura but can speak Greek. In fact, I suspect that she is from a rich local family: we found this luxurious sedan chair, along with those five horses, at the bandits' camp."

"You did well again, all of you! Go rest: I will take care of those horses and sedan chair."

"Before that, I believe that we need to ask this poor girl a few questions, in order to find out who she is exactly. She will also need to wash, to remove the stains on her body."

Hiram nodded in comprehension at that and went to the horse carrying the girl, then helped her down before caressing her head. She was actually fairly small but graceful and was in her early teens.

"I am Hiram, master of this caravan. What is your name, young girl?"

"Babita!" answered the girl in a timid voice.

"Babita...that's a pretty name for a pretty girl. You told Nauca that you were from Mathura, correct?"

"Yes! My father rules Mathura. He had sent me with an escort and with my nanny to go visit a temple dedicated to Krishna, one day to the west of here."

Hiram couldn't help exchange a shocked look with Nauca and the other guards at those words before he looked back at the girl.

"Your father rules Mathura? Is he a king?"

"No! My father's name is Vishnumitra but he doesn't wear the title of 'King'. Rather, he is called 'Governor' and rules under the authority of King Hippostratus."

"Still, that makes you a person of importance, Babita. What title should I use to call you?"

That question somehow seemed to pike the girl, who snapped her head up and looked into Hiram's eyes.

"I don't want to be called by some meaningless title! For my father, I am only a girl to be given away in marriage to a nobleman, in order to build up his power and influence. I have been promised in marriage since the age of four but now, having been



Babita of Mathura

soiled by bandits, my future husband will not want me anymore and I will probably be discarded by my family as being an embarrassment.”

“An embarrassment?” said Nauca, pricked by those words. “You were attacked, then raped by bandits through no fault of your own. How could your family consider you an embarrassment? Don’t they love you?”

Babita lowered her head as tears started rolling on her cheeks.

“My nanny loved me, and so does my mother. However, this is how things are in and around Mathura. Boys are important, while girls are only good at helping their families earn money or influence through prearranged marriages. After this, I will have no value left in the eyes of my father.”

“What a heartless bastard!” muttered Nauca to herself, positively angry and revolted. Hiram then put his hand on one of her shoulders and spoke softly to her.

“Nauca, Sarmatians may consider and treat women as equal to men, but they are the exception in this sad world, not the rule. I have heard before about such arranged marriages, and not only about India. Things are in fact worse in that matter with girls from the nobility or from rich families: they are too often considered simply as ways to advance the fortunes of their families through prearranged marriages, often planned from a very young age. I am afraid that Babita is right about the kind of reception she will get once back in Mathura.”

“And what will her family do with her then? Simply disavow and abandon her? I can’t accept that kind of outcome.”

“Unfortunately, there is nothing we can do in this matter, Nauca. We cannot risk alienating or insulting that girl’s father: it could cause the end of this caravan if he takes umbrage to our objections. I am sorry but that is the reality we have to live with. Maybe, with luck, that governor will have a softer heart than even her daughter believes him to possess.”

11:06 (Central Asia Time)

City of Mathura, Indo-Greek Kingdom

The arrival of the caravan at the gates of Mathura created some consternation among the guards protecting the walls when they saw young Babita atop a horse and with the empty sedan chair carried by two horses. An officer then approached Babita, bowing his head in respect to her.

“What happened to your suite and escort, Lady Babita? And why are you back so early from your pilgrimage?”

“My suite and escort are dead, massacred by bandits as we were going through a forest some two days away. Thankfully, this caravan was nearby and their guards attacked the bandits’ camp at night and killed most of the bandits, then freed me.”

The officer nodded, impressed by that story, before looking at Hiram and bowing to him.

“You will have the forever gratitude of Governor Vishnamitra for this brave act, caravan master.”

“Thank you but in truth we also acted for our self-preservation as well, as those bandits would have loved to loot my caravan. Could I ask one of your men to guide my caravan to the nearest caravanserai with enough space left to lodge us? You could then escort me and Lady Babita to her father’s palace.”

“Of course! BINDI! GUIDE THAT CARAVAN TO THE NEAREST CARAVANSERAI ABLE TO LODGE IT! I WILL ESCORT LADY BABITA TO THE PALACE.”

Leaving his associate Kasim to lead the caravan and take care of its lodging, Hiram then followed the officer, who had grabbed the reins of the horse carrying Babita, with Nauca trotting behind him, herself holding the reins of the horses carrying the sedan chair and the effects recuperated from the bandits.

The ride was not long, with the group soon arriving at the main gate of a walled palace. The palace itself counted three stories and was built of yellow-gray stone. Dismounting and leaving their horses in the care of servants, Hiram and Nauca entered the palace behind the officer and Babita after the officer had spoken briefly to a servant, who then ran inside. Another minute and the group arrived in what was obviously a throne room. The officer told Hiram and Nauca to wait where they were, then led Babita out by a backdoor. Hiram took that occasion to speak in Sogdian to Nauca, keeping his voice low.

“Remember: whatever happens, don’t show up anger or disapproval at what that governor may say or do. The safety and future of our caravan may depend on this.”

Nauca could only nod her head at that, realizing how delicate the situation was. She was going to have to repress her feelings, in order not to endanger her travel companions, however frustrating this could prove to be. After some three minutes of waiting, the officer came back in the throne room, accompanied by a mustached man

wearing silk clothes and rich jewels. The mustached man then went to sit on the large cushions piled atop a dais before addressing Hiram in Greek.

“You may come forward, caravan master.”

“Thank you, Your Highness!”

The governor seemed to be both surprised and a bit annoyed when Nauca came forward as well. Still, he kept a smile on his lips and spoke again in a magnanimous tone.

“I am the one who must thank you for saving my daughter Babita from those bandits, caravan master. What is your name and where are you from?”

“I am Hiram, from Samarkand. My caravan is traveling to Pataliputra, where we hope to do some good trading. My companion here is one of my caravan guards, Nauca. She led the attack on the bandits’ camp and killed many of the bandits. By the way, she is a Sarmatian, one of the warrior women the Greeks called ‘Amazons’.”

The governor raised an eyebrow in interest at that.

“Indeed! She must be the first one to come to Mathura in a long time. You have both my gratitude and my admiration, Nauca of Sarmatia.”

“Thank you, Your Highness!” replied Nauca while bowing low. “We also recuperated the sedan chair, horses and personal effects of your daughter’s suite from that bandits’ camp. They are now in the courtyard of your palace. Unfortunately, we were not able to bury or cremate the bodies of her guards and servants, which are still lying in the forest where we found them.”

“A column of my soldiers will take care of that, Nauca of Sarmatia. Now, could you tell me in what state you found my daughter Babita?”

‘Here we go!’ thought Nauca before speaking out loud, forcing herself to keep a straight face.

“When we approached the bandits’ camp, in which a campfire was burning, I saw your daughter tied with her back to a tree. She was completely naked at the time and I saw a bandit go to her and rape her. That is when I and my four companions started shooting arrows and killing those bandits. Once they were all down, I ran to your daughter, cut her ropes and covered her nudity with a blanket taken from the bandits. Then, we returned to our caravan’s camp with her.”

The governor’s expression showed some dismay then despite his best efforts to stay impassive. Nauca knew then that Babita had been right about the reactions she expected from her family.

“That is a most sad and tragic story. You only delivered justice by killing those bandits, Nauca of Sarmatia.”

“We would have done the same to help anybody who would have fallen victims to those bandits, Your Highness.”

“And your bravery and compassion are to be commended. Let me show you properly my gratitude for saving my daughter, Hiram and Nauca.”

The governor then loudly clapped his hands together, making a servant appear from the back door, carrying a medium-sized decorated box in her hands. The servant walked at small steps to Hiram and knelt in front of him while presenting her box to him. The caravan master opened wide eyes on opening the box and seeing that it was full of big, magnificent pink pearls. He then bowed deeply to the governor after closing back the box.

“You are too generous, Your Highness.”

“Your good deeds merited no less, Hiram of Samarkand. Again, you have my undying gratitude for saving my Babita. May your trip to Pataliputra be both safe and profitable.”

“Thank you, Your Highness!”

Understanding that this audience was now over, Hiram and Nauca backtracked to the door and left the throne room, whose doors were then closed by two guards. Hiram took a moment to show the pearls to Nauca, who could only admire them.

“These pearls are truly beautiful, Hiram. With them, one could make a necklace worthy of a queen. The question I have now is what will happen to poor Babita after this?”

“Unfortunately, that is not for us to decide or even worry about, Nauca. Let’s leave and go join our caravan.”

When the two of them entered the courtyard of the caravanserai now occupied by Hiram’s caravan, it was to find that Kasim had basically finished taking care of their beasts and that Timur and Igrid were already guarding the storage shed containing the merchandises and valuables of the caravan.

“Good job, Kasim! You worked fast and well.”

“Hey, I should be good at this after fifteen years of practice. So, how did it go at the palace?”

"As expected, the governor gave us a gift to reward us for having saved his daughter. Take a peep into this box."

Kasim's eyes opened wide when he saw the pink pearls in the box held by Hiram.

"By Mithra! These are magnificent! You should be able to sell them for a very good price."

"Indeed! The best part is that they didn't cost me anything."

"And what about your wife Seda, Hiram?" asked Nauca in a sneaky tone.

"My wife? What about her?"

"Well, maybe she would like to get a necklace made with those pearls, or are you planning to tell her that you didn't think about giving her a gift on return from this trip to India? Isn't she the queen of your life?"

Kasim laughed at the face Hiram made at Nauca's words.

"I believe that she is attempting to shame you, Hiram, and it is a good try, I must say."

"Humph! I see! Alright, Seda will get a gift on my return, but I will get you for that, Nauca."

Both Nauca and Kasim laughed at that.

17:02 (Central Asia Time)

Great hall of the caravanserai's inn

Mathura

Hiram was halfway through his supper, eaten at a long table around which his associates were also eating, when a big, solid man stopped next to the table and spoke in fair Sogdian.

"You are Hiram of Samarkand, the caravan master who arrived this late morning?"

"Yes! Who is asking and why?"

The man, who appeared to be a Punjabi, smiled and took a tiny leather purse from inside his vest while answering him.

"The who is Najib Singh and the why is to discuss about this."

The said Narendra Singh then made three small translucent stones roll from the purse and into his hand, making the Sogdians stare at the stones.

"I would however prefer to discuss this in private, rather than in this hall. The walls have ears here."

"I wholeheartedly agree with you on that. Would you mind to sit down while we finish eating? We won't be long."

Singh sat at once next to Hiram while putting back the precious bag inside his vest.

"So, what would your caravan have of interest to barter in exchange for my diamonds, Hiram of Samarkand?"

"Well, one of my associates still has some amber from the far North to sell, while I have four top-quality horses still to sell. We also have plenty of gold and silver coins, if you would be interested in them."

"Gold and silver coins are always interesting, my friend. I believe that we will be able to conduct some good trading together. Uh, which one of you has amber to offer?" The Punjabi man was shocked to see Nauca, sitting opposite him, raise one hand in response.

"I do! I have both small chunks and a few larger blocks which would be suitable to make sculptures out of them."

"You, a woman? You are a caravan merchant?"

"And also a caravan guard. I have a few specimens of amber on me: you want to see them?"

"Very much so!" said Singh. Nauca then took a small leather bag from her belt purse and opened it, making a half dozen golden pieces of amber roll on the table. Singh nodded his head in appreciation as he took one of the pieces in one hand and examined it closely.

"Nice! They definitely are of top quality. I would certainly be ready to sell you a diamond or two in exchange for a few of these."

"Then, we will definitely have to discuss trade together, Najib Singh."

Finishing their meals quickly, Hiram, Nauca and Xiao then went first to go fetch their bags of valuables and coins before going to Hiram's room with Najib Singh, where Hiram invited the Punjabi merchant to sit on the large sheep's skin acting as a bed, while he and his two associates sat on the floor cross-legged, facing him.

"Well, let's discuss prices and values concerning your diamonds, Najib Singh."



Nodding his head, Singh spread on the floor in front of him a piece of cloth, then took out his small bag of diamonds, rolling one of them out on the cloth.

"You will understand that, due to their high value and rarity, I would prefer to discuss the price of my diamonds one by one, rather than to negotiate a bulk price."

"That is understandable, my friend. Since he is our expert on gems, I will let my associate Xiao, here to my right, examine your diamonds and offer a price for each of them."

"Fair enough! Let's start with this nice blue diamond. By the way, all my diamonds come from the region of Golkonda, near the southeast coast of India."

"Just by curiosity, Najib Singh," cut in Nauca, "I was looking at buying only a few diamonds, preferably of the larger size, which would be the sort to tempt rich customers to acquire them in order to make exceptional jewels. This diamond on the cloth is a really nice one and is of fair size but do you have one large diamond that would truly be worthy of royalty?"

Nauca's question made Singh smile before he fished out a small leather bag suspended from his neck by a chain.

"I do have three very valuable diamonds of large sizes that I keep apart from the others but you better have lots of money with you, if you hope to be able to buy one or more of them."

Singh retrieved first the small diamond already on the cloth before opening his small purse and fishing out a magnificent light blue diamond the size of a fingernail, putting it down on the cloth. Nauca, like Xiao and Hiram, stared at the gem with utter fascination as Singh spoke in a facetious tone.

"Is this diamond exceptional enough for you, Nauca of Sarmatia?"

"By Cybele, yes!"

"Then, let's see if you have enough money or other valuables to barter in exchange for you to be able to buy it."

Nauca first let Xiao examine closely the diamond and weigh it on his small precision scale he routinely used to evaluate gems. With a prior consent given by Nauca to haggle on her behalf concerning gems, Xiao then offered an initial price, which was quickly countered by Singh, who understandably wanted as much as possible for his diamond. A hard bargaining session followed, ending after a couple of minutes with an agreed final value of 2,440 drachmas. Hiram held his breath on hearing that final

price: that was more than the yearly salary of three skilled workers. As for Singh, he grinned to Nauca, showing yellowing teeth.

“Now, the next question for you, Nauca, is this: can you afford that diamond?”

“Oh, I believe so.” said negligently Nauca before taking out of one of her two saddlebags a huge chunk of golden amber nearly the size of a human head. “My question is: can you afford this chunk of Baltic amber?”

Both Hiram and Xiao chuckled on seeing the stunned look Singh threw at the chunk of amber, which was one of the largest such pieces of amber they had themselves seen before. Nauca then handed the amber boulder to Singh, who took it with near reverence before examining it from multiple angles.



“This is...incredible! I never thought that amber could come in such sizes.”

“I have to recognize that I myself rarely saw such a large piece of amber, which is by the way of perfect color. So, how much could I get from it that I could then use to help pay for this diamond of yours? I have a few more large chunks as well, if you are interested in them.”

Xiao, who knew that Nauca was by now quite knowledgeable about amber prices and trading, as Sarmatians had been trading amber for centuries, then let her haggle with Singh for the block of amber. She finally got a very respectable price of 830 drachmas for it from Singh, who promptly deduced that sum from the price agreed to for his large blue diamond. Nauca then emptied her saddlebag full of amber on the cloth laid on the floor, unveiling another six large but somewhat smaller chunks and a whole collection of small and medium-sized amber pieces.

“I know that having a diversity of colors and sizes always attract more the customers, rather than a single big one: that allows them to then make their artisans produce a whole set of various amber jewels. So, are you interested in those as well?” Singh nodded his head slowly as he examined the pieces of amber one by one. After a long moment of reflection, he gave a sober look at Nauca.

“How about this? My diamond against your amber collection?”

Xiao repressed a smile on hearing that: Nauca would come out a winner with this deal...if she accepted it. Xiao appreciated the way Nauca kept a straight face, as if she was tempted to refuse that offer, before nodding her head.

“Deal!”

Both Nauca and Singh then did a solid forearm shake to seal that deal before Singh gathered up his newly acquired amber collection. As for Nauca, she fished out a small purse hanging down from a strong bronze chain between her breasts and put the light blue diamond in it before hiding back the purse inside her shirt, attracting a comment from Singh.

“I see that you keep your most valuable things at the same place I do my own valuables, Nauca.”

“I have even more valuable things under my shirt, Najib Singh”. Replied Nauca in a mischievous tone before opening her shirt and exposing her firm chest, making the eyes of all three men present pop out.

“Uh, that definitely qualifies as a hidden treasure, Nauca of Sarmatia.”

“Yes, but they are not for sale and are only meant as gifts. Consider this as a thank you gift for sealing this deal with me. Now, I believe that my two associates would be interested as well in buying some of your diamonds.”

“Right! Let’s get to it!”

A good hour later, with night having fallen, the four of them split up after concluding a fruitful haggling session. Nauca returned to her room with her saddlebags, one of which was still full of gold and silver coins. Knowing that she would need to take her turn at guarding the merchandises storage hut in a few hours, she didn’t waste time before laying down on the sheepskin serving as her bed in the inn’s room, the precious small purse still hanging from her neck and her dagger laid next to her, under the rolled blanket she used as a pillow.

20:28 (Central Asia Time)

Saturday, August 3, 61 B.C.E.

Nauca’s room, inn of the caravanserai

Mathura

Nauca’s day in town had been a good and fruitful one: she had been able to buy sizeable quantities of various spices, items which were in constant and high demand in the West and North. Her largest buy was that of many bags full of black pepper, plus a few bags of red pepper, but her costliest one had been the acquisition of a few tiny

pouches of saffron, the rarest and most valuable spice one could find and one that would sell well with nobles and other rich people. The best part about those spices was that they were both light and easy to transport, as long as you took care to protect them from water and ice. Still, as the caravan was due to leave Mathura next morning to continue its trip towards Pataliputra, Nauca had enough reserves of gold and silver coins left with her to buy even more merchandises before they started back on their return to Samarkand.

She had just finished taking a sponge bath in her room, with Igrid, Talya and Amara already asleep in the room, which was lit only by a single oil lamp, when someone knocked rather loudly on the door. Being still naked and wet, she grabbed her sword and approached her door but kept it locked while speaking through it.

“Who is it?”

A male voice answered her in Greek.

“Governor Vishnumitra sent me! I am one of his officers and I am escorting someone to bring her to see Hiram the caravan master.”

Nauca had at once a bad feeling about this, not in the sense that she was in danger but rather about the fate of someone else.

“Give me a minute to put something on and I will then show you to Hiram’s room.”

“Alright! I will wait.”

Toweling herself dry as quickly as she could, she then slipped on a short Greek tunic, not bothering to put on a loincloth first. Before unlocking her door to go out, she looked at Igrid, who had been awakened like the others by the knocking.

“Lock back the door behind me and open it only for me or Hiram.”

“Understood.”

Nauca then unlocked and opened the door of her room and saw in the semi-darkness of the hallway a bearded man wearing an armored vest and a sword under a large cape that mostly hid his uniform. A small girl stood next to him, wearing a hooded cape that made it difficult to recognize her. Nauca was still able to make her out as young Babita. She then looked back at the guards officer.

“Follow me!”

The trio walked down the narrow hallway together until Nauca stopped in front of a door and knocked lightly on it.

"Hiram, this is Nauca. Open up, please!"

"I'm coming!" replied Hiram's voice a few seconds before the safety bolt of the door was pulled and the door opened. Hiram was still fully dressed and, by the numerous extra oil lamps lit in his room, Nauca understood that he had probably been doing some accounting work about his business.

"Hiram, the governor sent this officer to escort Lady Babita here. I believe that we all need to talk together in private. May we come in?"

"Of course!" replied Hiram before opening wide his door and letting in Nauca, Babita and the officer. With Nauca closing and locking back the door, the officer bowed his head in salute to Hiram.

"I am sorry to bother you at such a late hour, Hiram of Samarkand, but I was sent here on orders from Governor Vishnumitra, with the mission to escort Lady Babita to this caravanserai."

As Hiram waited for the officer to explain himself further, the man, a lochagos⁹, hesitated a bit, apparently embarrassed by what he had to say.

"Lady Babita is not going to live anymore at the palace, or in Mathura. The governor is asking you to bring her with you as part of your caravan. I have brought with me a bundle of spare clothes for her, along with a purse full of silver meant to pay for her needs during her trip."

"Can I gather that Lady Babita will not be welcomed anymore in Mathura, Lochagos?" asked Hiram, understanding what was happening. The officer nodded his head once and spoke in a subdued voice.

"You are correct, Hiram of Samarkand. Believe me when I say that executing this order brings me no joy. In essence, the governor has deemed Lady Babita to be impure and a stain on the reputation of his family because of her misadventure with those bandits you encountered. The man to whom she was promised as a bride doesn't want her anymore and no other noble family will want her either after this."

"But all this happened through no fault of her own. How could a father repudiate his own daughter like this?"

"I have seen and heard about other similar cases in the past, Hiram of Samarkand. It may appear sad and cruel in your eyes but it is the reality around here."

⁹ Lochagos : Ancient Greek military rank for the commander of a company of soldiers.

Sensing that the man was genuinely sorry about Babita's fate, Hiram nodded his head once slowly.

"We will take good care of Lady Babita, Lochagos. Tell your governor that she will leave Mathura tomorrow morning with our caravan and will never return here. Thank you for escorting her here."

"I was only doing my duty, caravan master." replied the officer, bowing to Hiram before putting down the bag and purse he had been carrying and then leaving the room. Once he was gone, Nauca gently pulled back the hood covering Babita's head, revealing the fact that the teenage girl was now tearful and about to cry. Feeling a pang in her heart, Nauca gently hugged her.

"We will take good care of you, Babita. I will take good care of you."

"But what will I do now of my life? I was raised in a palace, surrounded by servants who did everything for me. I will only be a deadweight for your caravan."

"Not true, Babita! How many languages can you speak, read or write?"

Surprised by that question, Babita took a few seconds before answering Nauca.

"I can speak, read and write Sanskrit, Greek and Prakrit, while I can also speak a bit of Dravidian. I can also read and write in Brahmi script. My father wanted me to be well educated, so that I would reflect well on my family at the court of my future husband I was promised to."

"And do you know how to count?"

"Of course I do! My education was not limited to languages."

"And can you ride a horse?"

"Uh, not very well."

Nauca then turned to face Hiram, a big grin on her face.

"You now have a local interpreter with your caravan, Hiram, an interpreter who can also help you with your accounts."

As Hiram also grinned, liking Nauca's suggestion, poor Babita was left confused for a moment.

"Wait! Me, an interpreter? Don't you already have someone who knows Sanskrit in your caravan?"

"No, we didn't, Babita." replied Hiram, now looking most serious. "Nauca's suggestion actually makes a lot of sense and you could indeed prove to be very useful to my caravan. This was our first trip down to India and we were working with the assumption that Sogdian and Greek would suffice for us to manage during our trip. That

was mostly true when we dealt with other caravan merchants, but we were having real problems conversing with the local peoples around India. Consider yourself hired as our official interpreter, with a pay of one drachma a day, plus food and shelter. Nauca will take care of getting a horse with saddle and set of bridles for you tomorrow morning. At night, you will be sleeping with Nauca and the three other girls in our caravan, so do not worry about being abused again, Babita.”

All that was apparently too much for the teenage girl, who broke down and started crying, prompting both Hiram and Nauca into hugging her and comforting her. As he hugged her, Hiram spoke softly into her ear.

“Life with a caravan may be a tough one, but you will be able to travel a lot and see many other parts of the World, Babita.”

“And you can now consider me as your big sister, Babita.” added Nauca.

Early next morning, Nauca went to see Iman, one of Hiram’s associates, a Persian man who specialized in selling and buying horses and who still had a few horses with him to sell. Since Babita was fairly small, standing only at about 150 centimeters, and had a slender, lightweight body, Nauca bought from Iman his smallest horse, a tough steppes horse with a good character that would be easy for Babita to handle. Next, she went to the town’s market and was able to find a ‘hard tree saddle’, a type of saddle she personally preferred for being more comfortable for both the rider and the horse and that also provided a much more stable seating than the old traditional blanket. Having been manufactured in India, that saddle also incorporated on its left side an Indian invention: a long leather loop that made it easier to mount a horse by providing a footrest for the rider to insert his or her foot in it and then pull oneself up. In the case of the saddles Nauca used on her two horses, Tamat and Minad, she had years ago the idea of adding a second leather loop, that one on the right side, so that she could easily mount up from either side. Nauca also bought at the same time a set of bridles and reins, plus a pair of saddlebags, before going to another shop and buy a bedroll, a water flask and other small but essential articles needed for outdoor living. While the bundle of clothes left by the governor’s officer had contained an ample wardrobe for Babita, it had been lacking a bit in terms of travel clothes. In particular, it did not include any cold-weather clothes, something that Babita would sorely need during their trip back to Samarkand through the mountains of either the Pamir or of the Karakoram. However,

Nauca decided to wait to buy such clothes until they would actually get close to mountains and Winter.

When Nauca came back to the caravanserai with the horse intended for Babita, fully equipped and carrying some extra sets of clothes and a few provisions for the teenager, Babita looked questioningly at the leather loop hanging from the left side of the saddle.

“Uh, what is that strap for, Nauca?”

“It is meant to make mounting a horse easier, Babita. Here, raise your left foot high and insert it in this loop, then grab the pommel of the saddle and pull yourself up.” The first attempt by Babita to insert her foot in the leather loop proved frustrating to her, as her foot simply pushed away the leather strap rather than go inside the loop. She let out a curse in Sanskrit as she tried again, without success.

“That damn loop won’t stay open wide enough to let my foot get in. Couldn’t we attach some kind of wooden block to the bottom of that loop, so that it could stay open at the bottom and make it easier to put my foot in?”

Nauca was about to answer her when Babita’s words struck her mind, leaving her speechless for long seconds as she stared at the leather loop hanging against the flank of the horse.

“Of course! Babita, you’re a genius!”

“Me? A genius? Why do you say that? Hey, where are you going?”

“I need to get some last things in town. Start packing your things on this horse and make sure that it is fed before we leave Mathura. Talya can help you with that.”

Leaving the mystified teenager in the stall with her new horse, Nauca nearly ran out of the caravanserai and went to a carpenter shop she had seen nearby. Thankfully, the local carpenter and his young apprentice were already at work at this early hour and, with lots of gestures mixed in with Greek words, Nauca got the carpenter to cut for her a dozen rectangular pieces of wood approximately the length and width of a hand and about as thick as two fingers. She also bought from him some long iron nails, which actually cost her a lot more than the blocks of wood she had asked him to cut for her. Paying the mystified but happy carpenter, Nauca then returned with her load to the caravanserai, where Hiram eyed with curiosity the nails and blocks of wood she was carrying.

“Uh, what are those for, Nauca? You’re planning to go into wood carving?”

"Sort of! I will explain...once we are out of town."

"Ooh! Secret wood carving work!" replied in a sarcastic tone the caravan master. "I'm curious!"

"Well, if what I am thinking about works, then we certainly will want to keep it a secret, Hiram, as it could be used for both good and bad."

"As you wish, Nauca. We will leave in half an hour, so you better go pack your things and empty your room."

"Don't worry: I will be ready on time."

Nauca was true to her word and was on her horse and ready to go by the time the caravan started exiting the courtyard of the caravanserai. As for young Babita, she rode besides Hiram's horse, near the head of the caravan, closely followed by Timur and Igrid. At the tail of the caravan, Gorudos and Talya kept an eye on possible thieves who would try to grab things from the passing camels. Babita couldn't help stop her horse for a moment and look back at her city of birth after the caravan left Mathura via its eastern gate. Seeing tears rolling on her cheeks, Hiram got closer to her and gently put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"I realize how hard this has to be for you, Babita, but we all have to move on in life. On the other hand, you are now free from an arranged marriage you probably didn't want to happen, especially when considering how fast your would-be groom dropped you as soon as he heard about your misadventure with those bandits. You may yet find your true love in your coming years as you travel with us."

"You are right, Hiram. At least now I am no longer a simple puppet to be used at will by others. Still, I loved my city."

"I too love my Samarkand, but I learned to live away from it for months and even years. When I return to it, my long absences only make me love it more."

"Are you married, Hiram?"

"Yes, and I also have a son and a daughter growing up in Samarkand. Now, we have to look forward and do what this caravan does best: trade. You will see: that lifestyle has its rewards."

CHAPTER 7 – TRADE SECRET

17:06 (Central Asia Time)

Sunday, August 4, 61 B.C.E.

Main road to Prayaga (modern-day Allahabad)

Thirty kilometers east of Mathura

Seeing that the Sun was low on the horizon and would set in about one hour, Hiram ordered his caravan to leave the road and to use as a night bivouac a zone that had been deforested years ago next to a stream and in which dense long grass grew. He then had his camel drivers and horse riders tie their animals to iron pikes hammered into the ground, using long ropes so that they could eat grass at will. Next, he had the beasts unloaded and their precious bundles of merchandises gathered in the center of the bivouac, where they would be easier to watch. Finally, he had tents erected and a campfire prepared. The Sun was about to set when Hiram went to see Nauca, who was showing to Babita how to brush her horse and give her water.

“So, Nauca, are you finally going to tell me why you got those blocks of wood and those nails in Mathura?”

“Can I wait until I have checked out something first, Hiram. I would hate to cover myself with ridicule in front of the men if my idea proves to be worthless. I should be ready to tell you by tomorrow morning.”

“As you wish!” replied Hiram, not insisting and turning around to go speak with Askhat, their cook.

Igrid and Talya, also curious about what Nauca had in mind, refrained from asking questions but watched her at intervals as Nauca first used a knife to shave slivers from a pair of wood blocks, to smoothen their edges, then nailed one block to the inside of the lower part of the leather strap attached to the left side of her saddle. Igrid scratched her head when Nauca did the same thing to the right-side leather strap loop of her saddle as Nauca flattened the tip of the nails protruding from the block and piercing the leather strap.

“Nauca, you really lost me there. What are you doing?”

“Testing an idea that came from Babita.”

“From Babita? But she is the first to say that she knows little about horses and riding.”

“True! However, you often can apply ideas to different purposes. In this case, this should improve tremendously our stability on the saddle...if it works. There! I believe that this will do. Time to try it now.”

Nauca then put her left foot in the ‘reinforced’ leather loop attached to the left side of her saddle and lifted herself into the saddle with ease and speed. However, she then kept her foot inside the loop and put her right foot inside the right-side loop before pushing her horse to a full gallop, surprising Igrid. The Germanic girl then opened wide eyes as she watched Nauca gallop in zigzag around the tents of the camp, bending sideways at the same time to a degree that would have made anyone fall off the saddle. Iman, the horse trader, as well as Hiram, also watched her go with incredulity, then ran to her when Nauca stopped her horse near Igrid and jumped to the ground.

“It works! You must try this, Igrid! Get on my horse and then slip your feet in the loops but keep them there: they will allow you to stay in the saddle even when you bend sideways.”

Igrid was mounting Tamat when Hiram and Iman arrived at a run and stopped next to Nauca, with Iman being the first to ask her a question.

“By Mithra! How did you manage to stay in the saddle while bending sideways like that, Nauca?”

“With the help of these modified feet loops, Iman. We all use one such foot loop to make it easier to pull ourselves up and onto our saddle but, by using those modified feet loops on both sides and keeping our feet in them while riding, then your position in the saddle is made a lot more stable. Igrid will now try these feet loops, then you will be able to try them yourself.”

Nauca then patted hard the rump of her horse, making it go to a gallop. Igrid, quickly getting the feel of the new loops, then zigzagged around the tents, even making abrupt stops and pivots on the spot which would normally have sent her down to eat dust. Iman watched her performance with growing excitement and could barely restrain himself when Igrid returned to the group and jumped out of the saddle. Hiram looked at Nauca as if she was a witch as Iman yelled in delight while galloping around the camp.

“By Ahura Mazda! Those new feet loops are amazing! Where did you get the idea for them?”

"From Babita, believe it or not. She was complaining that it was difficult to put her foot in a normal loop and then suggested that we fix a wooden block to the inside bottom of the loop, to keep it open and rigid. That prompted me to go get wooden blocks and nails in order to test her idea. As you can see, these rigid feet loops actually make a rider a lot more secure in the saddle, allowing him or her to do tight maneuvers that would normally throw riders to the ground."

"This idea could change a lot of things about riding, Nauca. We could make a fortune selling your idea around."

"We won't sell my idea and we will keep it a trade secret just for us, Hiram." replied Nauca, her expression now most serious. "Yes, it greatly helps horse-riding but it would also make cavalry charges a lot more murderous. Imagine the kind of strength with which a cavalryman could now run his lance through another horseman or through a foot soldier. Such charges by a cavalry unit would spread panic through a body of infantrymen, breaking battle lines and making war even more bloody. As a disciple of Ahura Mazda, the God of Good, do you wish that to happen?"

Hiram was speechless for a moment, realizing that Nauca's argument was both logical and right. He then slowly shook his head.

"No! I do not wish to see such carnage be caused by this. But how will we keep this a secret? Every time that we will enter a caravanserai, the stable hands will notice those reinforced loops and will ask questions about them."

"Maybe we could fit pieces of cloth over them to hide them and claim that the cloth is meant to keep our legs warm while riding in Winter and to protect them from dust and mud in the Summer."

"Nauca, that's brilliant! So, what's next about this?"

"Could we stop here for an extra day, time to make similar foot rests for the rest of our riders?"

"For that? Hell yes! Uh, how do you want to call those new foot rests, Nauca?"

"Uh, I will have to think about that, Hiram."

"Maybe you should ask Babita about it? She seems to have a quick mind."

"Right!"

Iman stopped Tamat next to them at that moment and jumped to the ground, all excited. His excitement however turned to dismay, then to disappointment when Nauca told him of the decision they had just taken. However, being like Hiram a follower of

Zoroastrianism, he understood and accepted Nauca's reasons to want to keep this idea a secret. Still, he looked utterly dejected while shaking slowly his head.

"Such a great idea...to be hidden to all."

"Maybe circumstances will one day force us to reveal this new idea to someone else. Then, we will at the least be able to select who will first learn about it, my good Iman. If the Romans truly becomes too pushy north of the Pontus Euxinus, I just may pass my secret to my compatriots of the Roxolani Tribe and be part of the first line of cavalry to charge those damn Romans."

CHAPTER 8 – PATALIPUTRA



14:17 (Central Asia Time)

Friday, September 20, 61 B.C.E.

Main road following the western shore of the Ganges River

Two kilometers northwest of Pataliputra (modern-day Patna)

“PATALIPUTRA, AT LAST!”

The joyful shout from Hiram made the members of his caravan cheer as one as they eyed the vast walled city visible in the distance. Nauca was no less happy than the others and exchanged a grin with Timur, who was riding point with her.

“Nearly six months of travel since we left Samarkand: it will be nice to be able to finally take a week or two of rest before hitting the road again.”

“We certainly deserve such a break, Nauca, and so do our tired beasts. Still, we were lucky: we didn’t lose a single horse or camel during this trip.”

“True! When I was traveling with Yurkan’s caravan and heading towards China, we lost two horses in sandstorms while crossing the Taklamakan Desert. That is one place I definitely do not like.”

“The same here. That place is like Hell.”

An hour later, the caravan had reached the city and had entered it after paying the customary gate toll. Hiram was now looking for a decent caravanserai that could lodge his caravan and was trotting along a busy street when someone shouted out loud in Greek.

“HIRAM? HIRAM OF SAMARKAND? YOU FINALLY CAME TO PATALIPUTRA!”

Looking in the direction where the shout had come from, a surprised Hiram saw a bearded man wearing a turban who was nearly running towards him through the crowd of pedestrians.

“SAJITH SINGH? IS THAT YOU?”

“OF COURSE IT’S ME!” shouted back the man, who then reached him and looked up at him while grinning. “It’s been, what, two years since we met first in Urgench, my friend? What finally decided you to come to India and Pataliputra?”

“The Romans made me decide so, Sajith. On my last trip to Tanais, I found out that there was now a Roman garrison at that trading post. Unfortunately, that garrison and its commander had instituted new trade taxes, on top of the usual taxes levied by the local archon¹⁰, taxes that mostly erased the profits I was expected to make from my visit to Tanais. These Romans thus confirmed to me their vaunted greed. So, instead of going West for my next caravan, I decided to go South.”

“What?” exclaimed Singh in a falsely indignant tone. “You didn’t come to Pataliputra to visit me in my home?”

“Well, business is business.” replied Hiram, smiling, making Singh grin again.

“Now, that is an excuse I can understand and accept. I suppose that you are now looking for a decent caravanserai where you could lodge your people and your beasts?”

“I am! You know one such establishment?”

“If I know one? I own one and my brother runs it! We presently have plenty of place left and it also is next door to one of the biggest market and shops district in the city. If you will follow me, I will guide you to it.”

¹⁰ Archon : Old Greek title for a local governor or ruler.

Hiram eagerly followed Singh from then on as the local caravan master led him along a collection of streets. Singh couldn't help gawk at Nauca and at the other four girls who were part of the caravan and looked up at Hiram, who was still on his horse.

"You now have five girls with your caravan? Are you trying to form an Amazon troupe or what?"

Hiram chuckled at that before answering Singh.

"It's a bit of a complicated story but two of those new girls effectively fought with my Nauca in order to protect us from a group of bandits we encountered near Mathura. I will tell you all about that and much more at supper."

"Then, let's have that supper together at my own house, rather than at the caravanserai's inn. Bring your girls and your associates with you as well."

"Uh, is your house big enough to greet all of us, Sajith?"

"Let's say that business has been good to me for a few years already, Hiram. I will only have to warn my cooks to prepare for twenty or so extra guests. By the way, your Nauca has grown quite well during the past two years. I will have to warn my son Najib to watch where his hands will wander."

"Please do that, Sajith: Nauca is as fierce as before. She and two of my brother's caravan guards annihilated a Chinese cavalry column of more than thirty men sent after us by a renegade general who had taken over Khotan."

"Thirty Chinese soldiers?! Wow! She is a true Amazon alright! She will have to tell her story about that during supper."

"Oh, she has plenty more incredible stories to tell on top of that one, my friend."

Hiram then let it at that and mostly kept silent while Sajith guided his caravan to one of the largest caravanserais he had seen in his career as a caravan master. That caravanserai also proved to be well equipped and well run, with an inn that counted no less than sixty guest rooms built on two upper levels above a vast reception hall. It also had a bath and laundry house, a solidly built and guarded merchandise storage building and even had a brothel, which made many members of Hiram's caravan grin with anticipation. Before leaving him to return to his home, Sajith presented his brother Imran, who ran the caravanserai, to Hiram, enjoining Imran to treat Hiram and his associates as favored guests. He also promised to send his son Najib later on, so that he could guide Hiram's group to his house for supper. Once Sajith was gone, Hiram concentrated on unloading his beasts, storing away their precious bundles of merchandises and taking possession of the rooms assigned to his people. Deciding that

he wanted his people to look at their best when they would go to Sajith's house, he told his associates and guards to take a good bath and change into clean clothes after taking possession of their respective rooms.

When Nauca and the four other girls of the caravan went to the bath house, they did so as a group, hoping to find a separate bathing room reserved for women. They got a nasty surprise when they found out that the bath house had a single, large and shallow pool for everybody. When Nauca inquired about a separate pool for women, Imran Singh could only shrug his shoulders and give her an apologetic smile.

"I am sorry, lady, but we never had women with the caravans which visited my caravanserai, so this bath house was built only with male customers in mind. The only women who use that pool are the prostitutes invited in by my male guests."

Nauca sighed with discouragement on hearing that, then looked at her four female friends.

"Damn! I really wanted to take a good bath after this long trip."

Igrid, Talya, Amara and Babita exchanged looks before Igrid made a suggestion.

"The men of our caravan have proved themselves to be trustworthy up to date, Nauca. If they promise not to try to touch us, then I would be ready to bathe with them."

"Really? That would be like tempting the Devil, Igrid. What about Amara and Babita? They are so young."

When Amara replied to that, it was with a most sober expression on her young face.

"I have already seen and experienced the worst in men, Nauca, and I really want to take a good bath. I also trust our men to show respect to us."

"And what about you, Babita?"

"I am like Amara, Nauca: I already experience the worst in men. I say: let's bathe with the men of our caravan. Besides, they will probably have rented plenty of prostitutes to bathe with, so we won't be the only girls bathing naked with them."

"Talya?"

"I don't mind showing my body to our men, Nauca. Let's go bathe with them."

"Well, hopefully this will not turn into a giant orgy."

"Nauca, there will be prostitutes present." replied Igrid in a sarcastic tone. "It WILL turn into a giant orgy."

"I see that you all have adventurous minds, girls. Alright, let's go in and bathe!"

Like in many bathhouses she had previously visited, Nauca and her friends saw that bathers were required to first wash, scrub and rinse themselves in a separate room before entering the communal pool. They also saw that, as Babita had predicted, over a dozen prostitutes, all of them quite young and with a couple of them being early teenagers, had been 'invited' by the men of the caravan. Waiting in the lobby of the bath house while the men were scrubbing and washing themselves with the help of the prostitutes they had rented, Nauca and her four female friends then went in the washroom after the men had filed out to go into the communal pool. Undressing and leaving their clothes in the care of an old female servant, the five of them then eagerly washed off the dust and grime from their weeks of travel. They also took turns into scrubbing and washing each other's backs. Once clean, Nauca took a deep breath before leaving the washroom and going to the communal pool.

"There goes nothing, girls! Be ready for a lot of ogling."

"Pah!" said Igrid dismissively. "That's just part of the fun."

When the five of them walked inside the pool room, fully naked and with Nauca leading, all the men soaking in the pool with their rented prostitutes froze and stared at them with disbelieving looks, which turned quickly into pleased looks as the girls stepped into the pool. Seeing that the men stayed in their places and didn't wade towards them as they crouched down to their necks in the warm water, the five women and girls quickly relaxed and concentrated on enjoying their bath. Seeing that Askhat, their old cook, had not rented the services of a prostitute and seemed to take the whole scenery in stride, Amara, who had worked every day on the trail as his assistant cook, decided to go join him in his corner of the pool, where he stood alone.

"I'm going to keep company with Askhat, Nauca. He always treated me correctly and is like a father to me."

"Askhat is effectively a good, decent old man, Amara."

The old cook gently smiled when he saw the young Greek girl come to him and wrapped one arm around her shoulders as she snuggled herself next to him in the pool.

"Thank you for coming to me like this, Amara. Your confidence in me touches me, truly."

Amara looked up at the old Kazakh man while resting her head against his chest and passing her own right arm around his torso.

"You are worthy of my confidence, Askhat, and always was. You are a good man and deserves some company after this long trip."

The old cook swallowed hard on hearing those words, deeply touched by them.

"Amara, you are the daughter I would have liked to have. Unfortunately, my wife died years ago and my own sons have left a long time ago to go live their own lives."

"And you are like a father to me."

Askhat then kissed her on the top of her head, making her hug him even more tightly. Hiram, watching from his corner of the pool, nodded in approval at that scene and spoke to his associate Kasim, who was next to him along the edge of the pool.

"I am happy to see that Askhat and Amara are like this together. We are all friends of Askhat but he had been such a lonely man during the years he served with my caravan. He and Amara deserve each other."

Kasim nodded his head at that before throwing a discrete look at Nauca, whose firm breasts stuck out of the water.

"Nauca and the other girls have just shown how much they trust us, by coming to bathe naked like this with us. In a way, they just made us a great compliment, Hiram."

"True! I hope that all of our men will prove to be worthy of their trust."

"Well, they rented enough prostitutes to keep busy in the pool." replied Kasim, a grin on his lips.

There was quite a lot of 'action' in the pool as they soaked up for a good half hour while the prostitutes earned their pay. Out of a common accord, the five girls left the pool first to go dry themselves up and put on fresh, clean clothes they had brought with them, with Askhat being the only man to go out of the pool with them, accompanying Amara to the dressing room. When the rest of the men emerged from the bath house, clean and dressed, they saw that Nauca was now wearing her fine Punjabi ochre-colored embroidered silk ensemble of baggy pants and long side-split tunic, plus wore a very expensive-looking set of jewels, including a gold tiara inlaid with emeralds and rubies. She also wore at her belt a finely decorated and engraved dagger with a pommel made of a large lapis lazuli. Young Timur could only stare with admiration at her and her outfit.

"My, Nauca, you look like a queen!"

"Well, I am hoping to impress Sajith at supper time, so I took out the finest that I brought with me."

“You mean that you own something even nicer than this?”

Nauca nodded slowly once, now looking serious.

“These jewels were gifts from a king, Timur. I left in Samarkand another set of jewels that I received from an emperor.”

“Gifts from a king? Which king?”

“I prefer to keep that to myself, Timur. So, guys, are you ready to go visit Sajith’s house?”

“Let’s first wait for young Najib to come to the caravanserai. This city is one of the biggest ones I ever saw and it should be quite easy to lose yourself in it if we tried to simply follow some oral indications from Imran. Besides, it would be impolite to show up at Sajith’s house before he would be ready to receive us.”

“True! Then, we could all go have a cup of wine at the inn while waiting for Najib.”

“An excellent idea! TO THE INN!”

They had time to drink a single cup of wine each before young Najib showed up to guide them to his father’s house. When they got to it, some fifty meters away from the caravanserai, Hiram had to stop for a moment as he stared at the big stone building.

“Your father told me that business had been good to him in the last few years but he didn’t tell me that it had been THIS good to him, Najib.”

“Well, market for gems and precious stones has been very profitable for him lately.”

“Really? Me, Nauca and Xiao are actually looking for a good source of nice emeralds and rubies to buy.”

“Then, you are in luck, Hiram of Samarkand. My father recently acquired a stock of beautiful rubies from Arakan¹¹, which is reputed to be the source of the nicest and biggest rubies one can find. I am sure that he could make a special deal on them for you.”

Hiram grinned at that while rubbing his hands together.

“Excellent! A good meal and constructive trade deals: what more can a man hope for?”

“Nice women?” replied Najib in a sneaky tone, making Hiram smile to him.

¹¹ Arakan : Ancient name of the west coast region of Myanmar/Burma.

“Spoken like a typical young man. But you are right: nice women go well with good food and good deals.”

Najib did not reply to that, instead inviting Hiram and his people to follow him inside the two-story house, which could nearly qualify as a small palace. A head servant bowed deeply to Hiram when he entered the front lobby of the house.

“Welcome to Sajith Singh’s modest house, Hiram of Samarkand. If you will follow me, I will lead you to the banquet room.”

The fifteen men and five women and girls followed the servant down a hallway whose floor was made of marble, to finally enter a large room where large cushions and low tables were distributed along the walls, surrounding a small rectangular stone pond with a fountain in the center of it.

“Well, any less ‘modest’ than this and I would think that your master was a prince, or even a king.” said Hiram to the head servant, his words meant as a joking compliment. In response, the head servant bowed again while smiling.

“Here, in Pataliputra, being a good guest is paramount if one wants to succeed in business.”

“A most judicious rule, I must say.”

“Then, let me show you and your people to their places in this room. My master should be here any moment now.”

As promised by the head servant, Sajith Sing entered the banquet room with his wife as the last of the caravan members were shown their seats. Sajith then went at once to Hiram, who got up from his cushion to greet him.

“My good Hiram, I am so happy to be able to host you in my house. May I present to you my wife, Indira?”

Hiram bowed low to the still pretty woman in her forties standing next to Sajith.

“It is an honor to meet you, Lady Indira.”

“Please, just call me ‘Indira’: I am no royalty, after all.”

“As you wish, Indira. May I in turn present to you and your husband the members of my caravan?”

“Please do, Hiram of Samarkand.”

Starting with his head associate Kasim, Hiram then went around the room, presenting each of his associates and guards to Sajith and Indira. Both of them opened wide eyes when Nauca's turn to be presented came, impressed by her dress and jewels.

"By Krishna!" exclaimed Sajith while admiring Nauca's jewels and outfit. "I see that I was not the only one to whom caravan trading proved to be profitable. You have the beauty and appearance of a queen, Nauca."

"Those jewels you are wearing would in fact rival anything that the wife of King Bhumimitra has, young Nauca." added his wife.

"And I am wearing them to honor your invitation to your house, Indira." replied Nauca, careful not to reveal the origin of her jewels. Indira nodded her head at her reply, favorably impressed.

"I heard that you are a warrior of great valor, Nauca of Sarmatia. I am looking forward to hearing the stories of your exploits tonight."

Nauca understood then that refusing to tell her stories tonight would be considered like an insult by her hosts, something quite understandable in the present circumstances. She then sat back on her cushion as Hiram continued to present his remaining associates and guards to the couple.

Once the presentations were completed, Sajith Singh clapped his hands loudly, calling in his servants.

"LET START THIS SUPPER WITH SOME NICE WINE, MY FRIENDS."

Three male servants then entered the banquet room, each carrying a small amphora in their hands. They then went around the room, filling the cups of the guests before the cups for Sajith, Indira and Najib were filled. Sajith then raised his cup high.

"TO ALL CARAVAN MEN...AND WOMEN, WHO BRAVE LONG, HARD TRIPS IN ORDER TO BRING GOODS TO THE PEOPLE OF THE WORLD."

"TO CARAVAN MEN AND WOMEN!" replied in unison Hiram and his caravan members before taking a sip of wine from their cups. Following this, Sajith again clapped his hands together.

"LET THIS BANQUET BEGIN!"

This time, no less than eight male servants showed up, carrying a variety of large, covered silver service plates, which they distributed around the room, putting them down in front of the guests before removing their covers, revealing an appetizing variety of

meats and vegetables accompanied by rice. Two female servants then followed, distributing around round slices of flat bread.

"EAT AND ENJOY, MY FRIENDS!" said Sajith, giving the signal to his guests to start eating. Young Babita discreetly pointed a deep bowl filled with a reddish-brown sauce as Nauca was about to soak a piece of nan bread in it.

"Be careful with this sauce, Nauca: it is devilishly hot. If you don't like things that are too spicy, then I would counsel that you try that sauce to the right instead."

"Thanks for the warning, Babita. And you, do you like spicy things?" Babita's answer was to soak a piece of bread into the sauce she had just warned Nauca about and then eat it with a smile.

"I was raised on such spicy cuisine, Nauca." Just for curiosity's sake, Nauca then dipped a small tip of her bread into the hot sauce and tasted it. It didn't take more than a second before her eyes opened wide, while sweat broke out on her forehead and her tongue felt on fire, forcing her to gulp down some wine in a hurry.

"By Cybele! This sauce is like liquid fire! And you really like it, Babita?"

"I am eating it, aren't I?" replied the girl, amused. Nauca shook her head at that and prudently switched to the other type of sauce which, while quite spicy, was at least manageable for her tongue and throat. Despite that memorable first bite, the meal proved excellent and very tasty, attracting many compliments from the guests around the room and pleasing Sajith and his wife.

While the supper went on, Hiram and his associates exchanged tales of their travels with their hosts, with Nauca also contributing her stories to the discussion. The recounting of her various fights and battles, including the story of how she had avenged the murder of her whole family by marauders, impressed greatly both Sajith and Indira, who eyed her with renewed admiration and respect.

"You certainly bring pride to the legendary Amazons, young Nauca." said Indira. "You also lived quite an interesting life in those short few years. To be received and being gifted by the Chinese emperor himself is truly something to brag about."

"You know what impressed me most about Emperor Xuan, Indira? His care for his subjects, however low they are socially. I was told that he was raised as a commoner in his young age, after he was chased away from the imperial palace by a

usurper. When he was put on the throne, he never forgot his first modest years and showed both respect and care for all his subjects, something unheard of before.”

“That is something quite unusual indeed, Nauca. Here, in India, there is something in Hinduism that is called the caste system, which separates people by different social classes, starting at birth. Unfortunately, that caste system is a most rigid one and, in my opinion, also a cruel and exploitative one. Have you heard about it?”

“I have, Indira!” answered Nauca, her expression sober. “Young Babita here, who was born in Mathura, told me about it during our nights in our tent while we were traveling. To be frank, the Hindu caste system would be abhorrent to all my Sarmatian compatriots and not only to me. We Sarmatians consider everybody as equals, be they men or women, kings or simple hunters and cattle herders.”

Indira nodded her head in approval, then looked at eleven-year-old Babita.

“And in what caste were you born, little Babita?”

Indira didn’t miss the fact that Nauca stiffened on hearing that question. As for Babita, she touched Nauca’s forearm to signify to her that she was okay with that question, then looked soberly at their hostess.

“I was born in the Kshatriya¹² caste but was rejected recently by my family after bandits attacked and raped me while on a trip to a temple away from Mathura. I then joined this caravan, where I was welcomed with true love and care. I now consider Nauca like a big sister.”

Indira exchanged a stunned look with her husband before looking back at Babita.

“Your story is a most sad one but, thankfully, it ended well for you. Nauca, you are not only brave and fearless: you are also caring and compassionate, which only adds to your merit. May I ask you about the three other girls who accompany you?”

“You may, Indira. All three of them were initially enslaved by the Romans and sold as such in Tanais. When I heard about them, I bought their freedom and took them as companions for my trips. I am teaching Igrid and Talya to become good warriors and caravan guards, while little Amara has become our assistant cook. As I said before, Sarmatians relish freedom and I profoundly dislike this business of slavery.”

¹² Kshatriyas : Caste in the Hindu system that comprised rulers and warriors. It is the second-highest caste, while the Brahmin caste, comprising priests and scholars, is at the top of the system. Below the Kshatriyas are the Vaishyas, or merchant class, followed by the Sudras, which includes laborers, servants and peasants. At the bottom, excluded from that system, are the Dalit, or Untouchables.

This time, it was Sajith who commented on her answer.

“Decidedly, I wish that more people could be like you, Nauca. This World would then be a better one by far.”

“Thank you, Sajith. Now, to change subject, you may know that I am highly interested by two types of items for trade: gems and spices. Since this country has much of both, would you have tips or references which could be of interest to me or Hiram?”

“I can do better than that, Nauca: I could offer you both gems and spices I presently have in stock, and this at very competitive prices. I will be most happy to show them to you and Hiram tomorrow morning and discuss business together then.”

Hiram smiled widely on hearing that.

“I will certainly be here tomorrow to see your gems and spices, Sajith.”

“And what would you have to propose to me in exchange, my friend?”

“Gold and silver, lots of it! We have been selling off our goods, including horses and amber, while on our way to here and our purses are now quite fat as a result.”

“Gold and silver are always welcomed, friend. Talking of amber, I was due to leave in a couple of weeks to go to Samarkand and then Tanais, in order to buy and bring back amber, which is highly appreciated here and can't be found in this region. However, what you told me about greedy Romans being present in Tanais kind of discouraged me a bit about that project.”

To his surprise, it was Nauca who responded to that.

“There is a way to obtain top-quality amber from the Baltic region without having to pass by Tanais, Sajith. My own tribe often dealt with traders coming from the Baltic with loads of amber and I have heard a lot about that trade. Once back in Samarkand, I have in mind to trek towards the Northwest and the Baltic, where I could buy lots of amber at good prices by cutting away many layers of intermediaries along the Amber Road. Then, I would return to Samarkand and possibly to Pataliputra with that amber. There is however a new obstacle between us and Samarkand these days: the Sakas and the Kushans are at war south and southeast of Bactria and that war is threatening the caravan roads between here and Sogdiana. The one alternate route that we could possibly take is via the Karakoram Mountains. However, neither me nor Hiram ever used that road and don't know much about it, apart from the fact that it is a very tough and dangerous trip.”

“The Karakoram is indeed a tough place, my friend. Thankfully for you and Hiram, my caravan has traveled it a number of times while heading towards China and Sogdiana. Both of our caravans could thus cross the Karakoram Mountains if need be and go to Samarkand together.”

A big grin instantly appeared on Hiram’s face on hearing that.

“That is a marvelous idea, Sajith! I would be most happy to have my caravan join your caravan on such a trip.”

“Then, consider that as a firm offer, Hiram. We can discuss the details about it further tomorrow, along with you looking at my gems and spices. Now, let’s continue eating before our food grows cold.”

CHAPTER 9 – ON THE WAY BACK TO SAMARKAND



16:09 (Central Asia Time)

Sunday, September 22, 61 B.C.E.

Hiram's room, inn of the Singh's caravanserai

Pataliputra, Kanava Kingdom, India

Having had a long conversation with Sajith Singh meant to arrange for their joint trip to Samarkand, Hiram had called in his associates in order to brief them on the decisions taken jointly. He smiled to his eleven associate merchants while looking around his room, now quite full.

"My friends, me and Sajith have come to an agreement about our oncoming trip to Samarkand. Because the war between the Sakas and the Kushans is threatening a possible closure of the route passing by Bactria and the Pamir Mountains, we decided on a main and an alternate route for our joint caravans. The main route, if still open all the way to Samarkand, will basically see us retrace the route we took from Samarkand to Pataliputra. With a departure planned for two weeks from now, this would be a trip of about six months, along a road that we now know fairly well. However, if the Kushan-Saka War ends up cutting off that itinerary around Purushapura or beyond, then we will deviate from our main route at Taxila, where we will then go North and take the

Karakoram route. However, that alternate route will mean very difficult and dangerous travel conditions and would be very taxing on both riders and beasts. It would also lengthen our trip considerably and would add up to three more months to our traveling, which in turn means much higher travel costs in lodging, food and animal feed. We could also be hit by winter storms and avalanches and lose some of us. Let's not forget as well that our families are waiting in Samarkand for our return and would be gravely concerned by such a long delay over our expected period of arrival. For those reasons, Sajith and I decided that we will try to take the main route to Samarkand all the way and to take the alternate route through the Karakoram only if absolutely necessary. Let's thus pray that this Kushan-Saka war will be on hold when we will approach Purushapura."

Heraklion, one of Hiram's main associates, then raised a hand to ask a question.

"Hiram, you said that we are due to depart in two weeks, so that we could leave together with Sajith's caravan. Most of our planned business in Pataliputra has now been concluded and we only have the buying of fresh travel provisions left to do. What are we going to do in the meantime during those two weeks?"

"We rest while exploring further the opportunities available in this big city. Mithra knows how our beasts could also use some rest and recuperate fully from our long trip from Samarkand."

"Those extra days here will be welcomed by me, Hiram." said Nauca. "I have ordered some new equipment for my horse and it will take at least one week before it is ready. I also need to have some winter clothes made for little Babita, who has only clothes suitable for Spring and Summer."

"All good ways to occupy those two weeks of waiting here." said approvingly Hiram. "There are a number of very good artisans who have shops here in Pataliputra. Take the time to visit them and order or buy things that we can't find in Samarkand. We just don't know when we will return to this city, if ever, so profit fully from this occasion. Are there any other questions? No? Then, you may return to your various occupations, may they be buying things or profiting further from the services of the local women."

Collective laughter greeted that last joke from Hiram, with his associates then leaving his room to return to their individual businesses.

On her part, Nauca returned to her room in order to collect young Babita, so that she could use her as a translator while visiting a few shops in town. Dressed in travel

clothes rather than wearing her expensive Punjabi outfit, Nauca left the inn with Babita and walked out of the caravanserai, heading towards a blacksmith's shop specializing in the making of weapons and armor. That shop was fairly close to the caravanserai, thus it took her only minutes to arrive there, Babita at her side. On seeing her, the master blacksmith, a vigorous man named Rajiv, flashed a welcome grin at her and spoke in Greek to her.

"Aah, Nauca of Sarmatia! I have received from the leathermaker you hired the cut pieces of leather meant for your horse armor. I also acquired a good quantity of raw wool to be used as padding for that armor."

"That is good news, Rajiv. Do you still think that you will be able to finish producing that horse armor within a week?"

"Yes, easily! The longest time will be taken to make the pieces of rivetted iron chainmail armor meant to be fitted to the wool-padded leather backing of your new horse armor. Once completed, your horse will be basically impervious to arrows on its front and forward flanks, while retaining its full mobility. I agree with you that the long, armored coats used by the Sakas to protect their horses are both too heavy and too constricting, with their long flaps hindering their horses' leg movements. Your design you proposed to me is actually way superior to the Saka horse armor. Uh, would you object if I copied your design for my other customers?"

"I see no problems with that, Rajiv. It is not as if we would be unleashing a new sort of devastating weapon of some kind. Talking of weapons, do you think that your assistant smith could do something more for me?"

"We are not overly busy at the moment, so I could fully put my assistant at your service. What would you like him to make for you?"

"I would need two things to be made out of tempered Hinduwani steel, so that they could be as hard as possible. The first thing will be to make six lance points with hardened tips. If he could also fit them to long, solid lance poles, the better. I am not looking for long pikes of the kind the Greeks used, but rather lances of about 25 hand-widths in length with a strong wooden shaft. The blades should be triangular and with very sharp edges, for maximum penetrating power, and would have two side lugs on the socket to prevent the blade from sinking too deep in the target or for an animal to keep charging down my lance. I would also need their steel sockets to be long, in order to protect them against slashes from swords and axes."

"Such lance points should be fairly easy to produce, Nauca. What else will you need done?"

"Hardened steel arrow points by the dozen, as many as you could actually produce in no more than ten days. I want to be able for my arrows to penetrate a typical armored vest made of iron scales or chainmail. For that, I would prefer long but narrow and very pointy arrow points."

"I have already produced such kinds of armor-penetrating arrow points and have in fact a few in stock presently. Let me show you one, to see if it would fit your needs." Dropping his big hammer on top of his anvil, Rajiv then went to one of the wooden boxes lined up against one of the walls of his forge and fished out of it a steel arrow point, presenting it to Nauca.

"Would this kind of arrow point do the trick for you, Nauca? Its point has been hardened via tempering and it will be able to pierce easily all known torso armor." Taking the point presented by the blacksmith, Nauca examined it for a few seconds before nodding her head and giving it back to Rajiv.

"This will do just fine, Rajiv. I will want at least a hundred of them to be made, and this in no more than ten days."

"That is a tall order, Nauca, but we will do our best to fill it. Those points are however quite costly to make and I will have to charge one drachma per point, while each lance point will cost fifteen drachmas."

Nauca stayed impassive on hearing those numbers and opened her belt purse, extracting ten gold daric coins, which equated to 250 drachmas in Greek money, and giving them to the blacksmith.

"Here is an advance to cover much of the price of the various items I ordered. I will pay the rest on delivery."

The happy blacksmith promptly accepted the gold coins offered by Nauca and bowed low to her.

"Thank you, Nauca of Sarmatia. Your order will be filled in the delays you asked for, I promise."

"Then, I will return in ten days, Rajiv. Have a good day."

"And a good day to you as well, Nauca of Sarmatia."

As a satisfied Nauca walked out of the forge, young Babita looked up at her.

"Where are we going next, Nauca?"

“To a tailor shop, so that you could be fitted for winter clothes. If we have to pass by the Karakoram, then you will sorely need such clothes, including good winter boots and gloves. After that, I will visit a leathermaker, so that he could make leather lance holders for the lances I just ordered.”

“Oh! You really do think things in advance, Nauca.”

“I have to, Babita, because my survival may hinge on that. As they say, a bit of prevention is worth a ton of correction. Tomorrow morning, we will go see someone who is reputed to be a genius when it comes to crafting new things.”

“New things? What kind of new things?”

“You will see soon enough, Babita.”

08:11 (Central Asia Time)

Monday, September 23, 61 B.C.E.

Private workshop, Pataliputra

A thin man with graying hair and beard answered Nauca’s knocks on his door in the early morning. He was obviously of Chinese ethnicity and his eyes sparkled with intelligence. Nauca’s impression of him was at once positive and she bowed respectfully to the man, who in turn eyed her and Talya with curiosity.

“Are you the artisan named Liu Han?” asked Nauca in a friendly tone. She did not miss the way the man stiffened a bit at her pronouncing his name.

“Yes, I am! To what do I owe the visit of two pretty young women like you?”

“To your reputation as a man with a great imagination, Liu Han. My name is Nauca and my friend here is Talya. I am a Sarmatian, while Talya is from Dacia, west of the Pontus Euxinus.”

“You are a long way from your respective homes, Nauca and Talya.”

“Indeed, and the roads towards our native countries are both long and dangerous, which is why we came to see you. I need you to improve on a weapon used by Chinese soldiers, so that my friend Talya could better defend herself.”

“Then, come inside my modest shop, so that we could discuss this in private.”

“Thank you!”

Once they were inside, the Chinese man locked back his door and invited his two visitors to follow him into an adjacent room where a joyful disorder reigned, with tools of

many kinds intermixed with piles of various materials and dozens of rolled parchments. Liu Han gave an apologetic smile to Nauca as she looked around the room.

"Please excuse the disorder in my workshop, young lady: my imagination is greater than my sense of orderliness."

"No need to excuse yourself, Liu Han: it is your imagination which I want to use today. Have you heard about Chinese crossbows before?"

"Of course! They are an important part of the Imperial Army's arsenal and I was called many times in the past to repair or even make new ones. I also dabbled with various mechanical devices and even designed a couple of new astronomical instruments for imperial officials."

"Then, why did you exile yourself from China if you were such a talented artisan, if I may ask?"

Nauca's question brought some bitterness on the old man's face but he answered her after a short hesitation.

"Because an imperial official stole the credit for one of my inventions and tried to silence me through the use of assassins when I tried to protest the theft of my patent. Since that official had powerful connections in the capital, I was forced to flee in order to escape his assassins."

"A sad story and one of a great injustice committed, I must say. However, since I must leave Pataliputra in less than two weeks, I will now go to the reason we came for." Nauca then took a large jute bag that Talya had been carrying and opened it, then took out two crossbows and a bow and put them down side by side on a table.

"As you can see, those two crossbows are quite different from each other, Liu Han. The one on the left is a Chinese crossbow I acquired in China, while the one on the right is an old Greek gastraphetes crossbow of the kind the soldiers of the celebrated Alexander of Macedonia used. I found that gastraphetes in the city of Bactra, one of the old regional capitals of Alexander's empire. It has a few interesting features but does have a few drawbacks to its design, like the Chinese crossbow does. Now, I personally use a composite recurved bow like the one on the table rather than a crossbow and have been practicing archery for most of my life. However, my friend Talya did not start practicing archery until less than a few months ago and is still a raw beginner by my standards. She is presently using this Chinese crossbow instead of a bow because of its ease of use and accuracy with beginners, and so do many of the merchants in the caravan I am part of. What I am looking for is a way to improve on this Chinese

crossbow, to both make it steadier while aiming and thus improve further its accuracy and to also increase its effective range. Another weakness of the Chinese crossbow, from my point of view, is that it is nearly impossible to reload while you are sitting atop a horse, as you typically have to sit down on the ground in order to pull its string. I brought this gastraphetes because it uses a different way to pull its string into place. I also brought this spare composite bow I got in Bactriana. One of the things I don't like about the Chinese crossbow is its short string pull, making it less effective than it could be compared to a bow. Do you think that you could devise a way to make an improved weapon out of this composite bow by using it like a crossbow, a bit like the gastraphetes, but that would be possible to load while on a horse?"

"Hum, an interesting challenge, I must say. Let me think for a minute."

After a moment of thinking while looking at the three weapons lying on his table, the Chinese inventor looked at Nauca.

"Could you show me the way you presently use to load each of those two crossbows?"

"Of course! Talya, pull the string of your crossbow, please."

The Dacian girl, quite robust and strong for a girl of fourteen thanks to her incessant riding and exercising, grabbed the Chinese crossbow and sat on the floor, her legs extended forward. She then put both of her feet against the interior faces of the limbs, to which extremities the string was attached, and grabbed with both hands the string before straightening her back towards a prone position while pulling hard on the string, until it engaged in the rolling notch of the crossbow's mechanism. As she got back up, Nauca thanked her before grabbing the Greek gastraphetes and resting it to the vertical, the long pole sticking out of its front pole pressed against the floor. Then, she pressed her belly against the curved butt of the weapon and leaned on it, bringing it to its loaded position. Liu Han nodded his head slowly after the two demonstrations.



Han Dynasty crossbow

Greek gastraphetes crossbow and loading mode

Composite bow

"I see what you meant about those two weapons being impossible to reload while on a horse. However, your demonstrations, especially with that Greek gastraphetes, was useful in bringing a few ideas to me about correcting their deficiencies. Concerning a way to reload them while on a horse, adding a stirrup should make it possible to reload from the saddle. As for..."

"Wait! What was that word you just used?" asked Nauca, looking stunned.

"A stirrup! It is a loop in which you insert your foot in order to hang on to a rope while you are pulled up by others via a winch. They are often used on construction sites to lift workers up scaffolds. Why do you ask?"

"Uh, nothing! I just never heard that word before. But continue about those ideas of yours."

While still wondering about her reaction to the word 'stirrup', Liu Han went on with exposing his ideas.

"I could also add a proper shoulder butt, so that it would be easier to hold the weapon steady while aiming the crossbow. Finally, that method of loading used by the gastraphetes gave me a further idea: by using simultaneously the muscles of both the legs and of the back, rather than simply the muscles of both arms, one could easily pull much harder on the string, thus augmenting its power."

"So, could you produce quickly a new weapon, using this composite bow and the mechanism from the Chinese crossbow? If yes, could you then produce quickly more such new weapons within days, if I provided you with more spare composite bows and Chinese crossbows?"

The old inventor thought for a few seconds before answering Nauca.

"With the ideas I just got and the parts you are providing me, building a prototype weapon would take me no more than two days. As for building copies of it, if you could provide to me both a composite bow and a Chinese crossbow as parts for each new weapon, then I could build each new weapon in a day or two, once the new design is finalized."

"Excellent! And how much would you ask for your prototype and for each copy afterwards?"

"Since designing the prototype and finetuning it properly will be the hardest part, I will ask for fifty drachmas for it, while each copy afterwards will cost twenty drachmas, if you provide the parts I will need for them."

The inventor held his breath, hoping that this customer would not prove to be a stingy one. He may be a great inventor but he knew that he could not compete in the haggling department against a merchant. Liu Han thus discretely let out a sigh of relief when Nauca took fifty drachmas in silver coins from her belt purse and put them on the table.

"Here is the payment for you to produce the first new weapon. I will come back tomorrow afternoon, to see how you are doing. If your new weapon truly works up to my expectations, then I may just talk to my associates and make them delay our planned departure date in order to give you time to produce a number of copies."

"I will do my very best, Nauca of Sarmatia."

"Then, I will leave you in peace, so you can start working on this new weapon. If something happens, or if you finish the work faster than expected, then you can come to see me at the caravanserai of the Singh brothers. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes!" replied the inventor while grinning. "I arrived from China on their caravan, some three years ago."

"Excellent! Then, see you tomorrow, Liu Han."

His two visitors then left the house to return to the caravanserai. As they walked together, Talya gave a questioning look to Nauca.

"Why did you react like this to this word 'stirrup', Nauca?"

"Because I just found a name for what we were calling 'feet loops' up to now, Talya."

11:05 (Central Asia Time)

Tuesday, September 24, 61 B.C.E.

Singh brothers' caravanserai, Pataliputra

Nauca had just finished brushing and feeding her two horses and was walking back to the inn with Talya when she saw Liu Han enter the courtyard of the caravanserai, a large bag on his back and a big smile on his face.

"No! Don't tell me that he has already completed his new crossbow!"

Walking quickly to meet him in the middle of the courtyard, Nauca gave the Chinese old man a disbelieving look on seeing that an object the shape of a crossbow was in the bag he was carrying.

"You've already finished it? How is this possible?"

“By using the most important principle in mechanical design: simplicity! Instead of building a new crossbow, I simply added slightly modified pieces from the Greek gastraphetes to the Chinese crossbow, replaced the original bow on it with the longer, more powerful composite bow you left me and added a stirrup at its front end. The last touch needed was then to add two small iron posts at the front and rear in order to ease aiming and here it was: a better crossbow that can be reloaded while on horseback. You want to see it?”

“Of course I want to see it, Liu, but not here. Let’s go to the guarded storage house: we will have privacy there. Talya, could you go get Hiram discreetly and bring him to the storage house? He may be interested in this.”

“I’m on my way!” replied the Dacian girl before walking quickly towards the inn. Nauca then led Liu Han to the storage house, where the two armed guards provided by Sajith Singh let her and the Chinese man in. Once inside and alone, Liu took his new crossbow out of the jute bag and handed it to Nauca, who examined it with intense interest. It was really the Chinese crossbow she had given him, with parts added to it and with the bow part now replaced by the composite bow she had left him. The whole thing was disarmingly simple, yet looked like an effective weapon. As she examined it, Liu explained to her how it worked differently from its original shape.

“The main thing I did was to add this iron stirrup at the front, which is loosely attached via a long pin that allows it to pivot down in order to serve as a forward grip once loaded, so that your hand is not in the way of the arrow when you shoot it. To reload the crossbow, you need to use this.”

Liu presented to Nauca a sort of iron forked hook attached to a long, solid leather strap forming a loop.

“When operating this crossbow, you carry this hook by its strap slung across your torso. When time to reload comes, you put one foot in the stirrup and catch the hook on the bow string, then use the muscles of both your leg and back to cock it, until the string engages in the notched nut. I added a safety lever that prevents the nut from being released when the crossbow is carried cocked and loaded, to avoid accidents. Go ahead: arm your crossbow.”

Nauca did as he had told and found out that the strength needed to arm the weapon was quite manageable and was greatly helped by the use of the forked hook. Raising the crossbow to a level position, she took the arrow presented to her by Liu and put it in place against the string, where it was held by the notched nut mechanism. Liu then

made her grab with her left hand the front stirrup, which had pivoted down by itself when she had leveled the weapon, thanks to its strong but loose retaining pin. With the new butt of the crossbow pressed against her right shoulder and her two hands holding the weapon in a safe manner, Nauca aimed it at one of the wooden beams which were part of the back wall of the storage house, finding out that the two small posts added by Liu made aiming dead easy. Aiming at a large knot visible in the wooden beam, some twenty meters away, she slowly pressed the trigger, the way that she had been shown to do while in China. The arrow then flew out at a velocity that surprised her and that was visibly at least as fast as when she shot an arrow with her composite bow. Her arrow actually hit a bit higher than the knot she had been aiming at.

“Damn! I will need to get the hang of this new weapon and of its sights.”

“Now that you know how to aim it, you only need to adjust your sight picture. Here, I brought a number of extra arrows. Reload your weapon and try again.”

Nauca was about to reload her new crossbow when Talya entered the storage house with Hiram and Kasim. Nauca smiled to them and showed them Liu’s crossbow.

“We may now have a new and interesting weapon to defend ourselves from thieves, my friend. Watch me as I reload this new crossbow and shoot it.”

Talya and the two merchants watched her with intense interest, paying attention to the way she cocked her crossbow and then aimed it. The speed at which the arrow flew out, burying itself in the wood beam with a loud **‘THONK’** right in the middle of the knot in the beam, made them open their eyes wide. Nauca then shot a third arrow, which hit less than a finger’s thickness from the second arrow. Turning around and smiling to her three companions, she handed the weapon to Talya.

“My goal in having this new crossbow produced was to give us a powerful and accurate weapon that could be reloaded while on horseback. I believe that Liu Han, here, came out with a great design that we should procure in enough quantities to arm all of our people. We will now see how Talya does with this new crossbow.”

Nauca then closely directed Talya as she loaded the crossbow and leveled it, giving her directives on how to align the two sight posts while aiming. Talya’s arrow actually hit the wood beam close to the two last arrows shot by Nauca, making the Dacian girl shout out in triumph.

“YES! I LOVE THIS!”

“Pass your crossbow to Hiram, Talya. Let’s see what a mere merchant can do with it.”

Hiram pulled his tongue out at Nauca as he took the crossbow, making the others laugh briefly. Loading it and then shooting it, Hiram stared happily at his arrow, stuck in the beam and very close to the knot in the wood.

“By Mithra! This thing is dead easy to shoot and it appears to be very powerful. I like it!”

“Then, I would propose that we delay a bit our departure, so that Liu Han has the time to produce more of those new crossbows. We will however need to give him some of the composite bows we picked up near Purushapura, as they will constitute a vital part of the new crossbows.”

“Well, I believe that giving them to your man here instead of selling them will be more than worth it. How much will you ask for each of those crossbows and how long will you need to make them?”

“I already discussed their price with Nauca and we agreed on a price of twenty drachmas per crossbow, conditional on you providing the composite bows and Chinese crossbows needed for their construction. Since it is a fairly simple thing to build, I can produce about one new crossbow per day. How many would you need to be done?”

Hiram exchanged looks with Kasim and Nauca before answering Liu.

“Let’s go for a total of fifteen more crossbows for the moment. You may even get more orders from Sajith Singh once he sees this.”

“Uh, let’s try to stay discreet about this, Hiram.” cautioned at once Nauca. “We don’t want everyone in and around India to learn about this new type of crossbow.”

“Another trade secret, Nauca?” said Hiram, making Liu Han look at him and Nauca with some confusion.

“Another trade secret? What do you mean by that?”

“I will explain that later, once we will have brought the Chinese crossbows and spare bow needed to build new crossbows to your workshop.” answered Nauca while patting his shoulder.

08:18 (Central Asia Time)

Monday, October 13, 61 B.C.E.

Courtyard of the Singh’s’ caravanserai, Pataliputra

“FORWARD TO SAMARKAND!”

On the command of Hiram, who rode side-by-side with Sajith Singh, the long line of horses and camels of their two combined caravans started trotting out of the caravanserai, cheered on by the families of the men of Sajith’s caravan and by the workers and servants of the caravanserai. Apart from the men and women from the respective caravans, the column of beasts included as well two new camels and one new person: Liu Han. Hiram, seeing his immense potential value as an expert artisan and also wanting to protect the secret of his new crossbow design, which was now dubbed as the ‘Indian crossbow’, had decided to entice the Chinese inventor into moving to Samarkand on a permanent basis, using lots of gold to convince him to leave Pataliputra. Liu’s house and workshop had then been emptied, its content minus the furniture packed on a camel, and the house sold in a matter of days. Nauca was happy that Hiram had made that decision, believing it to be a smart move, especially in the long run. The fact that he was going to go live in a new place much further from China and from Chinese assassins had also helped convince the inventor to move to Samarkand. The 42 horses and 61 camels of the combined caravans soon trotted out of Pataliputra via one of its western gates, starting its long trek towards distant Samarkand.

CHAPTER 10 – MATHURA AGAIN

15:50 (Central Asia Time)

Friday, November 28, 61 B.C.E.

Near the eastern gates of Mathura

Indo-Greek Kingdom, Northern India

Sajith Singh was about to lead the caravan into the city of Mathura when he noticed that Nauca, Igrid, Talya and Babita had broken away from the long column of horses and camels and were now trotting down a side road which followed the external side of the city walls. Surprised, he threw a look at Hiram, who was riding next to him.

“Hey! Where are they going? Aren’t they going to enter the city with us?”

“No, because they can’t, Sajith: young Babita promised to her family that she would never reenter Mathura after leaving it with my caravan. Nauca and her group will go establish a camp outside the walls of the city, near its western gates, and will wait for us to leave Mathura before joining back with us.”

Sajith, who had heard Babita’s sad story from Hiram, watched the women and girls trot away before shaking slowly his head.

“To reject his own daughter because she was raped by bandits... That governor has neither shame nor honor. I hope that young Babita will live a good life in the years to come.”

“She won’t be neglected, Sajith, that I promise you. Nauca is treating her like her little sister, while I find her services as a translator and assistant accountant most valuable. People who can read, write and count are too rare around to be wasted. Besides, that girl has a heart of gold and has proved to be quite tough, even though she is not very strong physically, even for a girl of her age. She was barely able to stretch and load one of our new crossbows when I made her try it.”

“Talking about those new ‘Indian’ crossbows, they are truly great weapons. Before, I had my own caravan guards, plus a couple of my camel drivers, who knew how to shoot a bow accurately. Now, all of my men can shoot an attacker at up to fifty paces or more, something that tremendously improves the safety of my caravan. I must thank you again for sharing their secret with me, my friend.”

"What are friends for, if not for helping and defending each other?" replied in a philosophical tone Hiram before going through the city gate with Sajith.

Trotting along the walls of Mathura, Nauca saw that Babita was silently crying while riding next to her. Bending sideways, she gently patted the shoulder of the teenage girl while speaking softly to her.

"There is no need for you to cry, Babita: your family was at fault, not you."

"I know and that's what is hurting me: their selfishness and lack of care. Now that I am with you and the other girls, I know what true care and kindness are. It took that tragedy with those bandits to show me how my father considered me simply as a possession to trade away for more power and money. In contrast, the men of our caravan have been treating me with respect and genuine care. Just look at how Amara is treated by our cook like his own daughter. Now, that's true fatherly love."

"Indeed! Askhat may be illiterate but he is a good, decent man. By the way, I noticed that you and Liu Han are now good friends. I am happy, for both of you."

Babita, her tears having dried up, nodded slowly her head.

"I like his mind, which is truly out of the ordinary, and I feel comfortable discussing complex ideas with him around the campfire. He has also started to teach me Chinese."

"Has he? Now, that's something that could prove very useful to you in the future...and to this caravan as well. Good interpreters are always useful to have around on long trips."

"And I like my job with Hiram's caravan. It is certainly a hard life physically but it is also a most stimulating life: there are so many new things to see and learn along the trail."

"And that is why I love my life as a nomad, Babita."

A day later, time for the caravan to buy fresh food and animal feed supplies in Mathura, their group reunited with Sajith and Hiram and continued on towards the Northwest and Indraprastha. However, as the caravan was going through the same forest where Babita had been taken by bandits, Nauca decided to go check with her and Igrid the forest clearing where the bodies of Babita's escort and suite had been dumped by the bandits. She expected those bodies to have been gathered and given proper funerals, as promised by Babita's father but, instead, found hundreds of human bones

still littering the clearing, with some skeletons having obviously been dismembered by predators. That sight, while it horrified Babita, made Nauca utterly furious.

"That fucking governor didn't even bother to send his soldiers to retrieve the bodies of his own guards and servants. What a piece of shit he is!"

"What do we do now with those remains, Nauca?" asked Igrid as she also eyed the bones scattered around, her expression hard.

"Unfortunately we will have to leave them here: those bodies certainly attracted many wild animals and some could..."

A ferocious growl coming from her left then interrupted her and made all three of them pivot around to see what kind of beast had approached them. Babita's eyes opened wide with fear at the sight of a big feral feline with a resplendent orange, white and black striped coat which was now slowly advancing on them.

"A TIGER!"

Nauca, who had never seen a tiger before, understood at once that this could be a very dangerous animal for her and her companion and lowered at once her long Kontos lance, pointing it at the beast.

"BABITA, STAY BEHIND ME! WE ARE GOING TO SLOWLY BACK OUT OF THE FOREST AND JOIN BACK THE CARAVAN."

"BUT THAT TIGER IS LIABLE TO FOLLOW US AND THEN ATTACK THE CARAVAN, NAUCA."

Nauca was mentally agreeing with Babita when the tiger pushed a fierce and terrifying growl and jumped at her, demonstrating impressive strength and agility. If she had been armed with her bow or had taken out her sword, she would probably have been killed by the beast before it could be killed but her decision to enter the forest with her lance actually saved her life and that of her companions. Fighting her fear, she stood her ground and planted the butt end of her lance in the grass while raising its point in order to meet the tiger's charge. The long, wide blade made of tempered Hinduwani steel penetrated the beast at the base of its throat, sinking a good fifty centimeters inside the tiger before the side lugs of the lance stopped it from penetrating further. Despite being mortally wounded, the tiger's momentum and mass was enough to push Nauca backward and make her trip and fall on her back. She however managed, barely, to keep a grip with both hands on her lance, preventing the beast from landing directly on top of her. Her heart now beating furiously, she watched as the tiger took its last breath

before becoming still. Babita promptly helped her go back on her feet as Igrid cautiously probed the animal with her sword.

"It's dead! That beast was utterly terrifying, I must say."

"It certainly was, Igrid. Now that I can detail it at leisure, it is also a magnificent beast. Its coat must be a prized one around here."

"It is, Nauca." replied Babita while staring at the dead animal. "Few hunters can brag about having killed a tiger, while many peasants and travelers have been killed and eaten by them. Its hide is definitely worth keeping."

"Then, I will start skinning it on the spot while Igrid will escort you back to the caravan. Then come back with Gorudos and Timur, so that they could help me: that beast looks quite heavy."

"Alright, Babita, follow me and stay close to me." said Igrid before leaving the clearing with the teenager. Taking out her hunting knife, Nauca paused for a moment while admiring the dead tiger: it was certainly a magnificent animal, but it also had been a very dangerous predator. If she would not have killed it, she probably would be in the process of being eaten alive right now. Nauca repressed a shiver at that thought before starting her skinning job.

When Igrid returned two minutes later, she was accompanied by Gorudos, Timur, Hiram and Sajith. Looking first at the dead tiger being skinned by Nauca, Hiram then looked with growing horror and anger at the bones lying all around the clearing.

"That damn governor never had the bodies of his own servants and guards recovered? What kind of man would do this?"

"A man without honor or shame." replied grimly Sajith while also looking around the clearing. "Unfortunately, if these corpses attracted one tiger to this clearing, then more predators may show up, or already did. Staying here for any length of time would be very dangerous."

Sajith then approached the dead tiger to admire it from up close.

"A really nice beast that you killed here, Nauca."

"A nice beast? I nearly became its lunch, Sajith!"

"It is still a nice beast...once it is dead. You will now have quite a trophy with this hide."

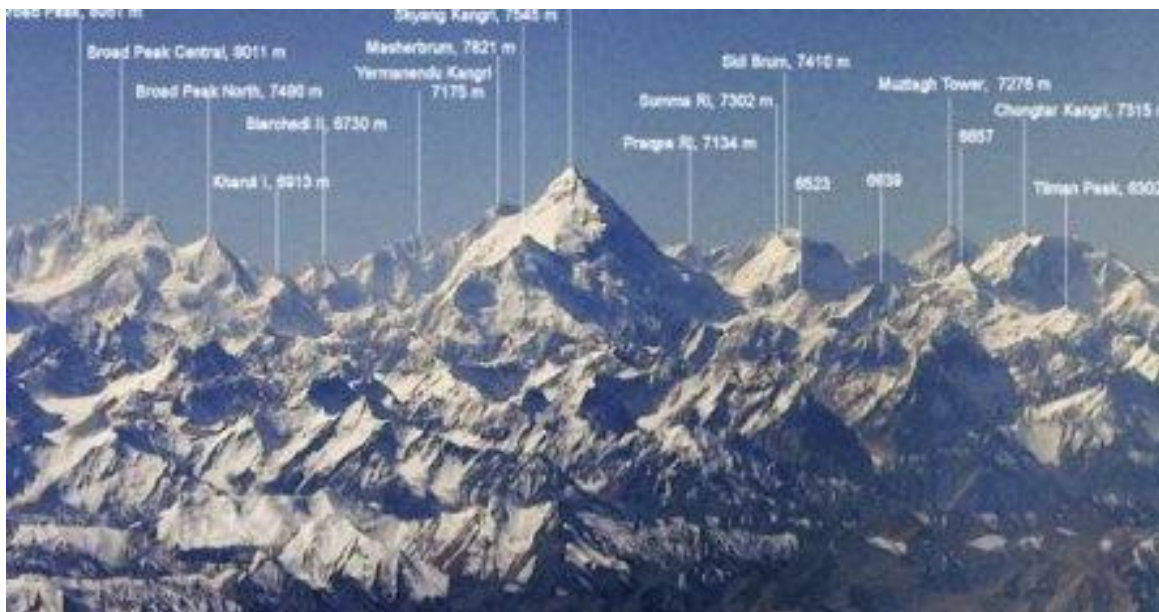
"I will certainly keep it as such, Sajith. I don't think that anybody west of Samarkand has ever seen a tiger before."

"I can vouch for that, Nauca." replied Hiram. "This will make for a most memorable trophy for you and will signal you as a great hunter and warrior."

"I can live with that!" said Nauca, a big grin appearing on her face.

The caravan resumed its trek one hour later, once Nauca had finished skinning the dead tiger and had scrapped its inside surface with the help of Gorudos and Timur. While Babita appeared to feel better once they were out of that forest, Hiram saw that she was still traumatized by the discovery that her nanny's body and those of her escort had been abandoned to wild beasts by her own father. Hiram thus promised himself to be extra caring to her in the days to come. He also promised himself to never again make trade with Mathura as long as that governor Vishnumitra would be ruling it.

CHAPTER 11 – KARAKORAM OR HINDU-KUSH?



Karakoram Mountains.

19:10 (Central Asia Time)

Friday, January 9, 60 B.C.E.

Inn of the Taxila caravanserai

Taxila, Indo-Scythian Kingdom

Both Hiram and Sajith drank their wine quietly, their minds preoccupied by the news that they had gleaned up to date after their arrival in Taxila. Everybody was talking about hard fighting happening to the Northwest around the Khyber Pass region between the Kushans and the Sakas, who were wrestling for control of that vital area. One indicator of the seriousness of that fighting was the fact that over half of the usual Saka garrison of Taxila had gone to Purushapura to reinforce the Saka lines holding the Khyber Pass. There were also rumors that Saka reinforcements were about to arrive from the South to help push the Kushans away. Overall, the prospects for using the usual caravan road through the Khyber and Bactriana were not good. The innkeeper had also told them about a caravan from Samarkand which had recently been caught in the fighting, decimated and then looted, something that had further darkened the prospects of the combined caravans Hiram and Sajith led. They were now waiting for the innkeeper to bring to their table the lone survivor from that looted caravan and were

hoping that the man would be able to tell them more about what was happening around the Khyber Pass. Hiram tensed up when he saw the innkeeper make his way to their table, followed by a man half hidden behind him.

"Here is the innkeeper, bringing that survivor, Sajith."

Sajith, twisting his neck to look behind him, then decided to switch places at the table and sat next to Hiram, so that this caravan survivor could talk to both of them face-to-face. Hiram's face suddenly reflected shock and dismay when the man following the innkeeper got closer to their table. Shooting up from his bench, he quickly went around the table and gently touched the left shoulder of the man, who had his right arm in an improvised sling and also had a long gash across his left cheek.

"Poros, my poor Poros! I am truly pained to see you in such an awful state. Please, sit down at my table."

As the said Poros sat down, Hiram threw a gold piece to the innkeeper.

"Bring a cup and a pitcher of your best wine for my friend Poros... And thank you for bringing him to me."

Hiram then sat back next to Sajith, facing Poros from across the table and speaking to him.

"Poros, this is Sajith Singh, a caravan master from Pataliputra. While I was in Pataliputra, Sajith and I agreed to travel to Samarkand together, so that we could have bigger numbers with us and thus better safety. Sajith, this is Poros, a caravan master from Samarkand who is also an old friend of mine."

Poros nodded his head at Sajith instead of exchanging a forearm shake, since his wounds still appeared painful. His voice and tone were those of a broken man.

"I...I wish that I would have met you in better times, Sajith Singh. However, I cannot call myself a caravan master anymore: I lost my caravan, my men and my goods and am now stuck here, nearly penniless and with no way to go back home."

Hiram then hurried to reply to that.

"Please don't say that, my friend. We can bring you back to your home in Samarkand, where you will be able to reunite with your family."

Poros lowered his head, while tears came out of his eyes at those words.

"That is most generous of you, Hiram, and I thank you for that. However, I still lost the sixteen men who had been traveling with me, good men and great merchants who also were my friends."

"Can you tell us what exactly happened to your caravan, Poros?"

Poros nodded once and swallowed hard before starting to speak in a subdued voice.

“I can! I was leading my caravan through the Khyber Pass and was maybe three days away from Purushapura, with my final destination being Pataliputra, when we encountered a squadron of Saka mounted scouts. Those Saka scouts then accused us of being spies sent by the Kushans but I suspect that they were only looking for an excuse to loot my caravan. I strongly denied those accusations but those Sakas ignored me and attacked us. We defended ourselves as best we could but we were no match for both their numbers and their armors and weapons. I myself was seriously wounded before I could escape. I then went around Purushapura, avoiding it because the Saka soldiers there were in a frenzy and were acting very aggressively, and managed to eventually arrive here, in Taxila, where local healers treated me the best they could. By then, however, I was nearly penniless and without the means to return to Samarkand.”

“When did that attack on your caravan occur, Poros?” asked Sajith.

“About a month ago. Since then, no caravan has been able to go through the Khyber Pass either way, while caravans heading west have been turned away by the Sakas in Purushapura. Unfortunately, those caravans who were rerouted then went South, instead of North. That is why I am still stuck here, surviving only thanks to the generosity of local merchants whom I know.”

“You will no longer be stuck here, my friend.” replied Hiram softly. “Once we will have replenished our supplies for the rest of our trip, we will then head to Samarkand via the Karakoram and Kashgar and we will take you with us. We are all part of the fraternity of caravan men and we will always support each other in difficult times.”

Those words attracted fresh tears on the cheek of the dispossessed caravan master, prompting Hiram to get up and go gently hug him while being careful not to touch his wounded arm.

“Tomorrow, I will get a horse and some travel equipment and clothes for you, my friend. Sajith has already led his caravan through the Karakoram a few times in the past, so he knows the way well and I am confident that we will get safely to Samarkand. From now on, consider yourself as one of my associate merchants and a member of my caravan.”

“Me, an associate merchant? But I have nothing left to trade with. In truth, I will be a ruined man, even if I return safely to Samarkand. I have no horses or camels left and no merchandises to trade, while my warehouse in Samarkand is presently empty.”

"All that can be corrected, my poor Poros. The important thing is that your family will not have lost you. As long as there is life, there is hope."

"Thank you, Hiram! You are a real friend."

Hiram was about to say something more to Poros when he felt that persons were gathering in his back. Alarmed, he pivoted around but then calmed down when he saw that it was Nauca and his other associates, who had left their nearby tables to approach him. All of them wore sober expressions as Kasim, Hiram's principal associate, spoke.

"Hiram, we heard the story given by your friend Poros and we would also like to help him."

"That is most kind of you to say this, Kasim. How do you propose to help him?"

"In a simple but most effective way, Hiram." replied Kasim before stepping forward next to the table. He then took his belt purse and poured dozens of gold and silver coins on the table in front of Poros, who could only look on with disbelief. Nauca was next to come forward, adding five rubies to the coins before letting another associate of Hiram come forward. All twelve of Hiram's associates ended up putting either coins or gems in front of Poros. They were then followed by Sajith and his thirteen associates, who also put money and valuables on the table. Hiram was last, putting on the table his large belt purse, which was only one-third full.

"Here! You will need a purse to carry all this, my friend."

The poor Poros then broke down and cried without shame at the view of the small mound of gold, silver and gems now resting on the table in front of him, next to Hiram's purse.

"Thank you, thank you, all of you!"

"It was the least we could do for a caravan brother." replied Sajith. "You will now be able to return to Samarkand and to rebuild your caravan business there."

"Well, this calls for a fresh round of drinks, I believe." said Nauca before shouting to the Inn's maid.

"Bring us three fresh pitchers of wine, girl! It's on me!"

The caravan men collectively cheered at that and sat back to wait for the extra wine. Once everybody was served, Hiram raised his cup high.

"TO ALL THE CARAVAN MEN IN THE WORLD!"

"TO CARAVAN MEN!"

The other customers of the inn then joined in, warming further Poros' heart and bringing fresh tears on.

07:55 (Central Asia Time)

Sunday, January 11, 60 B.C.E.

Taxila caravanserai's compound

Poros, mounted on the horse bought for him by the merchants of the combined Hiram-Sajith caravan, felt both renewed hope and humbleness as he trotted out of the caravanserai as part of the long column of horses and camels. They had even provided him with an axe and a knife as new weapons for him. As they exited through the northern gate of Taxila, Poros did his best not to throw a dark look at the Saka soldiers guarding it. The memory of his now dead associates was still painful in his mind and it was very hard for him not to hate every Saka soldier he met. However, showing hostility to them now could only attract trouble to his fellow caravan men who had proved so generous to him. Still, he felt much better once the caravan and himself trotted away from the city.

10:03 (Central Asia Time)

Tuesday, March 4, 60 B.C.E.

Karakoram Road, nine kilometers east of the village of Chilas

Near the border between the Indo-Scythian and Indo-Greek Kingdoms



Gilgit River near Karakoram Mountains.

The travel from Taxila had up to now been fairly easy, as the caravan was following a dirt road running alongside the Indus River, which flowed down a relatively flat valley. It had left the small village of Chilas in the early morning and was now heading for Gilgit, an important stop along the Karakoram Road situated at the foot of the Karakoram Mountains. Nauca, riding next to one of the caravan guards employed by Sajith Singh, was conversing with the man as they rode up a trail following the Gilgit River.

“The present weather kind of surprises me by its mildness, Sirhan. From what I had heard about the Karakoram, I was expecting much worse.”

Her remark made the young man smile in amusement.

"Aah, but you should wait until we are at higher altitudes, among the mountains, Nauca. There, the climate is much colder and the winds and storms much more violent. Also, we are lucky in that we are not traveling during the coldest months of the year. Once we will have passed Gilgit, then you will start to feel the cold."

"Well, it is not that I was fearing much the local climate. After all, Winters can be quite cold on the steppes of Sarmatia and... Wait! I see something ahead." Concentrating her attention ahead, like Sirhan, she spoke up after a few seconds.

"I see what looks furiously like a group of soldiers manning some kind of road checkpoint. They are wearing a lot of metal on them. Did you encounter soldiers here before on past trips?"

"No, but my last trip up this road was nearly two years ago and the last Saka soldiers were posted in Dasu, far behind us. However, I know that the Sakas have been steadily pushing out the borders of their territories during the last few years. They may have pushed north as far as here, throwing back the soldiers of King Hippostratus in the process."

"Saka soldiers, again!" said Nauca. "If they try to loot this caravan, like they did to the caravan of poor Poros, then they will regret it. Stay here, while I go warn Sajith and Hiram."

Making her horse Tamat pivot around and then pushing it to a gallop, Nauca got to the two caravan masters in less than a minute and stopped her horse once level with them.

"There are soldiers ahead, probably Sakas. There are about thirty or forty of them and they seem to be manning some kind of road checkpoint. They also have tents set up to one side of the road."

Hiram's face hardened at that news.

"Sakas! What tells us that they will be less greedy or arrogant than the ones who massacred the members of Poros' caravan?"

"Nothing!" replied Nauca. "We should be ready to defend ourselves resolutely if those soldiers try to loot our caravan."

"Agreed!" said Sajith. "The integrity of caravan trade should be defended. I will tell my men to prepare discretely their weapons."

"And I will tell my men to cock and load their crossbows." added Hiram before making his horse pivot in order to go down the line of riders. On her part, Nauca galloped back to Sirhan and stopped next to him.

"The word is to defend ourselves if those soldiers try to rob the caravan. We will wait for Hiram or Sajith's command to start fighting but prepare your weapons now."

"Bow or sword?"

"Since we are riding point, we will be right on top of these assholes when they will stop our caravan to check it, thus a close quarters weapon will be preferable for us."

"Right! My sword was getting rusty anyway."

"And my Kontos lance is screaming for new blood since I killed that tiger near Mathura. We will not fight without a reason but I won't mind teaching good manners to some of those arrogant Sakas and repay them for what they did to Poros' caravan."

Nauca then grabbed one of the two lances she carried in a leather tube attached to her saddle and put its butt inside the holder fixed to one side of her right-side stirrup. Holding her lance to the vertical with her right hand, like cavalrymen did while parading around, she then pushed her horse to a trot, with Sirhan riding next to her on the trail. The duo soon arrived at the checkpoint and was able to confirm that the soldiers were indeed Sakas. While most of them were heavily armored infantrymen, two of them, probably officers, were mounted on horses protected by armored skirts made of iron plates fixed to a leather backing. Their overall attitude did nothing to reassure Nauca.

"Those assholes look way too arrogant to my taste, Sirhan. I bet that there will be a fight soon."

"I love to teach lessons to bullies. I am ready as soon as Sajith gives the go to defend ourselves."

With Nauca and Sirhan stopping just short of the soldiers manning the checkpoint, Hiram, Sajith and Poros then trotted forward to join them, while the rest of the caravan stopped a short distance behind them. One of the Saka officers trotted forward on his horse to meet the caravan masters and spoke in Sanskrit to them.

"Who are you and where are you going?"

"We are merchants and are on our way to Samarkand. We request free passage for our caravan." answered Sirhan, since Nauca didn't speak Sanskrit.

"Not before you pay a toll to us."

"We already paid tolls at every city we passed by on our way to here." protested Sajith in Sanskrit. While Hiram did not understand his words, his angry tone was enough to understand what was being said. In response, the Saka officer threw a severe look at Sajith.

"Our kingdom is at war and needs extra treasury to finance it. We decide what tolls are justified, not you. MEN, SEARCH THEIR BAGGAGES!"

Six of the armored infantrymen then came forward towards the caravan riders while holding shields and javelins. The first of them went to Poros and started undoing one of the straps holding the flap of his left-side saddlebag, intent on searching that bag. That was when Poros could not contain himself anymore. Grabbing his battle-axe, he swung it down while screaming with rage, splitting in two the man's head with a mighty blow. Seeing that, Hiram then shouted as loud as he could in Sogdian, which everyone in the caravan understood.

"DEFEND YOURSELVES!"

Surprised by this sudden development, the Saka soldiers took a critical second to react. That was enough time for young Sirhan to draw his sword and run the nearest soldier through his throat. As for Nauca, she quickly reversed her grip on her lance and, adding her left hand to grip it with both hands, plunged her lance tip down the collar of another soldier, reaching his heart and killing him nearly instantly. Pulling out her lance in a flash, she then pushed her horse to a gallop while holding her Kontos with both hands over her right side, pointing it at the officer who had stayed behind the first officer. Screaming a savage war cry, she charged that Saka officer and skewered him with her lance as he was starting to take out his sword. The stirrups attached to Nauca's saddle helped her by steadying her in the saddle and also helped her absorb the shock of the encounter. The Saka officer, who did not have stirrups to help him stay in the saddle, flew backward off his horse and slammed down hard on the ground. Continuing her charge, Nauca made her lance pivot as she passed by her dying opponent, pointing it at a new target, this time a Saka infantryman. The man tried to stop her lance by holding his wooden shield in front of him while raising his javelin but Naucas's lance went clean through his shield before skewering the man's torso despite his armored vest. This time, her Kontos stayed stuck in the man's body, so she let it go and grabbed her battle-axe, charging yet another Saka infantryman.

The rest of the Saka soldiers didn't fare better, suddenly finding themselves the targets of six bows and fourteen crossbows. The leading Saka officer was pierced by one arrow from Igrid's bow plus two arrows from the crossbows of Talya and of Askhat. Grimacing with pain and wobbling on his saddle, he was then killed by a ferocious slash from Hiram's sword. With over half of their numbers killed or severely wounded within a

few seconds, the surviving Saka soldiers broke out in panic and tried to flee. 'Tried' was the operative word, as the archers within the caravan kept firing at them, shooting them down in quick succession. The last surviving Saka soldier got his head cut off cleanly by a swing of the battle-axe held by a hard-charging Nauca. Not seeing any other Saka soldier left standing or running, she stopped her horse and quickly looked around the battlefield. Seeing one wounded Saka soldier who was trying to get up, she first went to retrieve her lance and then ran it through the man, downing him for the count. Sajith, who had himself killed one soldier with his battle-axe, grinned and shouted in triumph after making sure that none of his people had been hurt.

"THE FIELD IS OURS! LET'S CHECK OUT THOSE SAKA BASTARDS! KILL THE WOUNDED ONES AND LOOT THE LOT OF THEM!"

Poros and the other members of the caravan did not have to be told twice, getting off their horses or camels and then checking out every Saka soldier lying around, while Amara and Babita helped by holding the reins of the unattended horses and camels.

"DON'T FORGET TO RECUPERATE THEIR WEAPONS, PARTICULARLY THEIR BOWS. THEY CAN BE RESOLD FOR A GOOD PRICE." shouted Hiram as he himself checked out the dead soldiers. Nauca grinned at Sirhan on hearing that.

"The good old game of 'stealing from the thieves', hey, Sirhan?"

"It's a game to my liking, Nauca." replied the young man as he cut off the purse carried by one of the dead soldiers.

After a few minutes, and with about everything of value grabbed by the caravan people, Sajith then had the dead soldiers' bodies carried away from the road and the river and dumped some distance away, behind a group of large boulders. Poros was returning to his horse after helping carry away a dead soldier when Hiram approached him, a wooden coffer in his hands.

"Talya found this in the tent occupied by those Saka officers. It seems that they have been 'taxing' quite a few travelers before we came. This coffer is now yours as a repayment for what the Sakas inflicted on your caravan."

Accepting the coffer from Hiram and opening it, Poros looked with disbelief at the hundreds of silver and gold coins contained in it before looking back at Hiram.

"But this should rightfully be split among all of us, Hiram."

Hiram shook his head in response, his expression dead serious.

“Sajith and me believe that you are the most in need and that you could use that money to distribute it in Samarkand to the families of your murdered associates, who are now without a bread-winner. Take this coffer, my friend, and make good use of its content.”

Poros didn't know what to say for a moment, then put the coffer on the ground before sharing an emotional hug with Hiram.

“Hiram, you are indeed a friend and a generous man.”

“Compassionate, not generous!” replied Hiram, a smile on his lips. “A good merchant can't be generous, or he will quickly get bankrupt.”

CHAPTER 12 – REUNITING WITH LOVED ONES

16:11 (Central Asia Time)

Thursday, June 19, 60 B.C.E.

**Caravanserai of Hiram and Yurkan
Samarkand, Sogdiana**

Having returned from the market, where she had bought some fresh meat and vegetables, Seda had her daughter Dinkha help by washing and then cutting some of the vegetables, while she herself rubbed the meat with some spices and salt. As she finished doing that, she stopped for a moment while contemplating the quantity of food she was preparing: it was more than sufficient for herself, her daughter Dinkha and her son Jakand. However, she had not calculated a portion for her husband Hiram, who had now been gone for over fourteen months and whose return was now well overdue. She had to close her eyes for a moment as worrying speculations reentered her mind again. As the wife of a caravan master, she was supposed to expect and endure long separations from her husband but she found those separations harder and harder to support. Her two children were also affected by those long absences but on a lesser degree than her. Her case was far from being isolated, as many of the associate merchants and camel drivers of her husband's caravan also had families which were sorely missing their loved ones. What worried most by far Seda and the other wives of Hiram's caravan members was however the thought, no, the possibility, that they would never return. A sudden, violent storm could have stricken the caravan, or bandits could have attacked it, killing all its members, or some war could have engulfed it, wiping it out. Such nightmare scenarios had happened to other caravans in the past and, as a city which lived mostly from the caravan trade, the people of Samarkand were well aware of how fragile that trade was. That had led to a level of communal solidarity that was quite rare for such a large city, with the people of Samarkand often contributing aid to stricken



families of caravans which had been hit by some disaster during trips to faraway lands. Seda nearly felt sick at the thought that she and her children could possibly need such communal help in the months to come. In fact, a few passing merchants and caravans had recently brought news of a resurgence in fighting between the Sakas and the Kushans along the road Hiram's caravan had to use, something that had only reinforced Seda's fears concerning Hiram. Unfortunately, she could do nothing about that but hope and wait.

Seda was absentmindedly filling an iron pot with water so that she could put it on the fire of her kitchen and boil it before adding the cut meat and vegetables, when Dinkha came running and screaming in the kitchen, nearly making Seda let go her pot of water.

"THEY ARE BACK, MOTHER! FATHER IS BACK!"

Forgetting at once her cooking and putting down the half-filled pot, Seda then followed her daughter outside at a run. Her heart jumped in her chest when she saw Hiram, at the head of his caravan, riding into the compound of their caravanserai. A bearded man with brown skin whom she didn't know was also riding alongside Hiram. However, Seda ignored that man and ran to meet her husband in the middle of the courtyard while shouting.

"HIRAM! HIRAM, YOU ARE FINALLY BACK!"

Making first his horse sidestep a bit, so that it would not block the rest of the caravan from entering the courtyard, Hiram then jumped on the ground and met his wife with open arms. The two of them then hugged and kissed each other for a long moment, soon joined by Dinkha and Jakand.

"By Ahura Mazda, it is so nice to be home again." said Hiram while still hugging his wife and two children. "I am sorry if my lateness made you worry about me but I had to use a longer route in order to avoid major fighting along my normal return route. However, we are all safe and sound and have done some good trading along the way."

Seda had tears on her cheek as she looked into her husband's eyes and as she caressed his cheeks.

"I was so afraid for you, Hiram. The other wives of the caravan were also afraid about your fate."

"My associates will be able to go meet and reassure their families as soon as we will have unloaded our beasts. In fact, why don't we send Dinkha and Jakand to go around and pass the good news to the families of my men?"

"An excellent idea, Hiram. DINKHA, JAKAND, YOU HEARD YOUR FATHER: GO INFORM THE FAMILIES OF OUR MERCHANTS THAT THE CARAVAN IS SAFELY BACK."

The girl and the boy immediately ran out of the courtyard to obey their parents, leaving Seda alone in the arms of Hiram. She tightly hugged him again, savoring this moment to the fullest, then looked at the caravan as it entered the courtyard in single file.

"Hey, I see a man and a girl that I didn't see before. And why is Poros with your caravan instead of with his own caravan?"

Hiram's expression changed then and he answered her in a soft voice.

"The old Chinese man and the Indian girl joined my caravan after we met them in India. As for poor Poros, he lost his caravan and his men to a band of looting Saka soldiers. Other Saka soldiers tried to loot my caravan but we defended ourselves and killed those soldiers. I am afraid that the route to India via Bactriana will be closed by fighting for many months to come."

"Well, the important thing is that you are safely back with all your people, Hiram."

"And I promise you that I will take a break from traveling for at least a couple of months, while I sell the goods I brought back with me. I will now have to organize our arrival and unloading but we will make it quick. Could you add three extra persons for supper at our table? I would like to invite the master of the caravan which jointly traveled with us, plus the Chinese man and Indian girl I picked up in India. There will be lots of new projects to organize here in Samarkand and I won't travel again before everything is well started up."

"Take all the time you need to do that, my dear husband." replied Seda while smiling and patting Hiram's chest. "Now, go take care of your caravan while I go prepare supper for you and your guests. After supper, I will help you take a good bath...with me."

"I can hardly wait for that, my lovely Seda."

Both of them then regretfully separated, Hiram going to the stables while Seda returned into their house to continue preparing supper.

The wives and children of the members of Hiram's caravan then started arriving from their respective homes, causing more tearful, happy reunions. Sajith Singh looked on with a smile as he stood next to Nauca.

"That is by far the best moment of a caravan trip, I must say. And you, Nauca? Is your family here in Samarkand?"

Nauca slowly shook her head in response.

"My whole family was killed by bandits years ago, in Sarmatia. Also, I am not married and don't intend to marry for many years to come. Having children would put a serious obstacle to my traveling, so I prefer to stay single for the moment. Maybe, when I get older and less physically able to travel, will I marry."

Sajith nodded once at that.

"And when you do, the man you will marry will be a happy man indeed. Did I tell you that my son Najib has a thing for you?"

"I noticed, Sajith." said Nauca, smiling. "He is a nice boy but, unfortunately for him, my future plans don't involve men in them."

"A sad waste, I must say." replied jokingly Sajith before going to check on the unloading of his caravan. On her part, Nauca went to unload her own horses and camels, which carried a fortune's worth in bags full of various spices. The rest of her fortune, consisting of gems, was on her, in a small bag hanging between her breasts and inside a leather money belt wrapped around her waist. She may presently be down to only a few hundred drachmas' worth in silver and gold coins, carried in her belt purse, but that would soon change once she started selling her gems and her spices to merchants and traders in Samarkand.

Her next task was to go meet with Liu Han and Babita, who didn't know where to go after their arrival. As an official associate of Hiram, Nauca was able to secure rooms for them at the inn of the caravanserai and also helped Liu to store away his precious tools and manuscripts. Her last task before going to have supper at the inn was to give her horses and camels a good brushing and give them water and hay. Both Timur, Gorudos and Sirhan accompanied her to the inn to eat supper with her. The first bite of the beef stew served that evening by the inn made her close her eyes in delight.

"Hmm! This is such a nice change from our usual travel diet of salted fish and dried and smoked meat."

"Don't say that to Askhat." replied a smiling Gorudos. "He would be liable to chase after you with his kitchen knife."

"Really? Look at how he is presently barfing down his own portion of stew." The three men sitting at her table twisted their necks to look at the old caravan cook, who was eating stew with young Amara, then smiled back at Nauca.

"True this time, Nauca, but you must recognize that Askhat can make miracles with very little."

"I will concede that, Gorudos."

"I wonder where we will go next, now that the road through Bactriana is closed by fighting, while the Romans in Tanais are discouraging trade there because of their excessive taxes." said Timur between spoonfuls of his stew. Nauca, who had been thinking about that for many days now while traveling, spoke after a short moment.

"I had an idea while we were crossing the Karakoram. Seeing how much in demand amber is in India and in China, I am in mind of going myself to get lots of amber...directly at its source, on the Baltic Coast. By acquiring amber there, I will cut many levels of intermediaries and will be able to buy it dirt cheap before returning and selling it, either in Samarkand or in China or India. However, that would not be a trip for a whole caravan and would be more easily done by a small group of riders. Amber is very light, thus a couple of simple pack horses would be more than sufficient to bring back plenty of amber."

"But you would have to travel through lots of unknown territories occupied by barbaric tribes. You could get attacked by bandits at every turn." Nauca threw a sarcastic look at Timur as she replied to that.

"And we were not attacked by bandits or by soldiers on our last trip, Timur? By the way, one of those 'barbaric tribes' happens to be my own tribe: the Roxolani of Sarmatia. Such a trip to the Northwest would actually allow me to visit my own people on the way, something I would truly like to do."

As Timur smarted from his verbal gaffe, Gorudos eyed Nauca with some concern.

"You are not going to travel alone, I hope? I would personally like to go with you but Hiram needs me and Timur to keep his caravan safe from bandits."

"I won't be alone, if Igrid and Talya accept to come with me. Igrid is from the Germanic tribe of the Bastarnae, which happens to be situated to the west of my own Sarmatia, so I am pretty sure that Igrid would love to come with me. As for Talya, she is a Dacian, a people living directly south of the territory of the Bastarnae. Together, the

three of us will be able to travel quickly and discretely while staying away from nests of bandits and robbers.”

“That could work, I suppose.” recognized Gorudos, thoughtful. “And when would you leave on such a trip westward?”

“As soon as I sell most of my spices and gems and after talking with Hiram about it. The amber I would bring back from the Baltic region would actually make an excellent trading merchandise for him to go sell in either China or India.”

“Hum! You do think of everything, do you, Nauca?”

“I do my best to prevent trouble, unless I am actively looking for trouble, my dear Gorudos.” said Nauca with a grin.

After finishing her supper, Nauca excused herself with Gorudos and Timur and went to sit at the table occupied by Igrid and Talya, who were sipping from cups of wine.

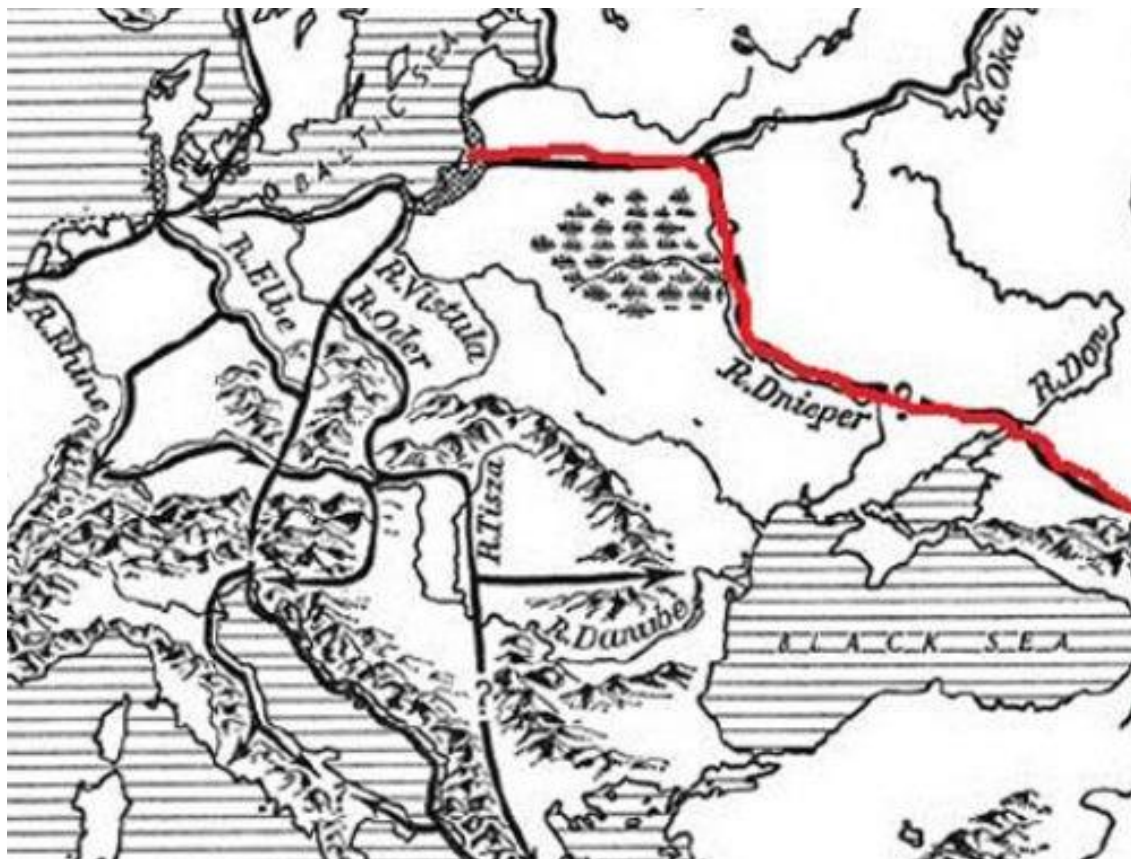
“High, girls! Do you mind if I sit and discuss something with you?”

“Go right ahead, Nauca.” replied Igrid, a most pretty sixteen-year-old blonde with an athletic body and who was as tall as Nauca. Sitting down facing Igrid and being next to Talya, who was now fifteen and had brown hair and gray eyes and was nearly as tall as her, Nauca then started speaking to them while keeping her voice low.

“How would you two like to accompany me on a trip to the Baltic region, via the steppes and forests to the Northwest of Tanais? I am planning to go get plenty of amber directly at its source, where it is the cheapest to buy.”

The instant smiles her proposal made appear on the faces of the two teenagers were plenty as an answer from them.

CHAPTER 13 – ON TO THE AMBER ROAD



07:45 (Central Asia Time)

Friday, July 4, 60 B.C.E.

Courtyard of Hiram and Yurkan's caravanserai

Samarkand, Sogdiana

Both Hiram and his wife Seda hugged Nauca emotionally as she was about to mount her horse. Then, Gorudos, Timur and many others lined up to do the same and wish her a safe trip. Feeling a pinch in her heart at having to leave her friends for months, Nauca then got on her horse and urged it forward, followed by Igrid and Talya. Together, they were leaving with a total of six horses: three riding horses and three pack horses, including Nauca's loyal Minad. Apart from their camping equipment and tent, the pack horses were loaded with food provisions, plus small bags of spices and other items meant for trade. Once at the Baltic coast, bags full of amber would replace the empty bags of rice and wheat for the trip back to Samarkand. Twelve-year-old Amara,

standing next to old Askhat in the crowd of onlookers, had tears on her cheeks as she watched the trio trot out of the courtyard. The old cook noticed that and gently caressed her head.

“There is no need to cry, Amara: they will come back to Samarkand.”

“Will they, Askhat? The Germanic tribes which live around the Baltic have a terrifying reputation as violent, bloodthirsty barbarians. Even if they return safely from there, their trip may take close to a year. I owe everything to Nauca and she is like a big sister to me.”

“Going away for long months is the life of caravan merchants, Amara. You lived it yourself, so should be able to accept that our friends leave like this. We ourselves may well leave on a long trip well before they are back from the Baltic. As for those Germanic barbarians, don’t forget that Igrid herself was one of them before being enslaved by the Romans and then bought and freed by Nauca. Her knowledge of their language and customs will certainly help Nauca avoid trouble during their trip.”

“You are right, Askhat, but it still hurts to see them go.”

“I also hurt to see them go, Amara, and I understand your pain. Now, we have to continue to live while waiting for their return. I am sure that they will return and their horses will then probably be loaded down with amber, lots of amber.”

The passage of the three armed and armored young women riding proudly on their horses while holding their lances to the vertical attracted quite a lot of attention and also cheering among the passersby and inhabitants of Samarkand. The trio then left the city by one of its western gates and took the road to Bukhara, 300 kilometers and ten days away. Since they did not have camels with them to slow them down, they could have covered that distance much faster but Nauca had decided that they didn’t want to push or tire their horses for no reasons. After all, she expected their trip to the Baltic to take around five to six months or more, so there was no sense in burning up their mounts right from the start. Also, since she didn’t want to overload her horses with tons of food supplies, Nauca was planning to hunt and fish along the way, so that they could live off the land during their trip. As for how to deal with the Germanic barbarians they will encounter, she was counting a lot on Igrid in that aspect to smoothen things out. While she was not worried about the weather conditions and topography they would encounter, bandits, marauders and warring tribes were definitely on her mind. In fact, they were the main preoccupation of all caravan merchants engaged on long trips.

Unfortunately, she could not simply wish them away and would have to deal with them as she went.

With the road they were following being alongside a small tributary of the Oxus River¹³ and with plenty of grass and vegetation around it, there was plenty to feed and hydrate their horses on the way to Bukhara, a major trading center of the region, like Samarkand. Also, with a constant flow of merchants, travelers and caravans using the road, which was well patrolled by Tocharian soldiers, security worries were minimal and the portion of trip to Bukhara went well and the trio reached the city in the five days they had calculated. Staying overnight there, Nauca's small group then left, heading for their next planned stop: Urgench, just south of the Oxus Sea¹⁴ and situated along the Oxus River.

15:38 (Central Asia Time)

Thursday, July 17, 60 B.C.E.

Amachios' caravanserai, Urgench

Sogdiana

"Amachios, you old rascal! You're still fat!"

The caravanserai master painted false outrage on his face in reply to Nauca, who had just entered the courtyard of his establishment with Igrid and Talya.

"And you're still bad mannered, Nauca. However, I may not stay fat for very long, the way the caravan trade to Tanais is drying up. Everybody is pestering about the greed of the Romans stationed in Tanais, with the new Roman taxes making the trip to there largely unprofitable."

"Maybe the smaller trickle of merchants coming to Tanais will give a clue to those damn Romans and make them lower their taxes?"

Amachios scoffed at that notion.

"The Romans, lowering their taxes? You are dreaming, young Nauca! But come down from your horse, so that I could hug you, you crazy Sarmatian girl."

¹³ Oxus River : Ancient name of the Amu Darya River.

¹⁴ Oxus Sea : Ancient name of the Sea of Aral.

Nauca obliged and jumped down from Tamat before exchanging a hug with the caravanserai master, who then looked at the two teenage girls still on their horses.

"You're forming a new Amazon army, Nauca? Who are your two young friends?"

"They are Igrid and Talya and are traveling westward with me to my native Sarmatia. Igrid was originally from the Germanic tribe of the Bastarnae, while Talya was from Dacia. Both were enslaved after their tribes revolted against the Romans and lost. I in turn bought their freedom and they are now good friends of mine who just completed a trip to India and back with Hiram's caravan."

"To India, eh? You will have to tell me all about it tonight, in front of a good cup of wine. But let me first provide stalls for your horses and a room for the three of you. Then, my wife will serve you a nice chicken stew for supper."

"That sounds wonderful, Amachios. Do you presently have many travelers in your inn?"

"Only a few, unfortunately. As I told you, the trade between here and Tanais has gone down quite a lot during the last year. One of my present customers just arrived from Tanais yesterday with his family and has only one thing to say about it: don't go there!"

"Oh?! I will definitely want to speak with that traveler at supper time."

"Then, I will inform him of your wish to speak with him. He is Greek and was a merchant in Tanais until the Romans convinced him to leave because of their greed and heavy-handedness."

"Damned Romans! May Cybele¹⁵ curse them all!" said Nauca, nearly spitting her words, before following Amachios to the stables while holding the reins of both of her horses.

After unloading their horses and then having stable boys brush, feed and water them, Nauca, Igrid and Talya brought their valuable objects, including their saddles with hidden stirrups, up to the room of the inn assigned to them. There, they took quick sponge baths and changed into clean clothes before going down to the great hall of the inn for supper. As Nauca was stepping inside the hall, she abruptly stopped and stared with disbelieving eyes at a family of five sitting and eating at one of the tables.

¹⁵ Cybele : Goddess of rocks, wild animals and birds of prey in the Sarmatian pantheon.

"Polonius, is that you?"

"Nauca?" said in turn the man with graying hair eating with his wife, daughter and two sons. Nauca then quickly walked to their table and hugged the man, who had stood up from his bench to greet her.

"Polonius! By Mithra! What are you doing here? Don't you have a horse corral to take care of in Tanais?"

"Not anymore, Nauca." replied in a resigned tone the Greek man. "Three months ago, the commander of the Roman garrison in Tanais decided that he needed horses to mount some of his troops. He then came to see me but, instead of buying those horses from me, he simply requisitioned them in the name of Rome and never paid me a single drachma for my horses. That effectively bankrupted me. I tried to lodge a protest with the local Archon but he proved as helpless as me when dealing with Romans. Since nothing assured me that this Roman bastard would not again steal my horses if I tried to rebuild my commerce, I decided to leave Tanais for good and to go reestablish myself in Samarkand. My brother Thanos helped me by providing rooms for us until we could depart for Samarkand."

"Were you able to save some of your horses from Roman seizure?"

"I only have eight horses with me, all that is left of my corral business. Since I had to pay my local debts before leaving, I now have little money left with me and don't know how I will sustain my family once in Samarkand."

Nauca felt sad on seeing the discouragement on the face of Polonius. She then patted gently his shoulder while speaking to him softly.

"Don't worry about that, Polonius: you still have friends in this World, including me. You once helped me in my time of grief and I will now be more than happy to repay your kindness. Let's sit down and have supper together. By the way, those two girls are my friends, Igrid and Talya."

Polonius exchanged forearm shakes with the two teenage girls before presenting his family to them.

"Let me now present to you my wife Cilicia, my sons Arkadius and Sisyphus and my daughter Elena. Boys, let's squeeze ourselves a bit to let Nauca and her friends to sit down at our table for supper."

Soon, all eight of them were sitting at that single table, with Nauca then ordering supper and wine for her group, adding an extra pitcher of wine for Polonius' family. As

the pitchers of wine were brought to their table, Nauca asked a question to the horse trader.

“And your brother Thanos and his family? How are they doing in Tanais?”

“Not very well, I’m afraid. Generally, the Roman presence in town is proving to be like a poison for business and commerce in general. Thanos has been particularly hard hit by the diminishing number of caravans now stopping in Tanais. He will probably have to sell his caravanserai within a year or two, unless something drastic happens in Tanais in the meantime.”

Nauca did not have to ask what that hypothetical ‘drastic’ event meant in Polonius’ mind. Only the departure of that Roman presence in Tanais would make things right again at the exchange post. However, the chances of that ever happening were slim to none. She then risked another question, trying to sound non-specific about it.

“And his family? I hope that they were not harmed or abused by the Romans?”

The way Polonius gave her a discrete look told Nauca that he probably knew by now about her past sexual relationship with Artemisia, Thanos’ daughter. His actual answer said lots to Nauca.

“My brother actually had to send away his daughter Artemisia, fearing that the Romans could force themselves on her one night. I could tell you more about that later, in private.”

“Alright: I will wait.”

When time came to pay for the supper, Nauca insisted on paying for the family’s meal. Despite his personal pride, Polonius protested only once before letting her pay, realizing too well that he would need every drachma he still had once in Samarkand. However, Nauca was not finished on that subject and took a tiny leather purse from her belt purse, putting it down on the table in front of Polonius.

“Polonius, you once showed me both generosity and compassion when I showed up at your corral in Tanais after losing my whole family to marauders. You sheltered me and supported me before helping me to establish myself at your brother’s caravanserai, where I spent three years before leaving with a caravan and starting a new life. It is now my turn to help you and I am most happy to do it, my friend. When you will arrive in Samarkand, go to the caravanserai belonging to Hiram and Yurkan’s family and tell them that I sent you and that I will take care of the cost of lodging and feeding your family, and

this out of the funds I keep there. I also want you to accept this, so that you could rebuild your horse business there.”

Polonius hesitated for a moment, watched by his wife and three children, before he took the small purse and opened it. Five beautiful rubies then rolled on the table, making Cilicia and her children hold their breaths as they stared at the gems. Tears came to Polonius’ eyes as he gave a haggard look to Nauca.

“I...I can’t accept such an incredible gift, Nauca.”

“Yes, you can...as a friend of mine. Please take them: I have plenty more with me and in Samarkand.”

She then sealed her words with a solid forearm shake with Polonius, followed by an emotional hug.

21:14 (Central Asia Time)

Courtyard of Amachios’ caravanserai

Urgench

When Nauca met Polonius again, the Greek horse trader led her on a slow walk around the courtyard of the caravanserai, careful to keep his voice very low while he spoke to her.

“About Artemisia, my brother eventually learned through the indiscretion of a young slave girl that she had an intimate relationship with you. Now, don’t get me wrong: while such lesbian relationships are severely looked upon in Greek society, me and my brother are quite liberal in thinking and are honest enough to recognize the hypocrisy about that. With Greek men often sodomizing young boys and bragging about it, then why scream about two girls loving each other. Unfortunately, Thanos had to protect the reputation of our family and chose to forcibly marry Artemisia to a passing Greek merchant when he learned about your relationship, some two months after your departure from Tanais. Then, unable to accept to be married to a man she didn’t love and barely knew, Artemisia hung herself in a part of the woods near the town. Thanos claimed afterwards that she had been assaulted and then killed by unknown assailants.” Polonius then had to stop speaking for a moment, as Nauca had stopped where she was and was now crying quietly, her shoulders shaking. The Greek man, not wanting to disturb her further, didn’t speak or touch her as she took a long moment to dry her tears

and regain control of herself. When she finally looked back at him, he saw no anger or resentment in her eyes, just infinite sadness.

"Maybe it was better like this: Artemisia would have been miserable for the rest of her life, forced to live with a man she didn't love. I should have brought her with me when I left Tanais with Hiram's caravan. Such a kind and intelligent girl. What a tragedy! Thank you for being honest with me about this."

"And those two girls traveling with you? Are they..."

"Intimate with me? Yes! Becoming pregnant while on the trail could cost them their lives through childbirth complications, the same way it could stop me from traveling. A caravan trail through mountains and deserts is no place for a newborn. When my family was still alive and living on the steppes, we could at least stop for a few days or even a few weeks when a woman came close to giving birth. You can't do that with a trading caravan: time is money, literally. So, we girls have to keep our spirits up as best we can while avoiding pregnancies. Can you understand my point of view on this, Polonius?"

"Well, if I was a woman rather than a man, I guess that my point of view would change radically, especially if it involved caravan trade. Is your destination Tanais?"

Nauca shook her head slowly at that question.

"No! I am going further than Tanais. Much further."

From her tone, Polonius understood that it would have been futile on his part to ask for further precisions about that.

CHAPTER 14 – ENCOUNTER IN SARMATIA



Blue arrow: Birth place of Nauca. Orange arrow: Tanais Emporium.

10:46 (Bosporus Time)

Wednesday, August 20, 60 B.C.E.

Eastern shore of the Tanais River (modern-day Don River)

North of the Tanais Emporium¹⁶, northern tip of Lake Meotis (Sea of Azov)

Stopping her horse a few paces from the eastern shore of the Tanais River, Nauca then stayed silent for a moment as she embraced the countryside beyond the western shore: she was about to reenter her region of birth after travelling for three years away from it. She was a true nomad at heart but Sarmatia was still a place dear to her. Igrid and Tayla, understanding the reasons for her silence, waited quietly behind her until she spoke up.

“Let’s go downstream to see if we could find a fording point for us to cross the river.”

¹⁶ Emporium : Greek name for a trading post.

The trio then trotted in single file while following the shoreline and looking for one of the sandbanks which frequently formed in the Tanais River, especially around bends. It took them less than half an hour to spot such a sandbank, at which time Nauca signaled her two friends to stay on the shore for the moment.

“Let me cross first, in order to test the maximum depth here. If I cross relatively dry, then you will follow me, but make sure that our sacks of rice and spices don’t get wet.”

Nauca then urged her horse forward, making it enter the water. At first the water came up only to the calves of Tamat but, as she approached the center of the river, her horse sank up to its chest. Thankfully, that was the deepest that Nauca encountered and she didn’t need to have Tamat swim. She eventually exited the river with only her legs and feet wet, then waived at her friends.

“YOU CAN CROSS HERE!”

As Talya started crossing, with two of their pack horses held by long ropes, Igrid stayed on the eastern shore, watching for any possible danger to them. Once Talya had joined Nauca on the western shore, Igrid crossed the Tanais, holding by a rope their third pack horse. Once they were all back together, Nauca reminded her two friends about her previous instructions.

“We are now going to head straight west until we will get to the shores of the Borysthenes River. That should take us about one week. Then, we will continue westward until we reach the Hypanis¹⁷ River, which roughly marks the limits of my tribe’s territory. We will however exercise maximum caution while traveling and will avoid lighting campfires once the Sun is down: they tend to attract marauders and thieves and we certainly don’t want to be caught by surprise while sleeping. Our cooking will thus be done while there is still some daylight. Since our provisions are limited in quantity, we will take the time to hunt and fish regularly, so that we can live off the land. If we see other travelers in the distance, or a camp, then we will steer clear and stay out of sight. I will be especially severe about those rules once we will have crossed the Hypanis River, as we will then be in totally new territory, at least where I’m concerned. Igrid, up to where did your tribe live beyond the Hypanis River?”

¹⁷ Hypanis River : Ancient name of the Southern Bug River.

“Us Bastarnae lived as far west as the Porata River and we could be found up to the source of the Tyras River¹⁸. However, I don't know how active the Romans have been during the last couple of years, so I am not sure anymore where we will encounter my old tribe.”

“Well, the World has been changing a lot lately, so we will have to take things as they come while exercising caution. As three young women traveling with horses and lots of possessions, we will be prime targets for marauders, thieves, roaming warriors and the likes. Never forget that if you don't want to end up dead...or enslaved again.”

Igrid and Talya nodded their heads somberly, knowing too well what enslavement meant for a girl in this brutal and cruel world. Urging her horse to a fast walk, Nauca then led them away from the river, heading due West.

19:11 (Bosporus Time)

Tuesday, August 26, 60 B.C.E.

Eastern shores of the Borysthenes River

Sarmatian territory

The happiness the three of them felt when they saw in the distance the light reflections of the setting Sun on the waters of the Borysthenes River was soon dampened by another sight they caught on as their weary horses approached the river. Nauca, mounted on the tallest horse of her group, saw it first and pointed at it, to their front right.

“I see the smoke and lights from multiple campfires. This could be a nomadic settlement next to the river but I find the number of campfires unusual. Normally, us Sarmatians travel by family groups of fifty to eighty people at the most. This looks much bigger.”

“Could it be a tribal meeting site?” proposed Igrid. “The chieftains of my tribe sometimes met like this for a few days in order to deal with disputes and talk about common problems.”

“That could be. However, let's not assume anything and let's stay cautious for the moment. First, we go establish our camp next to the river while keeping it discreet,

¹⁸ Tyras River : Ancient name of the Dniestr River.

so that our horses can drink and relax after this long day. Then, you and me will go do a reconnaissance on foot of that camp, while Talya stays back with the horses.”

“Sounds like a plan, Nauca. Uh, could we eat something once our camp is up, before going on foot? I am positively starving.”

“I see no problems with that, Igrid. However, we will eat cold: no campfire tonight until we know who occupies that large camp.”

“Understood!”

Arriving near the shore of the river, which was bordered by a fairly thick pine and fir forest, the trio dismounted and unloaded their horses before they led their beasts to the water to let them drink to their content. They also refilled their water pouches at the same time before going to the wood line to select a camp site location. They ended up choosing a small clearing in the woods that was close enough to the river to allow them to see it through the trees. Since the temperature was only fresh but not cold and there were no signs of coming rain, they elected to not erect their tent, simply laying out on the grass their bedrolls. A frugal meal of mixed nuts and salted fish washed down with water followed. At the end of it, Nauca passed on a few directives to her two friends.

“Alright girls, here is what will happen. Igrid, you will go with me on foot towards that large camp, so that we could see who is in it. We will go light, with no armor, so that we could be as silent and nimble as possible. Bring your bow and sword with you but leave your shield behind. I will do the same. Ready?”

“Ready as I will ever be, Nauca.” replied Igrid, excited by the possibility of some action after this long day of monotonous country riding. The two of them then shed the equipment they didn’t need, leaving their camp under the guard of Talya, armed with her ‘Indian’ crossbow and her lance.

Advancing along the river treeline and hugging the trees while being careful to make the minimum of noise at first, Nauca and Igrid then further slowed down their pace as the lights of campfires started becoming visible through the trees ahead. The wind, blowing towards them, also started bringing weak noises of voices from the camp. Nauca couldn’t figure out at first what language those voices spoke and twisted her head to look at Igrid, who had been following close behind her. She then saw that Igrid had frozen on the spot, shock and anger evident on her face. Nauca quickly backtracked and crouched next to her, speaking in a near whisper.

"What is it, Igrid?"

"These men: they are Romans! They are speaking Latin between themselves."

"Romans?! This far inside Sarmatian territory? Are you sure?"

"They raped me, flogged me and enslaved me, Nauca. Yes, I am sure! But you are correct in finding it surprising to see them this far north. I wonder why they are here."

Nauca thought about that for a few seconds before the answer came to her, making her tighten her jaws together.

"I think that I know why, Igrid: they may be after King Mithridates and his gold."

"King Mithridates of Pontus? But he died a few years ago, no?"

Nauca nodded her head slowly once before replying to Igrid.

"Officially, he committed suicide some four years ago, after he lost his third war against the Romans. Unofficially, I met him three years ago in about this area, as he was secretly fleeing north to seek refuge with a Sarmatian tribe that was allied with him. You remember those jewels I wore in India and which made you jealous? Well, they were gifts to me from King Mithridates, to thank me for hosting him at my hunting campsite. He was already quite old at that time and I am not sure that he is still alive now, but he had with him a heavily loaded chariot that may have contained part of his legendary treasure. By the way, all that I just told you about him must not be repeated to anyone, including Talya. The Romans would certainly be ready to kill indiscriminately in order to get their greedy hands on his gold."

"I...I will stay silent, I promise. Wow! King Mithridates, alive in Sarmatia..."

"Well, let's have a peep at that camp, first to confirm that these men are Roman soldiers and, second, to see how many of them are in this camp. Follow me but be extra careful from now on not to make noises or speak other than in whispers."

Going into the forest but staying close to the shoreline, so that they could easily orient themselves, Nauca and Igrid advanced at a crouch, careful not to make branches crack under their feet. As they went forward, the noise of male voices became gradually more distinct and stronger, until they had to stop at the last trees before getting to a large clearing where the unknown men had established camp next to the river. Nauca nearly swore to herself out loud when she saw the size of the camp and the number of men visible around campfires.

"Shit! There are hundreds of them, maybe over 600, all cavalrymen judging by the number of horses corralled along the river."

"And they are definitely Roman soldiers, Nauca. Their equipment and armor are easy to recognize."

"Over 600 armored cavalrymen... This is no simple scouting force, Igrid. They are on a long-distance raiding mission of some sort. If they would be here to conquer new territory, then they would have at least some infantry with them. I am now convinced that they are after King Mithridates."

"So, what do we do about those Romans, Nauca? They are way too numerous to even think about harassing them."

"What we will do is to go find King Mithridates and the tribe that is sheltering him and warn them about this Roman cavalry force. I am sorry but we will not have time to catch some sleep tonight: we have to move out now and go around these Romans while the night is young. Let's go back to our camp, quietly."

The duo did so, retreating through the forest and arriving at their camp some twenty minutes later. Talya was surprised to see them back so soon but also curious about what they had found. Like Igrid, she was both shocked and angry on hearing that they were near a Roman cavalry unit.

"Those Roman pieces of shit! I wish to see them all die!"

"You may get that chance, if we could find some Sarmatian tribe ready to run them down. Let's load back our horses: we have to put as much distance between us and these Romans while it is dark. We will go around that camp and head north to search for help."

The three of them then moved around quickly, putting their saddles and packs back on their horses and gathering their things before trotting out eastward for a good two kilometers before turning northward and hurrying past the Roman camp in the dark night, invisible to the Roman sentries. They went on for over an hour, putting a good fifteen kilometers between themselves and the Roman camp before Nauca decided that their horses needed a good rest and stopped inside the forest next to the trail, where they hastily established camp and went to sleep, alternating between the three of them to stand sentry duty. At twilight next morning, they woke up and mounted their horses again and continued to hurry northward, fervently hoping to encounter soon some Sarmatian tribesmen.

06:26 (Bosporus Time)

Thursday, August 28, 60 B.C.E.

Northeastern shores of the Borysthenes River

430 kilometers north of the shores of the Pontus Euxinus (Black Sea)

Nauca and her two friends were following what looked like an infrequently used dirt trail that generally ran North-South by the side of a forest close to the Borysthenes River, making their horses go at a fast walk, in order not to tire them unnecessarily. To the right side of the trail, a large expanse of long grass with dispersed clumps of trees, mostly firs and pines, covered the land. Nauca, who was riding side-by-side with Igrid and Talya, suddenly stopped her horse and signaled her friends to do the same while turning one ear towards her front.

"I am hearing something... A rider is approaching. Quick, let's go take cover inside the treeline to our left!"

Since the trail ran just outside of the treeline, it took them only seconds for them to hide among the trees. Seeing Nauca take her bow out of her gorytos, or Sarmatian quiver-bow carrier, Igrid did the same, while Talya grabbed her Indian crossbow and started cocking its string, using the stirrup attached to the front of her weapon to pull back the string and hook it to its retaining notched nut. Seconds later, a cavalryman appeared at a forward bend of the trail, pushing his horse at a fast trot. Igrid barely kept out an angry swear at the sight of the rider, instead bending sideways to whisper to Nauca.

"That's a Roman cavalry scout! He is probably on his way to deliver a message to the big cavalry unit now one day behind us."

"Then, it means that he has spotted something important. Let's kill him before he can escape us."

Adding action to her words, Nauca then fit an arrow on her bow and pushed her horse to take a few paces forward, so that she could come out from between the trees. As soon as she had a clear field of fire, she pulled her bow's string and aimed for a second before letting go her arrow. It struck the man between his shoulder blades, piercing his chainmail armor jacket and making the Roman scream with pain before he tumbled off his horse.

"IGRID, GET THAT ROMAN'S HORSE! I WILL GO CHECK OUT THAT ROMAN IN THE MEANTIME."

Nauca then pushed her horse to a gallop to get to the man lying in the grass, where she stopped Tamat and jumped to the ground, her sword in hand. Using one foot to turn over the Roman, who lay face down in the grass, she saw that the man was still alive...barely. She thus questioned him, using Greek, a language many Romans knew.

"Why are you here, in Sarmatia? How many other Romans were with you further north?"

The man, who was in his mid-twenties and was clean-shaven, slowly shook his head, signaling that he was not going to answer her questions. His eyes then glazed over and he became completely still after one last breath. Nauca looked down at the dead man for a moment, mentally reflecting about the precarity of life in these brutal times. She then proceeded to search him, hoping to find some kind of written note on him that could tell her about his mission. She however found no such note, meaning that he was probably carrying only a verbal message to his commander. The meager amount of silver and copper coins in his purse told her that he was probably of low rank, while his leather armor and light equipment marked him as a cavalry scout. Igrid came to her, holding the reins of the Roman's horse, as she was still looking down at the dead man. Looking quickly at the horse, Nauca saw that an oval wooden shield and three javelins were hooked to the beast, with a simple cushion and blanket acting as saddle. Igrid then confirmed to her what she had been thinking.

"That's a Roman Army mounted scout, a so-called 'Exploratore'. They rarely go around alone and I would expect that another three to five men are still forward of us, down this trail. For him to have been hurrying back like this must mean that his group of scouts has found out something important."

"Their designated target, probably. This means that we better find and kill those other Roman scouts before they can either withdraw with their information or understand that we killed their comrade."

"But we don't know how far they are or where they are, Nauca. How will we find them?"

"Easy! They will be watching their target from as close as they dare, so we only need to find that target to in turn find those Romans. Come down and help me load this dead man on his horse."

The two of them took a couple of minutes to lift the dead Roman and throw him across his horse's back, then tie him in place so that he would not fall off the horse. Once that was done, Nauca looked at Igrid and Talya, who had joined them by now.

"Here is what we will do, girls. What we want now is to find and trap those remaining Roman scouts before they could alert their unit that we discovered them. I will ride ahead of you with Minad, keeping a good distance between us while still staying in sight of you. I will act like a simple nomad traveling along this trail. As soon as we will spot a camp or settlement ahead of us, you two will retreat inside the treeline while I continue forward to that camp. With luck, I will be able to arrange a sweeping party at that camp in order to flush out those Roman scouts. Your job will be to shoot down those scouts if they try to flee from my sweeping party. Any questions, girls?"

"No!" replied Igrid. "Your plan is simple enough and should work in flushing out those Romans."

"Then, let's get back on the saddle. Let me take an advance of at least 500 paces before starting yourselves."

With Talya holding the reins of the Roman horse via a long rope, Nauca then galloped forward for about half of a kilometer before slowing Tamat and Minad down to a walk and continue at a moderate walk, her two companions barely visible to her behind.

10:31 (Bosporus Time)

Northern trail along Borysthenes River

Having just negotiated a bend in the trail through a few clumps of trees, Nauca stopped her horse at the sight of the large camp now visible in the middle of an open field of grass next to the Borysthenes River. That camp was typical of Sarmatian nomadic camps, with large, round felt tents, and was certainly not a Roman camp. However, it was clearly larger than a typical nomadic camp. Then, her heart jumped in her chest when she spotted a large chariot, parked behind a big tent: she had seen that chariot before, some three years earlier.

"The King is here." she said to herself in a low voice. Realizing that things were becoming critical, with Roman scouts probably observing her right now from somewhere among the trees of the forest next to the camp, she raised her right arm and waved in a pre-arranged way to signal to Igrid and Talya to go hide into the woods, then urged her horses forward at a walk, to give the appearance that she was not aware about the

Romans who were most probably observing the Sarmatian camp. Ahead, inside the camp, she could see a number of men, women and children walking, working or playing, all of whom were dressed like Sarmatians. The one thing that was unusual and that she could see was the fact that two men armed with spears were guarding the entrance to the tent behind which the large chariot was parked. Entering the camp and heading towards the guarded tent, Nauca stopped her horses some ten paces from it and jumped down on the grass. She then grabbed Tamat's reins and walked towards the pair of guards, stopping three paces short of them before bowing her head and speaking in Sarmatian.

"Greetings! My name is Nauca and I wish to speak with King Mithridates about an urgent matter."

The senior guard threw a suspicious look at her on hearing the name 'Mithridates'.

"How do you know that the King is here? Few know about his presence with us."

"How? Because I saw his chariot three years ago and I now see it parked behind this tent. If Hypsicratea is also here, then I must speak with her at once."

Her assurance apparently decided the guard, who then went in the tent for a moment before coming out, closely followed by a woman in her late forties who still appeared vigorous and who was armed with a sword and dagger at her belt. Nauca bowed deeply at her appearance.

"Great Hypsicratea, you may not remember me but we met some three years ago, not far from here, and my name is Nauca."

"I remember you, young Nauca. What prompted you to come visit us?"

"A deadly threat to King Mithridates and to this camp, great lady. A large Roman cavalry unit is presently on its way to here, coming from the South and following the trail next to the river, while I believe that Roman scouts are observing this camp as we speak. Me and my two companions intercepted and killed one of those scouts as he was riding southward, probably to warn his unit about your location."

The old female warrior stiffened at once on hearing the word 'Romans'.

"How many soldiers did this Roman unit count, Nauca?"

"At least 600, from the count of horses inside their camp. There were no infantrymen with them, just cavalrymen."

"And your companions, where are they right now?"

"They are hiding in the forest, next to the trail, ready to shoot down any Roman scouts attempting to withdraw south. I propose that your warriors initiate a search of the

nearby woods, in order to flush out those Roman scouts and make them withdraw. Then, my two companions will be able to intercept and kill them.”

“A sound idea indeed. We will certainly do that but first I must tell the King about this. Come with me inside!”

Her heart accelerating at the idea that she was about to see King Mithridates again, Nauca followed the King’s protector and lover inside the tent. Once in, she was able to see Mithridates, sitting on a wooden chair set next to another chair in which sat a mature Sarmatian noblewoman. Nauca immediately bowed deeply to the pair as Hypsicratea spoke to them in Sarmatian.

“My King, Queen Roxanna, this is Nauca of the Roxolani. She came to warn us about a deadly and close threat to us.”

Hypsicratea then spoke quickly, repeating what Nauca had told her. Queen Roxanna threw a worried look at Mithridates on hearing about the Romans.

“You should leave this camp at once under escort, Great Mithridates. You can’t risk capture at the hands of the Romans.”

“If I may, Your Majesty!” hurried to say Nauca. “I believe that further running would be futile. We must destroy this Roman force in its entirety in order to eliminate this threat for good. Simply fleeing would not save the King from those Romans: it would only delay disaster.”

“And what do you propose that we do, young Nauca?” replied Queen Roxanna. “I have less than a hundred warriors in this camp and it would take at least a day to assemble more warriors here.”

“I propose that we set a trap in this camp for those Romans and then shoot them to pieces as they charge in with their javelins. From what I saw of them and their camp, they did not have archers or bows with them, only javelins.”

King Mithridates, already of advanced age but appearing to be still clear-minded, smiled and nodded his head once.

“A bold but feasible plan, young Nauca. I like it! How far did you say that this Roman cavalry force is from here?”

“They should now be about one day’s riding from here, Your Majesty: more than enough time to prepare against them. However, those scouts near this camp should be dealt with first, so that they would not be able to alert their unit about our preparations.”

“A most sensible precaution indeed, young Nauca. Hypsicratea, take care of those Roman scouts with our young friend.”

"At once, Your Majesty!" replied the mature amazon while bowing, imitated by Nauca. The two of them then left the tent and faced each other once outside.

"So, Nauca, you had the idea for that plan. How do you propose that we get rid of those scouts?"

"I would like to leave the camp, as if I simply came to visit King Mithridates, and then return to my companions. An hour after my departure, you would then form a skirmish line and advance towards the woods to the south of the camp. That should force those enemy scouts to withdraw and mount back their horses in order to return to their unit. I and my companions would then shoot those scouts down as they come down the trail. They can't be numerous and we should be able to deal with them all. I will only ask you to have a small group of cavalymen standing ready to pursue them and distract them from my ambush."

Hypsicratea grinned on hearing her plan.

"You are a devious one, young Nauca. You seem to have quite a lot of experience about fighting despite your young age."

"I fought plenty of bandits and even some Chinese soldiers during trips to China and then India, Lady Hypsicratea."

"Indeed? I am impressed, Nauca. Go and return to your companions and be ready to warmly greet those Roman scouts: I will lead out our skirmishers in one hour. Good luck, Nauca!"

"And the same to you, Lady Hypsicratea."

Nauca then mounted on her horse but that simple gesture left Hypsicratea looking surprised and confused.

"Wait! How did you mount so easily on your horse?"

Nauca smiled to her and pulled away the piece of thick fabric which covered her left-side stirrup.

"Thanks to this, an invention I found in India. This is called a stirrup and it doesn't only help me to mount my horse: it and the one on the other side help me greatly in being more steady and secure in the saddle. Once this battle will be over, I will tell you all about it and will let you try them."

"By Cybele, I can't wait for that!"

Nauca's smile widened to a grin at those words before she urged her horse to a trot and left the camp, heading southward.

Forcing herself not to look inside the woods to her right side as she trotted down the trail, Nauca rode for about 600 meters before a whistle made her twist her head towards the nearby trees. Seeing Igrid waving at her, Nauca left the trail and stepped down from her horse before entering the wood line.

“So, did you find King Mithridates?” asked Talya, apparently dying with curiosity.

“Yes, I did! He is living in a large camp run by Queen Roxanna, the local tribe’s ruler. I warned them about the Romans and we agreed to get rid of the Roman scouts before we sucker their unit into a trap. Our job will be to prevent any of those Roman scouts from fleeing south once they are flushed out by Queen Roxanna’s warriors.” Nauca then gave a critical look at the crossbow carried by young Talya.

“Talya, your crossbow may be a powerful and accurate weapon, which you master by now, but it still has a slower rate of fire than that of our bows. You will be particularly vulnerable while reloading it, so I believe that we should build some kind of fixed, protective wooden shield for you while waiting for those scouts to show up. You will help Igrid cut down and then trim a small tree, which we will then cut in many short logs in order to build that shield. I will keep watch on the trail while you work.”

Guided by the counsels from Nauca, the two teenagers went hard at work, chopping down, trimming and cutting into logs a small tree, building a protective wall that was actually large enough to protect all three of them against thrown javelins. After some forty minutes of work, Nauca declared herself satisfied by the final result and made her two friends rest a bit before preparing for battle. That entailed putting on their helmets and various pieces of armor they owned, much of them having been looted from dead Saka soldiers in the cases of Igrid and Talya, who had at the time the luxury of taking only the best they could find in a mountain of weapons and armor. The two teenagers thus ended being encased in scale armor vests, bronze greaves and helmets, plus long oval shields. As for Nauca, she wore a set of steel lamellar armor which included a vest, hip protectors and shoulders and arms protectors, the lot worn over a thick padded gambeson undergarment meant to cushion blows and impacts. She also wore greaves which protected her legs and knees. A Greek-style Corinthian helmet and her large, round Indian rhinoceros hide shield completed her protection, which was probably the best one could get around anywhere at this time. Thus ready for battle, the trio then sat down, drank a bit of water and ate dry nuts while waiting for the fighting to begin.

That fighting was not long in coming and started with shouts and war cries coming from some 500 meters to the north of them, followed by the noise of metal hitting metal. Getting up and grabbing her bow, Nauca posted herself behind the left ledge of their protective palisade, with her Indian rhino hide shield planted at the vertical beside it. Talya took the center position while Igrid stood behind the right-side ledge of the palisade, her bow at the ready. They only had to wait a couple of minutes before she saw three riders coming down the trail, apparently in a great hurry.

“Three riders coming down the trail. Talya, shoot the first one! Igrid, you take the second one! Ready? Aim! Shoot!”

Their projectiles flew at nearly the same time and also struck their targets at the same time. The lead Roman, his chainmail shirt pierced by the powerful bolt shot by Talya’s crossbow, tumbled off his horse and rolled in the grass a few times before becoming still. The second Roman was hit in his right-side leg and screamed with pain but somehow managed to stay in the saddle. As for the third Roman, he got Nauca’s arrow in his right eye and fell from his horse, dead before he could touch the ground. Quickly stepping away from the palisade and jumping on the trail, Nauca aimed a second arrow at the wounded Roman scout and shot him squarely in the back, dropping him from his horse. Before Nauca could shout at Igrid and Talya to go catch the Roman horses, four Sarmatian horsemen galloped past her, going after the empty mounts. Hypsicratea, wearing a set of scale armor, then braked her horse to a halt next to her.

“WELL DONE, NAUCA! We now got all of those scouts. Time to prepare our ambush for that Roman cavalry unit.”

“And where will you want the three of us for that battle, Lady Hypsicratea?”

“Close to me! You earned that honor today. So, could I see your two friends?”

In response, Nauca waved at her companions, who then ran out of the woods and onto the trail, stopping next to her. Hypsicratea smiled to both of them but showed some surprise as well.

“Your friends are quite young, Nauca. Could you present them to me?”

“With pleasure, Lady Hypsicratea. The taller one is named Igrid and is sixteen-years-old. She was from the Germanic tribe of the Bastarnae. The shorter one is named Talya and she is a fifteen-years-old Dacian girl. I freed both of them from slavery over a year ago and they traveled with me to India and back.”

Hypsicratea smiled again and bowed her head to salute the two teenagers.

“Two valorous young girls... I like that! Well, get on your horses and follow me to the camp.”

The trio, dragging their pack horses behind them, were led by Hypsicratea into the camp and right to the royal tent, where their horses were tied to a tall pole solidly planted on the ground near its entrance. They were then invited in, where Hypsicratea put one knee down in front of both Mithridates and Roxanna.

“Your Majesties, the Roman scouts are now dead, thanks to these three valorous young women.”

“Excellent!” said Mithridates, who then waived to the trio to approach him, which they did before also kneeling and bowing in front of him.

“We are greatly honored by having had a chance to serve and protect you, Your Majesty.” said Nauca once she was kneeling.

“And it is a privilege to have such brave young women with me. I must say that the armor you are wearing would have been worthy of one of my past generals, young Nauca. You make for quite a martial sight right now, while your two friends are also superbly equipped.”

“Let’s say that we were able to acquire some of the best armor and weapons to be found during our trip to India, Your Majesty. We also acquired two novel items which could prove of great importance in the future. One is an invention from India called a stirrup, which greatly helps a rider to be more stable and secure in the saddle. The other is a new variant of the Chinese crossbow, which we call the ‘Indian crossbow’, and which is both very powerful and very accurate, plus is easy to master by about anyone. We could show you both right now if you want, Your Majesty: they are outside, on our horses.”

“I am always interested in new ideas, young Nauca. Let’s go outside! Will you come, my dear Roxanna?”

“Of course! That ‘stirrup’ thing truly intrigues me.”

With Nauca in the lead, the group walked out of the tent and went to Tamat, where Nauca uncovered one of her two stirrups and showed it to the king and queen.

“This is what I call a stirrup, Your Majesties. There is a similar one on the other side, attached to the saddle by leather straps which can be adjusted in length to fit various riders. To mount the horse, you simply put one foot in the stirrup, then grab the

saddle's pommel and pull yourself up and sit on the saddle. While riding, you keep both feet in the stirrups, which then provide you with extra stability and balance and allows you to perform maneuvers which would otherwise make a rider lose his balance and fall off his horse. Lady Hypsicratea, would you like to try this?"

"Did you really need to ask?" replied the mature woman, grinning from ear to ear. She then raised one foot, engaging it in the stirrup, then was up on the saddle without effort, watched with intense interest by King Mithridates. She then nodded her head to her king.

"It indeed makes mounting a horse so much easier. I will now gallop around to see how it affects riding."

With that said, she urged Tamat to a gallop and started zigzagging at full speed around the tents of the camp. Hypsicratea was grinning with glee when she returned to the royal tent and stopped Tamat near Mithridates and Roxanna.

"These stirrups are fantastic, Your Majesty! They allow speeds and maneuvers which we could not do before. They would also allow a rider armed with a lance to strike with much more force than without stirrups. This invention could change a lot of things."

"But it could cause a lot of grief if the wrong persons, like the Romans, learn its secret." cautioned Nauca, considerably cooling the enthusiasm shown by Hypsicratea, who sobered up at once.

"By Cybele, that's too true! Then, what do you counsel that we do with such a fantastic new thing, Nauca? Hide it from everybody?"

"If that was my intention, I would never have mentioned them, Lady Hypsicratea. I think that its secret should be known only by Sarmatians, with Sarmatian nobles making sure that it is not sold out or divulged to others. Right now, only us and a small number of Sogdian caravan merchants I am associated with know about stirrups and use them."

Mithridates and Roxanna exchanged looks with Hypsicratea before Mithridates soberly nodded his head.

"Young Nauca is right: the secret of these stirrups must be known only by Sarmatians, for our own sake. Roxanna, I believe that you should have a couple of your best and most loyal artisans look at those stirrups, so that they could be able later on to duplicate them and produce more of them. However, they better come here and look at them quickly: we have to prepare for a battle against 600 Roman soldiers."

"I will go get my local artisans at once and will also order my warriors to prepare for battle." replied Queen Roxanna before walking away while shouting orders. Mithridates then turned to face Nauca, smiling to her.

"And what kind of ambush are you proposing that we prepare, my young and devious Nauca?"

14:49 (Bosporus Time)

Friday, August 29, 60 B.C.E.

Alae¹⁹ 1 Bosporanorum

**Riding northward alongside the eastern shore of the Borysthenes River
Sarmatian territory**

The Procuratore²⁰ scout who stopped his horse next to that of Tribune Marcus Flavius Alba saluted him before giving his report.

"There is a large Sarmatian camp about four miles ahead, next to the river's shore, Tribune. The activity in it appears to be routine but we saw a large wagon parked behind a tent which is much larger than the others in the camp. As we were observing the camp, we saw a tall man in a rich robe walking around, speaking to various occupants of the camp. He was accompanied by what appeared to be a pair of bodyguards."

"King Mithridates, at last! We will finally be able to be rid of him...after he leads us to his gold." said Alba with a ferocious grin. However, his senior centurion seemed much less enthusiastic than his tribune about that report and fired back a question to the head scout.

"Have you seen any of our Exploratores²¹ near that camp, Decurion?"

"No, sir! They must have missed the clues about King Mithridates and continued on further forward."

The centurion frowned on hearing that answer and looked at his unit commander.

¹⁹ Alae : Roman cavalry unit counting between 512 and 768 men and subdivided into 32-men squadrons.

²⁰ Procuratore: Roman cavalry scouts charged with close-in patrolling around a Roman advancing unit. Typically stays well within a distance of one-day's marching.

²¹ Exploratores : Roman cavalry scouts charged with long-distance patrolling and screening ahead of a Roman advancing unit.

“Tribune, something is wrong here. Even if our Exploratores didn’t see anything special about this camp, they should at the least have warned us that it was here.”

Alba, already imagining the coffers full of gold that he could soon have in his hands, shook his head dismissively in response.

“Our Exploratores know that they had to avoid wasting time while scouting ahead of us. I told them so myself before we left our fort in Dacia. The last report we got from our Speculatores²² is already quite dated and the Sarmatians’ habit of frequently moving their camps around from pasture to pasture makes it urgent for us to act as quickly as possible. Forget our Exploratores for the moment and let’s get ready to assault that camp. We will attack that camp in a double-pincer, with half of our squadrons following the shoreline and then swinging right once in line with the camp and with the other half of our men advancing along this trail before swinging left, thus encircling it and preventing Mithridates from escaping us.”

While the senior centurion disagreed strongly with his tribune about this, the rigid discipline of the Roman Army made him accept his superior’s orders without further objections. He thus saluted Alba before galloping down the long double column of cavalymen, passing orders in turn to each squadron commander. Some 300 men then split from the column and rode through the forest adjacent to the trail, heading towards the nearby Borysthenes River. Once at the shoreline, the ten cavalry squadrons assigned to the left pincer force then followed it in a long single file, their javelins at the ready and their oval shields held along their left side. The squadrons assigned to the right pincer force waited a bit before advancing further, in order to let time for their comrades to deploy in proper position, then trotted forward along the trail in a triple column. Alba, who was riding behind the first squadron of the right pincer force, was soon able to look at the Sarmatian camp found by his Procursores: it was indeed a much larger than usual camp by Sarmatian standards, an obvious indication of its particular importance. He saw the few men and women walking around the camp flee inside their tents when the Roman column appeared on the trail, past the woods to the south of the camp.

“Tents won’t protect you from the wrath of Rome.” said Alba to himself before shouting an order. “ALAE, FORWARD AT A GALLOP!”

²² Speculatores : Roman spies employed by advancing Roman armies. They typically were disguised with civilian clothes or even enemy uniforms.

The ten squadrons of the right pincer force accelerated their pace while continuing along the trail, until they came level with the Sarmatian camp. Alba then gave another order, making his men pivot to the left and then charge.

“REMEMBER: KILL THEM ALL EXCEPT FOR KING MITHRIDATES! I WANT HIM ALIVE! CHARGE!”

Hidden among the trees of the forest to the south of the Sarmatian camp separating the trail from the river, Hypsicratea grinned ferociously as she observed the Roman advance and charge on the camp. Thankfully, Queen Roxanna had time yesterday to send fast riding messengers to the nearest Sarmatian camps around her own royal camp, summoning the help of all the warriors available. While they were still outnumbered by the Romans, at least now the odds would be much less against the Sarmatian side. Waiting until the Roman right pincer force had pivoted towards the camp, she then looked at Nauca, sitting on her horse to her right and rear.

“DEPLOY OUT OF THE FOREST AND BLOCK THE TRAIL!”

Nauca obeyed at once, walking her horse through the trees until she emerged out of the forest and onto the trail, followed by twenty more armed riders, including Igrid and Talya. The 21 horse warriors then formed an extended line across the trail before grabbing their bows or, in the case of Talya, her crossbow, and putting arrows in place, ready to shoot. Seeing that Nauca's small force was now in position, Hypsicratea looked at a man carrying a large copper horn and nodded to him. The trumpeter, raising his horn to his lips, then blew in it as hard as he could, making it sound three times. With that signal to start shooting now given, the sixty Sarmatian archers, many of them women, who were hiding in the tree line with Hypsicratea raised their bows and shot their first arrows, aiming at the right-side Roman cavalry force. At about the same time, another group of fifty Sarmatian archers hidden in the same forest but closer to the river, along with a group of 130 cavalry archers hidden in the forest next to the northern side of the camp, started firing a rain of arrows on the Romans of the left-side pincer force. The latter Sarmatian group was actually formed of warriors sent as reinforcement from other, nearby nomadic camps. Hypsicratea, watching closely the advance of the Romans, made her trumpeter blow a second signal as the Roman cavalrymen were starting to enter the camp. At that signal, the Sarmatian men and women who had run inside their tents on sighting the Romans pulled hard on ropes they were holding at the ready. Those ropes, laid between the vertical poles planted near each tent and meant to be

used to tie horses to them, rose up from the grass they lay onto and became rigid, with the tents' occupants then hurrying to tie their ends to long pickets which had been planted inside the tents. The Roman cavalymen charging through the camp suddenly found themselves facing dozens of strong ropes now running horizontally waist-high and crisscrossing the camp grounds. Many Romans, unable to react quickly enough to those obstacles, saw their horses trip and tumble in spectacular fashion, with their riders screaming while flying into the air before crashing face down on the ground. The Sarmatian adults hiding inside the tents then emerged in the open and, with young boys and girls holding shields in front of them in order to protect the archers in their groups, started shooting arrows at the Romans who had been knocked off their horses and were now painfully getting up. Boxed-in into groups of fifty or less cavalymen, many of them now dismounted and hurting, the attacking Romans were then subjected to a continuous rain of arrows coming from two opposite sides, to which were added the arrows fired by the occupants of the tents. With no bows of their own, the Romans had to reply as best as they could with javelins or had to charge with their swords and shields in hand. Tribune Marcus Flavius Alba, who had stopped his horse just outside the camp in order to observe how the battle was going, could only watch with dismay and rage with his staff officers as his alae was being quickly cut to ribbons by a shower of arrows. Over a third of his men went down, pierced by one or more arrows, within the first minute of the fight, which would have better deserved the term of 'massacre' rather than that of 'fight'.

"CUT THOSE DAMN ROPES, DAMMIT!"

A number of his trapped cavalymen did so as quickly as they could but the damage was already done, with their unit completely disorganized and with their charge broken. His men then started inflicting the first casualties to the Sarmatians when they attacked the nomads who had emerged from the tents and who were the closest to them. Despite their youth, the boys and girls holding shields and forming a protective wall for the adult warriors near them bravely held fast against the attacking Romans, while the adult Sarmatians defended their small groups with either bows and arrows, Kontos long lances, swords or battle-axes. After another couple of minutes of combat, Alba saw that fully two-thirds of his force was now down, either dead or seriously wounded. Understanding with bitterness that he had been suckered into a trap, he then gave the only order that still made sense.

"SOUND THE RETREAT!"

His senior trumpeter did so at once, with his call creating a short, momentary confusion among the Roman soldiers presently fighting inside the camp. Those soldiers knew too well that a hasty retreat while engaged in close combat was usually a recipe for incurring heavy casualties. The surviving Romans nonetheless obeyed and turned around to get out of the camp. Those whose horses had been wounded by arrows or incapacitated by falls due to the ropes had to retreat on foot while still subjected to a rain of arrows. Marcus Flavius Alba did not wait until his surviving men got out of the camp, instead starting himself to flee with some of his staff officers. His senior centurion, however, stayed behind to rally the men who managed to exit the Sarmatian camp.

To the south of the camp, on the trail, Nauca was watching the action with growing trepidation: this was starting to look like a major victory over the hated Romans. She then saw a number of Romans of high rank starting to flee, galloping in her general direction. She could even see that one of the Roman riders carried high one of the decorated unit standards the Roman Army was famous for. Next to that standard carrier was an officer wearing a splendid bronze cuirass and a decorated helmet. That officer then saw Nauca and her twenty mounted warriors blocking his path and shouted an order that made six of his escort riders surge ahead and form a protective line in front of him. Nauca had a mean smile on seeing that: she had a ready response for that.

“ARCHERS, GET READY! AIM! SHOOT!”

One bolt and twenty arrows flew as one, as the group of Roman officers was some fifty meters away. Then, not waiting to see the results of their shooting, Nauca shouted another order while putting her bow back in her gorytos.

“WITH KONTOS LANCE...CHAARGE!”

With the benefit of their stirrups, Nauca, Igrid and Talya quickly accelerated ahead of the other Sarmatian riders, surprising those warriors by their speed, while holding their long lances to the horizontal and to their right side, using their two hands. In response to that charge, the Romans got their gladius swords ready and pushed further their horses. When the two groups of riders met, it was with a combined speed of nearly eighty kilometers per hour. Having much more reach than the Roman swords, the Sarmatian lances hit first, with devastating effect. The Roman directly ahead of Nauca was skewered by her lance and flew backward from his saddle on impact, the lance still stuck in him. He then hit the ground and rolled a number of times directly in the path of Marcus Flavius Alba's horse, which could not avoid him and tripped on him. The

unfortunate beast then cartwheeled twice, breaking both of its front legs and projecting the Roman tribune in the air, screaming. With the advanced group of Roman officers and their escorts completely obliterated by the impacts of the Sarmatian lances, Nauca decided to continue her charge in order to meet another group of retreating Roman riders and grabbed her spare Kontos lance, which was carried in a leather holder attached to her saddle. Igrid and Talya, also having spare lances, imitated her, while the other Sarmatian warriors of their group grabbed javelins. The second wave of retreating Romans, having seen how their tribune's escort had been annihilated by the Sarmatian lances, hesitated, then decided to turn towards the left in order to avoid the incoming charge. Unfortunately for them, that only earned them impacts in their ribs' area when Nauca's group veered to the right to intercept them. Having been able to keep hold of her lance this time, Nauca veered in hot pursuit of one Roman cavalryman who had escaped that second charge and was now trying to flee at full gallop through the open grassy plain. Nauca grinned with ferocity as she gradually gained on her adversary, who was often looking backward, sheer terror visible on his face.

"YOU CAN RUN BUT YOU WON'T ESCAPE DEATH, ROMAN!" she shouted to him in Greek. That was when the Roman nearly fell off his horse when his mount hit a shallow hole in the ground hidden by the long grass. The Roman had to slow down, time to regain his balance, something that allowed Nauca to finally overtake him. With a mighty thrust of her lance, she pierced the man's lower back, making him scream with pain before he fell and rolled on the ground. Grimacing with pain, the wounded Roman tried to get back up and was grabbing his gladius when Nauca's ultimate charge skewered him, the point of her lance going completely through his torso despite of his chainmail armored shirt. Stopping and turning her horse around afterwards, she went back to her adversary, now lying dead on his back, and pulled out her lance, which had been sticking out of the man's chest, before giving a last sober look at the Roman.

"You came to Sarmatia and paid the price for it, Roman. Let this be a lesson to your kind who would want to invade us."

She next took the time to catch the Roman's horse by its reins before returning near the dead man, where she briefly stepped down from her horse in order to grab the man's purse. With that done, she returned to the main battlefield, where dozens of Sarmatian warriors were busy finishing off the last surviving Roman soldiers. Seeing a metallic reflection in the grass, Nauca stopped next to it and saw that it was the Roman unit's standard, the one carried by the officer she had first skewered with her lance. Picking

the standard up first, she then went to retrieve her first lance, still sticking out from the dead standard bearer. She also grabbed the bearer's purse, which proved to be quite heavy with coins, along with a gold ring with turquoise and a gold torque he had been wearing around his neck. She felt no shame in doing that, as she was only following a universal practice of the time after a battle: there was no sense or logic in leaving behind valuable items if they were going to be picked up by others later on. Besides, those valuables could later on be used to help victims of Roman aggression or the families of the warriors who had fallen in battle.

To her immense relief, Nauca soon saw that both Igrid and Talya were safe and sound. In fact, young Talya was positively fired up by the adrenaline rush of the battle and was grinning from ear to ear.

"By Athena, this had to be the most exciting moment of my life, Nauca!"

"You certainly did well, Talya, and so did you, Igrid. I am truly proud of both of you."

"Thanks, Nauca. I must say that your lance charge was positively epic. Teiwaz²³ would have been proud of you."

"Well, we can celebrate this later on, my friends. Let's go see what Lady Hypsicratea wants us to do next."

Seeing the head of King Mithridates, still a tall man despite his age, stick out of a group some fifty paces away, Nauca went in that direction with her two companions. On arriving next to the King's group, she then saw that the Roman officer wearing the fancy bronze cuirass had been forced to face Mithridates while on his knees. Mithridates in turn saw Nauca and noticed the Roman unit standard she carried on her horse.

"Well, well. We had the enemy commander in our hands. Now, we also have his unit's standard. Come down with that standard, my valorous Nauca."

Nauca was too happy to oblige and soon stood in front of Mithridates, with the tied-up tribune next to her, still on his knees. Smiling first to Nauca, Igrid and Talya, Mithridates then looked down at Marcus Flavius Alba, his expression now harsh as he spoke to him in Latin.

²³ Teiwaz: The Germanic God of War. Later known as 'Tyr' in the Viking sagas.

"You wanted to catch me and take my gold, Tribune Alba. Instead, you are now at my mercy, while your men are dead to the last. Know that only Sarmatians will learn about this battle and that, for Rome, you and your unit will simply have vanished while riding into Sarmatia. Hopefully, that will convince the rulers of Rome to never try invading Sarmatia again. Do you have anything to say before you pay the price for your defeat, Tribune Alba?"

Alba, looking utterly discomfited and scared, tightened his jaws together but did not say a word, making Mithridates nod once.

"As you wish! I will however grant you one gift before you die: I will give you some of my gold."

The king then nodded to the warriors holding Alba, who then forced him on his back and proceeded to tie his hands and feet to four pickets which were quickly planted on the ground. Now spread-eagled on his back in the grass of the camp, Alba started sweating, while his eyes rolled around, full of fear.

"What are you going to do to me, Mithridates of Pontus?"

"Like I told you a moment ago: I will give you some of my gold. Go ahead, Hypsicratea."

His lover and loyal supporter then approached the tied up Roman while holding by a hook a small cast iron bucket. Some kinds of fumes were rising from the bucket as Hypsicratea knelt next to Alba's head. The Roman then understood what was going to happen as a strong warrior used a pair of iron hooks to force his mouth open.

"NO! NOT THAT! PLEASE, DO...AARGH!"

Unable to speak further and with his mouth forced wide open, he could only stare in sheer terror as Hypsicratea started to tip her bucket to the horizontal, revealing its content: molten gold. Alba screamed hideously when the first drops of molten gold were poured into his mouth. However, his screams were short-lived as his mouth filled with molten metal, the shock of the atrocious pain quickly knocking him unconscious before he died, asphyxiated by the gold fumes and the gold plug that formed inside his throat. His body convulsed for a few seconds before becoming still. Young Talya, who had watched that while showing no pity for the Roman, then spoke up.

"Maybe we should use molten lead next time instead of gold, Your Majesty. Those Roman bastards don't deserve better than lead."

"I'll second that opinion." said in turn Queen Roxanna, making Mithridates chuckle.

"Women! Always so practical about things. Lead it will be the next time we catch Romans. Hypsicratea, how many of our warriors have we lost in this battle?"

"Less than twenty, Your Majesty. However, four of the children who held shields were killed, while three more were wounded."

Sadness reflected on Queen Roxanna's face for a moment before she spoke.

"They will be remembered from now on as steppe warriors, not as children. I want all the coins and valuables collected from the dead Romans to be gathered in one pile and then to be distributed equally among all of the warriors who fought today and to the families of our warriors killed in combat."

"Then, I will start with what I found, Your Majesty." said Nauca. "Here are the purses and jewels I took from enemies I killed. You can also add that Roman standard to the lot."

"No! Keep that standard, young Nauca!" countered at once the tribal queen. "You devised the plan we used to trap and destroy those Romans and you also charged their command group and killed the Roman standard bearer. You earned that standard as a personal trophy."

"I would tend to agree with Queen Roxanna, young Nauca." added Mithridates. "I wish I could have had you as one of my generals while I was at war with the Romans."

"But there was nothing truly exceptional about my plan, Your Majesty. I am sure that such tricks were often used in the past by many military commanders."

"A brilliant tactician who is also modest? Now that's rare!" said Mithridates, making many around him laugh. He then became serious again and looked down fondly at Nauca.

"Keep this Roman standard as your personal trophy, Nauca. If you really want to gift me and Queen Roxanna with something, then you can tell us about your adventures in China and in India tonight, while we will celebrate this victory. And have your two young friends with you at that time: they also greatly merited today."

Both Igrid and Talya puffed up with pride on hearing those words, coming from such a famous king.

CHAPTER 15 – GOING WEST



Blue arrow: Direction of westward travel of Nauca's group towards the territory of the Bastarnae.

16:20 (Bosporus Time)

Tuesday, September 2, 60 B.C.E.

Western shore of the Borysthenes River

Sarmatian territory

"Nice work, men, and thank you for bringing us across the river."

Nauca then added to her thanks by giving a gold piece to each of the five ferryboat men who had just brought her group to the western shore of the Borysthenes River. The happy senior ferryboat man took the gold coin and bowed to her.

"It was a pleasure, Lady Nauca. I wish you and your friends a safe trip west."

The men then put back on their flat-bottomed ferry the wood planks used to let Nauca's horses disembark and pushed their large embarkation away from the shore before starting to row, using their four big oars. Nauca, Igrid and Talya watched them row away

before mounting back on their horses. Their group now had nine horses with them, thanks to the loot distribution that had followed the victory over the Romans. Their three new horses, while still wearing their original Roman saddles, were now used by Nauca as extra pack animals which carried extra fresh provisions as well as the girls' portions of the Roman equipment, armor and weapons looted from the dead soldiers. Nauca had been more than happy to accept as part of that loot the field camping equipment taken from six of the killed Roman cavalymen, on top of their weapons and their chainmail shirts and helmets. The metal objects in the lot, like cups, bowls, cooking pots and digging tools, were liable to tempt many of the people they were going to meet along the way to the Baltic and added nicely to the collection of trading goods she already had brought from Samarkand. The metallurgical arts practiced in Samarkand were rightly considered to be as good or superior to anything produced in other places and Nauca had made sure to bring with her good quantities of metal utility objects which could be easily traded for amber later on, like silver mirrors, fine steel sewing pins and scissors. Other items of good trading value taken from the Romans were their bedrolls, capes and shoes, as good quality cloth and footwear were always in demand and also fairly expensive, with a typical, simple tunic costing ten drachmas, the equivalent of ten days of salary for an unskilled worker, or, for a pair of leather sandals, up to twelve drachmas.

While riding side-by-side through a grassy field with dispersed clumps of trees, Nauca looked at Igrid, who was riding to her right.

"Tell me more about your old tribe, Igrid. Also, if you know anything about the people living nearer to the Baltic, that would also be useful for all of us to know."

"Well, since I was taken and enslaved by the Romans at age fourteen, I know only what the folk stories I heard said, plus of course the customs and traditions of the Bastarnae. I know that my people originally came down from the Northwest many decades ago, roughly traveling down the lands comprised between the Hypatis²⁴ and Porata²⁵ Rivers. We encountered and assimilated on the way other people who lived very simply among the forests in isolated small groups of farms. Because we frequently had to cross streams or traveled up and down rivers, some of us became boatmen and engaged in trade along the rivers of our territory."

²⁴ Hypatis : Ancient name of the Southern Bug River.

²⁵ Porata : Ancient name of the Prut River.

“Now, that last part interests me, Igrid. Do you know if we could get all the way to the Baltic by boat, if we could find one similar to the ferryboat we just used?”

“Uh, I am not sure, but we should be able to travel quite far towards the Northwest if we could navigate up the Tyras²⁶ River, situated between the Hypatis and Porata Rivers. However, I am not sure that we will find boats able to carry horses once there.”

“What about traveling along the river banks? Are they steep or are they relatively easy to follow?”

“They vary from place to place, so I can’t say for sure if we actually could travel alongside the rivers. However, the terrain gradually goes up as we will travel to the Northwest.”

“I guess that we will have to wait until we are there to find out. Still, generally following the shorelines of rivers should make it easier to orient ourselves while traveling. What is also left to be seen is how we will be received by the people we will meet on our way.”

“Don’t worry about our trip through Bastarnae territory, Nauca. I will handle the meetings with my fellow tribesmen.”

Nauca was not sure that having a Bastarnae girl with her would always ensure a safe travel, as bandits and thieves existed everywhere, but she didn’t remark on that and kept riding mostly in silence while keeping a sharp look around for any potential danger.

19:05 (Bosporus Time)

Wednesday, September 3, 60 B.C.E.

200 kilometers east of the Hypatis River

Rain had been falling for the last two hours and night was approaching when Nauca spotted a sort of small settlement ahead, in a grassy field adjacent to a thick forest. This was the first sign of human presence they had seen since they had crossed the Borysthenes and a dry place to sleep would be a nice thing indeed. She thus decided to approach that settlement at a calm walking pace, in order not to scare those who lived in it. As she got closer, she was able to better detail it through the rain still falling: there were five round wooden huts with conical roofs and what looked like three

²⁶ Tyras : Ancient name of the Dniestr River.

small barns or storage huts, the lot surrounded by a low wooden palisade that was probably limited to keeping in domestic animals rather than being meant for defense. Smoke came from holes in the top of the huts' roofs, indicating that they were occupied. Nauca looked at Igrid, who was riding close to her.

"Is this a Bastarnae settlement, Igrid?"

"No! It looks more like an Antes settlement. The Antes are the original inhabitants of this region, whom we assimilated. Antes are typically farmers and cattle raisers who practice slash-and-burn agriculture. They are not war-like, contrary to us Bastarnae."

"Can you speak their language?"

"Uh, I only know a few words, but many of the Antes can understand Germanic."

"Then, I will let you speak to them. Stay polite and friendly and let's try not to scare them without reason. I fully intend to offer them things in exchange for their hospitality. Using a barn for the night would already be quite acceptable to me."

"Alright, I will thus play the 'friendly Bastarnae' with them." said Igrid while smiling to Nauca.

As their group was about to enter the settlement via a rather narrow and crudely made wooden gate in the low palisade, a dog started barking furiously, soon joined by two more dogs. That didn't surprise Nauca, as peasants and farmers often kept dogs as a way to give a warning of approaching predators...be they animal or human. In turn, the barking made heads appear at the doors of the huts.

"Well, at least somebody will be able to greet us now." said philosophically Talya, quickly followed by Igrid.

"With smiles or with weapons?"

"Come on, girls! Have some faith in human goodness. Not everybody in this world is mean or evil."

"Ha! Tell that to the Romans!"

Shaking her head at that, Nauca walked to the door of the nearest hut while keeping her hands high and visible. She then tried to speak in Sarmatian with the bearded man standing in the half-opened door.

"Do not be afraid of us: we are only seeking shelter from the rain for the night."

As she had expected, the man didn't seem to understand her but showed curiosity rather than fear as he stared at her and her two companions. Igrid then spoke to him in

Bastarnae dialect, which the man nodded to, having obviously understood her. Satisfied by that, Igrid then asked the man a question.

"Do you have a barn where we could put our horse for the night? We could also sleep there tonight."

"I have a barn for my dairy cow and my chickens. Follow me!"

As he led Igrid and her group towards one of the rectangular huts, a lit torch in one hand, the peasant smiled to her with malice.

"I also have a barn for my pigs, but I gather that you would not like to sleep in there."

"Uh, right! By the way, my name is Igrid and my friends are Nauca and Talya."

"And my name is Petr. I hope that my barn will be big enough for all your horses. Not too many people pass by our place."

"I am sure that it will do for us. Know that we are ready to pay for its use and for your hospitality tonight."

Petr, a tall and solidly-built man, nodded in approval at that before opening wide the large door of his stable. The light from his torch allowed Igrid to see that a single cow occupied a stall at one end of the stable, while wooden cages containing hens were piled near the stall. A big pile of hay half filled the rest of the small barn.

"It will be a tight fit but it will do. Thank you for receiving us. We will now unload our horses before going to visit your family. Could you in the meantime reassure the other inhabitants about our intentions? We are merchants on a long trip towards the Northwest."

The big peasant scratched his head at that last sentence.

"I must say that I never saw traveling female merchants before, especially ones that are as heavily armed as you and your friends are."

Igrid grinned to the man in return.

"We are Amazons and my leader, Nauca, is a Sarmatian."

"Aah, Sarmatians! I did meet a few of them some time ago, when they traveled past our settlement. They stayed correct with us."

'Thank the gods for that!' thought Igrid as she led her three horses to the big pile of hay. With their nine horses pressing against each other in order to fit inside the small barn, the three young women then took their packs and saddles off them, piling the lot against the wooden palisade of the cow's stall before laying down their bedrolls. With Petr gone to pass the word around the other peasants, Nauca searched for a moment in

the pile of effects taken off their horses, taking out an iron cooking pot, four small jute bags, a few bronze bowls, a Roman Army shovel, an axe and two wool blankets. Igrid looked on, wondering why she was doing that.

“What is all this for, Nauca?”

“Our way to repay our hosts for their hospitality. You must have noticed that these people are dirt poor and their own supper was probably going to be a meager one, so we will cook our own food for tonight. It will also give me a chance to make our hosts taste new flavors and drink some hot tea. As for the tools, bowls and blankets, I intend to gift them to Petr and his family. We will take our own cups and bowls with us for the supper.”

Igrid nodded in agreement at those generous intentions, which were typical of Nauca: she may be a fierce warrior when she needed to be one, but she always had a great heart. Igrid thus helped Nauca by grabbing the blankets and the tools after collecting her own cup and bowl.

Thankfully, the rain started to slow down as the three of them walked out of the barn and went to Petr’s hut, where the peasant was waiting for them at the door. Once inside, they saw that the hut was of the semi-subterranean type, with the dirt floor about one meter below the external ground level. A big central wooden pillar supported the conical wood and straw roof and an open stone fireplace was located about one pace from the central pillar. Hay piled in one corner of the hut probably acted as mattresses to sleep on, while a deep clay receptacle contained water. Igrid thought that Nauca had been right when saying that Petr and his family were dirt poor, as the scarcity of cooking tools and appliances proved. She smiled at the sight of the four young children sitting with a woman next to the fireplace: they had to be aged between two and eight years-old. Igrid had always loved small children and she knew that Nauca and Talya were also fond of them. In turn, the woman and the older child, a boy, stared at them with obvious curiosity mixed with surprise. Petr then pointed at the woman.

“This is my wife Rissa. My children are named Stan, Olya, Britta and Ulav.”

“Pleased to meet you!” replied Igrid, who was basically acting as the go-between for her small group, before smiling at the young woman. “I am Igrid, while my friends are named Nauca and Talya. We are merchants on a long trading trip towards the Northwest and we would like to express our gratitude for your kind hospitality tonight.

Know that we have food with us for our supper, which we will now cook, plus have a few gifts for your family.”

With Nauca passing to her the items meant as gifts, Igrid then put down in front of Petr and Rissa six bronze bowls, one shovel, one axe, two wool blankets and one tiny jute bag. While obviously delighted, the peasant couple looked with curiosity at the small jute bag, with Petr asking about it.

“What is in that bag, Igrid?”

In response, Igrid untied the string closing the bag and opened it before pouring a few black grains in Petr’s hand.

“A spice called black pepper, from India. Once finely ground, you sprinkle some of it on meats or in stews, adding much extra flavor to the recipe. Pepper is rare and expensive, but we brought a good provision of it with us, along with other types of spices and herbs. Go ahead and taste one grain each.”

Petr and Rissa did so, with their eyes lighting up nearly at once.

“I like it!” said Petr. “You said ‘black pepper’?”

“Correct! By trade, we specialize in procuring exotic items and spices in faraway countries and then bringing them back before selling them at a profit. Pepper is one of the items most in demand around. This bag is yours now. However, be careful not to sprinkle too much of it at a time: its taste is quite strong.”

Rissa took hold of the bag and sniffed its content before smiling to Igrid.

“I was about to make a rabbit stew for my family. Do you think that this ‘pepper’ would do well in it?”

“Very much so, especially if you also add a bit of salt in the stew. Do you have some salt?”

“We do! Uh, I am afraid that we have only two rabbits for supper and...”

“Don’t worry about that, Rissa: we have our own food with us. In fact, you will be able to taste something else new to you tonight: curried rice.”

“Cured riss?” said Rissa, repeating the unfamiliar words.

“Curried rice. Curry is another spice from India and it gives a unique, strong spicy flavor to recipes. As for rice, it is a staple from the Far East used by a lot of people. It is a type of white grain that is boiled before eating it. I am sure that your family will like it. Finally, we will make you try a hot drink made from an herb called ‘tea’, also in widespread use in the Far East.”

Petr and Rissa then exchanged a quick look, unable to believe their luck, before Petr bowed his head to Igrid.

“It is a pleasure to host such generous visitors as you and your friends, Igrid.”

“You gave us a dry place to sleep tonight, Petr, and it would have been stingy on our part not to compensate you for that. Me and Nauca will now start cooking some rice.”

As Rissa started to cook her own recipe of rabbit stew, adding some pepper and salt to it, Nauca and Igrid started cooking rice in their own cooking pot, eventually adding some curry powder in it, plus pieces of dried fish and two dried onions. As their rice was cooking, Igrid made Petr and Rissa taste a small pinch of curry powder, again making their eyes grow wide. Rissa did cough a bit, though, as she swallowed the strong spice.

“This spice is indeed quite strong and hot, I must say.”

“That is actually considered a mild variant of curry, Rissa. What they consider a strong curry in India would probably burn your throat out and make you spit flames.”

“Wow! Do these Indians have throats made of steel?”

“Some think so. However, curry is the perfect spice to go with rice. We will also boil some tea, to make a hot beverage that will help you tone down the taste of curry.”

About an hour later, both recipes and a pot of hot tea were ready to be served, with the family and their visitors sitting on the floor around the stone fireplace. To Nauca’s pleasure, who had made the curried rice recipe, Petr’s family wolfed down their portion of rice accompanying their rabbit stew and loved the taste of their cup of tea, in which a bit of honey had been poured. The three young women also took the time to play a bit with the four young children after the meal, something they too rarely could do during the last months. Nauca then added a tiny bag of curry powder to the gifts already given to the peasant family before leading her two friends to the barn, where they suspended their wet clothes to dry them out before lying on their bedrolls and fall asleep, tired by their long day of traveling.

The next morning, they woke up to a clear, sunny sky, with the temperature fresh but still well above freezing point. Reloading their things on their horses and then mounting them, the trio resumed its long trip, with Petr and his family warmly waving them goodbye. Nauca waved back at them before smiling to Igrid.

"You can always find good people around this tough world, Igrid. That alone makes life worth living."

"I must agree with you on that, Nauca. I just wish that there were more such good people around and less mean ones. So, we continue westward?"

"Yes! Once we will hit the Hypatis River, we will see if we can ford it safely. If not, then we will swing northwest and follow its eastern shore all the way to its source. Then, we will be about halfway to the Baltic."

"And then?"

"Then, we will see, in good time."

17:37 (Carpathians Time)

Sunday, September 7, 60 B.C.E.

Eastern shores of the Hypanis River (modern-day Southern Bug River)

It didn't take long for Nauca to decide that trying to ford the Hypanis River at the point they were in this afternoon would simply be too dangerous and risky. While the river was not very wide, it was too deep to ford with horses and its shores and bottom were also covered with large rocks which made footing treacherous, especially with the present strong current.

"Alright, let's forget about fording this river, girls. Until further notice, we will simply follow up its eastern shore. However, I believe that we should now stop for the night here: there is plenty of fresh water and grass for our horses, plus there are trees to both hide and protect our camp, next to the river."

"Hey, maybe we could take a bath in the river?" Said Talya in an enthusiastic tone. We haven't been able to wash properly for days now."

Igrid gave her in turn a skeptical look.

"That water will be near freezing point. You really want to bathe in it?"

"Why not? You're a wimp or what?"

"Ooh! A challenge!" said Nauca, amused. "Well, if you want to do so, you are welcome to it, Talya, but not before we set our camp and cook our supper before darkness. Remember my instructions: no campfire after nightfall. I see what looks like a perfect spot over there, inside that clump of trees with a small clearing in the middle, next to the river. Let's get to work, girls!"

First cutting off the long grass and bushes growing in that clearing, they then raised their teepee-like conical tent and made a small fireplace inside with rocks collected around. Another, smaller and rectangular 'A'-shaped tent was next erected just two steps in front of the entrance to their big tent, which then served to protect their packs, baggage and saddles away from any possible rainfall during the night. While Nauca started boiling water to prepare their supper inside the main tent, Igrid and Talya went down to the nearby shore, careful not to slip on the rocky slopes of the bank. With Igrid staying in overwatch with her bow at the ready, Talya then stripped naked and cautiously dipped a foot in the river.

"Ooh, it is cold! Still, I really need a bath."

Steeling herself, the teenage Dacian girl then entered the river, sinking up to her neck in the cold water while holding to a hanging tree branch. Despite the frigid water, she still managed to enjoy her bath, getting rid of days of dust and sweat covering her body. When she emerged from the water and climbed back to where Igrid stood guard, her nipples were puffy and pointing out, fully erect. Igrid smiled as she admired Talya's young breasts and couldn't help kissing and licking both of her nipples, making the teenager inhale with pleasure. Opening her legs and lying on the grass, she then guided Igrid's hand to her crotch and let her fondle her as she also kept licking her erect nipples. She climaxed after a few minutes of fondling and kissed her friend on the mouth.

"Time for you to go bathe, Igrid. I will now keep watch over you."

"Aren't you going to dress back first?"

"Why? I can watch around while naked. Once you are back from the river, we could then have some more fun together."

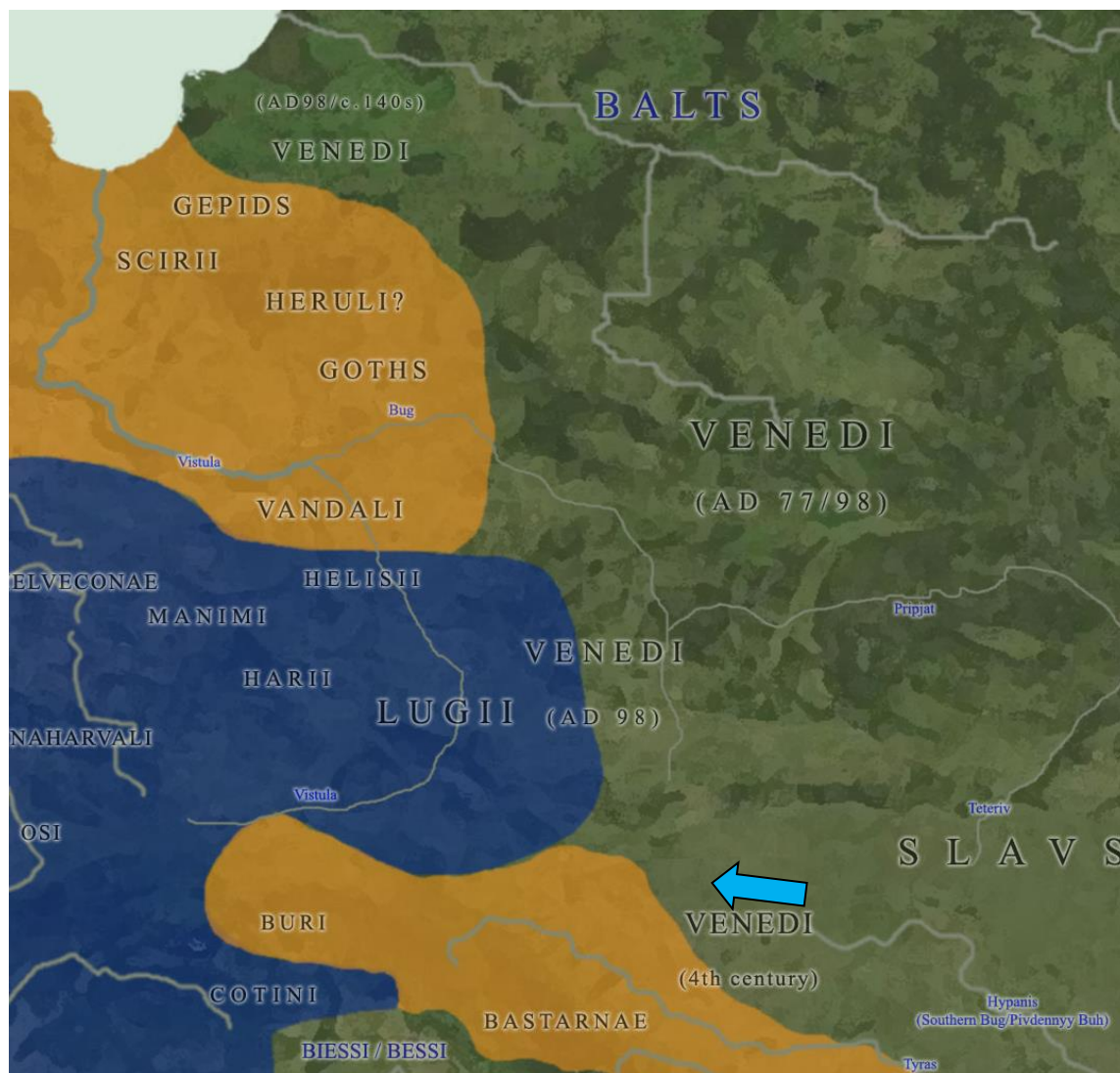
"Sounds like a plan!" replied Igrid, grinning, before stripping off with the help of her friend. Going down to the river, she managed to endure the cold water long enough to thoroughly cleanse herself, then went back to Talya, whose turn it was to admire her puffy, erect nipples.

"Such nice, sweet nipples you have. Let's honor them properly."

On the opposite shore, up the bank and standing behind large bushes where he had gone to urinate, a twelve-year-old shepherd boy couldn't believe his luck as he avidly watched both naked girls go at it. Their sight then proved too much for him to resist and he dropped down his breaches to start masturbating himself while ogling the girls. He was about to return to his herd of sheep grazing nearby, after the two girls

dressed back and left, when a third girl, apparently a bit older, also came to bathe in the river, giving him an extra show to watch. He still had the images of the naked girls in his head when he regretfully returned to his sheep. He toyed for a minute with the idea of bragging about this to his older brother but finally decided against it: maybe those girls would return to bathe in the river tomorrow and he certainly didn't want to let his brother steal this viewing spot from him.

CHAPTER 16 – THE BASTARNAE



Blue arrow: Location and direction of travel of Nauca's group.

11:16 (Carpathians Time)

Saturday, September 27, 60 B.C.E.

Hills to the east of modern-day Lvov

Territory of the Bastarnae Tribe

"So, what do you think, Nauca? Should we risk it?"

Nauca nodded slowly at Talya's question as she kept observing the large fortified village visible down in a small valley some three kilometers away. This was the first human

settlement large enough to be truly called a village that they had encountered to date during their trip.

“We were going to have to contact local people sooner or later during our trip, Talya, so we might as well do it now, while we are in the territory of Igrid’s tribe. Besides, we need to get proper directions to get to the Baltic Coast without being constantly blocked by rivers we know nothing about. However, I propose that we take a pause and eat lunch now before going to that village.”

Getting off their horses and then tying them by long ropes to nearby trees, so that they would be free to graze, the three of them then sat to a frugal lunch of cheese and nuts washed down with water. After finishing their meal, Nauca told her friends to put on their armored vests, just in case, then did the same herself. Maybe those villagers would prove to be friendly towards strangers, however her life experiences had taught her that it was always wise to err on the side of caution. Forty minutes after stopping for lunch, they were back in the saddle and started cautiously going down the hill’s slope leading to the valley ahead. As they advanced, they saw more and more traces of human occupation, mostly cut down trees and a few isolated, abandoned temporary lean-to shelters. About one kilometer from the fortified village, they emerged from the forested hills and started trotting towards it, using a trail wandering between a collection of small farms, plowed fields and grazing grounds. The peasants they saw on the way stopped their activity and looked on as the three of them went past them, some of them then cautiously returning close to their houses or firmly grabbing tools which could be used as weapons. Nauca noticed those reactions and frowned: hopefully, the inhabitants of that fortified village would prove more welcoming than those farmers.

“Igrid, you better take the lead now: I don’t like the way those peasants are reacting to us.”

“The same here. Unfortunately, my tribe tends to be suspicious of strangers.”

“Suspicious enough to attack us without provocation?”

“Not normally but all depends of what kind of local chieftain we will encounter.”

Nauca’s frown then turned to a grimace.

“Okay, girls, here is my thoughts about this situation: do not let yourselves be disarmed or taken prisoner. If we are attacked, then we will gallop out of the place and will then avoid any further villages on our way until we hit the Baltic Coast. I will rather

die than let myself be robbed and then enslaved. Igrid, we will now depend on your diplomatic talents more than ever.”

“My diplomatic talents? Uh, okay, Nauca.”

Igrid felt less than confident as she trotted at the head of her group and got closer from the village and its roughly-built wooden palisade. For one thing, the two big men standing guard outside of the gate were now pointing their spears in her direction and their facial expressions were not exactly friendly ones. Dressed in typical Bastarnae fashion, with baggy breaches and with naked torsos, the two guards held long oval shields and had daggers at their belts. Then, as Igrid came within twenty meters from the gate, four more men armed with spears and shields came at a run to form a line with the two guards, pointing their spears at the young women.

“Stop, girls!” ordered Nauca on seeing that. “I don’t like at all the attitude of these idiots. Igrid, tell them that we are traders and simply want to stop for a night here.” Igrid translated those words into Bastarnae and got a reply that made her frown.

“They want us to leave our weapons with them before we can enter the village.”

“Then, the Hell with them! If they can’t trust us, then we can’t trust them. Let’s go around this village and continue towards the Northwest.”

As Nauca started leading her two friends and their pack horses away from the gate, one of the guards, surprised, yelled at Igrid.

“HEY! WHERE ARE YOU GOING?”

“SOMEWHERE WHERE THE PEOPLE ARE SMARTER AND FRIENDLIER.” replied Igrid in a contemptuous tone while following Nauca. The guards looked at each other, not knowing what to do next.

“We should run after these girls, no?”

“And do what then? Besides, they are on horseback: we could never catch them.”

“What a bunch of assholes!” spat Igrid as she came level to Nauca’s horse. Nauca herself shook her head in discouragement before replying to her.

“Let’s try connecting with some of the individual farmers in this valley: maybe we will find a reasonable one who doesn’t spit on every passing stranger.”

They thus continued on along the trail which passed by the village and which also ran along the stream providing water to that same village. Some fifteen minutes

later, they crossed path with a mature man with gray beard who was leading a cow by a rope. Seeing that the man showed only curiosity at their sight rather than suspicion or hostility, Igrid tried her luck and, stopping next to him, spoke to him in Bastarnae.

“Excuse me for taking your time, good man, but we are travelers from afar and are heading to the Baltic Coast. We know that it is supposed to be to the Northwest of here but we would like to know if we will encounter any major river cutting our path along the way.”

“Oh, you will find the way to be easy to find, young woman. You see this small stream? It eventually joins with the Bug, a major river which generally runs North before turning West to then join the Istula²⁷. The Istula is the biggest river in the region and it eventually drains itself in the Baltic. Follow those rivers and you can’t get lost.”

“Thank you for the information, good man. Here, for your trouble.”

The man caught the silver coin thrown by Igrid and bowed to her to thank her.

“You are too kind, young woman. Have a safe journey to the Baltic.”

The man and his cow then continued on at their calm pace towards the fortified village while Igrid translated what he had said in Sogdian, a language she now was comfortable with after over a year and a half of practice. Nauca smiled with satisfaction on hearing the information from the farmer.

“Excellent! This will cut a major headache for us on this trip. We are finally approaching the end of our long journey, girls. Come on, Tamat! Forward!”

²⁷ Istula : Old pronunciation for the Vistula River.

CHAPTER 17 – A SEA OF AMBER

14:05 (Baltic Time)

Monday, October 13, 60 B.C.E.

**Fifteen kilometers east of the
Vistula River delta**

**Southern coast of the Baltic
Sea**



"THE SEA! I SEE THE SEA AHEAD!"

The three of them cheered loudly from atop their horses before continuing forward with renewed vigor along the trail they were following. Up to now they had not had to bypass other large settlements on their way, as the population density of the whole region seemed to be quite low, and they had encountered only isolated farms or small groups of farms. After another hour of walking their horses, they finally arrived on a wave-beaten beach made of a mix of rocks and sand. Coming down from her horse and grabbing its reins with one hand, Nauca then walked to the waterline and crouched to scoop some seawater in her right hand.

"Three months to arrive to the Baltic Sea... And our trade journey is actually only beginning. Only the gods know what we will encounter next...or what kind of people we will have to deal with."

Straightening up, she examined the beach she was on, looking both to her left and her right. The shoreline was bordered by a thick forest as far as she could see, with small hills rising among the coastal plains. No human hut or house could be seen from her location, nor was there any sign of human activity. For a nomad like her, this place looked to be eminently habitable, yet appeared to be mostly empty of people. A yellow sunlight reflection on the beach, some forty meters away, then attracted her attention and made her walk towards it. Arriving next to it after a few seconds, Nauca looked down at what had been reflecting the sunrays and suddenly felt emotion surge inside her: she was now looking at a fairly large block of amber, sitting in the sand and apparently deposited there by the waves.

"IGRID, TALYA! COME HERE, QUICKLY!"

Her two friends came at a near run, worried for a moment until they could look at the block of amber, which they stared at with disbelief.

“Amber?” said Talya. “How did it get on this beach?”

“Apparently, it was brought by the sea, Talya. Remember that amber is very light and can float in salt water.”

“Then, this could mean that more pieces of amber could be on this beach, right?” asked Igrid, sounding incredulous.

“Correct! Let’s get a pair of empty jute bags and let’s start combing this beach for amber. I will continue down this way while you and Talya will comb the beach the other way.”

Her two friends did not waste time in obeying her and the three of them soon were walking slowly along the beach, collecting the pieces of amber they found and putting them in their bags. That collect actually proved very fruitful, as the beach was sprinkled with pieces of amber of various sizes, from pebbles the size of beads to large blocks as big as one’s fist. When the trio reunited again after a good two hours spent combing the beach for amber, they had completely filled three large jute bags which had previously contained some of their reserve of rice, now eaten. Nauca could only stare and smile at the bags full of amber.

“Incredible! In mere hours, we collected enough amber to pay for our trip once we sell these back in Samarkand. If we could continue finding amber so easily along the beaches, we will be rich.”

“Uh, what about the local leaders and chieftains, Nauca?” said Igrid. “Won’t they consider all this amber as their rightful property? They would probably charge some kind of price or tax for the amber we picked up. If we are caught trying to leave with this amber without paying the local fee, we could end up in big trouble while being very far from any allies or friends.”

“Hum, you are too right about that, Igrid. What would the Bastarnae’s rules be about foraging goods from an open field, for example?”

“We would be asked to pay a fixed price according to the quantity of goods we picked, or we would have to trade things of equivalent value.”

“A fairly common rule, I would say, but to whom will we pay such taxes or fees? I see nobody around for as far as we can look.”

“How about continuing westward along the shoreline?” proposed Talya. “We are liable to eventually encounter at least a fishing settlement or village. I can’t believe that nobody lives along this coast, which must be rich in fish and shellfish.”

“A good idea indeed, Talya. Let’s walk westward along the shoreline while collecting the amber we can find, and this until we eventually get to a village or to a settlement. Once we will have found one, we will ask the locals to whom they pay taxes.”

The three of them then continued to walk on foot on the beach, looking for and collecting the amber they found. They also collected for their supper a few dozen mussels found in the shallower waters of the beach. Night actually came without them seeing a single hut or house, so they retreated a short distance into the woods and built a lean-to shelter for themselves out of sight from the shore. After a quick meal, Igrid and Talya went to sleep, while Nauca took the first sentry duty tour.

As her friends slept and while she was mounting guard, Nauca had plenty of time to think about their journey and its possible outcomes. If the local rulers didn’t prove to be excessively greedy, they then should make a huge profit by selling their amber in Samarkand, or by using it as a trading item on their next voyage to either China or India. Then, a question that had been recurring in her mind came back to her: even if she became rich, then what was she going to do about her money? She had always lived simply up to now and felt no attraction towards luxury or an expensive lifestyle. Even the jewels she owned already and which were stored in a safe chest in Samarkand pleased her simply by their beauty and sentimental value as gifts, rather than for their social status symbol. She just could not picture herself as some sort of court lady or rich urban merchant woman. She had always been a simple girl from the steppes and always would be. Walking through the woods, she went to the treeline facing the sea and contemplated the scenery as small waves crashed regularly on the beaches. The noise from those waves actually soothed her and she smiled to herself while listening to them and looking around. Then, her piercing eyesight caught on a dim light visible in the distance, along the shore: a house or camp was there, about a mile away. That fire had probably just been lit, which would explain why they had not seen it before going into the woods to eat and then sleep. Now knowing where they would go in the morning, Nauca returned to their small camp to resume her sentry duty.

08:24 (Baltic Time)

Tuesday, October 14, 60 B.C.E.

Baltic coast, five kilometers east of the Vistula River Delta

After closing off their campsite, the trio had to ride their horses along the shore for only a few minutes before arriving at a tiny fishing village. 'Tiny' was the proper word, as it consisted in a mere seven poorly constructed wooden huts located along the tree line, near a fresh water stream that then ran into the sea. A total of three dugout canoes were beached on the sand, with a group of men and young boys working next to them, either preparing or repairing fishing nets. Those men and boys froze the moment they saw the three riders approach, with one teenage boy then running towards the huts while shouting in alarm in a language Igrid could barely understand.

"Gee! It will be really fun to try to speak with these locals, Nauca: this is not exactly Bastarnae, despite having some similarities with it."

"Just do your best and stay polite with them, Igrid: one catches more flies with honey than with vinegar."

"Right!"

Nauca and Talya then stopped their horses while letting Igrid go forward alone, approaching the fishermen next to the canoes. Those men's expressions changed from fearful to confused and surprised when they saw that she was a teenage girl.

"Hello! Don't be afraid: we come in peace. We just want to ask for some information." said Igrid in Bastarnae. The older man in the lot, who could be about forty years-old, seemed to understand at least parts of her words and answered her in an ancient dialect that forced Igrid to make him repeat himself. After a good four minutes of verbal exchange mixed with lots of hands gestures, Igrid looked back at Nauca and motioned to her and Talya to come closer, then spoke to the former.

"This man says that they periodically pay a tribute in fish to a local chieftain who lives in a fortified village about two hours walk from here. That village is on the coast."

"Excellent! We will thus go visit that chieftain right away. However, before leaving, I will give a couple of gifts to these fishermen. We might as well start to cultivate some local friendship right away."

Coming down from her horse, Nauca went to Minad, which carried two saddlebags filled with small trading items, on top of carrying her tent. She searched for a few seconds in

one of the saddlebags, taking out of it three finely made steel sewing needles and two pairs of steel scissors, all produced in Samarkand. She then walked to the older man and bowed to him while presenting him the needles and scissors.

“Simple gifts from us, so that you could more easily repair your fishing nets and help your wife in making new clothes.”

The man’s eyes grew wide as he took the needles and scissors and admired the quality of their manufacture. He in turn bowed to Nauca and asked her a question that Igrid had to translate for her.

“He wants to know who you are, as he has never seen an armed and armored woman like you before.”

Nauca gently smiled at that and pointed at herself while saying three words.

“Nauca, Sarmatian Amazon.”

For some reason, her last two words seemed to strike the mature man, who then spoke rapidly while looking up once at the sky.

“Uh, he says that you must have been sent by a goddess called ‘Frijjo’ and by a god called ‘Teiwaz’. They are respectively the goddess of family, women and revenge and the god of war.”

“An envoy from the gods? I should be flattered by that. Tell him that we simply are traders from a far city to the Southeast.”

Igrid translated that to the man before Nauca thought about another question she would have for the man.

“Can you ask him what is the name of that local chieftain we are going to visit?”

After another gesticulating exchange, Igrid looked back at Nauca.

“That chieftain’s name is ‘Thorvald’.”

“Good! Then let’s go visit this ‘Thorvald’.”

10:51 (Baltic Time)

Private chamber, chieftain’s longhouse

Coastal village of the Cotini²⁸ Tribe, eastern shores of the Vistula delta.

²⁸ Cotini : Ancient Celtic tribe of the Hallstatt Culture which lived along the Baltic Coast and which gained a Germanic warrior leadership after the Goths started migrating south from Sweden to the Baltic shores at the start of the First Century B.C.E.

“FRIYA! FRIYA! YOU MUST SEE THIS! THREE ARMED AND ARMORED WOMEN JUST ARRIVED TO PAY VISIT TO THORVALD.”

The seeress²⁹ gave a stunned look to her servant on hearing those words.

“Armed and armored women? Valkyrjur³⁰ are here, visiting us?”

“Actually, they say that they came from far to the Southeast.”

“Whoever they are, I must go meet them. Thanks for warning me about this, Ruthveld. Where are they now?”

“They are at the front entrance of the longhouse, waiting to be received by Thorvald in the great hall.”

“Damn! Then I better hurry!”

Grabbing her seeress’ wooden staff, Friya then nearly ran from her room to the great hall, where Thorvald and his wife Gudrin received visitors and presided over feasts and reunions. Once in the great hall, Friya saw that most of the servants of the longhouse, along with a few of the warriors in the village, were already there, waiting to see the visitors. Thorvald himself, accompanied by his wife Gudrin, then showed up and sat on his raised chair. Friya next went to stand to the right and back of Thorvald, as her position as the tribe’s seeress allowed her to do. While Thorvald gave the orders around the village and in the lands surrounding it, Friya was confident about her own authority as a seeress, an authority that even Thorvald would think twice before contradicting. Thorvald then clapped his hands together and spoke out in a strong, loud voice.

“LET THOSE VISITORS IN!”

At that command, the head guard, a huge Germanic warrior armed with a long sword at his belt, then opened wide the double doors of the great hall. Two guards then walked in, preceding three young women, before pivoting and stepping out of the way to let the women approach Thorvald’s chair. Friya, like all the others present, held her breath at the sight of the three armed and armored women, two of which were mere teenagers, while the third one looked to be barely twenty-years-old. All three wore extensive sets of

²⁹ Seeress : Old Germanic type of priestess who was reputed to be able to predict the future and could invoke the favors of the gods. They were often equated in later Christian times with witches.

³⁰ Valkyrjur : Plural of Valkyrja, the Old Norse word that correspond to ‘Valkyrie’, the warrior women of Norse mythology who chose among the warriors killed in combat and then brought them to the Valhalla, the paradise for Norse warriors.

armor, with the older one covered nearly head to toe with metal and wearing a very impressive helmet which let only her eyes and mouth visible. She also wore a sword, a dagger, a battle-axe and a bow, on top of carrying in her hands an exquisitely engraved flat box made of bronze. One of the other two girls however spoke once the trio had stopped three paces from Thorvald's chair, using a dialect Friya had some difficulty in understanding. However, the girl spoke slowly and chose her words carefully, something that helped Friya a lot.

"Thank you for receiving us, great chieftain. We are traders who came from distant Samarkand, with the goal of buying local amber. This is Nauca of Sarmatia, and my name is Igrid, from the Bastarnae, while my other companion is named Talya." Seeing that Thorvald had problems understanding the girl, Friya approached him and whispered in his ear what she believed to have understood. Thorvald nodded his head but also asked her a question.

"This place called 'Samark' something, do you know about it?"

"I once heard about Samarkand from a merchant from the South who came around a couple of years ago. It is a very ancient city far to the Southeast."

"And that city, is it a rich one?"

"Samarkand is reputed to be one of the richest cities in the World and is the hub for commerce from everywhere, or so I was told."

"I see! Ask them what is the goal of their visit."

Friya did so, speaking slowly and choosing simple words. The reply she got made her nod her head with satisfaction before she whispered again in Thorvald's ear.

"They appear to me to be profoundly honest, as they just told me that they saw and collected pieces of amber on the beaches to the east of the village, but then came to pay you a compensation for the amber they found. They could easily have left without ever showing up here but chose instead to come and pay tribute to you. I say that you should be confident and friendly with those girls."

"I will. Ask them as well, politely, why they are so heavily armed and armored if they are simple traders?"

Passing that question on and getting an answer, Friya translated again for the chieftain.

"They say that the road from Samarkand to here is both long and dangerous, with bandits and hostile warriors along the way. They say that they had to fight while traveling."

"They fought? Who did they fight against?"

"The Romans, whose empire is far to the South and who are presently trying to invade a number of Celtic tribes in the Gaul, far to the Southwest of us."

"They fought against an empire?" said Thorvald, evidently impressed by that. "Can they prove that?"

"Let me ask them."

Friya then looked back at the girl who had spoken for her group up to now.

"Can you show us something to prove that you fought against the Romans?"

"Easily! Talya!"

The youngest teenager then stepped forward and presented to Friya a sword in its scabbard. Friya, examining it quickly, was immediately impressed by its finish and expensive look. She then gave it to Thorvald, who took the sword out of its scabbard to examine it with admiring eyes.

"An exquisite-looking sword indeed, with an iron blade that looks of high quality. It must have cost a lot to produce."

"It certainly belonged to a high-ranking Roman officer, Thorvald. I would say that those women are telling the truth and are worthy of respect."

The teenage translator then repeated something said to her by the older girl.

"This sword now belongs to you, as a gift from them and as a partial payment for the amber we picked up on nearby beaches."

Thorvald nodded at that, pleased, and spoke to the girl who had been doing most of the talking to date.

"You are indeed honest people: most merchants I know would rather vanish without giving me anything in exchange for my amber."

"We are indeed honest merchants, even though that is a contradiction in terms, Chieftain Thorvald."

That joke actually brought laughter around the great hall, something that helped relax the atmosphere.

"So, what else do you 'honest' merchants propose to give to me in exchange for picking amber on my territory?"

"We have both gold and silver, or would you prefer some items produced by the best artisans of Samarkand?"

That was when Gudrin, Thorvald's wife, hurried to whisper in his ear.

"I really would like to see what they brought from such a distant city."

“Your wishes are my commands, my dear wife.” said Thorvald to his wife before looking back at the teenager facing him.

“Show us what you brought from your city, girl.”

That prompted the older girl to step forward and open her flat box to present its content to Thorvald, Gudrin and Friya.

“I will first start with items that could interest your wife, Great Chieftain. First, I have this polished silver mirror that your wife will be able to use to help comb her hair and make herself even more beautiful.”

Gudrin took the mirror presented to her and held her breath as she looked at herself in it.

“This is the best mirror I ever saw, woman. I will definitely enjoy using it. What else do you have?”

“a set of fine steel sewing needles, along with a pair of steel scissors, with which your servants can make new, elegant clothes for you.”

Even Thorvald was impressed by the needles and scissors, made to incredibly high metallurgical standards and high finish. As Gudrin was swooning over them, Nauca presented to Thorvald a small jute bag of about half a liter of capacity.

“This bag of black pepper will help spice up the next feast you will give to your warriors. You just need a small quantity of it, finely ground, to add a great taste to venison. Don’t worry about this being a poison.”

As she said that, Nauca took a grain out of the bag and put it in her mouth, then masticated it. Reassured, Thorvald took the bag and also tasted one grain, with her eyes lighting up as a result.

“By Thunaraz³¹! This spice truly fires up your blood!

“Finally, for your priestess, I have an herb from distant China which she will be able to boil to produce a hot, stimulating beverage that goes well with a little honey. It is called ‘tea’.”

“Tea?! I heard of it many times but never had the chance to taste it. Thank you, young Nauca. But how did you figure that I was a priestess?” asked Friya.

“Because we have Shaman women similar to you in the steppes of Sarmatia, Priestess.”

Thorvald, now in a very good mood, rose from his chair, imitated by his wife.

³¹ Thunaraz : Ancient Germanic name of Thor, God of Thunder.

“Nauca of Sarmatia, you and your friends are welcome here and I gladly accept your gifts in exchange for the right for you to pick amber around my territory. You are invited as well to stay here for the coming night and to share my supper with me and my warriors.”

Nauca, along with Igrid and Talya, bowed to him then, quite pleased and also reassured.

“You are too kind, great chieftain. We kindly accept your generous invitation.”

“And I am anxious to hear the stories of your travels and of your fights, Nauca of Sarmatia. LISGARD! TAKE CARE THAT THESE WOMEN ARE WELL LODGED AND THEIR HORSES TAKEN CARE OF! ALSO, PASS THE WORD AROUND: THERE WILL BE A FEAST TONIGHT!”

“It will be done at once.” replied his leading servant before inviting Nauca and her two companions to follow him.

As they disappeared towards the rooms situated in the back of the longhouse and as the assembled warriors dispersed, Thorvald looked at Friya and asked her a question in a low voice.

“So, what do you think of those women, Friya?”

“That we could learn a lot from them about things that have been of concern to me for some time already. Disquieting stories have been going around about the greed and thirst for conquest of those Romans. Unfortunately, we heard only a few rare stories about the Romans from passing merchants coming from the West and the South. We really need to learn more about these Romans before they possibly push their way up to us. On the other hand, I am dying to learn more about those far-off lands of China and India. In a sense, I envy those young women for having been able to travel so widely.”

“Their stories tonight will certainly be interesting ones. Too bad that they are so difficult to understand.”

“Actually, if you ignore the different accent and some new words they use, I believe that both of our languages are related to a degree. The old legends say that our distant ancestors were nomads who came from far to the Southeast, like those women, settling our lands thousands of years ago. They are as if our own past is coming back to visit us.”

19:06 (Baltic Time)

Great hall, chieftain's longhouse

With Thorvald having asked Friya to sit between him and Igrid at the head table of the evening banquet, the seeress was now in the best position to discuss many things with the three female visitors and was fully profiting from that. While she translated many of the things said by the young women for the benefit of Thorvald, she was not shy about asking questions which were of personal interest to her, like learning more about the far-away places she had heard about in the past and also about other places she had never heard of before. In fact, the more she heard from Igrid and Nauca, the more envious of them she was. Friya had always been a curious person and one considered by her tribe to have an uncommonly open mind about new ideas and foreign concepts. One question she had just asked about the faraway lands to the Southeast then prompted Nauca in excusing herself for a moment. When she returned to her place at the head table, it was with a kind of bronze cylinder in one hand. Unscrewing the top cap of the cylinder, which seemed to be waterproof, she then extracted from it a large papyrus roll which she spread on the table in front of her after pushing away her plate and cup. Friya's eyes opened up with intense curiosity on realizing that the papyrus roll was actually a map of some sort. The map also attracted the attention of Thorvald, who then paid close attention to what Nauca said, with Friya translating for him.

"This map of the known world was made in Samarkand by one of the greatest scholars there. It understandably still has gaps and approximations in it, as it is very hard to obtain precise information about faraway places. In this, Samarkand is the ideal place to gather that kind of information, as dozens of caravans from many places pass through it every year. That scholar, who is originally from China, has asked me to map as best I could the territories I was due to go through during my present journey, so that he could improve his map. Don't be worried about the intents about doing such a map: the Sogdians have no intentions, desire or capabilities to invade other lands. Rather, it is meant to help and assist caravan masters during their long and often perilous trading trips. I have other papyrus rolls in this cylinder that have notes and sketches made by me as my friends and I traveled towards here. Any new information you could tell me about the lands to the West and North of here would thus be most welcome."

Nauca then pointed at where she was according to the map.

"This is the approximate point where I think I am now according to this map. As you can see, the contours and significant features of this region are still vague and lack

precision, but I hope that my travel notes will help improve and update this part of the map. Could I bother you to help me doing this tomorrow, Friya?"

"I would be most happy to do so for you, Nauca. The writing on your map is in Greek, no?"

"Correct! Greek is used by many people in my part of the World. Even the Romans often study and use Greek, on top of using their own Latin."

"You can read and write?" asked Thorvald, curious, making Nauca nod her head.

"Yes! I can read and write in both Greek and Sogdian. As for Sarmatian, we don't have a full writing system of our own and thus often use Greek instead."

"Can you show us where Samarkand is and which way you traveled during your last three months?" asked Friya. Nauca then slid her finger southeastward on the map, retracing her route, to finally stop on the dot marking Samarkand.

"This is the approximate route I followed and here is Samarkand, basically in the middle of the Known World. To the East of it is China; to the Southeast is India; to the South is Persia; to the Southwest is a large place called Africa; to the West is Greece, the Roman Empire and the Mediterranean Sea; to the Northwest are in succession the Black Sea, the steppes of Sarmatia, the forests of the Bastarnae and the Baltic region; while the immensity of the cold steppes and forests extend to the North. Hopefully, I will be able to gather more information and observations during my trip, thus improving on our knowledge about the Baltic region and the countries to the West."

Friya contemplated the map for long seconds, trying to memorize as much of it as she could. Nauca noticed that and said something that positively fired her up.

"If you wish so, I would be ready to let you copy this map tomorrow, Friya. However, my reserve of papyrus is strictly limited and I can't spare any of it for your copy of this map."

"That's alright, Nauca: I will use parchment, an animal skin that was scrapped and cleaned up. It is easy to write on parchment, using a piece of coal. From what I can see here, you traveled through enormous distances while coming our way. I now understand better the need for you to be well armed and armored during such a hazardous journey."

"About that Roman Empire you told us about, Nauca, what do you know of it?" asked Thorvald, understandably concentrating on something that could become a

source of problems for him in the future. In response, Nauca put her finger on top of the boot-like peninsula where Rome was situated.

"According to what I learned from the Greeks in the Tanais Emporium, Rome started off centuries ago as a simple city-state, then gradually expanded both its territory and its military power. It has by now conquered about every territory surrounding it and the countries situated around the Mediterranean Sea, shown here. Presently, Roman armies are continuing to push eastward through Persia, northwestward and northward through the territories of the Celts in Gaul and will soon threaten the territories occupied by Germanic tribes like yours in Northern Europe. They even tried to push through Sarmatia but Sarmatians, of which I was part of, destroyed a Roman cavalry unit counting over 600 men, more soldiers than you have people in your fortified village. Hopefully, that will discourage them from trying to attack Sarmatia again."

"But, if those Romans are fighting against so many people and in so many different places at the same time, how come that they have not been defeated and pushed back when so outnumbered?"

Nauca nodded her head, acknowledging the logic in Thorvald's question.

"Oh, the Romans did suffer defeats in the past and still suffer defeats from time to time, but what makes the Roman war machine so powerful is not numbers, although it counts many tens of thousands of soldiers. What makes the Romans so dangerous are their iron discipline, their tactics and their training. While they are inherently inferior to a force of mounted archers, like us Sarmatians, in close combat their battle formations are very hard to break, while their equipment is of excellent quality and also abundant. A Roman legion, counting some 5,000 soldiers, is a formidable force to face in the field. The one weakness of the Roman Army is that it is in the vast majority a heavy infantry force. Its cavalry arm is still no match for us Sarmatians or for other force of mounted archers and the Roman legions are still a bit slow in moving around. However, once on the move, stopping them is like trying to stop a giant rolling stone. Attacking them when they are on fixed defensive positions and formations is equally dangerous. The best way to defeat a Roman army or unit is to use mounted archers able to harass the Romans with a rain of arrows while staying away from its walls of shields and javelins, then to attract them into a well-prepared trap where they won't be able to deploy properly."

Nauca's words made Thorvald think for a long moment as he digested their meanings.

"But us Goths have few archers in our ranks: we prefer fighting with sword and axe. What would be the best way in your opinion to oppose and stop those Romans if they attack us?"

"Use your forests!" was Nauca's immediate reply. "Dense forests and marshes will prevent the Romans from deploying in their battle formations and will also make it easier to mount ambushes against them. Once surprised while in marching column through a forest, then your warriors will basically be able to cut them to pieces. However, never underestimate the discipline of the Roman legions: they are not the kind to panic and flee and they will not break ranks, even under heavy pressure. Finally, I have this warning for your people about the Romans: never trust them! Their greed for riches and thirst for power knows no limits and they consider all other people as inferior to them. If Romans see something they like, then they will take it and will enslave or kill the people who will resist them. Tomorrow, I can show you a few examples of Roman equipment that I earned as loot after we Sarmatians defeated that Roman cavalry unit. It will give you some idea of what facing the Romans mean."

"I will certainly like to examine that Roman equipment tomorrow, Nauca of Sarmatia."

"Then, I will prepare a display of Roman equipment for you and your leading warriors tomorrow morning, great chieftain."

Apparently satisfied by what he had learned from her, Thorvald then concentrated his attention back on the banquet itself, speaking with a number of his warriors and with his wife, while Friya was free to grab Nauca's attention again for more personal questions of her own. Nauca carefully stored back her precious map inside its bronze protective cylinder before continuing to eat while discussing with Friya. One thing she particularly wanted to learn from her was the layout of the land and people around the village and beyond. When she remarked about the low population density in the region, Friya responded with a gentle smile.

"There are indeed fairly few people living around here, Nauca. For one thing, this environment of large forests does not promote the cultivation of large surfaces, thus limits the amount of population our territory can support. In truth, much of our food here comes from the sea."

"So, there are no real cities on the territory of your tribe?"

"None that I know of, Nauca. This village of ours is about the largest kind of settlement you will encounter along the Baltic Coast and the lands immediately to the

South of the sea. The one exception would be our royal capital of Visby, on the island of Gotland, in the middle of the Baltic, straight north from here. Even then, I am not certain that you would call it a city. Thus, you may not find it of much interest to visit, unless you want to bring gifts to King Agnarr.”

“Well, I traveled to do trade, not to give away gifts to everybody.” replied Nauca, making Friya smile.

“A logical point of view, coming from a merchant. So, do you intend to go further west from here?”

“Possibly! It will depend on what I can expect to find or trade if I continued on instead of returning to Samarkand.”

“And what would you be interested to find if you went further west? Furs? More amber? Slaves?”

“Not slaves!” replied at once Nauca, making Friya realize that she just had hit a sore point in Nauca. “I don’t deal in slaves and in fact abhor the whole concept of slavery. I love freedom about everything else and I will never deprive someone else of his or her freedom, for any reason. Keep this to yourself, Friya, but my two companions had been enslaved and sold by the Romans a couple of years ago after their people revolted against Rome and lost the war. I then bought them in order to free them. Now, they are my friends and I consider them my equals as persons.”

Friya could only stare respectfully at Nauca then.

“Decidedly, you are quite apart from others I knew, and in a good way. You are a good person to befriend, Nauca.”

“Thank you! I simply try my best to be a decent and caring person, that’s all.”

“And that’s what demarks you from so many people around this world, Nauca. Then, if you are not interested in slaves or furs, what else would interest you? You seem to have an affinity with horses, right?”

“I have been riding horses since the age of five and, yes, I love horses. However, I saw very few horses in this village, apart from my horses of course, and they looked quite ordinary to me.”

“Well, a Celt merchant from the Belgae³² tribe of the Frisii once visited us and his mount and his pack horses were big, black, magnificent horses. He told me that they

³² Belgae : Main ancient Celtic tribe which lived along the coast of the North Sea, in modern Belgium and the Netherlands.

were called 'Frisian' horses and that they were to be found in the territory of his tribe, on the other side of the Jutland Peninsula, to the West of here."

Nauca immediately showed interest by her reaction at these words.

"And how far from here would these 'Frisii' be living, Friya?"

"He said that it took him over three weeks to travel to our village, where he filled up with blocks of amber before returning home."

"Three weeks... And how would you compare his 'Frisian' horses with my present horse, Tamat?"

"Much bigger and more vigorous by a wide margin, I would say. The carrying capacity of his pack horses was impressive. Also, with their shiny black robe and long mane, they made for truly magnificent beasts."

That description left Nauca dreaming for a moment as she pictured such a horse in her mind.

"By Cybele! I must see one of those Frisian horses. If they are truly like the way you described them, then I must buy a few of them and bring them back to Samarkand. Thanks, Friya! You may just have given me a new reason to continue my trip westward."

"And I am sure that you won't be disappointed by those Frisian horses, Nauca."

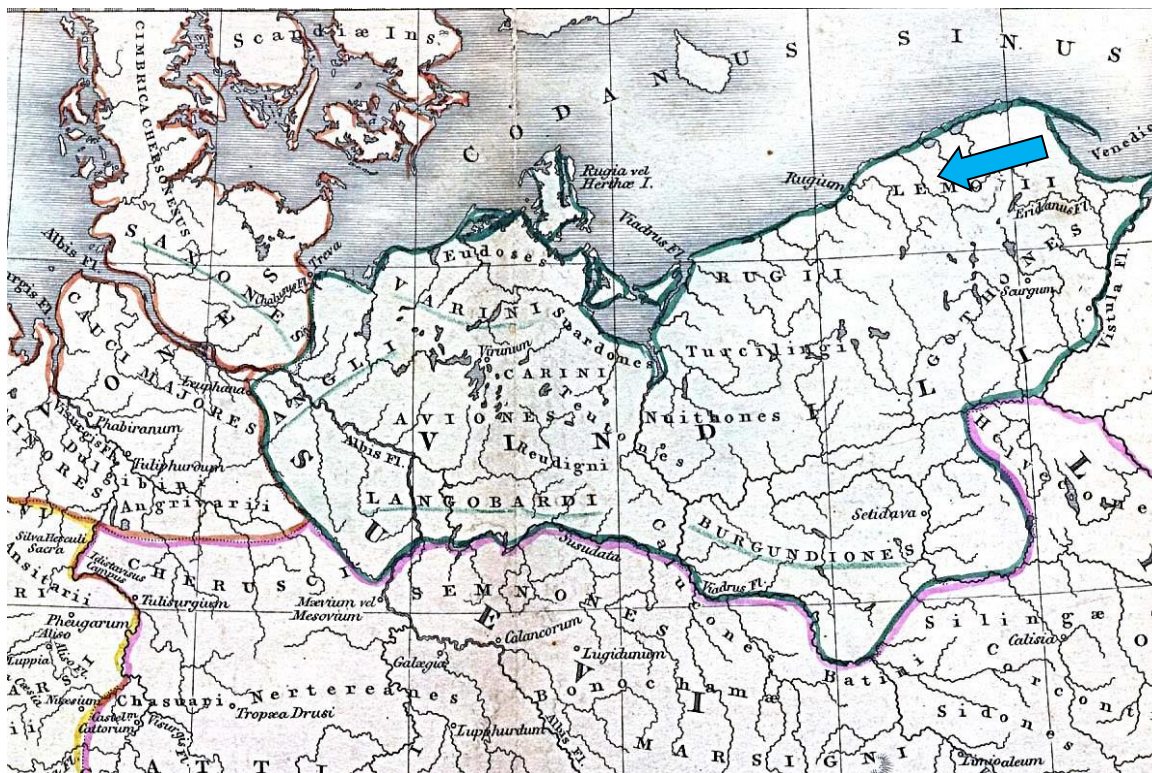
"Hopefully, those people will let me buy some of these horses." said Nauca, making Friya laugh briefly.

"Let you buy your horses? With the spices and other goods you are carrying? Hell, they would be crazy not to sell their horses to you! The only question would be 'by how much will they try to rob you while haggling with you'."

Nauca chuckled at that before replying to the seeress.

"Don't worry for me about that, Friya: I do have some experience in haggling, after all. Samarkand by itself would qualify as a top school in haggling."

CHAPTER 18 – GERMANIA



Blue arrow: Direction of travel of Nauca's group when leaving area of Gulf of Gdansk.

08:42 (Baltic Time)

Thursday, October 16, 60 B.C.E.

Coastal fortified village on the Vistula Delta

Southern coast of the Baltic Sea, on the Gulf of Gdansk

Two days after arriving in Thorval's village, Nauca, Igrid and Talya got back on their horses, their reserves of provisions replenished during their stay, and said goodbye to Friya, who raised both of her arms high while looking at the sky.

"MAY FRIJJO³³ PROTECT YOU DURING YOUR LONG TRIP, MY FRIENDS!"

Nauca briefly twisted around in her saddle to wave at Friya, then trotted out of the wooden gate of the village with Igrid, Talya and their pack horses, loaded with big bags full of chunks of amber and with two bundles of furs bought from villagers. Once out of the gate, Nauca directed her horse Tamat to take the trail that, according to Friya, would lead them to the next village, a half day away. Thanks to the seeress, Nauca now knew

³³ Frijjo : Old Germanic name for the Norse goddess Frida.

that there weren't any cities or even towns worthy of the name in the territories they were going to cross while heading west, just villages of various sizes and farms or groups of farms. Nauca waited until they were a good 400 meters from the village before looking at Igrid and Talya.

"So, what do you think, girls? That place was friendly enough and we were able to acquire a large quantity of amber for next to nothing but, trading-wise, that village was quite limited in what it could offer us. Most of the villagers didn't have any coins to buy some of the merchandise we brought from Samarkand and those who bought something from us paid with either amber, smoked fish, furs, hard-boiled eggs or locally-made sausages. Not exactly what I would call a bustling trading center."

"Well, Friya did warn us to expect more of the same as we go westward." replied Igrid. "Those Goths are obviously still living very basic lives and their agricultural output is still limited, with much of their diet consisting of meat and fish. Their social system is also quite basic, something demonstrated by their said lack of cities. That for us means that we will have to play it blind during our trip, as we can't say what kind of village chieftains we will meet on our way."

"That last part is actually a bit scary." said Talya, who was riding behind Igrid's horse. "The thought that we will depend on the mood and goodwill of every village leader along our way is not reassuring. How will we know that we won't be attacked and robbed or worse, while sleeping in a village?"

"We won't know, Talya, and that also worries me." replied Nauca, thoughtful. "Even though Friya told us that women are generally respected in this country, we do carry what would be considered by the local men a fortune in goods and equipment. Maybe we should actually camp out in the forest, out of sight of villages and farms, and only go there fully armed and armored, ready to trade but also to fight if need be."

"I agree with that!" said at once Igrid, her expression somber. "I was once forced into slavery and I have no intentions of letting anyone reduce me to slavery again. You do remember what Friya told us about the local slave trade?"

"Yes, I do! Along with amber and furs, slaves are the other main trading commodity in this region."

The three young women then fell silent while riding their horses westward, reflecting mentally on the various dangers and risks to be found ahead of them.

While roughly following the coastline while on the trail, the trio rode through a near-endless, thick forest swept by a cold, humid breeze. Thankfully, they were well equipped for that kind of weather, having fur coats and hats and also wearing well-made boots produced in Samarkand. Rare were the cultivated fields they encountered on the way, most of them tended by only one or two farms. The farmers they saw either kept their distances or retreated to their houses on seeing the weapons they were carrying. By the time that the evening approached and time came to stop for the night, Nauca's mind was made about how and where to camp: out of sight of the local people. She ended up choosing a small clearing off the trail, next to a small stream. Stepping down from Tamat, Nauca's first action was to lead her horse to the stream, so that it could drink to its content, imitated by Igrid and Talya. Next, they tied their horse to nearby trees, using long ropes which would allow their mounts to freely graze the long grass of the clearing, and unloaded them, piling their saddles, bundles and bags next to the spot chosen to erect their tent. That tent, a conical one made of wooden poles and a sewn envelope made of thin, water-resistant animal skin, took them only minutes to erect. Once it and their other, smaller 'A-frame' tent were up, the young women transferred their bags of supplies and merchandises inside the smaller tent, so that they would be protected from both rain and thieves. As per a routine they had adopted early on during their trip, they made a campfire right in the center of their tent, keeping it small and piling rocks around it to contain the flames. Talya sighed with delight when the smell of tea being boiled filled the tent.

"Aah! I think that I now can't live without a good cup of hot tea every day, especially after a hard day of riding in the cold."

"I must say that I was conquered by tea once I first drank a cup of it, years ago." said Nauca while getting ready to serve tea to her two companions. "Hopefully, those Germanic tribesmen will also appreciate it and will then want to buy some of our tea."

"Well, Friya and Thorvald seemed to like it enough." replied Igrid. "I wonder if those Celts Friya told us about would also appreciate tea. Friya did say that the Celts had a more advanced culture than that of the Goths."

"She did say that and her willingness to acknowledge that was a testament to her open-mindedness." said softly Nauca. "What she told me about the lands around and beyond her village proved very useful to me in order to write down notes and annotate my sketched map of our voyage."

“And she was in turn quite happy when you let her make a copy of your map, Nauca. By the way, I am impressed by your writing and drawing abilities. Who taught you those skills?”

“I learned to write in Greek in Tanais, before I started travelling with caravans. As for learning to draw maps, I learned that from Liu Han, who had been producing maps for years while living in Pataliputra, using his vast knowledge and the information he gleaned from the caravan masters he spoke with. Liu Han is a true genius and we are damn lucky to have met him in the first place and even luckier to have been able to convince him to go with us and Babita to Samarkand.”

“Babita...”, said softly Talya after taking her first sip of hot tea. “The poor girl was treated horribly by her family after we saved her from those bandits. Thankfully, she now seems fairly happy to live in Samarkand, close to Liu Han.”

“Don’t laugh, but I believe that Babita is also of high intelligence, not quite as much as Liu Han but still close. Liu Han quickly noticed that and started at once to teach her many new things. In fact, Liu told me before our departure from Samarkand that Babita was learning Mandarin Chinese at an impressive speed. Liu seemed to be quite fond of her.”

Those last words made Igrid chuckle.

“Fond is not the word I would use to describe Liu’s feelings towards Babita. Their relations seem to be quite, uh, close.”

“Good for them!” replied Nauca, shrugging her shoulders. “They both deserve some happiness in this hard life. Well, you girls better go to sleep as soon as we will have eaten supper: I will take the first guard shift. We still have weeks of travelling ahead of us and we need to be well rested tomorrow morning.”

02:25 (Baltic Time)

Friday, October 17, 60 B.C.E.

Forest west of the Bay of Gdansk

Goth territory, Germania

As per Nauca’s rules about sentry duty, Igrid was wearing her lamellar steel armored vest and her helmet while doing her night guard shift outside the group’s tent. She also wore her padded gambeson under her armored vest, both to help cushion blows if she ever got into a fight and to ward off the cold, damp air of the night. Since

the temperature was barely above the freezing point, she also had put on leather gloves, thus was barely bothered by the cold. Thankfully, it wasn't raining tonight, contrary to many of the days they had travelled through this region. As a Bastarnae girl, she had learned to endure the elements and to survive in the hills and forests of her native land, so this night guard duty was no challenge for her. Rather than the elements, she was much more concerned about the possibility that roaming bandits or a band of wandering Germanic warriors could find and attack her camp. A sinister owl then reminded her in a hurry about another possible threat in this forest.

"Wolves! Shit!"

A second, then a third owl sounded off as she hurried back inside the tent and shouted an alarm.

"WAKE UP! WAKE UP! WOLVES ARE NEAR OUR CAMP!"

Not waiting for Nauca and Talya to fully wake up, Igrid then rushed back out of the tent, where she got closer to their tied-up horses. They had also heard and sensed the approach of the wolves and were now quite nervous and scared, prompting Igrid into speaking to them in a reassuring tone while gently patting them.

"Calm down! Calm down, girls! We are here to protect you."

Staying near the horses, Igrid then scanned visually the dark forest surrounding them, while listening intensely in order to figure out from where the owls were coming. What she perceived then made her swear.

"Hell! They are all around us. We must have a whole pack of wolves surrounding us. Nauca and Talya better hurry up."

She then decided to stay near their horses, both to protect and reassure them and because they were what was most precious to her and her friends after their own lives: if they lost their horses here, in unknown territory, then their chances of ever returning safely to Samarkand would be drastically diminished, on top of putting an end to their trading voyage.

"YOU BETTER HURRY, GIRLS: THEY ARE ALL AROUND OUR CAMP NOW."

With the low visibility provided by a half moon shining through a cover of low clouds, bows and arrows would be of limited effectiveness and range here at night, so she pointed out her Kontos lance, firmly holding it with both hands. Igrid tensed up when she suddenly saw a pair of moving red dots among the trees, maybe some fifty meters away. Then, she saw another pair of red dots, then a third and fourth one, prompting her to shout again.

“THEY ARE NOW WITHIN FIFTY PACES OF THE CAMP! HURRY UP, GIRLS!”

She then had again to calm down their horses, which were now close to panic. That was when she decided to take the initiative. Running to a position in front of the horses, she aggressively pointed her lance while shouting as loud as she could.

“SHOO! GO AWAY, YOU BEASTS, OR YOU WILL TASTE THE TIP OF MY LANCE!”

Her defiant stance seemed to make the wolves hesitate for a moment, despite their clear numerical superiority. To Igrid’s relief, Nauca finally came out of their tent, wearing her armored vest, helmet and weapons but not much else. Nauca then grabbed her own lance, planted in the ground near the entrance of the tent, as Talya also got out of the tent.

“WE BETTER CONCENTRATE ON DEFENDING OUR HORSES, NAUCA.”

“I AGREE! TALYA, GRAB YOUR LANCE AND POST YOURSELF AT THE BACK OF OUR HORSES. PROTECT OUR BACKS!”

Talya, who was holding her crossbow, did fetch one of her two lances and took position at the back of their horses but kept her crossbow in her hands, loading it in a hurry after planting her lance next to her. She barely had time to put in place a bolt before the wolves’ howls turned into ferocious snarls, with a good dozen pairs of red dots then rushing at the camp through the trees. Talya was the first to counter-attack, raising her crossbow and aiming it quickly before shooting her bolt. The leading wolf running at her got hit in its chest and fell on the ground, dying. Talya then barely had time to grab her lance and point it before two more wolves charged her, their white canines visible in the dark. Despite her fear, she held her ground and skewered the nearest beast as it was about to jump on her. However, she didn’t have time to extract her lance from the dead wolf before its companion jumped on her with a ferocious snarl. The shock from the beast’s assault made her backpedal and she would have fallen on her back if not for the fact that she then collided with the back end of her own horse. She cried in pain as she felt the teeth of the wolf partially bite into her left arm but, thankfully, the sleeves of her riveted chainmail vest prevented the beast’s teeth from fully biting into her arm and possibly rip it off. With adrenaline flowing from fear and despair, Talya grabbed her dagger at her belt and stabbed the wolf biting her, digging her blade deep into its neck and killing it nearly instantly. With the beast then falling on the ground and taking its last breath, Talya hurried to extirpate her lance from the second wolf she had killed, then

returned to near the horses, ready to face more wolves. However, no other beasts came her way, prompting her to shout out to Nauca.

“OUR BACK IS NOW CLEAR OF WOLVES! WHAT DO I DO NOW?”

“STAY THERE, IN CASE ANY WOLVES TRY TO GO AROUND US!” replied Nauca as she skewered her first wolf with her lance. With her lance now stuck in the dying beast, she drew in a hurry her sword, a long blade made out of Hinduwani³⁴ steel, the best and toughest metal one could get around India and Samarkand. One swing of it was enough to chop the head off the second wolf which attacked her, followed by a jab of her sword that pierced the throat of her third attacker and by a slash that killed a fourth wolf. On her part, Igrid followed up her first lance jab with a quick second one, hitting in succession two wolves, before switching to her battle-axe, retrieved in the Khyber Pass from a dead Kushan warrior. Its Hinduwani steel blade, swung down with all her strength, hit a third wolf on the head, splitting it open and killing the beast at once. With more than half of their pack now dead in mere seconds, the remaining wolves hesitated, then ran away in a hasty retreat through the woods.

“KEEP YOUR POSITIONS, GIRLS: THEY STILL COULD RETURN FOR A SECOND TRY. ARE YOU ALRIGHT?”

“I’M INTACT!” answered Igrid, who was then followed by Talya.

“I GOT BITTEN ON MY LEFT ARM BUT MY CHAINMAIL SLEEVE PREVENTED THE WORST, NAUCA. I GUESS THAT I WILL END UP WITH ONLY BITE MARKS.”

On hearing that, Nauca hurried to Talya and gently pulled back the left sleeve of her chainmail vest, then examined closely her arm as best as the darkness let her do.

“I don’t see blood, Talya, just bite marks. Are they painful?”

“Quite! However, the pain is bearable.”

“I will examine your arm again, once it is daylight. We don’t want any infection to set in.”

Talya grimly nodded at that: infection was one of the biggest killers after a battle, with few ways known to combat it once a wound got infected.

“What do we do now, Nauca?”

“First, we pile up those dead wolves close to our tent’s entrance: with luck, their sight and smell will deter other wolves from attacking again.”

³⁴ Hinduwani steel : A type of high-carbon steel originally produced in India in Antiquity, later to be called ‘Damascus steel’ once it started to be exported to the Middle East.

“Or could attract another beast to our camp.” sneakily suggested Talya, making Nauca wince.

“True but I’m presently more worried about wolves than anything else. Once we have piled up those dead beasts, Igrid and I will go sleep, while you take your turn on guard duty. In the morning, we will examine your arm again and then will start skinning and curing those wolves. Wolf pelts make excellent winter clothes and will be nice additions to the bundles of fur we already have.”

“Well, if it goes on like this, our trading trip could become a hunting and trapping trip instead.” said Talya in a joking manner, making Nauca smile.

“I would see nothing wrong with that, Talya. This actually reminds me of my old hunting and trapping trips in the Taiga³⁵ of Sarmatia, while I was a young teenager. Besides, furs are always in high demand and fetch good prices, so that won’t detract much from our original purpose of trading. Also, we could at the same time get some fresh meat to eat. This forest probably shelters a mix of bears, boars and deer, plus smaller animals like rabbits and squirrels.”

“Then, hunting we will do! I especially like boar meat.”

“Me too! Now, let’s get to work and pile up those dead beasts.”

Thankfully for Talya, morning came without further incidents and Nauca was able to examine again her left arm with the help of daylight. She was more than relieved when Nauca found no breaks in her skin, something that was going to prevent possible infection in her arm. While still painful, she could live with those bite marks, which would eventually fade and disappear with time. Then came time to skin the ten dead wolves and scrape their hides, an essential job in order to prevent the hides from rotting away. That hard work took all of the day, with them finishing it only as darkness fell. Another day and night were needed to let the skins dry at least partly before the pelts could be rolled up into a bundle and loaded on one of their ex-Roman pack horses. Only then did the trio resume its journey westward.

³⁵ Taiga : Name given by locals to the boreal forests of Russia and Siberia. The Taiga often intermixes with the grassy plains of the steppes.

10:36 (Baltic Time)

Monday, October 27, 60 B.C.E.

**East bank of the river Oder, near site
of modern-day Zieczcin (Poland).**

**Territory of the Rugii Tribe,
Germania**



A light snow was falling when Nauca and her friends arrived on the east bank of the Oder River, emerging from a forest which bordered it. On both banks of the river, Nauca was able to see a village next to the water's edge, something that she found encouraging.

"Look at those two villages, built facing each other from across this river. With luck, we will be able to find and use a ferry to cross to the western bank."

"What if those two villages hate each other's guts?" replied Igrid. "The tribe on the other side of this river is probably not the same tribe settled on this side."

"That could be but we won't know until we go to the riverbank and ask if there is a ferry. If we are told that there are no ferries despite these two villages being in sight of each other, then the chances are that they are hostile to each other."

"That sounds logical." said Talya. "Let's go forward and find out."

"My thought exactly!" replied Nauca before urging her horse forward.

As they got nearer to the village and the river, Nauca saw something that made her smile.

"I SEE A RAFT ATTACHED TO THIS BANK, NEXT TO THE VILLAGE."

"Thank the gods!" said Igrid in response. "Searching for one could have taken us days."

"Let's accelerate a bit, so that we could arrive at this ferry before someone else." The trio, along with its pack horses, thus accelerated to a canter, just short of gallop. They did arrive at the ferryboat before anyone else and Nauca was then able to eye it critically, to judge if it could safely carry all of their horses. It was a simple raft made of round logs attached together and propelled by four long oars but it was large and looked sturdy enough. It had a central mast meant to support a canvas sail, plus a tent next to the mast and a wooden handrail along its sides.

"Igrid, could you ask one of those ferrymen how much they are charging to carry people and horses?"

"Sure!" said the Bastarnae girl before speaking in Germanic with the older ferryman, who seemed to be in charge of the raft. She then translated into Greek what the man told her.

"He is asking for twelve silver pieces or the equivalent for us and our horses."

"One silver piece per person and per horse... That sounds fair to me. I will pay him."

Getting off her horse and grabbing its bridle, Nauca got on the ferryboat before giving twelve silver drachmas to the boatman, making him smile. The man then waved to Igrid and Talya to come aboard as well with their horses. Once they were aboard, the elder boatman gave orders in Germanic to his five crewmembers, who then pushed the raft away from the shore with their long oars before starting to row towards the western shore of the river. As the raft was crossing the river, its pilot spoke in Germanic to Igrid, who listened to him before translating his words in Greek for the benefit of her two companions.

"He says that the people on the other side of the river are from a different tribe than that of the Rugii, who live on the eastern side of it. Those on the western banks are from the Suardone Tribe and they are very suspicious about strangers."

"Great! Another bunch of xenophobes!" replied Nauca. "Well, we will do our best to stay polite with them but do not hand over your weapons if they ask for that. I will not make myself defenseless and nor should you too."

"Oh, we learned our lesson with the Romans, Nauca." said Talya.

They then fell silent for the rest of the trip, until the raft bumped against the sandy shore and a crewman jumped out to tie the ferryboat to a nearby tree as five armed Germanic warriors approached. Nauca didn't like the way they were looking suspiciously at her and at her two friends. However, those suspicious looks changed into stunned looks when the warriors realized that they were female, with their apparent leader growling in a voice full of surprise.

"Women? Armed and traveling by themselves? What is this?"

Igrid then took on her to answer the warrior's rhetorical question.

"We are Amazons and we are on a trading voyage, collecting amber in order to bring it to Samarkand and sell it there."

"Amazons? Samarkand? Where is that?"

"Far to the Southeast of here...VERY far!"

The leading warrior, who wore baggy pants and a deerskin vest and who was armed with a spear, a dagger and a hexagonal shield but had no armor of any kind, eyed with envy the sets of armor worn by the three young women, making a remark to his four companions.

"Look at all this armor those girls are wearing. They must have bought them with money."

"No, we got them from defeated enemies we killed in combat. We are Amazons, not simple peddlers. Now, what do you want?"

The warrior was taken aback by that direct response from Igrid and eyed her with a bit of irritation.

"What we want is to collect the usual toll we ask from all the ones who cross the river near our village."

"Fair enough! How much is your 'toll'?"

"One silver coin per head, including animals. You can pay with coins or with the equivalent in objects."

Igrid translated that to Nauca, who then stepped forward while taking twelve silver drachmas from her purse.

"At this rate, my purse will soon be flat if we keep hitting rivers along our way. Here you go, big brute."

Of course, Igrid refrained from translating her last words then. The Suardone warrior took the money, then nodded his head once.

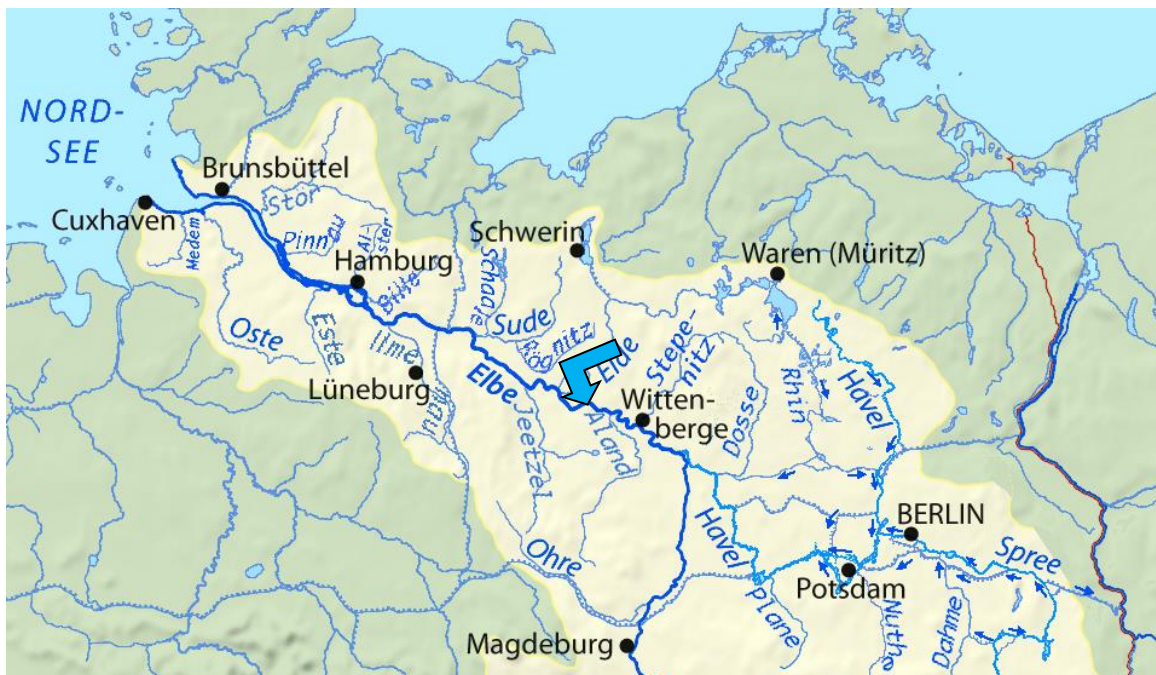
"You may pass, women."

Igrid did not reply to that, instead getting back on her horse and taking the lead ahead of Nauca and Talya. The five warriors watched them trot away with their pack horses before looking at each other.

"Have you ever seen women warriors before, men?"

"They may be armed and armored, but are they real warriors? I don't think so!" replied one of the Suardone, making his companions nod their heads in approval at his words.

CHAPTER 19 – MORE RIVERS



Modern map of the Elbe River basin and its tributaries. The Oder River is shown along the right edge of the map. Blue arrow shows the location and direction of travel of Nauca's group.

16:48 (Germania Time)

Thursday, November 13, 60 B.C.E.

Eastern banks of the Elv River (Old Germanic name of Elbe River)

Territory of the Saxon Tribe, Northern Germania

"Rivers and more damn rivers! What a waste of time! And precious few ferryboats to be found along those rivers."

Igrid nodded her head at that exasperated rant from Nauca as their group was riding upstream along the eastern bank of a large river, the fifth one they had encountered during the last two weeks.

"Have you noticed that we are encountering less and less people as we go West? We even found empty, abandoned farms on our way."

"Yes, I noticed that, Igrid. I find that quite strange, actually. Even though forests cover the great majority of the lands we crossed, the cleared fields we went through still looked quite fertile. Around Samarkand, people would grab such fertile fields in an instant. Yet, a good part of these cultivated fields now seems to be abandoned. And

that was not out of some 'over-population problem': there are hardly any people living in this region, at least from what we saw."

"Maybe most of the people live along the coast, to the North of here." said Talya, making Nauca nod once.

"That could be, Talya, but that does not explain the farms we found abandoned. Furthermore, all the signs showed that they were abandoned recently, within a year or two or even less. What could cause people to abandon fertile fields and intact houses like this?"

"The coming of invaders, maybe?" proposed Igrid. Nauca immediately shook her head at that.

"What invaders? You saw like me that the people living along the Oder River seemed quite content to live there and didn't show any fear of incoming invaders. And I don't think that the three of us qualify as an invading army."

That remark made young Talya chuckle a bit.

"Us...an invading army... Yeah! Many young men would be happy to greet such invaders as us."

The three young women then fell silent while riding along the river bank and looking for a way to cross the large, deep river. After another half hour of riding and with the Sun getting quite low on the horizon, the group arrived at a large clearing bordering the river which contained what looked like two farm houses and a barn. Smoke rose from the chimney of one of the houses.

"Well, it seems that we finally are encountering some of the locals. Let's go and ask them permission to use their barn for the night. I'm afraid that it is about to rain...again!"

Making their horses trot towards the houses, which were surrounded by fields that seemed to have been cultivated recently, the young women soon stopped and dismounted near the entrance of the house that seemed to be occupied. With Talya holding the reins of their horses, Igrid and Nauca walked to the roughly built wooden door of the farmhouse, with Igrid knocking on it while speaking up in Germanic.

"HELLO! WE ARE LOOKING FOR A SHELTER FOR THE NIGHT. WE MEAN NO HARM."

Igrid then heard faint noises of a short conversation between a man and a woman and had to knock a second time before she heard steps approach the door from the inside.

An old man with a long gray beard finally unlocked and opened the door. His well-used, simple clothes, told her that he was probably quite poor. He also happened to be holding a long knife and looked less than assured. However, his demeanor changed on seeing that his visitors were young women. Still, the arms and armor worn by Igrid, Nauca and Talya reawakened his suspicions.

“Who are you and why do you come so heavily armed, women?”

“We are traveling merchants from very far to the East and we are armed because there are many dangers along our route. We mean no harm to you, on the contrary, and only wish to be able to use your barn for the night. As you can see, it is about to rain again and we would like to stay dry tonight.”

After a moment of hesitation, the graying man, who was quite thin and looked underfed, relaxed and returned his knife to his belt before opening wide his door.

“We were afraid at first that someone was coming to take our farm but I must say that you are the most polite and prettiest invaders I ever saw. You are welcome to come in and use my barn, woman.”

Both Nauca and Igrid chuckled at the remark from the old man, with Igrid then replying to him while bowing to him.

“Thank you for accepting to shelter us, old man. We will go first put our horses in your barn, then will come back to your house.”

Igrid and Nauca then turned around and went to grab the reins of their respective mounts and pack horses to lead them to the barn next to the house. The barn, despite being of fair size, was next to empty, if you excepted a pile of hay, a trough half-full of water and cages containing a dozen hens and a rooster. First unloading their horses and piling their saddles and bags in one corner, the young women then made their animals drink water and tied them next to the pile of hay. They finally brushed their horses before getting ready to go to the house. However, Nauca first made her two friends take one sack of rice, a small bag of dried tea leaves, a tiny pouch of curry powder and some smoked fish with them, prompting a question from Talya.

“Why bring those inside, Nauca?”

“Did you notice how thin that old man was? He and his wife may well be close to starvation and giving him some of our provisions would be an adequate way to thank him for his hospitality. We can always fish, hunt or buy food on our way but I doubt that this old man can get food easily.”

Talya lowered her head at this most recent demonstration of caring toward others from Nauca.

"You are right, Nauca. My own previous life did not accustom me to care much about others."

"But you are a good person and you proved to me that you still care, Talya. There is already way too much cruelty and indifference to the welfare of others in this World and too little kindness. When I was very young, my father and uncle had already isolated themselves from our tribe to live separately and thus get away from that mad culture of constant raiding and robbing other people's herds that was part of the mentality of us Sarmatians and of other steppe people. I learned from my father and mother that being kind to others is overall more beneficial to everyone in the long run than simply applying the law of the strongest."

"A law that the Romans definitely believe in." added Igrid before leaving the barn, the sack of rice on one shoulder and her bedroll on the other shoulder.

When they entered the farmhouse, the old man looked with incomprehension at the bags carried by the three young women.

"What are those bags?"

"We saw that you probably don't have much food for yourself and your wife and we didn't want to take the little you have, so we brought in some of our own travel provisions."

The old woman standing next to the old farmer gave a thankful look at Igrid as she dropped her bag of rice in the corner of the small house used as a kitchen area.

"You are kind people indeed, young girl. Where are you from?"

"I am a native of the Bastarnae Tribe, which lives far to the Southeast of here. However, me and my friends came from Samarkand, a city even farther to the Southeast. My name is Igrid and these are my friends, Nauca and Talya."

"And I am Grete, while my husband's name is Friduric. But please, come and sit next to our fire."

"Thank you! Do you mind if we use your pots and utensils to prepare supper for all of us?"

Neither Grete nor Friduric were ready to confess that they actually had nothing for supper, as they were trying to ration the little food they had left, so they simply nodded their assent to Igrid. They then sat close to the fire, using cut logs as chairs, and

watched as their three guests got busy boiling water in two separate pots. While the water was warming up, Igrid and Nauca sat down facing the old couple, with Nauca starting to ask them questions which Igrid then translated, along with the answers from the couple.

“Tell me, good people: we saw very few people living in this region and even found empty houses and farms, yet there was no trace of violence at those empty houses. What is happening around here?”

That question brought a bitter smirk on the old man’s lips.

“You can thank King Ariovistus for that, woman. Ariovistus is the King of all the Suebi Confederation, of which our own tribe of the Saxons belongs to. King Ariovistus decided about a year ago to move west and south to invade the lands held by the Celts on the other side of the Rhine River, which forms the border between us Germanic tribes and the Celts. He thus called to arms all the warriors ready to follow him, with the result that most of our men joined his army, taking their families with them at the same time. That is why the other house in this clearing is empty: my foolish nephew went away, dragging with him his wife and three children, with dreams of glorious battles and conquests in his head. Unfortunately for me, he also took with him our two dairy cows and our five pigs, leaving us with only our chickens and barely enough wheat grain to replant our fields next Spring. As a result, we barely survive from fishing and from our reserves of dried vegetables while trying to preserve that precious reserve of grains.”

Nauca couldn’t help lower her head, discouraged by this latest example of human foolishness and selfishness.

“I must confess that I myself saw plenty of that kind of foolish thirst for conquest and so-called glory through battle in the countries I went through while part of a traveling caravan, Friduric. We ourselves fought many times in the past, but only in order to defend ourselves and our companions. That is why we are so heavily armed: to defend ourselves from the many dangers we encounter during our long trips.”

“I wish that more people would be as thoughtful and caring as you, Nauca. Where are you going, if I may ask?”

“We are going West, to get to the lands of the Frisii, where we are planning to buy some of their horses, which are said to be big and magnificent.”

“Aah, yes, the Frisii! I know about them. They live along the coasts of the Nordsee, to the northwest of here.”

“Tell me about them, Friduric. Are they Germanic or Celtic?”

"Neither! They are a tribe of the Belgae people, which lives along the coasts of the Nordsee. They tend to live their own lives and stay away from others' wars while cultivating their fields and raising their herds."

"They sound like sensible people to me, from what you are saying."

"They are but don't attack them, or you will get quite a fierce reaction from them. King Ariovistus is unfortunately ignoring the fact that the Celts who live to the South of the Belgae are equally fierce. He, along with my ex-neighbors and other tribesmen, may end up paying dearly for underestimating the Celts. But tell me, Nauca: if you were planning to visit the Frisii, why are you so much south of the coast? You should be traveling downstream, not upstream."

"A good point, I must say. The truth is that the number of rivers we have been encountering, along with the near absence of ferryboats or fording points to cross them, is greatly frustrating us and has forced us to head upstream in order to find fording sites or a ferryboat we could use. Would you know about such fords or ferryboats nearby?"

"Well, you may find such a fording site some half a day's march south of here, where the Elv and the Havel connect together. By crossing the Havel, then the Elv, you may find the water levels there to be low enough to let you wade across. I know that many people go there in order to cross the Elv."

Nauca couldn't help let out a sigh of relief when Igrid translated those words from Friduric.

"At last! You have no idea how many days we have been wasting by having to chase after ways to pass the numerous rivers we encountered."

"Then, why travel mostly by land when you will come back towards your home? Most of the rivers of the region originate to the South or Southwest of here and some are quite long. If you could find a proper boat to carry you and your horses, then you could probably cut a lot of distance and difficulty from your trip home."

Nauca nodded slowly her head at that.

"Now, that is an idea worth exploring, Friduric. Thank you for that suggestion."

They discussed further for another few minutes, with Nauca asking Friduric to describe to her the geography of the region, until Talya spoke up.

"The rice is ready! We also have some hot tea to drink."

"Rice? Tea? What are those?" asked Grete, Friduric's wife, prompting a smile and an answer from Igrid.

“Rice is a type of grain that is cultivated in the East, very far from here. The people there eat rice as much or more than they eat bread and it is one of the main food staples in those regions. Rice is very filling and can be used in all kinds of recipes, cooked with either fish, meat, vegetables or a combination of those. It is also easy to store it for long periods, as long as it is kept dry. I will show you later how to cook rice. As for tea, it is another staple cultivated in the East and is a type of leave used to make a hot and stimulating beverage by boiling its dried leaves in water. It has a bit of a bitter taste but many then put in a bit of honey in order to sweeten it. Tea is the perfect hot beverage for long winter days. I am sure that you will like both rice and tea. For our supper tonight, Talya has cooked rice with some smoked fish and a spice called ‘curry’.”

“It does smell very good, I must say.” said Friduric while eyeing the pot of rice Talya was now bringing to the large slice of cut log that the couple used as a table. Talya then filled bowls of steaming rice, serving Friduric and Grete first. She, along with Nauca and Igrid, didn’t miss the way the old couple hungrily ate their rice after tasting a first bite of it: they were definitely bordering on starvation.

“By Wodanaz, this is really good!” said Friduric between spoons of rice.

“We are happy that you like it. Talya will now serve you cups of hot tea to drink. She added in some of the honey we are carrying for our trip.”

The tea proved to be as well liked by the old couple, if not more, than the rice recipe. As the couple happily ate, Igrid showed them some uncooked rice and dried tea leaves and took a few minutes to explain to them how to prepare them and also gave them a number of suggestions about what kind of recipes could be made with rice. The happy farmers in turn told the young women about what they knew of the region, providing them with more useful information. From it, Nauca concluded with some discouragement that their problems about river crossing were far from over. However, she could only blame herself for having launched into this trip westward without proper prior knowledge of the region’s geography. She then reminded herself that there were no corresponding maps available to her and that she was in fact in the process of taking notes and scribbling sketches which would eventually be used to draw such a map of Germania. Right now, what these old farmers were telling her would have to do in order to help her upcoming travel through these lands.

Once they had all eaten supper, they then unrolled their bedrolls on the bare ground of the farmers' hut and went to sleep: they were quite tired from their hours of riding and, with Friduric and Grete being too poor to be able to afford candles, the inside of the hut was now quite dark. Nauca mentally debated about having one member of her group stand guard during the night but finally decided not to: the population density of this region was so low and this farm so isolated that the possibility of some thieves or bandits showing up during the night was very low. Still, she made sure to sleep with her sword close at hand and so did her two companions.

When the morning came and they woke up, they found with relief that their horses, equipment, supplies and merchandises were still in the barn, untouched. While Igrid showed to Grete how to boil tea, the old woman in turn collected a few fresh eggs laid by her hens and boiled them, providing the group with a frugal breakfast of hard-boiled eggs. That in turn prompted Nauca in giving to the overjoyed couple some of her reserves of wheat flour, grain animal feed and salted lard. When the young women finally departed on their horses, the old couple came out to wave them goodbye.

"THANK YOU FOR YOUR GENEROSITY! MAY WODANAZ WATCH OVER YOU DURING YOUR TRIP."

"AND MAY YOU GO ON AND LIVE MANY MORE YEARS, GOOD PEOPLE." replied Igrid, waving back before trotting away. Thankfully, the weather that morning was dry, albeit cold, and the trio made some good way while riding upstream along the eastern bank of the Elv. After about two hours of riding, they arrived at the junction of the Elv and of the Havel that Friduric had told them about and continued on upstream of the Havel, hoping to find soon a fording point to cross to the west bank. Luckily for them, they found such a point within half an hour and were able to cross the river at low tide, with the water going up only to the belly of their horses. Going westward for another fifteen minutes, they found a similar fording site on the Elv and crossed it. Nauca's spirits were now much higher than yesterday as her group was then able to trot westward at a good speed through the fields and forests of the countryside.

In the following four days of travel, her group encountered three more rivers across its way. Thankfully, those rivers proved much smaller than the Elv and they were able to cross them with little difficulty and waste of time. As they went, Nauca scrupulously kept taking notes and making sketches about the terrain they had gone

through, using as a standard measure of distance the length traveled on horseback in one day. Once back in Samarkand, she would then be able to draw with Liu Han a map of the whole region that could prove very useful in the future. However, when they encountered the fourth river since the Elv, a river which would be known in the future as the Weser, that river proved to be



a much more serious obstacle than the three previous ones. Nauca felt some worry as she contemplated the river, which was easily over 150-meter-wide at the spot they had arrived to.

“Damn! There is no way that we will be able to find a fording site along such a large river. We will definitely need a ferryboat or a raft. The question now is: will we be able to find one and, if yes, where? Upstream or downstream from here?”

“I would say, let’s go upstream.” replied Igrid, who was scanning the horizon to the north of their position. “I believe that I see a sort of village in the distance, along this side of the river.”

Nauca looked in that direction for a few seconds before smiling.

“You are right, Igrid! Let’s go downstream along the riverbank: we should be able to get some information about a ferry or raft from the people there.”

With renewed hope that they would be able to cross this river, the trio followed the eastern shore of the river at a horse’s walk, passing by the treeline bordering the river. As they progressed and got closer to the village they had spotted, Nauca couldn’t help frown as they could detail better the human settlement they were approaching.

“This place looks quite poor and primitive, from what I can see. I doubt that those people could buy some of our merchandises, even if they wanted to.”

“Be careful about judging only on appearances, Nauca.” replied Igrid. “Besides, what we want now is information about a way to cross this river, not about possibly selling our things to these people.”

"I don't know, Igrid." said Talya. "This village doesn't even have a palisade around it to protect it and the houses in it are mere huts. On the other hand, I see cultivated fields around it, along with a few heads of cattle."

"Well, it seems that we have now been spotted, as I see a group of people form up near the shore, looking in our direction. Thankfully, they look simply curious and not hostile."

Nauca's last remark proved correct, as the mixed group of men, women and teenagers that had formed near the shoreline was armed with only a few knives and axes and didn't show open hostility when the trio stopped near them. Both Nauca and Igrid dismounted and bowed to the villagers, with Igrid speaking to them in Germanic.

"Good morning, good people! We are traveling merchants from very far to the East and are trying to find a way to cross this river with our horses. Would there be a raft or ferryboat available somewhere around here?"

The older man of the lot, who was maybe in his late thirties, answered her in a Germanic dialect that forced Igrid to pay attention in order to understand him.

"There is a ferryboat that operates from the opposite shore, woman. When we need it, we simply blow a horn twice and it will then come, if it is available. Uh, how come three young women like you are traveling by themselves while carrying arms and armor? Are you answering the call to arms from King Ariovistus?"

Igrid immediately shook her head at that last question.

"No! We didn't come to fight: we came to trade and are from a very distant land to the East. We are not interested in participating in the local wars. As for our arms and armor, they are meant simply as protection against the various bandits and beasts to be found along our route. That ferryboat you mentioned, can it carry horses?"

"Yes! It can carry about three to four horses or cows at a time. Do you want us to call for it to come here?"

"Yes, please!"

The man nodded his head, then looked at a teenage boy standing next to him.

"Hrolf, go get my calling horn and bring it to me."

As the teenager started running towards the village, the man looked back at Igrid with clear curiosity.

"You said that you are traveling merchants. What kind of merchandises have you brought with you?"

"Well, we do have a variety of things we brought from the East. However, do you have something to exchange for them, or some silver coins?"

"We have no coins, woman. As for things of value that we could exchange, we have a few furs that our people caught during the past year, but not much else."

"Furs will do. In exchange, we have some metal tools, like iron pots, shovels and pics, along with spices and blade weapons, like knives, swords and javelins."

"Some of us could be interested in your things. I will go warn those of us who have furs to trade to come to the shoreline in order to exchange them for your things."

"Tell your people that we would also accept fresh food provisions, like salted or smoked fish or meat, along with grain feed for our horses."

The man nodded again before leaving at a slow run. With Igrid then translating her conversation with the man for the benefit of Nauca, the latter then decided to unload and unpack a variety of the trading goods they had been carrying since leaving Samarkand. The men and women still on the shoreline immediately started looking at the merchandise while discussing their quality and degree of interest among them. As Nauca had expected, her domestic appliances and tools, like iron pots, utensils, bowls, scissors and sets of sewing needles, attracted more attention than the various weapons on display, while farm tools also proved of interest to the villagers.

When the elder villager returned, a horn in one hand and a bundle of furs under one arm, his first move was to blow his horn twice as loud as he could. His horn call then was rewarded by the sound of another horn's double blow that made him smile.

"The crew of the ferryboat heard me and just signaled that it will soon be on its way to here. In the meantime, we could discuss together about the value of my furs. I have pelts from rabbits and foxes."

"Alright: let's examine the quality of your furs and decide on a price value for them. Then, you will be able to see what you would like to buy in exchange for your furs. The same will go for the other villagers who have furs or other things to offer us."

"Fair enough! Uh, by the way, where are you going exactly?"

"We intend to visit the Frisii in order to buy some of their big black horses. Horses are very important for us."

"The Frisii? Then, you won't have long to travel further before you will encounter them. Their territory along the sea coast starts about one week's march from here, once you are across the Weser."

'Meaning about three days on horseback.' thought Igrid. *'We are getting close.'*

With Igrid continuing to play interpreter while also participating in the haggling that followed, the trio ended up acquiring quite a lot of good quality furs, mainly fox pelts, along with a couple of large jute bags full of oat grains and some smoked or salted meat and fish, traded for an assortment of kitchen utensils, pots, pans and farm tools. The village elder's wife also grabbed a pair of steel scissors and a set of sewing needles, while her teenage daughter got her hands on one of the silver mirrors on offer by Nauca. By the time that a large raft formed of tree trunks tied together showed up with five boatmen, both sides of the exchange concluded their business with strong forearm shakes, each satisfied by their dealings. Seeing that the raft could only support at most four horses at a time, Nauca decided to split her horses in three groups of three and sent Igrid across first with the initial three horses. Crossing her complete group to the western bank of the river took a total of about two hours, after which she handsomely paid the happy boatmen before starting again on her western trek. It would have been both foolish and quite stingy not to pay well such a useful set of service, which could prove essential for them again in the near future.

CHAPTER 20 – LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT



Frisian stallion.

09:49 (North Sea Time)

Monday, November 17, 60 B.C.E.

Frisii territory, sixty kilometers northeast of the Lower Rhine River

“NAUCA, I SEE A HERD OF HORSES AHEAD! THEY ARE ALL BLACK!”

Alerted by the shout from Igrid, Nauca anxiously concentrated her eyes towards the far-off fields ahead of them and felt her heart jump with joy on effectively seeing a herd of about forty black horses, which were busy grazing the long grass of the field they were in. She was also able to distinguish a man riding a horse near the herd.

“I see a man on a horse, watching over that herd. Let’s go see him but let’s also look as friendly as we can: I would really love to buy some of those black horses from their owner. We will remove our helmets and armor before going towards him.”

Doing so took them some ten minutes, time to pack away their armor, with the trio then having their horses walk calmly towards the herd. Nauca made a friendly wave as soon as the man watching the herd saw them, then sent Igrid ahead alone to go speak with him.

As Igrid approached the herd’s keeper, she was able to see that he was actually a teenage boy on the verge of adulthood and was armed with both a knife and a pair of javelins. In turn, the teenager watched her approach with obvious curiosity and didn’t touch his weapons as Igrid stopped her horse close to his horse, which was of the same race as the big black horses busy grazing the grass.

“Good morning! Me and my two companions are traders from far to the East of here and came with the hope of buying some Frisian horses, of which we heard a lot of good. Your horses indeed look magnificent, strong beasts. In view of your age, I gather that you are not their owner.”

“Effectively, I am only watching over them. They belong to my family.”

“And would your family be ready to sell some of those horses to us?”

“I think so! After all, we raise those horses in order to sell them once they are adult. I must stay and continue to watch my herd but you can go to my family’s farm, which is a few minutes from here to the Northwest, and speak with my father. His name is Durax.”

“Then, we will be happy to go speak with him and discuss trade.”

“And he will also be happy to see you: buyers have been rare during the last few weeks and Winter is arriving soon. You will find a trail through the woods in that direction. Follow it and you will get to my family farm.”

“Thank you!” replied Igrid before waving at her friends and signaling to come forward. Once near Igrid and the herd keeper, Nauca dismounted and, walking slowly in

order not to scare the animal away, approached one of the black horses, which was at least fifteen centimeters taller at the withers than her own Tamat and was also much more massive while still being a very handsome animal, with a long black mane and tail and a head that stood high. She then gently caressed the head of the Frisian stallion while speaking softly to it.

“You are a true beauty. You also look so strong, yet appear sweet in character. I hope that I will be able to buy you and many of your kind.”

Kissing the horse on its nose, Nauca then mounted back on Tamat and followed Igrid, who led her two companions towards the Northwest. She easily found the trail signaled by the teenage boy and then followed it while going through a small forest. Once through that forest, they were able to see a farm composed of a number of buildings, including a long barn and a stable. There was as well a large corral with a dozen black horses in it close to the main farmhouse, plus cultivated fields, which were now empty and stood down for Winter. Nauca embraced the complex with critical eyes.

“Hum, quite a large farm establishment. This family must be an important and rich one for this region. We couldn’t have encountered a better opportunity than this. I hope that this Durax will prove to be sensible in his demands to us for his horses.”

As they got closer from the farm complex, Nauca was able to distinguish something that unsettled her a bit.

“What the... I see two men armed with spears and shields guarding the entrance to the farmhouse. This Durax must really be an important man around here to warrant such protection. Hopefully, his importance won’t get to his head while we discuss trade.”

Continuing with her horse at a calm walk, in order not to alarm those two guards at the farm, Nauca and her two companions soon arrived within shouting distance of the farmhouse. By then, one of the guards, having spotted their approach, had gone inside the house, to soon emerge in the company of a bearded man. That man in turn wore clothes of obviously higher quality than those of the guards, making Nauca guess that he was the farm owner. Again, she used the services of Igrid as translator and dismounted before approaching the man and speaking to him in Sarmatian.

“Greetings! My name is Nauca of the Roxolani and I come from distant Samarkand on a trading expedition. I would like to buy some of your splendid horses, if that would be possible.”

"Business is always possible...if you have money or goods with you. From Samarkand, you say? I heard about it but never saw anyone from it before today. But come inside, you and your two friends, so that we could discuss business together. You can tie your horses to these poles on each side of the door. My guards will make sure that nobody steals from your horses while we are inside."

"You are too kind. By the way, my name is Nauca and my friends are Igrid and Talya."

"And I am Durax, husband of our tribe's Folk Mother, Frana."

That last 'detail' made Nauca hesitate and stop for a moment.

"You mean that your wife is the queen of your tribe?"

"Close! Frana is the matriarch of the Frisii and is ruling our tribe while young King Ascon is growing up."

"Is she here? If yes, I would certainly want to pay my respects to her."

Durax seemed pleased by her words and nodded his head once.

"She is effectively here but is presently discussing in private with some of our most prominent nobles and chieftains. I will however warn her of your arrival before we start negotiating for the sale of my horses."

First going through a long corridor with Nauca, Durax then led her into a large room that had all the appearances of a meeting and feasting hall. At the far end, Nauca saw a mature woman sitting at a table and discussing with nine big men, all of them armed with swords and axes. The woman and nine men stopped discussing on seeing Nauca enter with Durax, who then went to whisper into the ear of his wife. Something that he said made her do a double take and she then stared with curiosity at Nauca while signaling for her, Igrid and Talya to come forward.

"Please come closer, young women. You really came from Samarkand? Here, this name is nearly legendary and you are the first persons to arrive here from that city." Nauca and her two companions walked towards the table and stopped some three paces from it before putting one knee down on the ground and bowing their heads in respect.

"Pardon us for interrupting your counsel meeting like this, Great Frana. We were not expecting to find such an important person as you when we came to this farm in order to buy some of your horses. I must say that your horses are as magnificent and strong as they were said to be."

The Folk Mother smiled with pride, obviously flattered by Nauca's words.

"Our Frisian horses do indeed have a wide reputation as majestic animals. I am sure that they will make quite an effect on entering Samarkand at the end of your return trip. Did you come this far just to buy some of our horses, Nauca of Sarmatia?"

"No, Great Frana! The primary goal of our trading expedition was to buy amber from the Baltic Coast and then return to Samarkand. However, once on the Baltic Coast, we were told about your great Frisian horses and I then decided to come and see them for myself. As a Sarmatian nomad, I spent all my life on horseback and I both love and respect horses."

"Wait! Would you be one of those fabled Amazons the Greek were so afraid of?" That question made Nauca grin with malice.

"I am! However, contrary to what the Greeks pretend, we kicked their asses, not the other way around."

A sober expression came to Frana's face on hearing that.

"By the gods! You must have been sent to us by Baduhenna, our Goddess of War. You would certainly be worthy of representing her. Would you be ready to call yourself a warrior?"

"I AM a warrior, Great Frana. I fought many battles to date, including against the Romans, and killed dozens of men in combat. While my two companions have less experience of fighting than me, they also fought a number of times and killed men."

"Then, you are all worthy of representing Baduhenna. Consider yourselves my guests of honor during your stay here. Since you must have traveled long and hard from Samarkand, why don't you install yourselves here today before discussing the buying of my horses? That will allow me to finish my discussion with our tribal chieftains. Then, I will be able to direct all my attention on your visit. Durax will now give you rooms in our house and will make sure that your horses are fed and cared for."

"You are too kind, Great Frana." replied Nauca, pleased, while bowing her head again. Getting up, she then let Durax lead her and her two friends out of the meeting hall and into a large room with a fireplace in the center of it, where the Frisii man showed them a large pile of hay which obviously was meant to be used as a sleeping surface.

"Feel free to bring your things in this room and install yourselves for the coming night: it is yours until you decide to depart. I will then show you where to bring your horses, so that they could drink and eat."

"Thank you, Durax! You and your wife are too kind."

Durax smiled as he replied to her.

“Nothing is too good for female warriors sent to us by the Goddess Baduhenna.” Nauca was careful not to contradict him on that: such beliefs about envoys sent by gods were common enough around the whole World, while this could only play in their favor in the hours and days to come. She didn’t even need to pretend to have been sent by this Goddess Baduhenna, as such envoys were said to often be unaware themselves of the role they were meant to play, with the gods manipulating their moves in an unconscious way. She thus got busy bringing in her personal baggage and bags containing the trading goods brought from Samarkand, along with the bundles of furs and bags full of amber their pack horses were carrying. Once their twelve horses were unloaded, Durax then led the trio of young women into the long stable of the farm and allotted six of the stalls inside it to them. They had time to take the saddles and pack supports off their horses before a servant came to Durax and whispered something into his ear. The farm owner nodded his head once and dismissed the servant, then spoke to Igrid in Germanic.

“My wife would like to speak with you in the presence of our gathered chieftains and elders. They are presently discussing a delicate subject and she wishes to see if you saw or heard during your trip anything that could be useful to us on the subject they are discussing about.”

“Would that be about this King Ariovistus’ plan to attack the Celts of Gaul who live south of here?”

Durax seemed to be struck hard by Igrid’s reply and looked at her with renewed respect.

“By the gods, you were indeed sent to us by the great Baduhenna. Please follow me.”

As they followed Durax back to the house, Igrid quickly translated for the benefit of Nauca and Talya what the man had just told her. Nauca nodded her head in turn while thinking about the implications of this situation.

“Thank Cybele that this old farmer on the Elv River told us about this King Ariovistus’ plans. By attacking the Celts in Gaul, he may very well trigger a response by the Romans, which could in turn eventually bring lots of trouble to the Frisii. When we will face Frana, translate for me but let me decide what we will say to her. We may have to play a delicate balancing act with our information.”

“Understood!”

When the trio was reintroduced in the meeting hall, they found the atmosphere there more agitated than on their initial entrance. There was clearly some kind of difference of opinions between the participants. Again, Nauca knelt and bowed her head to Frana before looking at her and speaking via Igrid.

“We are at your disposal, great Folk Mother.”

“Thank you, Nauca of the Roxolani. Know that we have been discussing the subject of a request, no, a demand by King Ariovistus of the Suebi for our warriors to join his army, in order to help him invade the lands of the Celts into Central and Southern Gaul. My strong opinion would be to ignore that call for help, as this invasion would contribute in creating chaos and destruction for all of us, and not only for the Celts. On the other hand, some of our chieftains are pushing for joining Ariovistus’ army for this planned invasion. Would you have something to say about this that could help us take a decision on whether or not to send our warriors to help King Ariovistus, my friends?”

“I certainly may have something to say about that, great Folk Mother. We heard about King Ariovistus’ projects while traveling through Germanic territory and we also saw how many of the Germanic people have already left their farms and lands in order to join his army, bringing with them their families and most of their farm animals. So, that invasion is already on the move and about to hit the Celts of Central Gaul, if it has not already done so. While we are not from this part of the World, we did see many things during our voyages that would make me caution you against joining King Ariovistus’ army, great Folk Mother. First, wars, while they may look beneficial to one side at first, always end up bouncing back into your face in the long run. The great King Mithridates of Pontus fought three wars against the Romans but ultimately lost his kingdom to the Romans, with his people then paying a terrible price as a result. Second, such an invasion of Gaul by Germanic tribes under King Ariovistus is liable to attract a very strong reaction from the Romans, who are said to already have a strong footing in Southern Gaul. The Germanic warriors may be victorious at first but, if there is something that the Romans are known for, it is for being persistent and for play the long game. The Roman Army is presently by far the most powerful military force known in this World and, while it may lose some of its battles, then more Roman soldiers will follow up and crush their adversaries. If you help Ariovistus in his invasion of Gaul, then you will make yourself and Frisia an eventual target of Rome.”

Her words, once translated by Igrid, seemed to anger one of the chieftains sitting around Frana’s table and he spat a hot reply at Nauca while looking at her with contempt.

"This so-called 'warrior woman', who is supposedly sent to us by Baduhenna, is trying to discourage us from going to fight? I spit at your advice, woman!"

Nauca got up at once on both feet and pointed a resolute index at the chieftain while returning his stare.

"I am not telling you not to fight: I am telling you to fight intelligently! Keep your warriors here, ready to defend your territory when the Romans will eventually advance north in response to Ariovistus' invasion of Gaul. Sending your warriors away would only leave your lands without proper protection. I have fought the Romans and, while us Sarmatians beat them then, our warriors then stayed within Sarmatia, instead of foolishly going south on a rampage that could only go badly in the long run."

"What tells me that your claims of having fought and beaten the Romans are anything but empty bragging by a weak woman? I say: ignore that foolish woman, my brothers!"

Nauca had by then had enough of that idiot. Even if Frana then intervened in her favor, the insults he had thrown at her could not be left unanswered. If they were, then she would then put herself, her friends and possibly Frana as well at the mercy of the chieftains' reaction.

"I WILL SHOW YOU WHO IS THE FOOLISH ONE HERE, YOU IDIOT! TALYA, GO GET MY SWORD, MY SHIELD AND THE STANDARD WE CAPTURED IN SARMATIA. AS FOR YOU, I CHALLENGE YOU TO SINGLE COMBAT."

"THEN, YOU WILL DIE HERE, WOMAN!"

While witnessing this angry exchange, Frana realized that stopping that fight from happening would bring no good, on the contrary. As a folk mother, she could counsel and lead her tribe to a point, but she did not have the kind of power that her tribal chieftains could muster. Also, by preventing that duel, she would be marking Nauca as a coward and a liar, something that could cost her dearly afterwards. Durax, who had also watched this exchange from one side, did not intervene as well, although he thought that Brixus was indeed an idiot and a hot head.

Nauca, like her opponent, then moved away from the table and to an empty space in the middle of the hall, where they stared angrily at each other while Talya was running to get the things Nauca had requested. When she came back with her sword, shield and captured Roman standard, Nauca hurried to tell her something in Sogdian.

"Keep the standard wrapped and out of sight for the moment and give me my shield and sword, Talya."

"Are you sure that you want to do this, Nauca?" asked the Dacian girl, afraid for her friend. Nauca nodded once in response.

"It must be done, Talya. Don't worry about me: this big brute may have lots of muscles but he also has very little brains."

As she took her sword and shield from Talya, her opponent taunted her.

"I am ready to fight bare-chested, while you still wear that long tunic of yours. What tells me that you are not wearing some kind of armor under your clothes?"

"So, you are afraid of me and use that lame excuse in response? You want to fight bare-chested? Then we will both fight bare-chested!"

Nauca then quickly removed her tunic and the band of tissue supporting her breasts before taking hold of her shield and sword while topless.

"You wanted to see my tits, you big brute? Well, here they are: stare at them to your content before I cut you to pieces and show to your friends what kind of an imbecile you are."

Brixus, enraged by her insult, then pushed a rageful growl and charged her, his sword held high for a downward strike and his oval shield held in front of him. It was obvious to Nauca that his rage made him underestimate her and think of her as an easy opponent. Holding her ground while holding her round rhino hide shield in front of her, she held her long sword, made of superior Hinduwani steel and with razor-sharp edges, low and parallel to the ground, ready for a stabbing strike. She also bent both knees, so that she could quickly crouch into a low stance. Brixus, who was a good half-head taller than her, then slammed his shield into her shield, hoping to throw her backward under the force of the impact and make her trip or lose her balance, at the same time as he readied his sword for a furious downward swing targeting her head. Instead of trying to stop the big warrior's charge, a futile goal in view of his mass, Nauca instead used her crouched position to deflect Brixus' shield by suddenly raising her own shield while twisting it to a near horizontal position over her head and shifting it sideways. As Brixus' shield slid against her shield while also being deflected over her towards her left side, Nauca quickly put her right foot forward while crouching even lower. Her right arm then thrust forward and up, aiming the tip of her sword at the now unprotected lower belly and groin of her opponent. Her motion, all done in a fraction of a second, allowed her to stab Brixus near his groin and left hip, with her steel blade penetrating a good fifty

centimeters upward in his torso, slicing his spleen in two, cutting through his intestines and penetrating deeply his left lung before piercing the bottom of his heart. As the big Frisii warrior kept going forward due to his charge, she stepped aside to let him pass, making in the process her sword blade twist and open even more widely the horrific wound she had just caused. Intense pain and shock now on his face, Brixus stopped himself and turned around, already realized that he was going to die. Still, Nauca taunted him by wiggling her breasts as the Frisii was about to crumble to the ground.

“HERE YOU GO! ADMIRE MY BREASTS ONE LAST TIME BEFORE DYING, YOU STUPID HUNK!”

Brixus' eyes then became unfocused and he fell face first on the dirt floor of the hall as the other chieftains watched on with disbelief. Turning around to face them and Frana, Nauca then spoke out loud.

“WAR IS NOT ONLY ABOUT PHYSICAL STRENGTH, BUT ALSO ABOUT BEING SMART AND SKILLFUL. AS FOR ME HAVING LIED ABOUT FIGHTING THE ROMANS, HERE IS THE UNIT STANDARD OF THE ROMAN CAVALRY UNIT THAT DARED TO GO INTO SARMATIA TO RAID IT!”

Taking from Talya the standard captured from the Alae 1 Bosporanorum, Nauca then threw it on the table around which the chieftains and Frana sat, where it landed with a loud 'clank'.

“OVER 600 ROMAN CAVALRYMEN TRIED TO RAID SARMATIAN TERRITORY, BUT WE KEPT OUR GROUND AND AMBUSHED THEM. NOT ONE ROMAN GOT OUT OF THAT ALIVE. I SAY, STAY HERE AND BE PREPARED TO DEFEND YOUR LANDS IN THE MONTHS AND YEARS TO COME. LASTLY, HERE IS MY ADVICE TO YOU ABOUT HOW TO DEAL WITH THE ROMANS: NEVER TRUST THEM, AS THEIR GREED IS INFINITE, LIKE THEIR THIRST FOR POWER.”

As the stunned chieftains stared at the Roman unit standard, Nauca finally took the time to put back on her chest band and her tunic, following which she wiped the blood on her sword on dead Brixus' pants, further showing her contempt for him. Frana, who was about as stunned as her chieftains, was nearly tempted to applaud her performance but managed to keep her decorum, speaking in a calm but firm voice to the chieftains.

“Nauca of the Roxolani fought and won her duel with Brixus both fairly and cleanly. Furthermore, she proved to us that she was no liar. I thus say to you: let's reject the request from King Ariovistus to join his army and let's keep our warriors here,

where they will be able to defend our lands and our people. Does anyone disagree with that?"

All the chieftains nodded their heads at that, allowing Frana to get up and speak in a solemn tone.

"Then it is decided! We will follow the wise advice transmitted by the great Baduhenna through her envoy. You may now leave and pass the word to your warriors and people."

The chieftains then got up from their benches and left the hall, with four of them grabbing Brixus' body and carrying it on their way out.

Frana, along with her husband Durax, waited until the chieftains were gone before hurrying to Nauca to congratulate her.

"Nauca, that was one impressive demonstration of sword fighting skills. Your bravery while facing such a powerful opponent was also memorable."

"Thank you, Folk Mother! I must say that I owe my skills to lots of practice and to quite a few fights. I do hope that your chieftains will truly accept your directives. Experience has taught me that it is never a good thing to attract the attention of the Romans."

"Well, your performance should convince them to follow my directives. However, my level of authority on them will eventually go down by a lot, once young King Ascon attains adulthood and takes effective control of our tribe."

"And how smart is your young king, Lady Frana?"

"I am still not exactly sure about that, Nauca. The one thing I know about him is that he is quite hard-headed already."

Nauca slowly shook her head at that a couple of times, then smiled at the folk mother.

"Well, enough about wars and leadership. How about we discuss a bit of trade together, along with your husband? I have Chinese silk and tea, Indian spices and some trinkets made by the finest artisans in Samarkand available for sale. I accept payment in horses."

Nauca and her companions ended up staying another four days at Frana's farm, resting from their trip, stocking up on fresh travel provisions and, most importantly for Nauca, collecting as much geographical information on the region as possible from the folk mother and her husband, adding that information to her travel notes and making a

few new sketches, on top of procuring more parchment and ink for her nearly depleted stocks of writing supplies. When her group finally left the farm to start its return trip to Samarkand, it was with a much-enlarged troupe of horses which now comprised three Frisian stallions, eleven mares and four young Frisian horses. Also, Durax and half a dozen of his servants and guards were accompanying Nauca as she went north towards the coast of the North Sea. There, Durax used the authority of his wife to requisition a small flotilla of the biggest boats available, on which Nauca's group and its horses embarked and then sailed along the coast up to the mouth of the Elbe River. There, the flotilla continued upstream on the Elbe as far southeast as the river would permit before letting off Nauca and her troupe of horses, thus saving them weeks of hard travel by land and avoiding them the headache of having to find fording sites across multiple rivers. Their spirits high, the three young women waved goodbye to Durax and to his Frisian sailors before continuing their trek by land.

CHAPTER 21 – BACK IN SAMARKAND

14:10 (Central Asia Time)

Wednesday, March 18, 59 B.C.E.

Five kilometers short of the western gates of Samarkand

Sogdiana, Yuezhi Kingdom

Nauca, overjoyed at seeing the walls of Samarkand in the distance, was surprised to see on one side of the trail she was using, which itself ran next to a stream, a horse corral and a few houses and huts she hadn't seen before, sitting in the middle of a rich, grassy pasture. A few horses of varying age were visible inside the corral, where a man and a teenage boy were apparently busy training one horse in particular. Concentrating her sight on the man and boy, Nauca suddenly felt her heart jump in her chest as she recognized the man. Surprising Igrid and Talya, she then urged her Tamat to a gallop, going towards the corral while shouting out loud.

“POLONIUS, IS THAT YOU?”

The man stopped his training work and twisted his neck to look at Nauca. He in turn recognized her and ran to the fence of the corral, where he greeted Nauca with a huge grin.

“Nauca! Thank the gods: you made it safely back from your long westward expedition. Was it a fruitful one?”

“Judge by yourself, Polonius: look at the magnificent beasts I bought from the Frisii Tribe, on the northern coast of Gaul. They are called ‘Frisian’ horses.”

Polonius' mouth opened with admiration as Igrid brought a pair of Frisian horses close to the fence, so that he could look at them from up close.

“By Apollon, they are beautiful! And they also look very strong.”

“Oh, they are, Polonius. They easily can carry nearly double the load of a typical steppe horse like Minad and are intelligent and sweet beasts. They don't have the same kind of endurance for long galloping periods that my Tamat has but they still make perfectly good mounts, on top of being ideal to pull heavy chariots. With a properly designed and built chariot, or used as pack horses, they could greatly boost the carrying

capacity of a caravan while being much faster than camels. But come over that fence and check them out.”

The old Greek horse trader didn't have to be told twice and climbed over the fence before approaching one of the black Frisian horses and caressing its long mane. His eyes were sparkling as he examined the animal.

“It is a magnificent beast indeed! I would kill to have a couple of them.”

Polonius' words made Nauca grin with malice.

“No need to kill anyone to get some of them, Polonius: I am now gifting you with one stallion, three mares, a foal and a filly. The rest will come with me to the caravanserai of Hiram and Yurkan, where I will get busy selling the mountains of amber I procured on the Baltic Coast.”

Her words attracted tears to the Greek trader's eyes and he then hugged her emotionally, with her warmly returning his hug.

“Nauca, I already owed you this new horse ranch, thanks to your generous gift you gave me when we met in Urgench some eight months ago. Now, you are giving me those magnificent horses? Your generosity knows no bounds. How could I ever repay you?”

“You don't need to repay me, my friend.” replied Nauca in a sober tone. “This is only a just reward for when you helped me in Tanais after I lost my whole family to bandits. The only thing that I will be asking you is to live many more years, so that you could pass a prosperous business to your sons. Come: let's choose together the horses which you will take.”

Polonius started at once with the two horses which Igrid had brought next to the fence and was about to look at the other Frisian horses when he belatedly noticed that Nauca's group now included a fourth girl. Polonius then threw a questioning look at Nauca while pointing at the young teenager, a beautiful and athletic girl with brown hair and brown eyes.

“Uh, who is this, Nauca?”

“This is sixteen-year-old Shirin, the youngest daughter of Queen Roxanna of the Roxolani. On our return trip, we passed by Queen Roxanna's camp in order to pay homage to her and to another noble I know. There, Queen Roxanna presented Shirin to me, telling me that her daughter was a bit of a strong and adventurous character, like me, and that Shirin wished to travel with me and see the World. I was then most happy to take her under my wing and bring her to Samarkand. Soon enough, she will be

traveling to China, India and other exotic places. As for her being able to defend herself, don't worry: she was raised exactly like me and is already a very good archer and an experienced hunter, on top of having ridden horses since the age of six."

"Wow! You are trying to form a new Amazon army, is that it?" joked Polonius, making Nauca chuckle.

"Maybe! Now, I believe that you still have to choose two mares, a fowl and a filly."

"Right! Let's get to it!"

After some ten more minutes, the happy Polonius had chosen his six new Frisian horses, following which he again hugged Nauca, along with her three travel companions, before they resumed their trip towards the nearby city of Samarkand. Another twenty minutes and the small troupe was entering the city, proudly holding their lances up and decked in their helmets and armored vests. The sight of four armed young women and girls riding through the city gate attracted enough popular attention by itself but the passage of the big, black and majestic Frisian horses they were dragging behind long ropes attracted even more attention and curiosity among the inhabitants, despite them being quite blasé already by the past parading of many caravans through the city gates. Nauca then led her procession to the entrance gate of the family caravanserai owned by Hiram and Yurkan, where their entrance immediately attracted a number of enthusiastic people wanting to greet them. One of the first ones to run to Nauca as she dismounted from her horse was young Amara, who launched herself into Nauca's arm while shouting with joy.

"Nauca! You came back safely from your long trip, thank Athena!"

"And it is nice to see you again, Amara. I missed you too."

The young Greek girl then saw Shirin, still sitting on her horse, and looked questioningly at Nauca.

"Who is that girl, Nauca?"

"A new friend and protégée of mine. Her name is Shirin and she is sixteen. She is a Sarmatian girl, like me, and wanted to travel the World with me instead of simply living in the steppes with her tribe. But we will have plenty of time to present her properly later on. First, I want to unload my horses and take care of them after our long trip. Are Hiram or Yurkan here in Samarkand at this time?"

“Yurkan left for China eight months ago with his caravan. He will thus need another year before being back here. As for Hiram, he is here in Samarkand but went to meet other traders and caravan masters in town to discuss business with them prior to leaving again for India.”

“Aah, excellent! I have lots of nice Baltic Amber to sell: it will make the perfect trading good for such a trip to India. And Babita and Liu Han, how are they doing?”

“They are doing very well, thank you. In fact, they are the main reason why Hiram has not departed yet on another trip: he has been taking the time to properly establish Liu Han and Babita in Samarkand and had a house with a workshop annex built for them next to this caravanserai. Since arriving here, Liu Han has gained a lot of customers for his maps and mechanical devices and is doing some very good business.”

“Good for him! On my part, I have taken plenty of notes and drawn many sketched along my trip westward and he will be able to update his maps with those notes and sketches. I will go visit him later on today and discuss things with him.”

“Are you planning to leave on another trip soon, Nauca?”

“I in fact intend to leave with Hiram’s caravan when he will depart for India, in order to go sell my amber there at a good profit. We will thus be able to travel together again, Amara.”

That piece of news made the young teenage girl scream and shout out with joy while jumping up and down, a demonstration of friendship that warmed Nauca’s heart.

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