

NAUCA

DAUGHTER OF THE STEPPES



By

Michel Poulin

NAUCA

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A historical fiction novel

By

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE, CRUELTY AND SEX, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE 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 tells the adventures of a young fictitious girl born on the steppes north of the Black Sea in the First Century B.C.E (Before the Common Era). The nomad women riders and warriors of that region and time were actually what the ancient Greeks called 'Amazons' and were much more than just a myth. The author, helped by research and articles written about archaeological finds around the Caucasus area, has strived in this novel to depict as accurately as possible the lifestyle, environment and historical background of those fierce, independent women who were truly the equals of their men.

OTHER BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

(All available free online at Free-Ebooks.net, or can be ordered direct via email to the author at natai@videotron.ca.)

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NAUCA – DAUGHTER OF THE STEPPES

MAPS OF SARMATIA AND OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE (1ST CENTURY B.C.E.)



Red arrow : Place of birth of Nauca Yellow arrow : location of Tanais Emporium

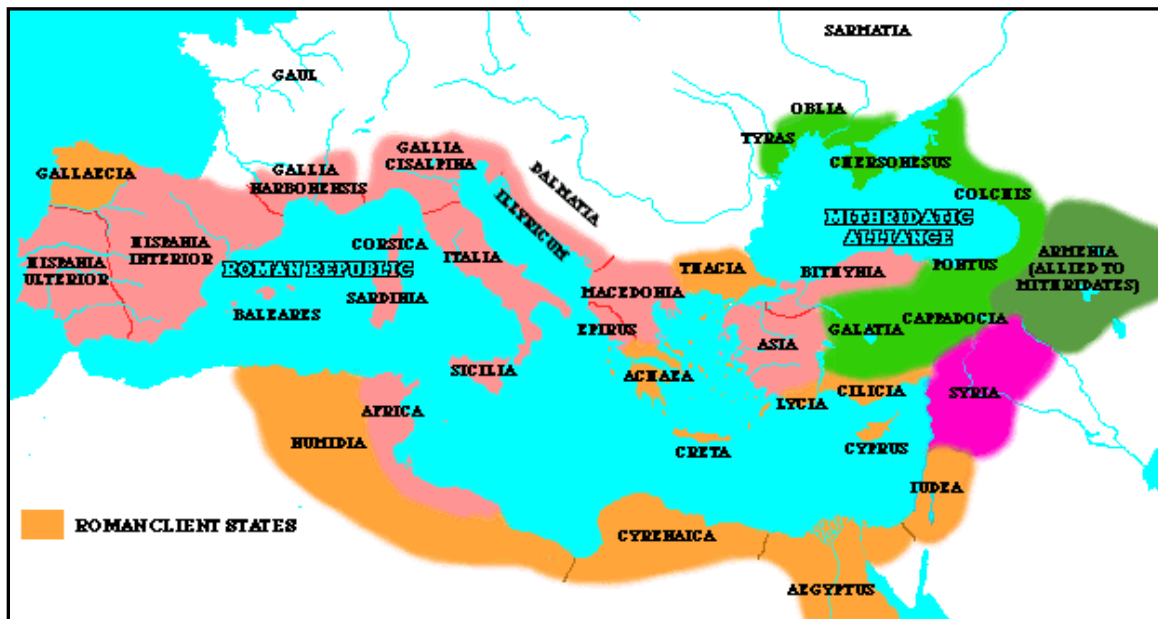


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A nomadic camp in the Caucasus.

CHAPTER 1 – A GIRL IS BORN

09:05 (Caucasus Time)

Friday, May 6, 80 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era)

Sarmatian nomadic campsite

Between the Borysthene (Dniepr) and Tanais (Don) Rivers

Territory of the Sarmatian tribe of the Roxolani (modern Eastern Ukraine)

North of Lake Meotis (Sea of Azov)

“Keep pushing, Amage: I can see the baby’s head now.”

“I...I am doing only that!” protested the exhausted young woman lying on top of a bear fur with her legs spread apart and with her sister-in-law Sarukê and niece Mada present to assist her labor. Childbirth being a women’s affair, the male members of the family had been told to wait outside of the yurt, the traditional felt hut used by the nomads plying the steppes and forests of the Caucasus. Finally, after a last push by Amage, Sarukê exclaimed in triumph.

“I have it!”

The noise of two slaps were followed by wails from the newborn, which was quickly rinsed with lukewarm water before being wrapped in a cloth and handed over to Amage.

“Congratulations: it’s a girl!” said Sarukê. “She is big, strong and healthy. Hold it while I cut the umbilical cord.”

The Sarmatian woman quickly made a knot in the umbilical after cutting it, then washed Amage’s groin area and her own hands afterwards. Next, Sarukê looked at her thirteen-year-old daughter Mada.

“You can go tell Boraspos that he can come in now.”

“Yes, Mother!” replied the teenager before getting up on her feet and leaving the yurt. Outside, she found the father of the baby, Boraspos, waiting anxiously with his brother Irganos, Sarukê’s husband, and the four other young children of their family group. Mada smiled to Boraspos, a strong, tall man with a short beard.

“The baby is out and well, Uncle. It is a girl. You can come in now.”

Boraspos didn’t have to be told twice and entered the yurt, going to his wife’s side and kneeling near her to admire his new daughter.

“She really looks big and strong. You produced a splendid daughter for us, my sweet Amage. What name would you like for us to give her?”

“I was thinking of ‘Nauca’.”

“I like it! Then, ‘Nauca’ it is. I am sure that she will make a great hunter and warrior worthy of our tribe. Rest now: I will take care of things around our yurt today.” Boraspos then kissed his wife and his new daughter before getting up and leaving the yurt, going to his brother Irganos.

“We called our new daughter ‘Nauca’.”

“Nauca...a fine name for a Sarmatian girl.”

“Indeed! I think that I am going to go hunt something for supper tonight, to celebrate her birth. You and your family are invited, of course.”

“Then, I better go hunt with you, Brother, or we may dine on hot air.”

The laughing Irganos just had time to step aside in order to avoid the booted foot headed for his bum.

08:26 (Caucasus Time)

Tuesday, September 8, 76 B.C.E.

Sarmatian nomadic campsite

Hills east of the Borysthene (Dniepr) River

Territory of the Roxolani Tribe, north of Lake Meotis (Sea of Azov)

‘THAT’S IT, NAUCA! USE YOUR KNEES, HEELS AND BALANCE TO MAKE IT TURN!’

Amage, standing beside her husband Boraspos as their little Nauca made her first ride solo on a young horse, had a proud smile on her face as she watched her youngest daughter expertly control her mount without bridles and while riding bareback.

“By Cybele¹, Nauca must be one of the fastest learning children I have ever seen in terms of learning how to ride a horse. She is still only four and a half years old and she is already riding with ease.”

“Well, our son Galatus was also a quick learner but I must concede that Nauca seems to be born to ride. She should make a great huntress and warrior.”

The mention of the word ‘warrior’ somehow cooled the enthusiasm of Amage, whose smile partly faded.

“You know that I did my share of fighting in the past, when those Alani raiders were roaming our tribe’s territory, stealing horses and killing people. However, this business of everybody raiding and stealing from everyone else strikes me as both foolish and cruel. The steppes are big enough for everybody to live in peace and prosper on them and in the mountains. To kill whole families while stealing their herds and then brag about that around campfires at night is wrong in my opinion. I know that this is the way us Sarmatians have been living for generations, but do we really want to continue to do such senseless killings?”

Boraspos calmly looked down at his wife, understanding her feelings.

“Well, that is one reason why me and my brother Irganos have broken away from our old tribal group and have gone to our own separate pastures, Amage. I am proud to be both a hunter and a warrior and I am ready any day to kill an enemy attacking us, but I found no honor or pleasure into attacking without provocation other people’s camps and stealing their horses. You remember when I once objected to a planned raid by our old group, before we split from it?”

“Yes, I do, Boraspos: some called you a coward and laughed at you.”

“And I made them swallow their words afterwards. Maybe, one day, this urge to steal and kill will fade away. Unfortunately, even if we ourselves don’t raid and steal from other people, we still have to train as warriors, if only to defend ourselves against

¹ Cybele: Ancient Asian goddess, venerated as ‘Mother of the Mountains’ and associated with rocks, wild animals and birds of prey.

raiders, looters and invaders. For that reason I will make sure that our little Nauca learns everything I can teach her about riding, shooting a bow and fighting with other weapons. She may still be very young but her body is already tall and strong for her age. She is in fact taller than many boys of her age who I have seen before. We can be proud of her, Amage.”

Boraspos then gently put his left arm around his wife’s shoulders as they both continued to watch Nauca ride around their camp and its surrounding grassy pasture field.

06:25 (Caucasus Time)

Thursday, October 2, 71 B.C.E.

Boraspos and Irganos campsite

Hilly summer pastures near the eastern shores of the Borysthene River

The morning call of the rooster her family possessed woke up Nauca, who was sleeping beside her elder sister Tamura in one corner of their yurt. Well accustomed by now to the family routine, she got up from under the bear skin the two girls used as a blanket to keep warm in this fresh Autumn season and quietly started dressing up for her early morning tasks. At nine and a half, Nauca was already a good 150 centimeters tall and had the body of a young athlete, thanks to the tough living of the steppes and constant physical work. Her reddish-brown hair was worn long and loose, down past her shoulders, and she had long, strong legs which made her a fast and nimble runner indeed. Putting on a pair of woolen trousers and a long-sleeved tunic, Nauca buckled around her waist a leather belt which supported an iron dagger in its scabbard, then put on a winter coat and a peaked cap with ear flaps made of rabbit pelts stitched together, finishing by lacing on a pair of fur-lined leather boots. With the inside of the tent still in the dark but aided by her exceptional eyesight and by her knowledge of the tent’s layout, Nauca then walked out of the yurt, pushing aside the patch of felt covering the entrance. Once outside, she inhaled with delight a deep breath of the cold morning air and quickly looked around her at the still mostly dark grass fields and forests surrounding their two tents. Her family and that of Irganos would soon have to move down from this high plateau that had served as their summer pasture, to lead their herd of horses to warmer winter pastures on the plains and forests bordering the nearby Borysthene River.

Going around the side of her family's yurt, Nauca grabbed a wooden bucket used to collect mare's milk and walked past the wooden cages containing the dozen chickens her family kept as providers of fresh eggs, heading towards the nearest mare of their herd. She suddenly saw movement out of the corner of her right eye and snapped her head around, in time to see a dark human silhouette come out from behind the yurt and run at her, a sword in hand. That was the kind of situation when most persons either fled or fought. In Nauca's case, her hunting experiences with her father had accustomed her to fight rather than flee. However, the man now running at her was much bigger than her and wore some kind of armor and a helmet, on top of being armed. Her first reflex was to shout as loud as she could, in order to warn her family, while reaching for her dagger.

"MARAUDERS IN THE CAMP! MARAUDERS IN THE CAMP!"

Her attacker let out an angry growl and accelerated further the pace of his charge. Half frozen by fear and surprise, Nauca realized that she would certainly lose in a straight strength contest. However, she knew that she would be more agile and nimble than the big man charging her, who was weighed down by his armor. Trying a desperate move, she rolled in a tight ball on the grass towards her attacker, to stop abruptly when she hit his legs. The man made a cruel grin as he raised his sword to strike her.

"That was a stupid move, gir..."

His last word strangled in his throat when Nauca, pushing up her torso with her left arm, stabbed the man in the testicles with her iron dagger, performing a vertical thrust with all her strength. The atrocious pain from that strike froze the man, while his eyes bulged. He then passed out and collapsed on the ground. Nauca quickly rolled aside, barely missing being pinned down under the heavy man. Enraged and with adrenaline now filling her veins, she knelt over her attacker and repeatedly stabbed him in the neck, cutting his right-side jugular. With the man now quickly bleeding to death and shaken by spasms, Nauca jumped back on her feet and looked quickly around her. Marauders and looters rarely acted alone and she suspected that other bandits could have infiltrated the campsite. Seeing that her dying attacker had a gorytos² containing a bow and a large quantity of arrows, Nauca quickly grabbed the bow, along with a half dozen arrows, then ran around her family's yurt. Her acute vision showed her at once two dark shapes

² Gorytos : Scythian-style large quiver which could contain a bow, up to a hundred arrows, plus a pair of javelins. Widely used by horse riders of the steppes.

approaching the entrance of her uncle Irganos' tent, while two more shapes were now running towards the entrance of her own family tent. Still pumped full of adrenaline and resolved to protect her family at all cost, Nauca put one knee on the ground and quickly positioned one of her arrows on the bow she had taken. She didn't have the full strength of a grown man but her archery lessons with her father and her hunting expeditions had already made her a redoubtable archer. With her desperation adding to her strength, she drew the bow's string and let loose, aiming at the lead man charging her. Hit in the throat from a distance of maybe twenty meters, the man hesitated, then collapsed on the ground while emitting a gurgling sound. His companion, seeing that, accelerated to a full sprint while holding high his battle-axe and screaming a war cry. Nauca's second arrow flew less than three seconds later, hitting the man square in the middle of the chest as he was a mere eight meters away. As the man fell on his knees, gravely wounded, Nauca got up on her feet, so that she could shoot more arrows over his head. The two men who had been about to enter Irganos' yurt, probably with the intention of slaughtering the family in their sleep, hesitated on seeing their two comrades go down in quick succession. That was when they decided that it was time to retire to safety and ran back towards their waiting horses, tied to a nearby tree. Nauca didn't let them go, instead aiming carefully her two next shots and pinning down the two marauders with arrows in their backs. Holding her bow and remaining arrow in her left hand, she drew again her dagger and ran to the man kneeling close by, who was desperately trying to extract the arrow stuck in his chest. Seeing his battle-axe lying in the grass near him, Nauca changed her mind and sheathed her dagger, then grabbed the axe. A furious swing of the axe to the neck half severed the head of the wounded bandit, killing him instantly. Nauca's father was emerging from the family tent, his battle-axe in hand, as Nauca started sprinting towards the two men she had shot in the back, resolved to finish them off. By now, even though she was still a preteen girl, Nauca was in a total killing frenzy state, enraged at seeing that men would attack her family like this, without provocation and in a most treacherous way. A Scandinavian Viking who would have watched her then would have said that she was now in a 'berserker' state and would probably have applauded her. Getting to the nearest of the two men she had shot, who was crawling towards his horse, she let go her bow and arrow and, using both hands, delivered a vertical chopping blow to the man's neck. This time, she did sever completely his head. The second wounded man was killed by an axe blow a mere few

seconds later. With no one left to kill, Nauca took one step back and took a few deep breaths to calm down and chase away her remaining rage.

Her father got to her as she was still trying to calm down. Seeing that she was apparently not wounded, Boraspos then checked out the two marauders lying in the grass, finding them to be dead. Returning to his young daughter, he hugged her warmly while speaking softly to her.

"You were incredible, Nauca. You most probably saved both our family and that of my brother by killing those marauders. If not for you, those bastards would have killed us in our sleep, then would have left with our horses and possessions."

"I...I only reacted from instinct, Father. I didn't have time to think at all when that first marauder sprinted at me to silence me. I killed him with my dagger, then grabbed his bow and shot the four others."

"And you proved yourself to be a born-warrior in the process, Nauca. I am so proud of you."

"What do we do now, Father?"

Boraspos faced her and smiled gently to her.

"Now, we collect the weapons, armor and horses of those thieves before throwing their bodies to the wolves in the forest. Forget your milking duties: Tamura and Galatus will take care of milking our mares. Let's strip those two bastards first."

Nauca was pulling off the scale armor vest of one of the thieves when Irganos came at a run, to then stop near her and Boraspos. The admiring look her uncle gave her made Nauca feel both pride and satisfaction.

"Nauca, I must thank you for protecting us like this. To take on single-handedly five grown men is a feat that will be told around campfires for the years to come."

"But, Uncle, I only did what was necessary for me and all of us to stay alive."

"True, but that didn't diminish in anyway your merit and valor in combat in killing those stealing bastards."

"Irganos is right, Nauca." cut in Boraspos. "As a reward, you will decide how the loot from these bandits will be split. In fact, you could justly claim everything for yourself."

“But that would be completely selfish, Father. Besides, I can only use one set of weapons and armor. I am sure that Galatus, Tamura and my cousins could use the rest and I would be happy to share all that with them.”

That earned her approving nods from both Boraspos and Irganos.

“Generous on top of being brave... You truly make me proud of you today, my dear daughter. We will discuss the distribution of the loot at lunch time, around a good fire.”

Five hours later, with the two families sitting around a campfire on which pieces of horse meat were slowly roasting, Boraspos stood up to speak to them all, Nauca at his side.

“My friends, today Nauca proved herself to be worthy of being called a ‘warrior’ and, through her valor and bravery, saved the lives of our two families. I then promised her that she would have first pick on the weapons, armor and possessions taken on the five bandits she killed. While I still intend her to have first choice, I would like to present to her two items that, in my opinion, are probably the most valuable for a warrior in the lot.”

Going to the pile of weapons, armor, purses and horse equipment set near the fire, Boraspos grabbed both a sword in its scabbard and a gorytos containing a bow, dozens of arrows and two javelins, then handed them to Nauca.

“The bow in this gorytos is truly of superior manufacture and will be a worthy weapon for such an expert archer as you, my daughter. As for this sword, I examined it earlier on and found it to be a rare example made of probably the finest steel that is known, a steel called ‘Hinduwani steel’³, which is made into far-off India. The bandit who had it probably stole it from a caravan merchant. You may take that sword out of its scabbard and examine it, Nauca.”

His daughter did so and was immediately intrigued by the dark, wavering pattern visible on the surface of the long, razor-sharp blade.

“Hey, it is as if someone drew black waves on that blade with a piece of coal. What are they, Father?”

³ Hinduwani steel : A type of high-carbon steel made in Southern India, starting in the 6th Century B.C.E. When adopted by Arab artisans, it was renamed ‘Damascus Steel’.

“In truth, I don’t know. However, a merchant in Tanais⁴ once showed me a similar blade, for which he was asking a ruinous price. He told me then that such Hinduwani Steel blades were the best and toughest blades one could find in the World and that caravans from the East sometimes brought a few Hinduwani Steel weapons, to be exchanged against horses and furs. I believe that such a blade would truly befit a warrior of your quality, Nauca.”

Nauca, overwhelmed, could only admire for long seconds the long, shiny blade. Putting it back in its scabbard and putting it down near the cut piece of tree trunk she used as a seat, she then took out and examined the composite recurved bow, which was obviously of top manufacture.

“Decidedly, those marauders must have stolen many unfortunate people in order to have such superb weapons, Father. Only the gods may know how many people they killed in the process.”

“And killing them was an act of justice, on top of being an act of self-defense, Nauca. You may now continue to distribute the loot by yourself.”

Looking down at the pile of weapons, pieces of armor, purses and other equipment, Nauca hesitated for a moment before grabbing the heaviest purse in the lot for herself, along with a scale mail armored vest that could reasonably fit her once grown up, along with a helmet, a half-moon-shaped ‘Pelta’ iron and leather shield, a bronze battle-axe, a pair of javelins and a long Kontos lance, a thrusting weapon meant to be held with both hands by a charging mounted warrior. She completed her part of the loot with the best set of saddle and horse bridles in the lot. Nobody objected to her choices, as all agreed with Boraspos that she had earned them. Now left with the task of distributing around the rest of the loot, Nauca decided to split most of the bronze, silver and gold coins left between her father and her uncle, while reserving the few pieces of jewelry for her mother, aunt, young sister and her cousin Mada, now a 22 year-old young woman who was soon due to get married. The largest sets of armor went to Boraspos, Irganos and her cousins Akkas and Chodios, now teenagers approaching their twenties. The last items to be distributed were the horses taken from the marauders. While Nauca loved her present horse, a small and stocky Tarpan Eurasian horse that fit well with her present size, she knew that she would eventually need a larger horse. She thus chose

⁴ Tanais : An old Greek emporium (trading post) situated on the delta of the Tanais (Don) River, some 30 km west from modern Rostov-on-Don.

for herself a splendid silvery-white Akhal Teke horse, a tall, fast and powerful race of horse which was prized all around the steppes and beyond.

With the loot distribution completed and with everybody most happy and satisfied, the two families then ate lunch around the campfire before resuming their normal daily tasks, with the happy Nauca invited by her father to go hunt with her, so that she could use her new bow. Two days later, the two families dismounted their yurts and packed them on their two small chariots, in order to move down to the eastern shores of the Borysthene River in advance of the approaching Winter.



Ruins of the ancient Greek colony and trading post of Tanais, on the Don River delta.

CHAPTER 2 – TANAIS

05:11 (Caucasus Time)

Wednesday, May 18, 69 B.C.E.

Family summer campsite, hills east of the Borysthene River

Territory of the Sarmatian tribe of the Roxolani

North of Lake Meotis (Sea of Azov)

“AND DON’T FORGET TO BUY SOME GOOD QUALITY WOOL CLOTH!”

“DON’T WORRY, AMAGE: I WON’T FORGET!” shouted back Boraspos to his wife as he started leading a herd of 21 horses towards the Southeast. His nephew Akkas, who was helping him control the herd with his brother Chodios and his cousins Galatus and Nauca, giggled at the exchange.

“Aunt Amage really wants that cloth, doesn’t she?” said Akkas to Chodios, who was riding near him.

“Well, we do need new clothes for next Winter, Akkas, unless you want to ride bare-bottomed in December.”

In response, Akkas bent sideways and lowered his voice.

“Talking of bare-bottomed, I wouldn’t mind seeing Nauca do so. She is growing very nicely indeed.”

“Careful, Brother: Uncle Boraspos could punch you silly if he heard you. Besides, shouldn’t you be looking for an appropriate bride from another group by now?”

“All in due time, Chodios.”

On her part, Nauca could only contain her excitement with difficulty: this was going to be the first time that she would be traveling well away from the family campsite, with this trip’s destination being the Greek emporium⁵ of Tanais, some nine days away on horseback. Members of the family did such trips to Tanais about every three to four years, when they had a significant number of grown horses ready to be sold, along with the accumulated furs and pelts they had caught while hunting. In exchange, the money they would get from the sale of their horses and furs would make it possible to buy things that the family could not produce itself or find in the nature, like woolen cloth, metal tools, weapons and utensils. Rare were the nomads in the region who were raising herds of sheep so, while about every woman and girl knew how to spin wool, getting the raw wool itself was not that easy, unless you lived near a town or a trading post. In the case of Tanais, Boraspos knew from experience that he would find there plenty of wool cloth of varying grades and quality available for buyers with money. Depending on how much money they would get for their horses, they then may well have enough left after buying cloth to spend on a few luxuries. For nomads like them, about anything apart from basic food and clothing could be considered a luxury item. In the case of Nauca, she still had the purse full of coins that she had won as part of the loot taken on the marauders she had killed over two and a half years ago. Her problem was that she had no idea yet about how she was going to spend that money. However, she was resolved to scrupulously follow the counsels of her father on that matter, in view of his experience on what to expect in Tanais.

09:00 (Caucasus Time)

Friday, May 27, 69 B.C.E.

Forest woodland some nine kilometers west of Tanais

“Here you are, boys and girl: Tanais, the most northern Greek trading post one can find around and a place where you can find nearly anything, including trouble.”

⁵ Emporium : Greek designation for a trading post.

announced Boraspos as they emerged in the open after riding through a forest with their herd.

“What do you mean by that, Father?” asked Nauca, a bit surprised by his last words. Her father gave her a sober look.

“By that I mean that you will find all kinds of various people in Tanais. Some are decent and honest people; others will lie to you to trick you and take your money and a few will be ready to attack you and steal outright from you. While the main languages used in Tanais are Greek and Sarmatian dialects, you will also hear dozens of other languages in the taverns, inns, markets and whorehouses of the town. That place is nothing like you have seen to date in your life, Nauca, and as a pretty young girl, you will attract lots of attention, some of it of the unwanted kind. So, while you certainly want to profit from your visit and look for novelties, stay on your guard at all times, don’t flash your money, keep your valuables close to you and don’t trust somebody’s words unless I judge him to be honest. Understood?”

“Yes, Father!” replied Nauca, her enthusiasm a bit cooled down. Boraspos next looked at his son Galatus and his two young nephews.

“These words of caution apply to you three as well. There are plenty of pretty prostitutes and many not so pretty prostitutes plying their trade in Tanais, eyeing passing nomads, merchants, sailors and caravan handlers to earn a few drachmas. If you ever use some of them during our stay, make sure that you don’t get some disease from them, or either me or my brother may cut your dicks off on our return to the camp.”

Nauca giggled at that, while the two young men nodded their heads, knowing that Boraspos’ threat was not a joke. With that said, Boraspos urged his horse forward, heading for the town and port visible in the distance, along the western shores of the Tanais River Delta.

About one hour before noon, the five mounted nomads and their herd of 21 horses arrived at the limits of the western part of the city. Just outside the narrow and twisting streets and alleys of the agglomeration of modest houses and buildings, they found a number of fenced corrals, some of them already containing horses. Recognizing a man he had dealt with some four years ago and whom he had found to be reasonably honest, Boraspos rode directly to that man, who sat under a small open tent set up next to the entrance of a corral containing seven horses. The Greek man

smiled as he eyed the 21 horses brought by Boraspos: all of them looked vigorous and healthy. He greeted Boraspos with a solid handshake and while speaking in Sarmatian.

"I see that one of my best providers of horses is back. You are Boraspos, right?"

"You do have a good memory, Polonius."

"Pah! A good merchant needs to have a good memory. If not, he risks getting robbed blind. So, those horses are for sale, my friend?"

"They certainly are, Polonius. Would you like to inspect them?"

"Of course! I never buy a horse without inspecting it first."

The Greek merchant then patted the shoulder of a teenager who had just run up to him.

"Demetrios, open the barrier of the corral and be ready to guide in the horses I will select for buying."

"Yes, Father!"

As the teenager got busy, Polonius approached the nearest horse of Boraspos' herd and started examining it, starting with its mouth and teeth. After his short examination, the Greek stepped back by a few paces to evaluate the size and stance of the horse before looking at Boraspos.

"I am ready to give you 400 drachmas for this horse, my friend."

Boraspos hid his satisfaction then: that was more than he had hoped for at first and was certainly more than he had gotten from the same man four years ago. Maybe something was pushing up the price for horses. Still, he made a show of bargaining for a while, finally getting Polonius to accept a price of 420 drachmas. With both men satisfied, the horse was led in by young Demetrios while Polonius wrote down on a parchment the agreed sum, then went to inspect a second horse.

The whole inspection and bargaining process for the 21 horses took a bit over one hour, with a most happy Boraspos getting a total of 8,600 drachmas for his herd of horses. Of course, Polonius didn't have such a sum on him or even at the corral, so he led the nomads towards his house in the fortified main city quadrangle, located behind stone walls with towers and surrounded by deep moats. As they went through the narrow streets of the western quarter, which housed the more modest shops of the city and the houses of local artisans, Boraspos couldn't help ask a question to Polonius.

"Am I wrong by having the impression that prices for horses have gone up significantly?"

While continuing to walk, the Greek merchant gave him a sober look.

“You got the right impression, my friend. The war between King Mithridates and the Romans down in the Pontus⁶ has gone badly for the King. He recently suffered a number of stinging defeats and basically lost most of his army to the Romans. Mithridates is said to be presently sheltering in Armenia, on the eastern shores of the Pontus Euxinus⁷, where he is trying to rebuild his army. Because of that, the demand for good horses has never been higher. Add to that the fact that a caravan from far to the East has arrived two days ago and is also wanting to buy lots of horses and I should make a very nice profit this year.”

“That caravan, do you know what it was carrying?”

“Of course I do!” replied Polonius, smiling in amusement. “I would be a poor merchant if I didn’t keep informed about the opportunities and possible bargains to be had. Basically, it mostly brought silk, spices, jewelry and some weapons from the East. In exchange, I expect those Eastern merchants to return home mostly with horses, furs and slaves.”

Polonius’ last words soured somewhat Boraspos’ good spirits and he made a bitter smile.

“Slavery... To us nomads of the steppes, freedom is the most important thing in life. I would kill myself before allowing someone to enslave me or my family.”

“Well, the whole World seems to use slaves, so who am I to rail against it? Talking of family, who is that stunning young woman rider who came with you?”

To Polonius’ surprise, Boraspos broke out into laughter at his question.

“That ‘young woman’ is my daughter Nauca and she is eleven years old.”

Polonius abruptly stopped on hearing that and threw a disbelieving look at Nauca, still riding her horse, then looked at Boraspos.

“She’s only eleven? But she is nearly as tall as me!”

“I know!” said proudly Boraspos, grinning. “She definitely has my blood in her. She is already an excellent huntress and horse rider and proved herself as a warrior as well.”

“Proved herself as a warrior? At eleven?”

⁶ Kingdom of Pontus: Situated along the southern coast of the Black Sea, in present day Turkey. Ruled from the late 2nd Century B.C.E. to the early 1st Century B.C.E. by King Mithridates VI, who fought three successive wars against Rome and eventually lost.

⁷ Pontus Euxinus: Ancient name for the Black Sea.

“Actually, she was only nine when she killed by herself five marauders who tried to kill and rob us one early morning, some two years ago. She stabbed one man with her dagger, then shot the four other robbers with a bow.”

“Wow! The Spartans would have loved that story. Uh, how long do you plan to stay in Tanais, my friend?”

“I am not sure yet, Polonius. Two or three days, maybe, time to buy a few things around.”

“Then, since you will soon have a lot of gold and silver with you, thanks to your horses, let me give you one piece of advice: go stay at the old caravanserai next to the port area. It has fortified walls and is defended by moats. Since it is used by foreign merchants with lots of precious goods, it is well guarded and has ample facilities for travelers with horses or camels. Also, since the reputation of Tanais as a trading post is crucial for the local economy, the local Archon⁸ has been very careful in having the caravanserai run by honest men. You and your relatives will be safe from robbers there, plus you will be living next to the caravan handlers who recently arrived in Tanais. Maybe you will have a chance to buy directly from them some oriental treasures with the gold and silver you will get from me.”

“That definitely sounds like a judicious advice, my friend.” replied Boraspos, who understood well the old trade rule which said that eliminating one intermediary in a trade deal always saved money.

On her part, Nauca kept looking left and right from atop her big Akhal Teke horse, fascinated by the new things she was seeing. She had never seen so many people in one place and the kaleidoscope of colors rivaled with that of the vegetation of the steppes. One thing that she didn't like much, however, was the odors. While she could smell tempting odors coming from various street food vendors and inns, the smell from the local latrines and rudimentary sewers, along with that of the garbage littering the back alleys, violently contrasted with the pure fragrances of the steppes' pines, firs and other plants. The noise level and cacophony were also a bit unsettling to her. Nauca was quick to realize as well that she would have problems if she ever decided to live here: only a minority of people seemed to speak Sarmatian⁹, the only language she

⁸ Archon: Title for a local ruler or administrator in Ancient Greece.

⁹ Sarmatian: Iranian dialect related to Saka-Scythic, which evolved into Modern Ossetian.

knew. That fact then started to make her reflect on what she knew, or rather what she didn't know. The only world she had known to date was the steppes and her own people. However, if she ever wanted to explore the rest of the World one day, she would need to learn other languages and study things like geography and foreign customs. Hell, she didn't even know how to count properly! As for reading and writing, the Sarmatian language didn't have a written form, so Nauca was in fact a complete illiterate. That was not through any fault of her own, as she knew that she was quite intelligent and could learn new things fast, but she felt frustrated then at realizing how limited her knowledge and horizons were. Maybe she would have to change that...one day.

After passing through the Western Quarter, the group arrived at the main city quadrangle, a fortified sector with moats, stone walls and towers measuring 250 meters by 240 meters. As he guided the Sarmatians towards one of the gates in the walls, Polonius waved a hand at the fort.

"This is where the richer people in the city reside, along with Archon Phoros and his top administrators. My own house is inside the main city quadrangle and it is where I keep my gold and silver, as it is about the safest place in Tanais. I will speak to the guards at the city gate, as you would normally not be allowed in by yourselves."

Boraspos nodded his head at that, understanding the situation. While the merchants of Tanais were most willing to trade with visiting nomads, the rough ways of the latter and their habit of raiding each other around the steppes made many merchants uneasy and suspicious of them. Thankfully, Polonius was not among those merchants. With the five Sarmatians trotting behind the Greek merchant, Polonius spoke quickly in Greek with one of the two guards standing at the gate, slipping a silver drachma coin in his hand as well. The guards then let the group pass but Nauca didn't miss the suspicious looks from the guards as they eyed the panoply of weapons which the Sarmatians were carrying. Keeping her impressions to herself for the moment, she followed Polonius and her father inside the fortified city and down a fairly large street. The group then turned nearly immediately onto a side street, covering another forty meters before entering the walled front yard of a large brick house, where Polonius told them to dismount. With a servant taking care of their horses, the five nomads entered the house behind Polonius, who led them to an open-air atrium situated in the center of the house.

"Please, sit on those stone benches, my friends: I will go get your money. Would you like some wine?"

"That would be very kind you." replied Boraspos, who had tasted wine before during previous visits to Tanais. Polonius clapped his hands loudly then, getting a female servant to appear. The merchant gave her a short order, then disappeared inside the house. The servant disappeared as well for a moment, but soon returned with a collection of cups and a ceramic pitcher, then poured a cup of wine for each of the nomads. Getting her own cup of wine, Nauca sniffed at the red liquid and looked at her father.

"What is this, Father?"

"That is called 'wine', basically fermented grape juice with a fair proportion of alcohol. Wine is a very common drink in towns and cities and I actually like its taste. Just drink it in small sips and let its flavor flow down your throat."

Nauca did just that, cautiously taking a first sip. She had to concede then that she did like the taste of that new drink. Up to now, the only liquids she had drunk were water and koumiss, fermented mare's milk.

"It is actually quite good, Father."

"I appreciate it myself, Nauca, but be careful not to drink too much of it or to drink it too quickly: you could easily get drunk with it. For a girl or woman to get drunk in a city like this one would probably invite some troubles."

"What kind of troubles, Father?"

"Like men trying to abuse those drunken girls, when their judgment is impaired. Things can also get very rowdy when men and women celebrate together and get drunk. Things can then degenerate quite quickly. You may still be young, but many men in this town would try to use you for their pleasure, if given a chance."

"Oh! I see!"

"Good! Never forget that, Nauca."

Thus warned, Nauca kept sipping slowly her wine. Polonius was back before she could drink half of her wine. Putting down a heavy leather pouch, a weight scale and some kind of wood frame with beads strung on wires on top of a bench near Boraspos, he then opened wide the pouch, revealing an impressive amount of gold and silver coins.

"I have here both Athenian gold staters and silver drachmas and tetradrachms. The gold stater is worth twenty silver drachmas, while the tetradrachm is worth four drachmas. I will now count out your money by weighing it on this scale and recording

the numbers on this Chinese abacus, a very practical item for people like me who have to count and record large sums. I would suggest that, once the whole sum will be counted, you split it around your purses: one big purse full of gold would attract quickly all the thieves in this town, of which there are quite a few, by the way. Then, I would further suggest that you hide your purses inside your tunics. What I will give you actually represents over ten years of salary for a skilled worker: many people would be ready to kill for so much money, so be very careful with it.”

“Hell, five marauders were ready to kill me, my family and the family of my brother in order to steal our horses. I certainly get your point, my friend.” replied Boraspos in a sober tone.

“Good!” said the merchant before starting to weigh the coins, ten gold staters at a time. While Nauca didn’t know how to truly count, having used only her fingers and toes in the past to count things, she closely watched Polonius as the merchant used his scale and abacus. The abacus in particular struck her imagination with its simplicity and practicability. The counting actually went surprisingly fast and Boraspos ended splitting the mass of coins between him, his two children and two nephews after only twelve minutes or so, time that included explanations by Polonius about how he was counting the money. Now very satisfied, Boraspos tied back the cordon of his bulging purse and tucked it inside his tunic, as Polonius had counseled him to do.

“It is decidedly a pleasure to deal with you, my good Polonius. I hope that you will be able to resell those horses quickly and at a good profit for you.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, my dear Boraspos. Between the Archon looking for new war horses for his king and those Eastern merchants, your horses will fetch a very good price, thank you very much.”

Akkas, who had been mostly silent up to now, then asked a question to the merchant.

“What about that war with the Romans, Polonius? Would King Mithridates be looking for mercenaries, by chance?”

While that question made Boraspos snap his head to look severely at his 22-year-old nephew, Polonius took his time to think his answer carefully.

“Well, King Mithridates is certainly looking for new soldiers to rebuild his army in Armenia. However, you should realize two things. First, King Mithridates was forced to flee his palace in Sinope as the Romans advanced and defeated his army, thus is now nearly penniless. Second, as much as I hate the Romans, with their limitless greed and brutal ways, I have to say that the Roman war machine is a truly formidable one, highly

disciplined and made up of experienced soldiers. If you ever enrolled in King Mithridates' new army, young man, then chances are that you will not return alive from the war. I in fact anticipate that the Romans will eventually take over the whole area of the Pontus Euxinus and may even come all the way to here. Now, don't get me wrong: I have no love for those Romans, who took and sacked my beloved Greece in the past, but I know how to recognize losers and winners when I see them. King Mithridates is now fighting his third war against the Romans and I expect him to lose again. The problem is that he is dragging down to defeat and destruction his allies and his own soldiers with him. Enrolling in his army would not be wise, young man."

To Boraspos' satisfaction, Polonius' words seemed to thoroughly douse Akkas' enthusiasm. Boraspos then spoke to the merchant.

"Thank you for your wise words, my friend. Would there be a particular merchant who you could recommend to us for his honesty? We will need to buy a number of things before returning to our camp in the steppes."

"You are in luck, my friends!" exclaimed Polonius at once, grinning to Boraspos. "My brother Thanos administers the caravanserai for the Archon and would be most happy to help you. He is nearly incorruptible, speaks a godly amount of languages, knows everything that happens in town and deals all the time with visiting caravan handlers. He will be able to both lodge you at a reasonable cost and help you find good deals. I will write a quick note for him right away."

Boraspos smiled to his children and nephews as Polonius disappeared again, carrying inside his house his depleted money pouch, weight scale and abacus.

"Decidedly, Polonius is a good man to know here in Tanais. Now, before you start spending the gold and silver filling your purses, my nephews, remember that those coins belong to your father, who will split them with you once back at our camp. If you have to spend coins here, be parsimonious, unless you are buying items that Irganos has asked you to find in Tanais. Understood?"

"Yes, Uncle!" replied in unison Akkas and Chodios, sounding and looking obedient.

"Good! Once I will have that note from Polonius, we will go to the caravanserai and find lodging there."

"Could we go eat soon, Father?" asked Nauca as her stomach produced an audible gurgling sound. "I am starving!"

Boraspos, who was himself getting quite hungry, nodded once.

“We will, Nauca, as soon as we have rooms at the caravanserai.”

A few minutes later, Polonius was back with a rolled piece of parchment, which he gave to Boraspos. The nomads then left the merchant’s house after a last handshake. Getting back on their horses, which included three horses carrying bundles of furs and pelts, the product of three years of hunting, plus two other horses carrying their tent and food supplies for their trip, the five Sarmatians trotted out of the main fortified city and went towards the port area. Armed guards at the gate of the caravanserai challenged the group but, thankfully, at least one of the guards could speak Sarmatian and they were allowed to easily enough enter the walled, sprawling compound. Nauca’s eyes immediately fixed on a group of the strangest beasts she had ever seen, prompting her to ask a question to Boraspos.

“Father, what are those things with two humps on their backs?”

Boraspos eyed the beasts in question for a second before smiling.

“Those things, my dear daughter, are Bactrian camels. They are used a lot by merchants from the Far East because they survive well in desert areas. They accumulate water in their humps and can go many days without drinking. Don’t ride too close to them, though: horses don’t like their strong smell. Now, let’s find this ‘Thanos’.” Boraspos had to ask three men before the last one proved to speak Sarmatian and offered him to get the caravanserai administrator. Dismounting with his companions, Boraspos waited patiently near one of the stables built along the inside faces of the perimeter wall. That gave Nauca more time to look around her, fascinated by all those new sights. The variety of languages spoken and outfits worn was nearly dizzying to her. In turn, many of the people present in the caravanserai, most of them obvious foreigners, eyed with curiosity the five Sarmatians. However, the stares a few men fixed on Nauca made her feel uncomfortable, being clearly lecherous. Boraspos noticed those stares and moved closer to Nauca, so that he and his horse would be between the foreign men and his daughter.

“You will have to be on your guard here, Nauca. Those foreigners have probably been traveling for months and may have been without women for quite a while. Make sure that one of us is always with you when such men are around you.”

“Understood, Father.”

The young man who had offered to go get Thanos for them then returned, accompanied by a lean, medium height man with short curly black hair. The latter wore a fine short

tunic and had a couple of gold rings on his fingers. Going to Boraspos and stopping one pace from him, he politely bowed his head to him and spoke in fluent Sarmatian.

"Hello! I am Thanos! What may I do for you, mister?"

Boraspos returned his bow and gave to the man the small rolled parchment he had received from Polonius.

"My name is Boraspos and we just sold 21 prime horses to your brother Polonius. We were looking for a place to stay for a couple of days in Tanais, time to sell our furs and buy a few things, and he recommended that we go to this caravanserai and ask for you. Here is a note he gave me."

Thanos took the parchment and quickly unrolled it, reading the short text written in Greek. He then tucked the parchment inside his tunic and smiled to Boraspos.

"My brother did well to send you here. Welcome to the caravanserai. Before we do or say anything else, let's get a few stalls for your horses. Follow me!"

Walking to a series of still empty horses stalls some thirty meters away, Thanos spoke quickly with a stable boy, who then started opening the gates of two of the stalls as the caravanserai master smiled to Boraspos.

"Those two stalls will be yours for the duration of your stay, my friend. The fee, which includes water and feed, is one drachma per stall per day. You said that you wanted to stay for a couple of days?"

"That's correct! We need to sell our furs and buy a few things before returning to our family camp in the steppes."

"May I see those furs of yours, friend?"

"Of course! Akkas, Chodios, Galatus, take down our bundles of furs!"

The three young men obeyed him at once and lined up the bundles on the ground in front of the stalls, as the stable boy and Nauca led their horses inside the stalls. Thanos quickly proved to Boraspos to be an expert on furs and pelts by the way he examined them and asked questions about them. After a good ten minutes of careful examination, Thanos smiled to Boraspos.

"Your furs and pelts are of high quality indeed, my friend. In my opinion, this lot is easily worth 3,800 drachmas. I would be ready to buy them from you or, if you prefer so, I could put you in contact with one of the merchants of the recently arrived caravan, who is looking specifically for furs. However, I must warn you that the man in question is a hard bargainer indeed."

That left Boraspos thinking furiously for a moment. According to his own past experience at selling furs, the price quoted by Thanos seemed quite fair, plus the man had been recommended to him by a merchant he trusted. On the other hand, choosing to deal with a foreign merchant he knew nothing about sounded like a risky proposition to Boraspos.

“I will accept your offer of 3,800 drachmas for my furs, mister.”

“Excellent! Wait here while I go get that sum and arrange for two rooms for your group at the inn. I should be back shortly.”

As Thanos walked quickly away, Akkas approached Boraspos and whispered in his left ear.

“You think that this was a truly fair price for our furs, Uncle?”

“I do! Those foreign merchants may look quite exotic and colorful to you, but they are first and foremost very experienced and savvy merchants bent on making the maximum profit possible from trading their goods. They could probably addle our brains with all kinds of excuses and stories meant to lower the price they would offer us for our furs. Besides, I trust Polonius’ word and he did recommend Thanos to us. By showing goodwill in this first meeting with him, we may well prepare the grounds for an even more profitable meeting next time we come to Tanais.”

Apparently won over by those arguments, Akkas nodded his head once and went into one of the two stalls rented to their group, where he started taking off from his horse the rudimentary soft saddle and the bridles equipping it, something Nauca was already doing with her horse. The whole group was soon busy inside the stalls, unloading their horses, brushing them and offering them water and hay with the help of the stable boy. Thanos came back to them some fifteen minutes later, accompanied by three strong men and one very pretty teenage girl. Thanos presented a heavy pouch to Boraspos, which produced a metallic noise when the latter took it.

“Here is your money for your furs, my friend. My men will carry away your furs after you will have counted your silver. Then, my daughter Artemisia will guide you to your rooms.”

Boraspos shook a bit the money pouch, quickly estimating its weight, then looked soberly at Thanos while still holding on to the pouch.

“I fully trust your brother Polonius and I will not insult him by doubting the honesty of someone he recommended to me. There is no need for me to count this silver, my friend.”

Thanos stared for a moment at Boraspos before nodding his head soberly, truly impressed.

"Many here may call you a barbarian, but you just proved to be a man of principles, Boraspos. Know that you will always be welcomed in this caravanserai. One word of caution before you follow Artemisia: don't leave any valuable items with your horses in their stalls. I do have guards on duty at night around the courtyard and the horse stalls, but they can't be everywhere and I don't know all of the foreign merchants presently using my caravanserai. On the other hand, the floor on which the rooms of my inn are situated is guarded at all times and the rooms themselves are thus quite safe." Boraspos, most pleased by this, exchanged a vigorous forearm shake with Thanos.

"I believe that we are made to do trade with each other, friend. I promise to reserve my best furs for you next time I visit Tanais."

With that said, Boraspos told his children and nephews to grab their saddlebags and horse equipment and follow him behind the waiting Artemisia. As the nomads put their soft saddle cushions on their shoulders, Thanos eyed those critically before speaking again.

"You know, those eastern merchants use hard saddles which are much better than your simple cushions and I know that they have brought a few saddles for sale. I would strongly recommend to you to buy saddles from them as soon as possible, while they still have some for sale: they would be very judicious buys for you in my opinion."

"I will certainly go have a look at those eastern saddles after lunch, Thanos. Do you mind if we use the services of your daughter as a translator for today and tomorrow? I am ready to pay her two drachmas per day for that."

While Artemisia grinned on hearing that, her father smiled and nodded his head in approval.

"Well, I have no objections to see her earn some honest money, my friend. You may use her as your personal translator during your stay in town."

"Thank you, my friend." replied Boraspos before extracting two silver coins from the big, heavy purse he was holding and then giving them to the happy young teenager.

"Your payment for today, Artemisia."

"Thank you very much, sir! If you will now follow me to your rooms."

The heavily loaded nomads followed the Greek girl out of the stables and into a nearby two-story brick building which turned to be the caravanserai's inn. Passing

through a large communal hall furnished with wooden tables and benches, Artemisia led the group up a wooden staircase and onto the upper floor of the inn, where a long corridor lined with doors on both sides ran the whole length of the building. Boraspos was pleased to see that an inn's servant armed with a dagger sat on a low stool at the end of the corridor, apparently mounting guard. Artemisia pointed the young man to them as they walked down the hallway.

"This is Megaros, the day guard for the upper floor of the inn. His job is to memorize the faces and names of the customers who rent rooms at the inn and to then allow only the rightful occupiers to enter specific rooms. My father gave you two rooms, or do you prefer to have three rooms, with a single one for your daughter?"

"Two rooms will be fine: Nauca will sleep in my room."

"Then, this room will be yours, with the next one on the same side going to your three young men. Once you will have dropped your things in your rooms, I will lead you down to the main hall, so that you can eat lunch."

"Aah, that will be nice: I am getting quite hungry."

As the nomads entered their respective rooms, Artemisia took a moment to go speak briefly with the young guard, to inform him about who the nomads were. As for Nauca, she followed her father inside a nearly bare room containing a large and deep stack of hay, a wooden stool, a small table supporting a water jar and large bowl made of clay, plus a sponge. A covered wooden bucket sitting in a corner near the single window was obviously meant to serve as a chamber pot. As for the window, it had wooden shutters and a thin cotton curtain. Boraspos nodded with satisfaction after quickly looking the small room: compared to living inside a yurt, this was quite adequate for him.

"Let's put our things in that corner near the hay stack, Nauca."

"What about that purse full of silver, Father? Are you going to leave it here during lunch?"

"By Cybele, no! If I would do that, it could well disappear while we eat, guard or no guard. Understand that many men would kill without remorse for this much silver and gold. Always keep your silver and gold on or very near yourself at all times and don't flash your money around. I trust our host, but I certainly don't trust the other customers of this inn."

"I understand, Father." said Nauca, who had been experiencing and learning many new things since they had arrived in Tanais. In truth, this was the first time ever that she had seen anything apart from life on the steppes. Boraspos heeded his own

words by putting his large money pouch inside a leather haversack which he then slung to one side, passing its retaining strap across his chest. With his left arm covering the top flap of his haversack, he then left his room with Nauca. His son Galatus and his nephews Akkas and Chodios joined them and Artemisia in the corridor a minute later.

When the group went down to the main hall, it found the room half full with a most eclectic mix of people of various races and origins speaking a good half dozen different languages. While the other customers only looked briefly at Boraspos and at the three young men following him, they did stare for much longer at Nauca. She was after all a tall and beautiful girl carrying a panoply of weapons despite her young age. Nauca did her best to ignore the stares and went to sit with her relatives around a long table as Artemisia excused herself for a moment before disappearing inside the kitchen of the inn. She was back a minute later and sat at the table before speaking to the Sarmatians.

"Today, the inn has on its menu a vegetable and beef soup, roast pork and chicken, plus bread and cheese. What would you like to eat?"

"Well, since business has been good for us today, we will indulge ourselves: we will have each a soup, plus will share two whole chickens and a pork steak between the five of us. Do you have koumiss here?"

Artemisia couldn't help make a grimace at the word 'koumiss'.

"Sorry but we don't! To be frank, your koumiss is not popular with the people of Tanais. We much prefer wine and beer."

"Then, wine it will be. Is it expensive?"

"It depends on its quality. Most people of modest means dilute their wine with water to cut the cost of it. The wine we have at the inn is imported from either Thracia or Armenia and is quite good. If you deal with merchants from the East, they may offer to sell you dried leaves they call 'tea'. They boil those leaves in water to produce a hot beverage that is quite good. I myself tried it and I like it."

"Do you have some of this tea at the inn, Artemisia?" asked Nauca, curious.

"Yes, we do! Would you like to try a small pot of it? It is however expensive, because of the long trip taken to bring it here."

"Why not?" decided quickly Boraspos. "It is not as if we are poor and we might as well learn and experience new things during our short stay. After all, we may return

to Tanais in only three or four years. Anything else that is exotic and would be worth tasting?”

“Definitely! After all, the caravans from the East commonly bring many kinds of spices that are in high demand by those who can afford their prices. One such spice that I tasted and that greatly enhances the taste of red meat is black pepper. It comes in small round black grains that are ground into a fine powder before being sprinkled on pieces of meat being cooked. Another spice I tried is red pepper. It is like black pepper but it adds a fiery taste to dishes and you have to be careful not to sprinkle too much of it or you will feel that your mouth is on fire.”

Boraspos opened his eyes wide at that description, obviously interested.

“This intrigues me a lot! Could you ask the cook to put some of your black pepper on our meat dishes?”

“I certainly can, but the inn charges an extra three obols¹⁰ to each portion of meat served with spices other than salt.”

That prompted Boraspos in taking out six silver drachmas from his smaller purse and presenting them to Artemisia.

“Tell your cook to season our meat with this black pepper. I would also like for him to bring us small samples of the raw peppers he has, so that I can taste them and judge if I like them. If I do, I might very well go buy good quantities of spices to bring back to our camp. Life is hard in the steppes and anything that can add something extra to it would be most welcome by us.”

“Then I will go advise the cook of your requests and will tell him to add a pot of hot tea to your order. I won’t be long.”

As Artemisia walked away towards the kitchens, Nauca looked at a nearby table where four foreign merchants with slanted eyelids were eating with gusto a sort of meat stew from which came a tempting smell. Her sense of smell was quite sensitive and she could routinely smell an animal in the forest before she could even see it. There was definitely something in that stew that she never had smelled before. With her stomach now growling from hunger, she did her best to be patient and wait for the meals they had ordered. Thankfully, when Artemisia came back to sit at their table, she was accompanied by a servant who put a clay pitcher, six cups and a full loaf of bread on the table. Artemisia then explained as the servant walked away.

¹⁰ Obol : Small silver coin from Ancient Greece. It took six obols to equate one drachma.

“This is your wine. Your hot tea will be served at the end of your meal, to help your digestion. As for the bread, you may like to use it to sponge the juice from your meat...or help you wait for your main meal.”

The five Sarmatians, all quite hungry by now, took her on her last words and quickly divided half of the loaf between themselves and ate it while sipping on their wine. Nauca had to confess to herself then that she was starting to like the taste of wine, which was so different from that of koumiss and was definitely much more agreeable. Some ten minutes later, two servants brought their meals to their table, to everybody’s satisfaction. However, before touching his food, Boraspos took the time to dip in turn a fingertip into each of the two small wooden bowl which had been brought with their food and then cautiously taste with his tongue the few grains sticking to his finger, washing the taste of one spice made of black grains with wine before tasting the other one, made of reddish brown grains. While he truly liked the black variety, the red variety made his eyes bulge, while he blew air out of his mouth.

“By the gods! That red spice really makes you feel on fire! The black one is however much less strong but still very nice. I like both of them. Have a taste of them, kids!”

As Nauca, Galatus, Akkas and Chodios dipped in turn a fingertip in the bowls, Artemisia gave them some extra information on the spices they were sampling.

“Those are only two of a wide variety of spices brought in by caravans from the East. They come mostly from Persia and India, while tea comes from China. The black one is black pepper grains, ground fine, and that small sample of it you are tasting is worth at least two drachmas by itself. The red spice is red pepper and is even more expensive.”

“I love that black pepper, Father.” said Nauca. “Imagine the taste of deer meat once seasoned with black pepper. As for the red pepper, it sure would help unclog one’s nose when suffering from a cold.”

“It may be expensive, but I will definitely want to buy at least a small bag of that black pepper before leaving Tanais.” said her father. “Artemisia, do you know if your father deals in those spices and could sell us some?”

“My father deals with everything that is brought to this caravanserai. I am sure that he will be most happy to sell some of that pepper to you for a reasonable price.”

“Excellent! Well, let’s eat!”

Eating their soups, then their meats and vegetables with gusto, the Sarmatians were hooked to the virtues of black pepper by the time they finished eating their meals. Boraspos sat back once his plate was empty, happy with his meal.

"This must have been the best meal I ever had. This black pepper truly enhances the flavors of meats in an incredible way. I must get some of it!"

"I will go talk to my father and tell him so." Said Artemisia while getting up from her bench. She then saw a servant approach with a service tray. "Aah, here is your hot tea coming! We normally serve it with a tiny portion of honey in it, to sweeten its natural taste, which is a bit bitter. I should be back before you finish drinking it."

She waited until the Sarmatians had taken their first sip of their cups of hot tea, wanting to see their reactions to it. She was not disappointed, with her guests being unanimous in declaring their love of it. Only then did she leave their table. She came back some fifteen minutes later, as Boraspos was paying for his family's meals.

"Good news, my friends! My father is waiting for you in one of his sales rooms, where he displays to his customers the wares he got from caravan merchants or from ships which brought cargo from Anatolia or Greece. You will thus be able to have first pick on many rare items."

"That sounds to my liking! Lead the way, Artemisia!"

This time, the group left the inn proper and walked across the open courtyard of the caravanserai, going to a large, single story rectangular building with large double doors which could allow in chariots. Two armed guards were posted in front of the main doors but let Artemisia and the Sarmatians pass on a sign from the Greek girl. They then entered a long warehouse lit by a number of high but very narrow windows which would not allow someone to crawl through them. They found Thanos waiting for them behind a line formed by three long tables, on which rested a wide variety of items.

"Welcome in my sales warehouse, my friends. You will find exposed on these tables examples of all the various items I bought recently from caravan merchants or ship captains. Take all the time you want to examine my wares and don't be afraid to ask questions. I understand that you are most interested in black pepper, my good Boraspos."

"I indeed am, Thanos! In fact, a small bag of it would make me quite happy."

"Then, this way, my friend. Your relatives are most welcome to gaze around while we discuss spices together."

Nauca did not have to be told twice before walking slowly down the line of tables, wanting to see first what was available before starting to look into more details at the items that would prove of interest to her. She soon realized that she could easily spend all the money she had on herself and still want some more items visible here, so she promised herself to be more selective as she returned to the first object that had attracted her attention, a decorated saddle of a kind she had never seen before. Artemisia, who was staying near her to help translate, quickly noticed Nauca's interest for the saddle and took on herself to ask in Greek some information about it to her father's assistant, information that she then translated to Nauca.

"This is what they call in China and India a hard tree saddle. It is made of a wooden main core split in two and is padded and covered with leather."

"Why split in two?"

"To leave a free space for the horse's spine and prevent the rider's weight from pressing directly on the spine. Supposedly, this kind of saddle distributes better the weight of the rider on the horse's back and also provides a much more stable and comfortable seat for the rider, while tiring the horse less. The assistant says that such saddles have already been in use for over a hundred years in China."

"I really like it!" said Nauca while examining closely the saddle, turning it around and looking under it. She soon saw something that intrigued her a bit: a leather strap whose both ends were fixed to the lower left side of the saddle and which formed a loop.

"Uh, what is that strap for, Artemisia?"

Her new friend had to ask the assistant before she could answer Nauca.

"He says that it is a small modification made in India, which is meant to help the rider mount his horse. To get on the horse, the rider raises his left leg and puts his left foot in that leather loop, then can pull himself up onto the saddle, using the front pommel of the saddle as a support."

Nauca's eyes grew wide on hearing that, while a grin appeared on her face.

"By Cybele! I must get this saddle! Tell this man to reserve it for me: I will go ask my father's permission to buy it. Uh, how much is it?"

Amused by her enthusiasm, Artemisia spoke briefly with the assistant warehouse keeper before looking back at Nauca.

"The starting asking price is 220 drachmas."

That kind of cooled down the eagerness of the teenager. Then she remembered that she still had the money she had taken from the marauders she had killed some two

years ago, money that she kept in a purse separate from the purse of silver won from the sale of her family's horses. Taking out that purse and opening it, she poured its content on the table, only to realize then that she didn't know how to count that money. Artemisia, seeing her embarrassment, volunteered herself to help her then.

"Let me count your money for you, Nauca."

Being the daughter of an expatriate big merchant, Artemisia had been well educated and was especially good with numbers, something that she proved by counting Nauca's silver coins in a mere two minutes.

"Gee, Nauca, for a young girl like you, you sure have a lot of money of your own. You have 243 drachmas there, more than enough to make an opening counter-bid. Would you like me to help you in this?"

That question created at once a dilemma in Nauca's mind. She fully realized that Artemisia was without a doubt a lot more experienced and qualified for such bargaining matters, but having to rely on someone else for this was quite embarrassing to her. She finally decided on a compromise solution and looked hesitantly at the Greek teenager.

"Would he accept 200 drachmas for this saddle?"

Knowing that simply the tone Nauca had used to ask that question would mark her as a potential sucker to any experienced merchant, Artemisia hid her smile and looked at the assistant warehouse keeper, speaking to him in Greek.

"She is offering 200 drachmas for the saddle. I know that she looks and sounds like an utter amateur about bargaining, but his father and my father are in very good terms. What can you give her without cutting too much on the expected sales profit?"

The man smiled at that and, playing her game, started a fake bargaining exchange with Artemisia, to finally 'accept' a final price of 205 drachmas. On being informed of that 'accord', Nauca nearly jumped from joy and hugged and kissed Artemisia.

"Thank you for helping me getting this new saddle, Artemisia. You are a real friend. Uh, can you count that man's money for me?"

"Of course!"

Counting and giving 205 drachmas to the assistant, Artemisia gave back the rest of the coins to Nauca after pouring it back in her purse.

"Here you are, Nauca. You still have 38 drachmas of your own money. Do you wish to buy something else?"

"Well, I did see a few more things of interest, but I don't know if I have enough money left for them now."

"What about your father? He has lots of money with him. How much would he be ready to give you to help your buying?"

"Uh, I don't know. Let me ask him."

"Don't forget your new saddle."

"Oh, right!" said Nauca, feeling a bit silly, before grabbing the precious saddle and swinging it over one shoulder with some effort. She then walked to her father, who was just concluding a deal for a medium-sized jute bag of black pepper grains, one smaller sized bag of red pepper and two large bags of sea salt, the lot worth a whopping 2,600 drachmas. Boraspos was having the precious bags carried to their rooms by servants, with Akkas to escort and guard the spices, when Nauca approached him with her saddle, Artemisia behind her. Boraspos' eyes stopped at once on the saddle, while Thanos smiled on seeing Nauca's obvious joy.

"Look what I found and bought with my money, Father: a new kind of saddle that should prove a lot more comfortable and practical than my old one. I got it for...uh, how much was it already, Artemisia?"

"You got it for 205 drachmas, Nauca."

"It is indeed a very nice-looking saddle." said approvingly Boraspos while examining the saddle. "I never saw one like this before."

"The Chinese and Indians have been using such saddles for a few decades already and everybody agrees that they are more comfortable and practical for both rider and horse, due to it distributing the weight of the rider over a larger surface." cut in Thanos. "Nomads like you and your family certainly could use such saddles."

"Do you have more saddles like this one, Thanos?"

"I believe that I have a couple more such items, my friend. Let me just check."

As Thanos walked away, Nauca gave a hopeful look at her father.

"Father, I saw a few more things that would interest me. Would you be able to give me some money to help me buy them?"

Boraspos gently smiled down to her in response.

"Nauca, you did your very significant part in helping our family, both by your successful hunting and by helping take care of our herd of horses. Consider the part of my money I split into your purse as yours. The same will apply to the part I gave to Galatus. As for Akkas and Chodios, I will temporarily lend them money, until Irganos decides about their shares."

That made Nauca, who was only some ten centimeters shorter than Boraspos, happily hug her father.

“Oh, thank you, Father! I promise that part of my money will be used to buy something nice for Mother.”

“I am sure that she will appreciate that, Nauca. You are indeed a good daughter.”

An overjoyed Nauca then returned to the lined-up tables with Artemisia, who whispered in her left ear as Nauca resumed her hunt for things to buy.

“Uh, how much money did your father split with you, Nauca?”

As an answer, Nauca took the heavy purse given to her by her father and handed it to Artemisia, who nearly choked on weighing quickly the heavy leather purse full of silver coins.

“By Athena! You must have over 1,300 drachmas in this purse! I wish that my own father would be this generous with me in terms of purse money.”

“Well, as he said, I did my part in catching furs and herding horses.”

“Wow! You Sarmatian girls sure have lots of freedom compared to us Greek girls.”

That made Nauca look with worry at her new friend.

“And how are Greek girls treated by their families?”

Artemisia hesitated before answering in a near whisper.

“I will tell you later, in private. Don’t worry about me, though: my father is a lot more liberal and open-minded than most Greek men and he never brutalized or neglected me. It is just that, in Greek society, women are considered inferior to men and are usually confined inside their homes. I envy how you can ride freely around the vast open steppes.”

Nauca did not insist on that subject then, not wanting to attract possible trouble to Artemisia.

The next item that excited Nauca in the display on sale made Artemisia somehow perplex.

“A battle-axe? But you are already wearing one on your left side.”

“Yes, a bronze battle-axe. This one is made of steel, which is much harder than bronze. Furthermore, this one on the table is made of the same kind of steel than the

sword I took on a thief I killed two years ago. That steel is from India and it is harder than iron or even other kinds of steel. It would make a perfect match with my sword.”

Artemisia looked at Nauca with big eyes on hearing that.

“You killed thieves? How old were you then?”

“Nine!” replied Nauca proudly. “I killed five of them when they tried to attack my family one early morning, while it was still sleeping.”

“Wow! Are you sure that you weren’t raised in Sparta instead of in the steppes?”

“What is that Sparta place anyway, Artemisia? I keep hearing about it since my arrival in Tanais.”

“Sparta is a Greek city with a most violent and warrior-like past. It was a deadly opponent of Athens, the city from which my grandfather came, but it has lost most of its power and fame by now and is controlled by the Romans. It was notable among Greek cities partly because the girls there had a lot more freedom than girls in the rest of Greece and also could train with weapons, something that was considered as a complete abnormality in other Greek cities. If you showed up in Athens today the way you are now, for example, you would create a public scandal and would probably be stoned by male passersby.”

“Well, if they did that, they would earn themselves some of my arrows quite quickly.” replied at once Nauca. Artemisia, understanding that this was no mere bragging, didn’t reply to that and instead helped Nauca bargain for the battle-axe, which she finally got for the not inconsiderate sum of 170 drachmas. The happy Nauca then soon added to her catch by finding and buying a dagger that was also made out of Hinduwani Steel. In contrast, Nauca’s other two buys before leaving the warehouse were a lot more conventional and proper, at least in the eyes of a Greek: a nice silver necklace for her mother and two silver bracelets, one for herself and the other for her older sister Tamura. On his part, Boraspos didn’t forget to buy the wool cloth requested by his wife, plus added two bolts of cotton cloth and a dozen thick woolen blankets. He added to that a large iron cooking pot and a set of iron campfire utensils, which very few nomads could brag about possessing, plus half a dozen jars of precious honey, which cost a good five drachmas per quarter liter, nearly the weekly salary of an unskilled worker. As for Chodios and Galatus, they chose to spend their money on gold and silver jewels, something that disappointed Boraspos. When the nomads finally exited the warehouse with their new goods, Boraspos’ purse had melted to a third of its former weight, while Thanos ended his business day on a most lucrative note.

After a supper at the inn that proved as good as the previous lunch, Nauca got permission from her father to go walk around a bit with Artemisia, saying that she wanted to tour the caravanserai in detail with her friend. Once out of the inn, Artemisia led Nauca up on top of the ramparts protecting the caravanserai, where she stayed away from the few guards on duty and spoke in Sarmatian in a low voice.

"So, what did you want to know about us Greek girls, Nauca?"

"To be frank, I would like to know everything about Greece and the rest of the World, but I realize that this would be asking way too much. Pretty much all that I know today is about life in the steppes and the people of the steppes. I also speak only one language and can't converse with most strangers because of that. This visit to Tanais is making me realize that there is so much more to learn about than the steppes. Don't get me wrong, Artemisia: I love the life of the steppes and especially the freedom it gives me, but I now wish that I could visit other places in the future and educate myself. You saw yourself how I couldn't even count my own money today."

"But that doesn't mean that you are stupid, Nauca, on the contrary. I believe you to be very intelligent, as a matter of fact. It is just that you never received any formal education, something I myself was lucky to get, thanks to my father. As a general rule, Greek girls don't get any formal education and are relegated to house duties and child rearing. I am one of the lucky exceptions, mostly thanks to the fact that my family lives here in this far-off outpost."

"And how could I hope to get such formal education one day? While routine, my days in the steppes are fairly busy ones, plus nobody in my family would be capable of teaching me how to read, write and count."

"That is effectively a problem, Nauca. One solution a Greek family would use would be to buy for you a well-educated slave, who could then educate you while you still lived in the steppes with your family. Another solution would be to come stay in Tanais and find yourself a tutor willing to educate you. The danger there would be that this tutor could well try to abuse you in exchange for his lessons, something that is not uncommon at all. Does your family plan to marry you off in the years to come?"

"My parents have not broached that subject with me yet, but it is indeed a tradition for us Sarmatians to eventually marry their daughters to young men from another group or tribe."

"Have you ever gone out in the woods alone with a boy, Nauca?"

Nauca reddened somewhat at that question but, being between girls, she finally answered it.

“Not to do what you think, Artemisia. I once went with my older brother Galatus to swim in a stream near our camp. We then, uh, spent some time mutually studying our bodies.”

That made the Greek teenager giggle briefly.

“I did that too with my brothers Alexandros and Nektarios. I also bathed with other teenage girls a number of times, something that is considered by Greeks a lot more appropriate for girls than bathing with boys.”

“To be frank, I am not really interested in boys...or men, and am in no hurry to be married, Artemisia. I want first to concentrate on becoming the best huntress and warrior that I could be.”

“That’s fine with me, Nauca, but never forget that men are always interested in girls, most often in a very selfish way. You should hear some of the stories of looting, raping and killing coming from the war against the Romans down in the Pontus. Women and girls always end up on the losing side in wars, while they also often lose in daily life.”

What Artemisia didn’t say then was that her eldest brother, Achilleas, had raped her once, when she was eleven years old and him fifteen, then had threatened to kill her if she denounced him to their father. Artemisia, who was convinced that the word of a boy would always be believed over that of a girl, had thus stayed silent while being very cautious when Achilleas was near her. Thankfully, Achilleas was presently on a commercial trip to Pantikapaion, the capital city of the Bosphorus, situated southwest of Tanais, at the eastern tip of the Crimean Peninsula. Nauca, intrigued by her words and wondering why Artemisia had said them, stared at the Greek teenager for a moment before deciding to forget about this. Artemisia then changed the subject entirely.

“So, how long are you going to stay in Tanais, Nauca?”

“We are going to leave tomorrow morning, after breakfast. Since our selling and buying has gone so well, my father decided that we didn’t need to stay longer.”

“I will be sorry to see you go, Nauca: you would make a good friend indeed for me. How long before I could hope to see you return to Tanais?”

“That will be decided by my father, but he typically comes here once every two to four years, once we have accumulated enough furs and horses to justify the trip.”

That prompted Artemisia into stepping next to Nauca and then hug her warmly.

"I will be waiting for your return, Nauca. May you have a safe trip home."

Next morning, Artemisia, along with her mother and father, was on hand to watch Nauca's group leave, their baggage horses loaded with precious spices, costly bolts of cloth and other items bought at the caravanserai. Artemisia, hiding her tears as she waved goodbye to Nauca, secretly wished then that she could also ride out into the steppes and escape her regimented life in Tanais. The time was already approaching when her parents would start looking for a suitable man who would marry her and lead her to a new home...and an uncertain future.



Nauca on the hunt.

CHAPTER 3 – ONE WORLD CRUMBLES

11:04 (Caucasus Time)

Sunday, March 10, 66 B.C.E.

Boreal forest, eastern shores of the Borysthenes (Dniepr) River

North of Lake Meotis (Sea of Azov)

Caucasus

“Come on, Tamat, pull!”

Both encouraged and guided by Nauca, her horse took a few steps forward, pulling up at the same time the carcass of the freshly killed deer via ropes passed over tree branches and tied to the deer’s hind legs. Once the dead animal was vertical and off the snow-covered ground, Nauca tied her horse’s bridle to a tree, so that it would not move, then went to the carcass and took out her hunting knife. Cutting first the jugular of the deer in order to bleed it dry, she then started to cut around the anus of the deer and sliced the belly open in order to gut the animal. Removing the internal organs and putting aside the edible parts, like the liver, the kidneys and the heart, took her only a few minutes of quick but careful work. At nearly fourteen, Nauca was by now a truly experienced hunter and trapper and could cut up a carcass as well as a professional butcher. The present

March temperature, which was at about freezing point, was going to help her by preserving the meat from the deer until she could go back to her family's campsite. Nauca was quite satisfied with her two-day hunting trip, having bagged up to now a fox, three rabbits and this deer. She had already cut off and scrapped the furs from the fox and the rabbits, plus had eaten the meat from one rabbit for supper last evening. Now, with this deer, she was going to be able to bring back to her family a large skin that could be used to make a set of warm clothes, plus enough meat for all for at least three good meals.

Nauca took the time to eat quickly some pieces of smoked and dried meat which were part of her trip's provisions, then loaded the deer carcass on top of her second horse, Minad, which she used as a baggage horse, and put the harvested organs, wrapped in large leaves, inside her saddlebags. With Minad's bridles tied via a rope to the pommel of her saddle, Nauca then urged Tamat forward, making it trot southward through the boreal forest in which she had been doing her hunting. She was already imagining the satisfied smiles from her parents when they would see the deer carcass and the furs, thus was in very good spirits as she started the six-kilometer trek through the forest.

It was close to four in the afternoon, with about one hour and a half of sunlight remaining, when she approached the limits of the forest, from which her family's camp was situated some 300 meters beyond, in the middle of a grassy plain covered by a thin snow layer. Seeing a column of smoke coming from the direction of her family's camp, Nauca stopped briefly her horse, both surprised and confused: the smoke was too thick to come from a simple campfire. Furthermore, she could now distinguish two close but separate columns of smoke. Her happiness at arriving at her camp quickly changing into concern, Nauca urged Tamat into a fast trot among the last trees of the forest, emerging in the open after another minute. The sight that greeted her then made her heart sink: the two yurts of her family and that of Irganos were finishing to burn, while a number of bodies lay around them in the snow. Also, the herd of horses belonging to the two families was nowhere to be seen.

"No! NOOO!"

Pushing her horse to a gallop, Nauca rode towards her family's tent, or rather what was left of it, and stopped her horse next to the nearest body. Jumping out of her saddle,

she quickly knelt beside the body, which lay face down in the snow, and turned it around. Tears filled her eyes when she recognized the dead face of her brother Galatus. After a few seconds of grieving over the dead teenage boy, Nauca got up on her feet and, walking around like a zombie, went in succession to each of the bodies, her mind numb with grief. From the arrows sticking out of the bodies of her father, uncle and two male cousins, it was obvious what had happened here: a band of marauders had attacked the camp, killed the two families and gone off with the families' horses and with everything of value after putting on fire the two yurts. As for the bodies of her mother, sister and female cousin, they were partially or totally naked, with each of them having been stabbed in the heart or having their throat cut. What had happened to them before they had died was not difficult to guess. Nauca also found the bodies of three men she didn't know, something that made her smirk with some satisfaction: at least her family and that of Irganos had not gone down without a fight. That the surviving marauders had merely abandoned the bodies of their own dead comrades, without even taking the time to bury them, told Nauca that they had to be a particularly violent and cruel group: to not bury or burn a comrade and leave his body to be devoured by wolves was considered by most Sarmatians as a despicable act. The surviving marauders had however taken the time to strip their dead comrades of their armor and weapons, showing by that the true level of their greed.

Sitting on one of the cut pieces of tree trunks used as stools around the family's campfire, Nauca let out freely her sadness and pain, crying for a long moment for her dead family and relatives. Then came despair and uncertainty: despair for having just lost everybody dear to her; uncertainty about what she would do next. Her first thought was to either bury or burn the bodies of her family and those of Irganos and his family. However, a look at the Sun, now quite low over the horizon, decided her to do otherwise: if she took care of the bodies of her family now, she would greatly diminish her chances of tracking down their murderers and make them pay for their cruel deeds. With the herd of horses the marauders had taken with them as loot, their tracks would be easy to follow, especially with the present layer of snow on the ground. Deciding to take care of her dead family later, after tracking and finding the marauders, Nauca did a quick prayer over her dead family, then got back on her horse, her mind now fixed on a single thing: to find and kill those responsible for this. As she was urging her horse forward, Nauca noticed a bit late that one of the two small carts which had served to carry the

dismantled yurts of the two families was missing. That brought a mean smile on her face: the marauders had probably piled their various loot on the missing cart and had brought it with them. That meant that tracking them would now be even easier for her to do. With Minad still following Tamat at the end of a rope, Nauca accelerated her horse to an amble, following the large collection of hoof prints and cart wheel tracks visible in the snow. With the cart to slow them down, plus having to keep control of a herd of eighteen horses, the marauders could not go very fast. With luck, Nauca hoped to catch up to them by nightfall, as they stopped for the night.

18:47 (Caucasus Time)

Hilly area with dispersed trees and long grass

Nightfall had come before Nauca could catch up with the bandits, but she now had no difficulty about locating them: a full moon had risen and there was also the light of their campfire, visible beyond the small gentle knoll Nauca was now climbing, still on her horse. There were still trees, mostly firs and pines, around her but in a much less dense pattern than when in the forest she had just gone through. As soon as she came within direct line of sight of the bandits' campfire, she stopped her horse and focused her eyes as best she could, helped by her phenomenal visual acuity. In the distance, some 300 meters ahead, she could see Irganos' cart, parked near a tree, plus a large group of horses busy eating the prairie grass around them. She also could see men busy either constructing summary lean-to shelters among a group of trees or cooking something on a fairly large campfire. On first look, she could count some eight men visible. She made a grimace at that: eight armed men was a lot to take on for a single girl. She was going to have to use all her cunning and hunting experience in order to defeat them, preferably one at a time. Examining the grounds around her, Nauca saw that a line of knolls and low hills formed a sort of long, curved gully that would bring her relatively close to the bandits' camp, and this while staying out of sight. She jumped at once on that opportunity and redirected her horse down towards that gully, careful not to make noises.

Some fifteen minutes later, she was tying her two horses to a tree growing in the gully, behind a knoll situated between her and the bandits. Taking the time to put on her scale mail armored vest and her helmet and arming herself with her bow, sword, battle-

axe and dagger, Nauca then cautiously climbed the knoll at a crouch. Once near the top, she went on her hands and knees and crawled forward slowly until she could see directly the bandits' camp and their fire. The eight marauders she could see seemed to have finished eating their evening meal and were dispersing towards their four lean-to shelters built within a patch of trees, leaving two men on sentry duty next to the fire. That agreed well with Nauca's plan, which was to sneak on them and kill them, one at a time as much as possible. She still could well lose that fight and get killed in the process, but she didn't really care or worry about that: the important thing for her now was to avenge her family by killing as many of those bandits as she could. A few minutes later, as Nauca was still observing the camp from atop the knoll, she saw one of the two men sitting around the fire get up and start to walk towards a clump of trees opposite from where the bandits had built their shelters. Nauca quickly understood that the man was probably going into the trees in order to relieve himself. Grabbing at once that opportunity, she ran down the slope of the knoll at a crouch, heading for the same clump of trees as the bandit. Being closer to it, she arrived first, then slowed down to a cautious walk, approaching the spot where she had seen the bandit enter the woods. A human soft growl from behind a tree made Nauca deviate in that direction, while she became even more cautious. Slowly and quietly drawing out her sword, she continued her approach until she could see the bandit. The man actually had his trousers down around his ankles and was leaning his back against the trunk of a pine, in the classic crouching pause of someone defecating. A ferocious smile forming on her face, Nauca quietly covered the last five steps separating her from the bandit, approaching from behind him. As the man was about finished, Nauca's arms came out around the tree, with her left hand clamping itself under the bandit's chin and pulling up, forcefully closing his mouth and preventing him from yelling an alarm. Her right arm, holding her sword, then made a slashing motion from left to right against the man's throat. The razor-sharp high-carbon steel blade easily slit wide open the bandit's throat and both jugulars. The man stopped convulsing after a few seconds, with Nauca then letting the dead bandit drop on top of his own feces. Quickly wiping her blade on the man's tunic and then sheeting it back in its scabbard, Nauca grabbed her bow and a couple of arrows and cautiously walked at a crouch among the trees, stopping behind a pine, where she had an unobstructed view of the bandits' camp. There was still one man sitting around the fire, while the others were now lying inside their shelters, being either asleep or about to fall asleep. Deciding that this was her best chance to kill the bandits with the minimum

of risks, Nauca decided to quietly kill the single man left on sentry duty before going to kill the sleeping ones. That however was going to need some very accurate shooting on her part if she didn't want to see that sentry having time to shout the alarm. Thankfully, the light from the fire gave her ample illumination for her shot, while the distance of forty meters was a short one for such an archer as she was. Taking careful aim, Nauca pulled the string of her composite bow to the maximum, then let go her arrow. Her shot proved true, with the arrow piercing the man's right eye and penetrating into his brain, killing him instantly. The bandit, who had been sitting on a sort of bundle, fell forward on his face without a scream or whimper.

Knowing that time was now as important as silence, Nauca retraced her steps among the trees, emerging at the back of the clump of pines and firs and then turning towards the patch of woods where the bandits' shelters were. Gambling on the probability that the remaining bandits were now asleep and less able to hear her, she went to a cautious run, covering the distance between the two clumps of trees in less than a minute. Once inside the woods again, she slowed down to a cautious walk and headed towards the shelters, careful not to step on branches and making them snap. At the same time she put her bow and arrow back inside her 'gorytos' quiver and grabbed instead both her battle-axe and her sword. Now ready for about any kind of close-combat encounter, she approached from behind the nearest lean-to, a rudimentary but quick and easy-to-build type of shelter. It was built by first fixing horizontally a small tree trunk between two standing trees at a height of about one meter and then lining one side with thin trunks and branches to form a sloping roof over the surface meant for sleeping. A layer of fir branches covering that ground surface would then provide some thermal insulation by reflecting the body heat of the occupants. One could also add a wind-breaker wall made of branches parallel to the open side of the lean-to or even add a small fire in the space between the two. It was actually a kind of shelter that Nauca often used during her hunting trips, so she was quite familiar with its setup. As she got close to the first lean-to, she saw that the bandits had piled their armor and weapons on one side, outside of their shelter. Four javelins were part of those weapons. Mentally recording their exact location for possible future use, Nauca took a last step and cautiously looked inside the lean-to. She saw the heads of two sleeping men, covered up to their chins by a bear skin. One man was sleeping on his back, while the other one was sleeping on his right side, curved into a fetal position. Thinking for a moment in

order to decide on her attack move, Nauca then very silently moved to the front of the lean-to and knelt near the heads of the two sleeping men. Concentrating on her next moves, she raised her sword at the vertical, tip down, and positioned it just over the throat of the man sleeping on his back. With her battle-axe ready in her left hand, she gave the sleeping man a hateful look before plunging her sword with all her strength into his throat, sinking her blade in until it hit and partially severed the man's spine at the level of the neck. With her blade still in the bandit's throat, she then raised her left arm and delivered a hacking blow on the side of the neck of the man sleeping on his right side. Neither men had a chance to shout or scream and both died with no more than weak whimpers or growls, with a second axe blow severing the head of the second man.

Feeling exhilaration at this early success but still conscious that there were still four bandits alive nearby, Nauca got back up on her feet, then stood still for a moment, all her senses awake to the maximum. Thankfully, the remaining bandits were still seemingly oblivious to her presence, so she walked silently to the next lean-to, again finding two men asleep inside. Repeating her previous tactic, she stabbed one man in the throat with her sword and hacked the head of the other with her battle-axe. However, the second man managed to push a short cry of pain before dying under her second axe blow. That was apparently enough to wake up at least one of the two men sleeping in the third lean-to, some five meters away. That bandit started rising from his mattress of branches and grabbed his sword, which he had left near his side, while shouting out in a Sarmatian dialect that Nauca recognized as being Tanaite.

"ALARM! THERE IS AN INTRUDER IN OUR CAMP!"

"I'll give you one intruder, you bastard!" said to herself Nauca while dropping her sword and axe and grabbing her bow, along with two arrows. The man was barely out of the lean-to and about to charge her with his sword held high when Nauca's first arrow swished through the air and burrowed itself in his chest, right over the heart's location. Opening wide his eyes in both surprise and horror, the bandit then fell forward on his face, dead before he could touch the ground. The second bandit sleeping in that lean-to had even less luck, being shot through his opened mouth before he could fully rise from his couch. Quickly placing a third arrow on her bow, Nauca then anxiously scanned the night around her, her heart beating fast, looking for any other possible bandit. Thankfully there were none and she soon could relax a bit, slowly letting the string of her bow return to resting position. Switching again to her sword and axe, Nauca then methodically

checked each bandit, making sure that they were dead. Once that was done, she looked up at the night sky and pushed a savage scream, celebrating her victory.

“THANK YOU, GREAT LADY AMEZAN¹¹, FOR LETTING ME AVENGE MY FAMILY!”

Letting the adrenaline level in her bloodstream go down gradually, Nauca then thought about what she would do next. The first move was obvious: to go get her two horses waiting for her in the gully on the other side of the knoll. Then, she would have to decide what she would take back with her before returning to her family campsite, so that she could properly take care of her dead relatives. Keeping her sword in her right hand, just in case, Nauca quickly ran up and down the knoll, returning with Tamat and Minad within five minutes. Tying her two horses to a tree near the fire, she spent the next hour or so collecting the bandits' weapons, pieces of armor, purses, jewels and various other possessions, piling them in a number of separate lots next to the fire. She also went to inspect the cart stolen from Irganos, finding it half full with items looted in her family campsite by the bandits. Tears came back to Nauca's eyes when she saw in the lot the silver necklace she had gifted to her mother on her return from her first ever trip to Tanais. Taking it from the pouch in which she had found it, Nauca kissed the necklace.

“You are now avenged, Mother. Soon, you will also be able to rest properly in death, along with the rest of our family, I promise you that.”

She finally decided to pile in the cart everything she had collected in the bandit's camp, then used the horse that had belonged to her father, tying it to the cart so that it could pull it. Next, she used the ropes and lassos found in the bandits' equipment to tie to the cart and between them the 31 horses dispersed around the fire. With the cart's horse itself linked by a rope to her horse, like Minad was, Nauca then urged Tamat forward: she wanted to get away from this place as quickly as possible despite the obscurity. It was still possible that part of this group of bandits would have temporarily split away to go loot another location. If ever such a group showed back up here, Nauca certainly didn't want to be still around then.

¹¹ Lady Amezan : Ancient divine warrior horsewoman of the Caucasus Nart Sagas. Her name meant 'Forest Mother'.

The trip back to the family campsite was quite slow, due to the cart and all the extra horses she had with her, and she arrived there only in mid-morning, having ridden all night. Anger flared in her when she saw that a group of five wolves had started eating two of the corpses.

“SHOO! GO AWAY, YOU VULTURES! LEAVE OUR DEAD IN PEACE!”

For good measure, she grabbed her bow and shot the pack leader, who was now growling threateningly while facing her from sixty meters away. The Alpha wolf, its skull penetrated by her arrow, dropped dead, prompting the other wolves into beating a hasty retreat. With a fresh arrow on her bow, in case the wolves returned, Nauca dismounted close to what had been her family campfire and looked around with sadness at the frozen corpses. Everything that she had known up to now in her young life was now gone for good, swept away in a wave of cruel violence. The worst part for her was that such acts of looting and killing were a fact of life among the nomad tribes of the region and were even praised as glorious feats by many. Her father, along with his brother Irganos, had grown tired of such senseless violence and had decided to live apart from other groups, precisely to avoid having to participate in such looting expeditions. That they had themselves fallen victims to such violence only added to the bitterness felt by Nauca. Pushing a sigh and storing back her bow in her gorytos, she then started the grim task of forming on top of the cold campfire a pile with the bodies of her family and of her relatives, intent on piling wood over it afterward in order to build a funeral pyre and burn the bodies. She however dragged away the bodies of the three bandits killed during the attack, leaving them to be eaten by the wolves: the bastards didn't deserve better.



Ancient market place.

CHAPTER 4 – BACK IN TANAIIS

14:43 (Caucasus Time)

Thursday, March 26, 66 B.C.E.

Polonius' horse corral, Western District of the Tanais Emporium

Western shores of the delta of the Tanais (Don) River

Maeotis Lake (Sea of Azov), Bosporan Kingdom

Polonius had gone inside the small tent set up beside the gate of his horse corral, wanting to warm himself a bit with the brazier he kept inside, and was drinking from a cup of wine when his youngest son stormed inside the tent, apparently excited.

“FATHER, A NOMAD RIDER IS APPROACHING WITH OVER THIRTY HORSES AND A CART.”

“Only one rider to guide in over thirty horses and a cart? How is that possible?”

“I don't know but he seems to be heading directly towards our corral.”

That prompted Polonius in jumping on his feet and running out of the tent, his cup of wine forgotten. He shivered nearly at once when the cold, near freezing wind, hit him. He however saw quickly that his son had been correct: a lone Sarmatian horseman

wearing an armored vest and a helmet was approaching, leading a small cart and a large group of horses, all of them linked together with ropes.

“By Zeus! You were right, Arkadius. This is most unusual: normally the nomads come with their horses at least one month from now, not before. Well, I suppose that we will know why soon enough. After all, we are in the horse-trading business, no matter what time of the year it is.”

Polonius, watching the rider and his horses and cart as they approached his corral, soon had to correct his first impression about the rider.

“By Athena! That is a woman, not a man!”

As the female rider arrived at the gate, Polonius finally recognized her.

“I know you! Aren’t you the daughter of Boraspos?”

Nauca, tired and dirty from her two-week trip and from having to care alone for all her horses, jumped down from Tamat to face the Greek merchant, who then noticed that she was a bit taller than him.

“You are correct, Polonius. I am Nauca, daughter of Boraspos. However, I bring sad news with me: my father and my entire family were killed by marauding thieves over two weeks ago. I was away on a hunting trip at the time and only found that out when I returned to my family’s campsite. Thankfully, the gods were on my side and I was able to track down and then kill the bastards who murdered my family.”

“I am truly saddened to hear about such a tragedy, Nauca. Did any other member of your family survive those bandits?”

Nauca slowly shook her head in response.

“None did! Even my uncle Irganos and his family were killed by those marauders. I...I am now alone, by myself.”

Seeing tears appear in her eyes, Polonius stepped forward and gently hugged the teenage girl.

“You are not alone, Nauca: you have friends in Tanais, starting with me. Did you bring those horses to sell them?”

“Yes! They are the horses that my family were raising, plus the horses I took from the bandits.”

“And what about that cart? I see that it is quite packed.”

“It carries the possessions of my family, which I took back from the bandits, plus the weapons, armor and equipment that had belonged to the marauders. Since I am

already well equipped, I was planning to sell much of it as well. I suppose that your brother Thanos would be the right man to whom to offer all this for sale, Polonius?”

“You supposed right, Nauca. But come inside my tent to warm yourself up and drink something: you look exhausted.”

“It was a long trip.” recognized Nauca in a tired tone of voice. “Taking care of 33 horses by myself was a lot of work and demanded constant attention.”

“Then, come inside to rest a bit. My son and my two horse handlers will take care of bringing your horses and cart inside my corral, where they will be safe from thieves.”

“Thank you, my friend.”

Going inside the small tent, Nauca sat in one of the two chairs furnishing it along with a small table supporting a jar of wine and four cups. When she wearily took off her iron helmet and the padded leather cap she wore under it, Polonius was able to appreciate how young she still was despite her dirty face and long hair matted by sweat. She also had grown into a truly beautiful girl. Fetching a towel hanging from a cordon of the tent and dipping part of it in a bucket of water, he then offered it to Nauca.

“Here, clean yourself a bit, Nauca: a pretty girl like you shouldn’t go around with a dirty face.”

“Thank you! You are too kind.”

Nauca took a few seconds to thoroughly clean her face of the dirt and mud from her trip, then gratefully accepted the cup of wine just poured by Polonius. She sighed with relief, both from tasting the wine and from the relief from the stress of her trip.

“By Cybele, I think that I could sleep for two straight days.”

“I will be happy to offer you the hospitality of my house during your stay, Nauca.” replied Polonius. “You will be able to sleep to your content after a hot bath and a good meal. We can discuss business about your horses once you are fully rested. I suppose that you wish to keep your own mount and baggage horse?”

“Correct! The other horses are however yours to buy and I insist on getting only a minimal price from you for them, Polonius.”

“Why do you say that, Nauca? You are entitled to a fair sum for those horses and I am not in the habit of fleecing my customers, even though us Greek merchants have a reputation for doing just that.”

Nauca smiled weakly at that joke.

“Why am I saying that? First, because you are a good man whom I consider a friend. Second, because I wouldn’t be able to sleep calmly if I end up with a mountain of gold and silver: I would be constantly afraid that some thief could take it away while I sleep. Third, because I really don’t give much of a damn right now. I would gladly exchange all the gold in the World in order to get my family back.”

Polonius, struck by her words, stared in silence at Nauca for a moment before speaking in a soft tone.

“First, thank you for your declaration of friendship, Nauca. Know that I will never betray it. Second, there are ways to pay you a decent price for your horses without loading you down with gold and silver. Certain items, like precious gems and spices, are worth more than their weight in gold and are easy to both carry and conceal. I know a couple of merchants who would be glad to trade your metal coins for those items. Third, the money you will get for your horses and things on your cart is going to be your main, if not only source of revenue to support you in the coming years. It will be too important in sustaining you to be thrown away. I will thus give you 350 drachmas per horse. Please accept that.”

Nauca hesitated for a moment, her mind foggy from exhaustion, then nodded once her head.

“Very well, I accept your offer, Polonius.”

“Excellent! Now, let’s go to my house, so that you could wash, eat and sleep. ARKADIUS! I AM GOING TO BRING NAUCA TO OUR HOUSE. TAKE CARE OF THE HORSES FOR THE TIME BEING AND MAKE SURE THAT NOTHING DISAPPEARS FROM THAT CART!”

“WILL DO, FATHER!”

Polonius then smiled to Nauca while offering his hand.

“It is indeed good to have a family and I fully understand the depth of your loss, Nauca. Come, I will lead you to my house.”

Taking his hand, Nauca pulled herself up from her chair and patted the merchant’s shoulder, a grateful expression on her face.

“Family is important, but good friends are a close second, my good Polonius.”

“Well said, Nauca. Get back on your horse and I will then lead you on foot to my house.”

They were soon heading towards the fortified main district of Tanais, where Polonius had his house, with Nauca still leading her baggage horse Minad by a rope. She had however transferred from Minad to Tamat's saddlebags the heavy purse containing the gold and silver which had been either the money belonging to her family or the loot previously stolen by the now dead bandits. It would have been too easy for a trained thief to lift that purse off Minad while it was trotting through the narrow streets behind Tamat. After going through the narrow streets of the western district and entering the fortified main city section, the duo soon arrived at Polonius' large mansion, entering its walled courtyard where two servants took charge of Nauca's horses. Nauca however loaded her saddlebags and weapons over her shoulders before letting them guide her two horses into the mansion's stables. When she followed Polonius inside the mansion they were met by the merchant's wife, a small and thin woman in her mid-forties and with black curly hair. The woman froze for a moment as she eyed the much taller, yet much younger Nauca, before giving her a warm smile.

"Welcome to our home, young girl. You look like you could use a bath and a bed."

Seeing Nauca hesitate in her answer, Polonius hurried to make the presentations.

"Sorry if I didn't warn you in advance of our arrival, Cilicia. This is Nauca, daughter of Boraspos, a Sarmatian from whom I bought horses on a few occasions in the past. Unfortunately, Nauca's whole family was recently killed by marauding thieves and she just arrived from a two-week trip while leading 31 horses, which she sold to me."

"My poor girl! Please accept my most sincere condolences for your cruel loss, Nauca."

"Thank you, Lady Cilicia."

Polonius then spoke more.

"I offered our hospitality to Nauca, so that she could wash and rest after her long and stressful trip. Could you lead her to our guest room and then have a hot bath prepared for her while I go take care of something?"

"Of course, my dear husband. Please follow me, Nauca."

Still carrying her weapons and saddlebags, Nauca followed Cilicia down a short hallway and finally entered a small room containing a bed, a small table with stool, a few wall shelves and a chamber pot. The wooden bed supported a thick mattress filled with hay and the single window could be covered with curtains.

"Here you are, Nauca. Take the time to store your things away while I go have a hot bath prepared for you. Do you have clean spare clothes?"

"I am afraid that the few spare clothes I have are now all dirty because of my trip, Lady Cilicia."

"Then, I will borrow something from my daughter Elena, so that you could change after your bath. I will be back soon."

On that, the Greek woman left Nauca alone in the room.

First taking off her helmet and scale mail armored vest and lining them against a wall, under a shelf, Nauca then laid down her weapons in front of them in a way that would make them easily accessible. Not that she expected to be attacked in Polonius' house but rather out of simple habit. The saddlebags, with the precious pouch full of gold and silver, went under the frame of the bed, on the stone floor. With the absence of banks in this century, Nauca and the people of her time had no choice but to keep her valuables with or near her at all times. The only alternative was to ask a dependable friend or relative to safeguard one's gold and silver during an absence or trip. She had time to take out her dirty clothes and pile them in one corner before Cilicia came back with a female servant.

"This is Thalia, one of my servants. She will guide you to the bathroom. Are these clothes in need of cleaning?"

"Yes, Lady Cilicia."

Cilicia nodded her head, then spoke briefly in Greek to the servant, a woman in her thirties, before looking back at Nauca.

"Thalia will take care of your dirty clothes after leading you to the bathroom. Clean spare clothes and a towel are waiting for you there. I will now go make sure that a good meal is prepared for you for supper."

With Cilicia leaving again, Nauca made a sign of the head to the servant, signifying to her to lead her to the bathroom, which she did. The bathroom turned out to be a fairly large room which included a large rectangular tub made of clay, a separate washing area with wooden tubs, sponges and washing boards and a small brick stove on which a large pot of water was heating up. Two other servants, a teenage girl and a preteen boy, both naked, were waiting for her in the bathroom. None of them appeared to be able to speak Sarmatian, so Nauca had to interpret their signs in order to start her bath. With the older woman leaving, probably in order to go fetch Nauca's dirty clothes, the

teenage servant helped Nauca undress and, once the latter was fully naked, took her hand and led her to one of the wooden tubs, which was half full of lukewarm water, making her step inside the tub. With Nauca staying in a standing position, both the teenage girl and the preteen boy grabbed sponges and wooden cups full of water and started splashing down water on her in order to wash away the worst of the mix of dirt and sweat covering her body. That turned the water in the tub to a murky brown color. Nauca was then made to step in a second tub with clean water, where more water was splashed down on her, followed by the scrubbing of small blocks of rudimentary soap over her whole body. After a final rinsing, the teenage servant made Nauca kneel next to the tub, time for her to wash her long hair. Only once all that was done was Nauca shown to the waiting bathtub. The water proved quite hot but still manageable and Nauca let out a sigh of contentment as she sat in the tub, hot water up to her chest. She had to fight off her fatigue in order not to fall asleep right there and then. However, the hot bath did miracles in relaxing her tired muscles. As she laid in the bathtub, the teenage girl and the young boy started washing by hand her set of dirty clothes, to which were soon added the dirty clothes she had left in her room.

After a good ten minutes passed soaking in the hot tub, Nauca was made to step out of it by the returning mature servant, who then toweled her and dried and combed her hair. Finally, she slipped over Nauca's head a Greek long chiton dress made of light blue wool and knotted a wool belt around her waist. With the woman making a sign to follow her, Nauca did so and was led to the central, open air atrium of the mansion, where she found Polonius, Cilicia and a teenage girl of about seventeen sitting and waiting on stone benches while chatting together. All three stopped talking and looked at Nauca when the latter showed up, with Polonius smiling to her and showing her one of the benches.

"Aah, our guest is here! You look splendid in this dress, Nauca. By the way, this is my daughter Elena. You are wearing one of her chiton dresses. Unfortunately, she speaks very little Sarmatian."

"Well, I can't blame her for that, as I myself can't speak any Greek. But thank you for the compliment, Polonius."

A servant came forward as soon as Nauca sat down, bringing her a cup of wine that she accepted. She however smiled in an apologetic way to her hosts before taking a first sip.

"Please don't think that I do not appreciate your wine if you see me only take small sips: I am so tired from my trip that it wouldn't take much wine to get me drunk and fast asleep."

"We understand," replied Polonius. "Would you mind telling us in detail what happened to your family. I will translate in Greek as you go, for the benefit of Elena."

"Very well, but there is really not much to say," said Nauca before starting to tell her story, speaking slowly and making frequent pauses to allow Polonius to do his translating. At the end of it, she had the three Greeks looking at her with big eyes and opened mouths.

"But that is a lot more than not much, my poor Nauca!" exclaimed Polonius. "To track and kill eight thieves at night, and this by yourself, is quite a feat of arm."

"I was actually lucky, as the circumstances played in my favor then. The snow layer and the fact that they had to drive a herd of horses and a cart made it easy for me to follow their trail and catch up with them. As for killing those thieves, they probably did not expect anyone to follow them so quickly after their evil deed. Sleeping men are quite easy to kill, after all."

Her words made both Cilicia and Elena shiver, with Cilicia making a cautious remark about them.

"I must say that us Greeks are generally not accustomed to see girls fight and kill. You certainly would live up to the old legends about the Amazons. After having lived here for nearly twenty years, I however realize that those legends must have been based on the lives of Sarmatian women warriors."

"I actually prefer to think of myself as a huntress rather than as a warrior, Lady Cilicia. I know that war may sound glorious to many young men, but my own father had grown to dislike this business of raiding and looting other tribes living around the steppes. He believed that there was ample space around the steppes for everybody. That was why he and his brother Irganos had split from our previous tribe and led our families to a separate pasture and hunting area: to live in peace, without bringing harm to others. Many other Sarmatians had laughed at his peaceful ideas, but I believe that my father was right to think that way."

"And I believe so as well, Nauca," agreed Cilicia. "Your father was a wise man."

"Thank you, Lady Cilicia," replied Nauca, who was then silent, images of her family coming back to her mind. Polonius understood how she was feeling and changed the subject of the conversation.

“So, what do you plan to do next, Nauca? Do you have plans for your future?”

“I had time to think about that during my two-week trip to Tanais. My first visit to Tanais showed me how little I knew about the World and the various people living around. In fact, I knew only about the steppes and still speak only Sarmatian, while I can’t read, write or count. Maybe I should use my money to take the time to educate myself, learn to speak Greek and to read, write and count.”

“Those are certainly good, useful goals to aspire to, Nauca. Then, what?”

“Then, I would like to travel wide and far, to learn about the World while being able to ride where I want. However, I have no wishes to go participate in a war, unless of course I get accidentally caught into one while travelling.”

Polonius nodded his head thoughtfully at those words.

“Another worthy goal indeed, Nauca. In view of what you have done to date, nobody could honestly accuse you of cowardice for trying to avoid getting involved in wars. As a merchant, I have seen all the damage wars cause, wars which end up profiting only a tiny number of men...for a while. In contrast, commerce, the free exchange of goods, ideas and knowledge are so much more positive things than wars.” As he said that, his son Arkadius and another, younger teenage boy walked into the atrium, making Polonius greet them with a smile.

“Aah, here are my two sons, Arkadius and Sisyphus.”

“Uh, if they are here, who then is guarding your horse corral and my cart, Polonius?”

“Soldiers of the Archon!” replied at once the horse merchant. “While you were washing, I went to see him to offer to sell him your horses. The Archon is presently buying on behalf of King Mithridates all the horses he can get, so that he can then send them to the King, who has retreated into Armenia with the remnants of his army and is now busy rebuilding a new army. Your 31 horses are a significant quantity for the Archon and he both agreed to buy the horses and to post four of his guards around the corral until tomorrow, when his men will take delivery of the horses. He will also probably be interested in the weapons and armor you brought in your cart, which is now in the courtyard of this house by the way, but I prefer to give a chance to my brother Thanos to buy your stuff first, so that he could then resell them to the Archon at a good profit. Don’t worry about Thanos fleecing you for your weapons and armor, Nauca: he is still as honest and dependable as ever. In fact, I often wonder how such an honest merchant like him could still make a profit and do good business.”

That made both Nauca and Cilicia giggle briefly before Nauca replied to that.

“Probably because he is known to be dependable. The word must have spread mouth to ear, attracting more customers to Thanos at the expense of the other merchants.”

“AH AH!” exclaimed triumphantly Polonius on hearing that while pointing an index at his wife. “I told you that she was an intelligent girl, Cilicia: she understood the point at once!”

“And how are Thanos and his family these days, Polonius?”

Nauca then saw Polonius hesitate briefly before answering with a smile.

“They are doing well and making more money than ever with incoming caravans and ships. Tomorrow, we will go see my brother with your cart full of goods, so that you can negotiate a fair price with him.”

While suspecting that Polonius was not telling her something, Nauca decided to let it pass and changed the subject.

“You said earlier that King Mithridates had to retreat into Armenia to rebuild his army. Is he going to lose the war? Are the Romans this powerful?”

Her questions sobered up at once the expressions of her hosts, with Polonius answering her in a neutral voice.

“I am afraid that he will ultimately lose this third war against the Romans. The question is only in how many months or years from now. As for the Romans, they may not have had more soldiers than King Mithridates, but they won naval supremacy early on, which allowed them to quickly get supplies and reinforcements and also let them interdict the King’s own maritime supply lines. As well, the Roman Army is made of well experienced and disciplined soldiers who are hard to defeat in a set piece battle. Remember that the Romans have conquered the whole of Greece decades ago, on top of occupying the Anatolia¹² and gaining control of most of the Mediterranean. Their only weakness is their inferior cavalry, which is equipped with bows less powerful than the kind of bow you use.”

“Talking of bow, I would like to take out a few select things from my cart before we bring it to your brother tomorrow. I want particularly to keep my father’s bow, which he himself got from my grandfather.”

¹² Anatolia : Eastern part of present day Turkey.

“We will do that tomorrow, once you wake up, Nauca. Now, I believe that supper is ready, if I can judge from the aroma floating out of our kitchen. Let’s go eat!”

Getting up from their benches around the atrium, the group moved inside to a large room furnished with padded couches and low tables. More wine was served before what could nearly be called a feast was served. However, despite of the quality of the food, Nauca ended up not eating much, her exhaustion quickly winning over her appetite. Seeing and understanding that, Cilicia gently led Nauca to her room and told her to sleep all she wanted, an advice she accepted readily enough. Removing her dress and lying down in her bed, it took her only a few seconds to be fast asleep.

10:19 (Caucasus Time)

Friday, March 27, 66 B.C.E.

Polonius’ house, Tanais

Nauca slowly woke up to find from a look through her window that the Sun was already quite high. Sitting on the edge of her bed, she took a moment to fully wake up and focus her eyes before getting on her feet. She then noticed that her Sarmatian clothes had been returned to her, cleaned and folded in a neat pile in a corner of her room. Even her armored vest, helmet and weapons belt had been cleaned of the dried mud and dirt from her trip to Tanais. She thus happily put on her Sarmatian trousers, tunic and soft leather boots. She was finishing to get dressed when someone knocked on the door of her room.

“Come in!”

Her visitor turned to be Polonius, carrying a fat leather bag and a small purse in his hands.

“Aah, you look much better now, Nauca. How do you feel?”

“Fully rested: this long sleep was exactly what I needed. What do you have there?”

“The payment for your horses. I already sold them to the Archon, who paid me on the spot for them. I then went to see a friend of mine who is a master goldsmith and an important trader of jewelry and art works, with whom I exchanged most of your cash money from your horses for precious stones that are much easier to carry around and hide than a bag full of gold and silver. This large purse contains 800 drachmas in gold

and silver coins, while this small purse contains a collection of large, beautiful polished emeralds and rubies from India and Bactria¹³. Let me show you.”

Walking to the bed and putting on it the larger purse, Polonius then emptied the small purse on the mattress, making about two dozen big, splendid emeralds and rubies roll out, all of them polished ‘cabochon’ style in the shape of small eggs. As Nauca approached the bed to better look at the gems, Polonius took one of the rubies between two fingers and showed it to her.

“These stone represent the other 10,000 drachmas that your horses were worth. My jeweler friend told me that, if you ever need to trade one of those stones for cash money or goods, then ask an absolute minimum of 400 drachmas for each of them, or the equivalent of a good horse. If someone offers you less than that, then he is trying to fleece you and you should either bargain a better price or find another buyer.”

Nauca took the blood red stone from Polonius and admired it from up close for a moment.

“These stones are magnificent. They will certainly prove a lot easier to carry around than the equivalent in silver. Thank you, my friend!”

“It was my pleasure. I also brought you a money belt, in which you will be able to hide your gems on your body, instead of in a belt purse that could be cut away by a thief.”

Nauca took the thin leather belt, which had small compartments lined with soft cotton, and examined it before smiling to the Greek man.

“Thank you again, Polonius. You are a real friend.”

“Bof! I am only pleasing someone who may bring me more good horses in the future. Now, if you are ready for it, we could go to your cart, so that you could take out the items which you don’t want to sell.”

“I certainly am ready for that, Polonius.”

Taking first the time to put her precious gems inside the money belt, she then pulled down her trousers and raised her tunic in order to tie the belt around her waist, denuding in the process her groin area. Polonius couldn’t help stare for a moment at her groin, obviously liking what he saw. He however didn’t comment on that and led Nauca out as soon as she had finished. Going together to the front courtyard of the mansion,

¹³ Bactria : Ancient kingdom which mostly covered parts of modern Afghanistan.

they arrived at Nauca's cart, which had been covered with a large linen tarp and was guarded by an armed servant. Pulling away the tarp, Nauca then searched for a few minutes in the pile of things filling the cart, taking individual items out one at a time. Once finished, she put the tarp back in place and explained her choices to Polonius.

"I basically took out a full spare set of weapons and armor, including my father's bow, in case I somehow lose my present weapons. I also took out a good provision of arrows, plus the few small jewels which had belonged to my family. The rest will be up to Thanos to buy."

"Excellent! Know that I advised him this morning of your arrival, while you were sleeping. He said that he is most eager to buy your excess weapons and armor and is also offering you a permanent room of your own in his residence in the caravanserai. Know that his daughter Artemisia offered at once to be your teacher, so that you can learn to speak Greek, to read, write and count."

"But, that's great!" exclaimed Nauca enthusiastically, finding that the perfect solution to her various needs and wants. When could we go see him?"

"As soon as you will have collected your things, harnessed your horses and said goodbye to my wife and daughter." replied the smiling merchant.

"Then, I won't be long, I promise!"

True to her word, she was back in the courtyard after less than five minutes, fully equipped and carrying her few possessions. Harnessing her horse Tamat and attaching Minad to her cart took another fifteen minutes. With Polonius using his own horse and with two of his armed servants riding in the cart, one to drive it and the other to prevent thieves from grabbing objects from the cart as it rolled through town, they then left the courtyard, with Lady Cilicia and Elena in attendance to wave goodbye to Nauca. As they rode out side by side after leaving the courtyard, Nauca asked a question to Polonius.

"What is the name of your jeweler friend, just in case I would need to use his services in the future?"

"His name is Pausanias. We are in fact about to pass in front of his house. I will point it to you."

"Thanks!"

Polonius did so after another thirty meters, showing to Nauca an opulent-looking house whose entrance was guarded by two armed men.

“This is Pausanias’ house. He has it well guarded, as he keeps quite a lot of gold and precious objects in it. He also happens to be the main goldsmith for the Archon and even gets orders from King Pharnaces, who reigns over the Bosporan Kingdom and who is one of King Mithridates’ sons.”

“So, he must be an important man in Tanais.”

“Quite so. He is also a good man to befriend.”

After a short, 300-meter ride, they entered the caravanserai by its river-side gate and trotted towards Thanos’ house, which was situated next to the inn. Artemisia, who was walking across the courtyard at the time, immediately shouted out in joy and started running towards Nauca.

“NAUCA, I AM SO HAPPY TO SEE YOU AGAIN!”

Nauca caressed the hair of the teenager from atop her horse once the Greek girl was next to her.

“And it is also nice for me to see you again, Artemisia. I was told by Polonius that you volunteered to teach me Greek, reading, writing and counting.”

“That’s correct! I couldn’t do less for a friend like you. Will you accept me as your teacher?”

“Of course I will! Can you advise your father that we are here? I have things that he may want to buy.”

“I’ll go get him at once.”

As Artemisia disappeared inside her family’s house, Nauca and Polonius made their horses trot up to it and dismounted, giving their horses’ bridles to one of Polonius’ servants, who had jumped off the cart. Before they could enter the brick house Thanos got out of it with Artemisia and went at once to Nauca to hug her.

“My poor Nauca! Please accept my deepest condolences for the loss of your family.”

“Thank you, Thanos. However, I was able to avenge them before coming here. Now, I have to rebuild a new life without them. Thank you for offering me your hospitality.”

“It is the least I could do for you, Nauca. So, I was told that you had things to sell.”

“That’s correct.” replied Nauca while pointing her cart. “My cart carries what belonged to my family and that of my uncle, plus the things I took on the dead bandits I

killed. Both the cart and what is on it is for sale, but I will keep my baggage horse, Minad. However, I insist that you give me only the minimal value for those items: you are after all going to shelter me and this is one way for me to repay you for it.”

“Very well! Let’s drive your cart into my warehouse: we can do this better there.”

Moving to Thanos’ warehouse, the group drove the cart inside it, where its content was then laid out on a row of waiting empty tables, displayed for Thanos’ examination. The latter showed special interest in the armor and weapons in the lot as Nauca described them to him.

“Those weapons grouped on the left belonged to my family and that of my uncle Irganos. I however kept for me the weapons that belonged to my father, both for spiritual reasons and as a spare set in case I somehow lose my own weapons. As you can see, they are of average quality and well used, while there are few pieces of armor in the lot. However, the bows are of top quality. On the right are the weapons and armor of the bandits I killed, plus what they must have looted on their preceding victims. As you can see, they were much better equipped for war and fighting than my family was. Still, my father, my uncle and my cousins were able to kill three of them, despite being caught by surprise.”

Those words made both Thanos and Polonius nod their heads somberly, with Thanos replying to her.

“You father Boraspos and his brother Irganos were indeed tough, brave men. They will be missed, like the rest of your family. As for all those weapons and pieces of armor, you are in luck, as weapons and armor are presently in high demand and can fetch good prices on the market.”

“Oh, why so?”

“Because of the war between King Mithridates and the Romans. The local Archon has received directives to encourage suitable young men to enlist to join the King’s army in Armenia and, while he found quite a few recruits, weapons and especially pieces of armor are in short supply to equip them. As a result, the asking price for those items have more than doubled in the last couple of months. Your weapons and armor, especially those bows and the armored vests and helmets, will be grabbed very quickly once I will offer them for sale.”

“Then, use them to get a good profit from them for yourself, Thanos. I will ask no more than a quarter of what you will sell them for.”

Both Thanos and Polonius stared at her as if she had proffered a sacrilege, while Artemisia opened her mouth and eyes wide in shock.

“You are going to lose a lot of potential money if I do so, Nauca. Are you sure about this?”

“Yes, I am! I lived all my life in the open steppes and I learned to live day by day with what nature provided us. I am also not attracted to luxury or riches, unless they can help me fill my dreams of living free and going where I want. You will never see me become some kind of sedentary woman, stuck in a house in a place like Tanais. Besides, I will need to pay for the services of your daughter Artemisia as my new teacher. So, for all those reasons, make the most profit out of those items I brought and I will be plenty satisfied with whatever you give me for them.”

Thanos couldn't help grin at her last sentence.

“By Zeus, I wish that all my customers be as accommodating as you, Nauca. Very well, I will give you 1,600 drachmas for the lot, including the cart. In return, Artemisia will get 300 drachmas from the profits I will make on their sale, as a salary for being your teacher.”

“That sounds perfect to me, Thanos.” said Nauca, while Artemisia grinned at the announcement that she was going to get paid. Thanos then exchanged a solid forearm shake with Nauca.

“Then, this is a deal. I must say that, when I was informed of your arrival and of the death of your family, I was afraid that you would want to forget your tragedy by going to join the war in the Pontus¹⁴.”

Nauca shook her head at that.

“I don't want to do to others what those bandits did to my family, just to gain so-called glory in war or get rich via looting. There are so many better things to do than war.”

Thanos and Polonius exchanged knowing glances at her words, while Artemisia looked relieved. Thanos then spoke in a low voice, so that his employees and slaves present in the warehouse couldn't overhear him.

“You are showing much more common sense about the war than my own eldest son, Achilleas. Keep this strictly to yourself: during your first visit to Tanais, my son Achilleas was gone on a trip to Pantikapaion, carrying an important sum in silver meant

¹⁴ Pontus : Name of the part of modern Turkish Anatolia that was ruled by King Mithridates VI.

to erase a debt that I had contracted with a merchant over there. Well, he never returned from that trip so, quite anxious about him, I went myself to Pantikapaion three months later, to look for him. On arrival there, I was confronted by my lender, who was quite furious and was demanding to be paid. After a few quick inquiries, I learned that my son, instead of paying off my lender, instead used my silver to equip himself for war and then left for Armenia by boat to join King Mithridates' army. So, I was stuck paying a second time for my debt, with due interests added to it, before returning to Tanais."

Nauca stared at him with bewilderment, unable to imagine such a selfish act from a son towards his own father.

"And...did your son ever return?"

"No, and he better not! On my return to Tanais I officially disinherited and disavowed him. If he ever shows up in the future, I will kick him out and he will also have to face charges of fraud and theft from the Archon's justice. My two other sons, Nektarios and Alexandros, are now my official successors for when I will die."

Nauca needed a few seconds to digest all that before she could say something in return.

"Well, I hope that you will still live healthy for many more years, Thanos: you are a most decent man indeed. The World could use many more men like you."

"And it could use many more women like you, Nauca. I said 'women' because I now consider you as an adult, not as a teenager anymore. You have shown enough courage, toughness and wisdom to earn that title."

"Thank you, Thanos: you are kind indeed. What's next?"

"Next, I pay you and then Artemisia will show you your room after you lead your horses into my private stable."

Executing himself, Thanos then went to a heavy wood and iron chest locked by an iron lock and guarded by two armed guards in a corner of the warehouse. As he took out a large key to open the chest, Nauca noticed that the chest was also solidly anchored in place by iron pegs driven deep into the ground, something that would make stealing quickly and silently the chest a problematic affair. Once opened, the chest proved to be half full with both gold and silver coins. Taking an abacus, an ink bottle, a pen and one of the sheets of papyrus lying on top of the mass of coins, Thanos took a moment to write a new entry on the papyrus document, obviously recording his buying of Nauca's items. He barely had time to count 1,600 drachmas in silver and gold coins and pour the lot in Nauca's larger purse before one of his employees came to him.

“Master, I have five young men who just showed up, looking to equip themselves for war.”

That made Thanos grin and look at Nauca.

“You see? It seems that your things came in just at the right time. If you will now excuse me. You are of course invited to have lunch with me and my family at noon.”

Thanos then locked back his precious chest before leaving Nauca, Artemisia and Polonius. The latter also left after excusing himself with Nauca, leaving her alone with Artemisia, who smiled to her.

“Well, now that you have concluded your businesses, we will go bring your horses to their new barn, then I will show you to your room.”

With Thanos' stable being separate from the stables used by the customers and visitors of the caravanserai and being guarded by one servant, Nauca was able to leave her saddle and horses' equipment in the stall now occupied by her two horses. She still loaded her weapons, saddlebags and bedroll on her shoulders before following Artemisia to the upper floor of her family house, where she was shown a well-furnished room measuring about nine square meters and lit via one window. There was also a small brick stove topped with a bronze hood and chimney duct meant to evacuate the smoke outside through the roof.

“Your new home in Tanais, Nauca. I hope that it will satisfy you.”

“Are you kidding? In the steppes, I slept in one corner of my family's yurt, lying on a bear skin laid on the ground. This is utter luxury in comparison.”

“If you say so. I will let you arrange your things, then we will go down for lunch.”

“Okay! Uh, when am I going to start my Greek lessons?”

“How about right now?” said with a smile Artemisia, using Greek, then repeating her words in Sarmatian before patting Nauca's left shoulder. “Don't worry about your lessons, Nauca: you are a bright girl and you will learn fast enough. In a couple of years you should be quite fluent in Greek, on top of knowing the alphabet and our numeral system.”

“Maybe, but I do intend to go out from time to time on hunting expeditions, in order to return with some furs and make myself useful.”

Artemisia nodded once at those words, her expression sober.

“Feel free to do so, but know that you don't need to do that to make yourself welcome here. Consider us as your new family.”

She then hugged Nauca and kissed her on her cheeks.

“I will be your new sister as well, Nauca.”

After a good lunch, where the rest of Thanos’ family warmly welcomed Nauca, she went back to her room with Artemisia, who went first to fetch in her own room a papyrus on which 24 different symbols were written.

“This is the papyrus I used when I was young to learn how to write. These symbols you see on it are the 24 letters of our alphabet. If you want to learn to speak and read Greek, then your first task will be to learn our alphabet, which by the way is also used to write numbers down. I will first read aloud each letter and let you pronounce them after me, then we will start making you memorize them. Don’t get frustrated if that alone takes a few days and weeks: that’s normal.”

“Okay, I am ready.”

“First, we have the letter Alpha...”

Concentrating fully on the task of learning from Artemisia, who had sat right next to her on the edge of her bed, Nauca nearly forgot her environment while doing her best to memorize the Greek letters. While proving not to be an easy task for her, she apparently did quite well, judging by the way Artemisia pressed herself against her after one hour of teaching.

“Bravo, Nauca! You are doing very well indeed. Let’s take a break before continuing: my tutor told me that too long a lesson is unproductive, as you don’t learn well when your head is tired.”

“Then, I will go brush my horses and check on them, then will return.”

“A good idea. You will find me in the spinning room, where I will be spinning and weaving wool in the company of servants.”

Some two hours later, the two teenagers were back in Nauca’s room to continue her study of the Greek alphabet. Nauca again made some rapid progress but stiffened at one time as Artemisia’s left hand, which she had put on Nauca’s right leg, got very close to her groin. A bit confused by that, Nauca threw a questioning look at her teacher.

“Why are you putting your hand there, Artemisia? It makes me a bit uncomfortable.”

"Oh, sorry about that: I was getting a bit too involved in my teaching." lied Artemisia. Promising herself to proceed with more caution from now on, she withdrew her hand but stayed very close to Nauca, offering her a plunging view of Nauca's young breasts via the wide cleavage of her short tunic. At the end of the second lesson, Artemisia declared herself done for the day.

"I think that this will be enough for your first day, Nauca. Would you like to take a bath with me tonight in the family pool? It will help you further decompress and relax."

"Why not? I believe in cleanliness and often went to swim in nearby streams while in the steppes."

"Excellent! Supper should be served in a couple of hours. I will see you then."

20:35 (Caucasus Time)

Bathhouse of Thanos' residence

Tanais caravanserai

Nauca was more than half-drunk when she entered the family bathhouse with Artemisia. In truth, she had drunk more wine than she ever had before during the meal, which had proved excellent and she clearly felt the effects of her excess drinking. The bathhouse proved to be a large, enclosed room with a wide, meter-deep pool in its center. Two young slave girls were in attendance in the bathhouse, while Artemisia ordered an older servant to stand guard at the entrance, so that no man could enter during their bath. On orders from Artemisia the two teenage slave girls, who were completely naked and had their groins closely shaved, helped Nauca and her host undress, then soaked and soaped both of them, washing them thoroughly before they would step in the pool. In the process, the slave girl washing Nauca spent quite a lot of time scrubbing her groin area, her breasts and her buttocks. Nauca, her judgment impaired by the wine she had drunk, thought little of it, believing that to be normal with Greeks. She actually liked the sensations the rubbing and scrubbing brought, something that Artemisia, who was watching her, caught on to. With the soap rinsed off her body, Nauca was then invited to get in the pool, which she did, finding the water to be fairly hot. That further relaxed her and nearly put her to sleep. The naked Artemisia got in the pool as well and sank up to her neck in the water, just next to Nauca.

"So, how do you feel?"

"Very relaxed. This hot bath is really helping to relax my muscles."

"If you would like, I know a further way to relax, Nauca."

"What do you mean?" asked Nauca, still innocent about sexuality. Artemisia smiled to her before giving an order in Greek to the two slave girls. One of the girls sat on the edge of the pool facing Nauca and opened her legs wide, while the other slave girl knelt in the pool, facing her. With the kneeling girl proceeding to perform cunnilingus on her, the sitting slave girl soon started to moan and squirm with pleasure, watched by a Nauca who at first didn't know what to make out of that.

"What are they doing, Artemisia?"

"Pleasuring each other the way girls do, Nauca. Too often, boys and men only care about their own pleasure, while neglecting their female partners. Unfortunately, Greek men think that women have no need for sexual satisfaction and simply ignore them after themselves coming to an orgasm. With this way, we could finally find some pleasure, with the added bonus that we don't risk becoming pregnant afterwards. You said that you were not planning or even wanting to marry soon, correct?"

"Correct! Having children and been confined to a house would stop me from filling my dreams of travelling through the World and learn new things."

"And did you ever play with your body as a young girl, when alone?"

Despite being half-drunk, that question still made Nauca's face redden as she kept watching the two slave girls, one of whom was clearly approaching orgasm.

"Uh, yes, a couple of times, but I didn't dare tell that to my mother."

"That's understandable, as I myself wouldn't be ready to tell my mother as well. However, using young slaves for pleasure is done by many Greeks, even though most keep silent about it. Let me show you."

Artemisia then gave orders in Greek to the two slave girls, who stopped what they were doing and swam across the pool to join her and Nauca, with one slave gluing herself to each teenager. Already half-aroused by watching the two slave girls and with her mind fogged up by both wine and fatigue, Nauca didn't protest when the older slave girl, who could not be more than twelve, started rubbing her groin area and licking her budding nipples. As for Artemisia, she got out of the pool and sat on its ledge, spreading open her legs to let her slave girl lick her clitoris. Nauca then realized that Artemisia, like the slave girls, shaved closely her groin. With waves of pleasure growing in her, Nauca asked a question in a halting voice to her friend and tutor.

"Why do you shave your groin like this, Artemisia?"

"First, to cut on body odors. Second, to make it more agreeable to my partners. You should do the same yourself."

"You think so?"

"Yes! It also prevents lice from infesting your pubic area. That may prove useful to you when you will travel through deserts, where you can't wash for weeks and months at a time."

Nauca actually found her last reason to be both logical and practical and nodded her head.

"Then, I should shave my groin as well."

"I will do it, after this girl is finished here." Eagerly replied Artemisia, grinning from ear to ear. A couple of minutes later, she climaxed a few seconds before Nauca did so as well. Giving an order to her slave girl, Artemisia then slid into the pool and went to face Nauca, with her hands starting to roam over the Sarmatian's body.

"I told my slave to go get a shaving kit. In the meantime, I need you to sit on the edge of the pool and spread your legs open."

"Okay!" said Nauca, still breathing fast from her orgasm. She had to tell herself in all honesty that her experience with the slave girl had been an agreeable one and that Artemisia herself was quite pretty and attractive. The younger slave girl then returned after another minute with a wooden bowl, a razor and a piece of soap, while Artemisia used that minute to fondle Nauca's genitals. Another six minutes later, Nauca's groin was shaved clean and then rinsed with warm water.

"Stay on the pool's ledge and lay down on your back and relax, Nauca."

The moment she did so, the two slave girls started fondling and licking her breasts, while Artemisia started expertly licking Nauca's clitoris and vaginal lips. Quickly stimulated by this energetic treatment, Nauca responded by using her two hands to fondle the two slave girls. Five minutes later, she was exploding into a strong orgasm, with her shout of pleasure quickly repressed by a slave girl covering her mouth with one hand. Artemisia tensed up a bit then.

"Careful about not making noises, Nauca: I could get in trouble if my father finds out about this."

"O...okay!" said a panting Nauca, who then looked into Artemisia's eyes. "Can I try this on you, to see if I do it right?"

"Of course, Nauca! We are friends, after all."

Switching places with Artemisia, Nauca hesitated a bit before starting to give cunnilingus to her friend. With Artemisia counseling her on her technique while the two slave girls were licking her nipples, the Greek teenager soon came again. Now well satisfied, Artemisia sat up on the edge of the pool and caressed Nauca's face and hair before kissing her on the lips.

"You decidedly learn fast, Nauca. We shall have a good time together in the coming months and years. What do you say to rewarding my two slaves for their work?"

"Why not?" replied Nauca, getting fully into the game, before making the younger slave girl sit in front of her, while Artemisia made the other slave sit as well on the edge of the pool. Another fifteen minutes and the four of them walked out of the bathhouse, dried, dressed and quite satisfied, acting as if nothing special had happened.



A campfire at night in the Taiga.

CHAPTER 5 – AN ENCOUNTER ON THE STEPPE

19:08 (Caucasus Time)

Thursday, May 26, 63 B.C.E.

Nauca's temporary campsite

Taiga forest, east of the Borysthenes (Dniepr) River

Sarmatia, South Caucasus

The Sun was quite low on the horizon as Nauca was starting to cook a portion of meat from the caribou she had killed and skinned earlier on in the day. She had already put up a lean-to shelter made of tree trunks and branches and had built her campfire a few paces in front of the opening of her shelter, plus had erected a rudimentary windbreaker on the opposite side of the fire. While it was late in May, it still was quite fresh and the wind was moderate to strong. She had established her camp at the edge of a large opening in the forest, near a North-South trail often used by nomads going to Tanais to sell their furs and horses. She was now on the last day of her week-long hunting and trapping trip and happy to taste again life in the steppes. Tomorrow morning, she was going to head back to Tanais, where she would be able to present to Thanos over a dozen varied furs and pelts.

Her piece of caribou meat was nearly ready to be eaten when her acute eyes spotted a group of about a dozen riders leading a four-wheeled chariot along the trail, going North. They were actually going to pass close to her camp and definitely appeared to have spotted her, as one rider had detached itself from the group and was now approaching her fire. Getting up on her feet, Nauca detailed that rider as it approached. She felt a bit of reassurance when she saw that the rider was a woman dressed in Sarmatian nomad style: if that group had been bandits, more than one rider would have approached her camp. As it was, that female rider had not grabbed any of her weapons and seemed friendly enough in her attitude. Nauca was able to see when the rider got close that she was a woman in her early forties with a fur hat covering her head. The newcomer then raised one hand in salute and spoke up in Sarmatian.

"May Cybele bless you, young one. We have been travelling northward for days and one of my companions is quite old. Would you mind if we stop for the night at your camp?"

"Not at all! You are welcome to my fire and I also have enough caribou meat for everybody. By the way, my name is Nauca."

"And I am Hysicratea. Thank you for your kind hospitality."

The female rider then half turned in her saddle and gestured for her group to come join her, then stepped down from her horse. Going to a nearby tree, she tied the bridles of her horse to it and took off her saddle and saddlebags from her horse, lying them down next to the tree. Returning to the campfire, she shook Nauca's hand with quite a lot of strength for a woman.

"You look quite young, Nauca. How old are you exactly?"

"I am seventeen."

"And you camp in the steppe alone?"

"Yes, I am! I am on a week-long hunting trip and am due to go back to Tanais tomorrow."

"You live in Tanais? But you do not look Greek."

"Because I am not, Hysicratea. I am a Sarmatian and I was born in the steppes as a nomad. Unfortunately, my entire family was killed by bandits when I was thirteen. I was at the time hunting some distance away from my family campsite and returned to it only to find my family dead. I was able to track down the bastards who had murdered them and killed them in turn as they slept. Then, I went to Tanais, where a Greek

merchant my father knew lived. I have since then been living in Tanais, doing one or two hunting trips per month in the steppes to catch furs. And your group? Are you escorting merchants bent on trade?"

Nauca's question made the woman hesitate briefly before she answered her.

"No! I am escorting an old noble man who is hoping to find the camp of the local Roxolani chieftain. Would you know by chance where I could find that local noble?"

"You are in luck, as I met two days ago a messenger sent by the Roxolani King, who was heading towards Tanais. The royal Roxolani camp should be about three days ride to the North, close to this trail."

"Aah, excellent! You are indeed a blessing for my group, young Nauca."

"Well, let me put more meat on the fire: your companions must be hungry and tired by now."

"Indeed! Let me help you with that."

Two caribou legs plus pieces of loins had been added over the fire by the time the chariot and its escorts stopped next to the camp. Those riders indeed looked like guards, as they were armed and armored, but one man in the lot stood out: while a big man who rode his horse with obvious long practice, he looked very old, with gray-white hair and beard and wrinkles on his face. While he was dressed mostly like a Sarmatian nomad, he wore a number of expensive-looking gold rings on his fingers and rich gold bracelets were worn around his wrists. The sword worn at his side was contained inside a richly decorated scabbard, while the handle of his dagger was inlaid with gold and gem stones. While noticing all that, Nauca did not remark on it and simply shook hands with the old man when Hypsicratea presented him to her.

"Nauca, this is Mirdad, my master."

"Welcome to my modest camp, Mirdad. I have some caribou meat roasting over the fire, if you are hungry."

"I certainly am hungry, young Nauca. I must say that it is uncommon to find young women travelling alone in the forests."

Nauca then repeated her story to 'Mirdad', who slowly nodded his head at the end.

"A tragic story, but one with an inspiring outcome: that of a young girl overcoming a great loss to build a new life for herself. So, how is life for you in Tanais?"

“Mostly boring.” replied Nauca, making Mirdad smile in amusement. “However, I regularly go out on hunting trips and, when in Tanais, I spend my time educating myself with the help of a good friend.”

“And what are you studying, young Nauca?”

“Greek, reading, writing and counting, mostly. I also often talk with passing caravan merchants arriving from the East with their wares and listen to the stories of their travels. I hope soon to be able to accompany such a caravan as it will return East, so that I could visit new places and see new things while riding freely.”

“A judicious goal indeed! There is so much to see in this World. You can take the word of an old man like me for it. Your taste for freedom is also a most positive thing. I see a great life ahead of you, young Nauca.”

Nauca bowed at that compliment.

“Thank you, Mirdad. I built a lean-to shelter for myself for the night, but it is not very cold tonight and I would be happy to let you the use of my shelter for tonight.”

It was the turn of Mirdad to bow to her.

“A generous offer that I will accept with pleasure, Nauca. If you will now excuse me, I will pass a few directives for the night to my companions.”

Mirdad then walked towards the chariot, whose driver was busy unhooking his two horses from it. Like quite a few members of the old man’s group, the driver seemed to speak only Greek, which Mirdad used to give him a few orders. At the end, the chariot driver bowed and gave a short acknowledgement in Greek in a voice he kept low. However, Nauca had sensitive ears, while the wind helped carry the words of the driver to her and she was able to hear the man’s three last words: ‘yes, Your Majesty’. Stunned, Nauca froze for a moment but managed to regain her cool and, her expression neutral, went back to the fire to check on her roasting meat, her mind in turmoil. Men of the advanced age of ‘Mirdad’ were not common, while he was obviously a rich man. He had to be some kind of noble. Then, why did he dress in such low-class clothes? Especially, why would he be addressed as ‘Your Majesty’, a term reserved for kings. As she turned a caribou leg over the fire, she thought about the latest things that she had heard in Tanais about the war between King Mithridates and the Romans. It was said that King Mithridates had been soundly defeated another time and that he had then fled from the Pontus to Pantikapaion, taking refuge in the palace of his son Pharnaces. That was however the only things she had learned recently about the war. Unwilling to waste

time in endless speculations, she thus concentrated on preparing the meat for her visitors.

The ten men and two women were soon sitting around the campfire, helping themselves to pieces of roasted caribou meat. Her visitors were delighted to discover that she had seasoned her meat with both salt, black pepper and some red pepper, something that prompted a question from a happy Hypsicratea.

“Mm, this roast meat is delicious, Nauca! Where did you find the pepper for this? Tanais?”

“Effectively! Every time a new caravan arrives from the East, I spend some of my money to buy various spices and other exotic goods. While I do not crave precious things, I did develop a taste for Eastern spices, especially black pepper. Meat is so much better with pepper.”

“Very true!” replied Mirdad, who was munching with delight on a piece of leg. “You decidedly show yourself to be the perfect host in this vast wilderness. You seem to have allied with success the freedom of the steppes with the exotic products of the East. Well done, Nauca!”

“Thank you, Mirdad.”

“Well, such good meat calls for some good wine. Bituitus, go fetch some of our wine in the chariot!”

One man got up from the cut piece of wood he was using as a seat and walked quickly to the covered chariot, climbing inside it and disappearing for a moment before climbing back down and returning with a large flask full of liquid. The wine from the flask proved to be an excellent one to Nauca, who had become accustomed to wine during her three years in Tanais and had learned to correctly judge them by their color, smell and taste. That was another clue to add to the others she now had on who was really this ‘Mirdad’. However, she didn’t want to be impolite with her guest and refrained from asking him about that. After feasting on the roast and spiced venison and drinking dry the flask of wine, the whole group then went to sleep, with two men staying up on sentry duty.

Thankfully, the night proved event-free and they woke up shortly after sunrise. Mirdad and his group immediately prepared to leave with their chariot, while Nauca carefully extinguished and smothered her campfire, so that it could not start a forest fire. As she was about ready to mount her horse to head for Tanais, Mirdad came to her with

Hypsicratea, a small bundle in his hands. Stopping one step in front of her, Mirdad then presented the bundle to Nauca.

“I want to thank you again for your generous hospitality, young Nauca. You would really make me happy if you would accept this small gift from me as a thank you. I will however ask you to open this bundle only after I am gone.”

Taken short by this, Nauca could only nod her head and took the bundle while bowing to Mirdad.

“You didn’t need to, Mirdad, but I would be insulting you by refusing your gift. I wish you a good, safe trip.”

“And I wish you a long and exciting life, young Nauca. Goodbye!”

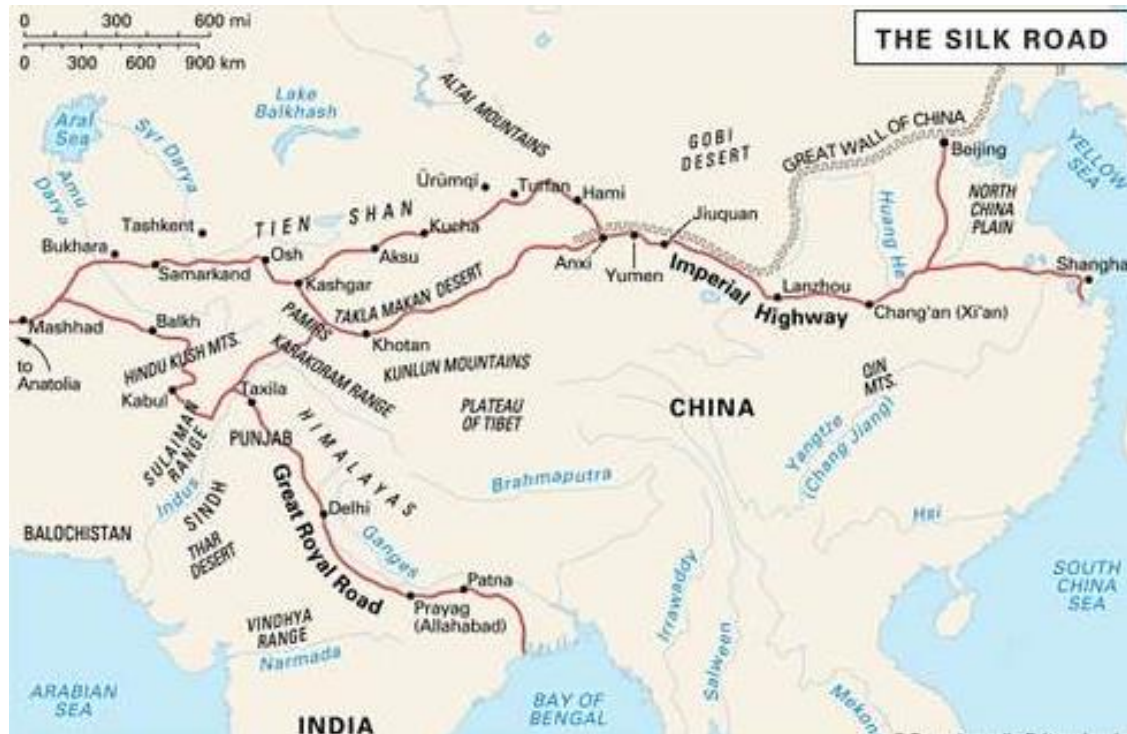
The duo then left Nauca and returned to their horses. Nauca was still on foot, beside her two horses, when the chariot and its escort of riders started moving away towards the North. She waited a couple more minutes, time for the chariot to take some distance, before carefully opening the bundle, made of a piece of cloth rolled around some objects. She nearly had her breath taken out on uncovering a magnificent cup made of gold and of polished, sculpted jade and inlaid with polished emeralds, rubies and turquoises. She also found a set of beautifully engraved gold jewels, also inlaid with precious stones. The lot had to be worth over 5,000 drachmas! Looking up at the chariot and its riders in the distance, Nauca felt blood rush to her brain as she finally realized who she had hosted for the night.

“The King! King Mithridates himself, at my camp!”

Rolling again her precious new possessions in their cloth, she then put the bundle in one of her saddlebags and firmly secured its leather flap via its two securing buckles. Mounting her horse Tamat with the help of the leather loop fixed to the left side of her saddle, she urged it forward, leading her baggage horse Minad via a long rope attached to her saddle.

“Forward, Tamat! Let’s return to Tanais! Artemisia must be getting impatient to be able to play with my tits again.”

CHAPTER 6 – ON THE SILK ROAD



09:21 (Caucasus Time)

Friday, June 17, 63 B.C.E.

Caravanserai inn, Tanais

Western shores of the Tanais (Don) River Delta, South Caucasus

Maeotis Lake (Sea of Azov)

The inn of the caravanserai was nearly full at this hour with merchants, caravan guards and camel drivers who had arrived in Tanais late in the evening two days ago and had slept late for two consecutive nights, tired by their long trip from the East. Now, over thirty men were sitting around the tables of the inn and eating a late breakfast while discussing business with a few local merchants. When Nauca entered the inn, she heard at least four different languages, including Greek, being spoken around the large hall. After more than three years spent in Tanais and thanks to Artemisia's teaching, Nauca was now fluent in Greek and could even read and write in it, on top of being able to count and do basic arithmetic. She had also picked up quite a lot of Sogdian, the

language spoken by a large portion of the merchants and traders plying the Silk Road and who often ended their westward trips in Tanais. Sogdians, who came from an old kingdom situated southeast of the Sea of Oxus¹⁵ and who were widely recognized as masters of trade, made up the majority of the merchants and traders traveling along the Silk Road and often showed up in Tanais with their wares from the East, looking for profitable sales and exchanges of goods. Seeing a dozen of them in this caravanserai was thus quite common for Nauca, who liked to listen to the stories of their long trips and who frequently asked them about the countries and places they went through. However, this morning Nauca was not here simply to listen to stories.

'Artemisia is going to kill me when she will learn about this.' thought Nauca to herself as she headed towards the man she knew to be the master of the caravan which had arrived two days ago. That man, a Sogdian merchant named Hiram, was actually discussing business with Thanos and two other local merchants, using Greek. Nauca knew that Hiram could speak at least four different languages, including Greek, and probably knew even more languages. Under a rather unassuming and unremarkable appearance, Hiram hid a very sharp mind, with a special talent to judge the persons he met and made deals with. If you lied to him, Hiram would catch on to it quickly and would turn that against you. He was also a master haggler with few equals but was known to always respect a deal after it was concluded in good faith. For all that, Nauca had quickly grown to respect him during his previous visit to Tanais with his caravan of goods.

Hiram, like Thanos and the two Greek merchants sitting with him, looked up at Nauca and stopped speaking when she halted next to his table, dressed in a short Greek tunic but with her sword and gorytos in her back and with a dagger and purse at her belt. The Sogdian couldn't help smile with delight as he admired for a second Nauca's long, graceful legs, put in evidence by her short tunic.

"Yes, young girl?" he asked in Greek.

"My name is Nauca and I wish to travel eastward with your caravan. I am thus offering you my services as a guard and as a hunter."

¹⁵ Sea of Oxus: The Sea of Aral.

Hiram exchanged a quick glance with Thanos, who had grown sober at once on hearing Nauca's words, before looking back at the tall, athletic-looking teenage girl standing in front of him.

"And you feel qualified to act as such for such a long, arduous and risky trip, young Nauca?"

"I was born and raised in the steppes and hunting has no secrets for me, while I am no stranger to fighting." replied at once Nauca in a firm voice. That was when Thanos cut in on the exchange, speaking to Hiram.

"I have known Nauca for three years now, Hiram, and I can vouch to you that she is a first-class hunter, a deadly archer and also a brave and resourceful girl."

Hiram mused on that for a second while eyeing Nauca and her weapons before speaking to her.

"You should know that I must keep my traveling costs as low as possible in order to maximize my profits for each trip. I already have two guards for my caravan, good men who are also excellent archers. If I hire you as a guard, then I can't promise you much in terms of wages. Also, our trip to Samarkand will take more than four months. Are you ready for such a long trip, girl?"

"Yes! As for my wages, my main goal is to be able to see more of the World. I am not asking for more than food during the trip and lodging when stopping at caravanserais along the way."

Hiram nodded his head slowly at those words.

"Your demands are quite modest and reasonable, I must say. So, you want to travel in order to see new things? Are you planning to return to Tanais afterwards? Know that my caravan will not go further than Samarkand, my city of origin. Once there, if you wish to continue further eastward, you will have to negotiate passage with another caravan going towards China. Depending on the weather, our trip to Samarkand could take over five months. If you decide to go all the way to Chang' an, the capital of the Chinese Empire, then you are looking at a trip taking close to a year."

"I am a nomad!" replied Nauca, undaunted. "My home is where I am!" She then looked down at Thanos, with her voice noticeably softening up.

"Please don't take this as some dissatisfaction with your hospitality, Thanos: I consider you as near to being family as one can be. I am just growing restless of living in one place and want to learn about the World."

"I understand your motives for wanting to go and I accept them, Nauca. We will miss you."

"Thank you, Thanos!" said Nauca before looking back at Hiram. "So? Are you ready to hire me and let me go with your caravan to Samarkand?"

Favorably impressed by her, the Sogdian merchant needed only a second to take a decision.

"I will take you with my caravan, young Nauca, with food and lodging as wages for your services. If we encounter bandits on the way and you are able to protect my caravan from them, then you will have the right to half of the loot taken from every bandit you will kill. Is that satisfactory to you?"

"Yes! When are you planning to depart for Samarkand?"

"In two days, once I will have concluded my business here. Make sure to bring both light and warm clothes for you for the trip: the weather on the high mountain plateaus can be frigid, while we will have to cross a number of vast arid deserts."

"I will be ready, Hiram. Thank you for letting me come with your caravan."

Nauca then turned around and left the hall, watched by Hiram. The Sogdian then looked at Thanos, a slight smile on his lips.

"That girl looks quite interesting, and I am not talking about her beauty, even though she is a truly fine-looking girl."

Thanos nodded his head slowly, his mind reviewing what had just happened.

"Oh, you won't meet many girls like her, Hiram. On the other hand, I will miss her: she has caught many nice furs for me during the last three years. She also happens to be quite a likeable girl. My own daughter, Artemisia, is a very good friend of her and she will be devastated to learn that Nauca is going to leave Tanais."

10:06 (Caucasus Time)

Thanos family's residence

Tanais caravanserai

Having searched for Artemisia around Thanos' residence, in which she had been living herself for three years now, Nauca found her friend in the weaving room, busy weaving wool treads into a cloth. Artemisia's smile on seeing her enter the room only made more difficult to Nauca what she wanted to do. In turn, the sober expression on

Nauca's face made Artemisia's smile fade and she stopped her weaving work while staring at her.

"What? What is it, Nauca?"

"Artemisia, I told you many times in the past that I would not stay here in Tanais for all my life and that I wanted to travel and see the World. Well, the time for me to leave has come."

The hurt and sadness which appeared on Artemisia's face at those words in turn saddened Nauca, who hurried to her friend to hug her.

"I love you, Artemisia, truly, but I need to move on and travel. Besides, you know as well as me that, sooner rather than later, your father will have you married to some local man, in which case our relationship will have to be terminated if you don't want to be shamed and punished because of our liaison. Be assured that I will have fond memories of our friendship together."

Tears appeared in Artemisia's eyes as she looked up at her friend and secret lover.

"When...when will you be leaving Tanais?"

"In two days. I will leave towards the East with the caravan presently in the caravanserai."

"Will you ever return to Tanais?" asked Artemisia, having to swallow a ball in her throat in order to speak. Nauca shook her head slowly in response.

"I don't think so, except for passing by on my way to another place. My trip to the East will probably take a year or even longer. By the time I pass by here again, you will probably have been married already to some man."

Artemisia nodded once her head to acknowledge the truth of those words. In Greek traditions, girls and young women had to obey their fathers or suffer some harsh discipline or even disavowal from their family. Once married, a Greek woman had no say in her future and would be mostly relegated to her husband's house, where she would be expected to be an obedient wife who would take care of the domestic chores and of producing and raising children. However, knowing that Nauca was right didn't make the present moment less painful. Returning Nauca's hug and pressing her tightly against herself, Artemisia started crying silently while Nauca gently caressed her hair and head.

"I will miss you so much, Nauca."

"And I will miss you too, Artemisia." replied Nauca, equally moved. Her friend then looked up at her, tears still flowing on her cheeks.

“Be careful during your trip, Nauca. I would hate to hear that something would have happened to you during your voyages.”

“That would only be life, especially for a nomad like me, Artemisia. As for you, I will pray that your father finds a kind and considerate husband for you, a man who will respect you as much as he will love you.”

Artemisia did not reply to that, as she knew too well that she could not really expect such an outcome. Marriages were mostly decided in terms of either financial benefit or family prestige. Marriages of true love were in fact a rarity and, when they happened, were widely derided as delusional and contrary to accepted norms and customs.

“Still, please be careful, Nauca. Could I see you tonight?”

“Yes, but we will have to be even more careful than usual about our activities together: now would be a truly bad time for our relationship to become known. How about taking a bath together late tonight?”

“That would be nice, Nauca. I will make sure that only my two personal slave girls will be around then.”

Nauca was then tempted to say something about this business of slavery, a thing which she, as a freedom-loving nomad, abhorred, but restrained herself. Slavery was unfortunately a practice that existed everywhere around the World. From what she had heard from passing caravan merchants, no country was free of that practice and she doubted very much that slavery would ever disappear, so she had to accept it, even though she hated the institution. Kissing Artemisia on her lips, Nauca then stepped back from her.

“I will see you again tonight. In the meantime, I have to prepare for my trip and procure a few things to facilitate it.”

She then left the weaving room, her heart heavy.

05:03 (Caucasus Time)

Sunday, June 19, 63 B.C.E.

Courtyard of the Tanais caravanserai

In traditional fashion for a caravan, the merchants and camel drivers of Hiram’s caravan were all up very early in the morning, in order to be able to start their long journey with as many hours of light possible for their first day of travel. Thankfully, the weather was nice, with a blue sky and a breeze from the sea that helped refresh from

the hot Sun. Thanos and his whole family, including Artemisia, were on hand to watch the caravan leave for its long journey. Nauca, atop her horse Tamat and with her second horse, Minad, carrying her provisions and equipment and tied by a long rope to her saddle, waved goodbye for a last time to Artemisia and her family as the long line of camels, heavily loaded with large bundles, started filing out of the courtyard via the main gate of the caravanserai. That prompted fresh tears from Artemisia, with her mother then taking hold of her to console her. Nauca herself felt sadness at leaving her friend, something that Timur, a young Mongol man who was one of the three guards of the caravan, noticed and made him speak to her as he rode next to her.

“You are leaving a good friend behind, Nauca. Am I right?”

“Yes, you are, Timur. However, that is a common occurrence for us nomads and we must concentrate on the present moment and near future.”

Timur nodded approvingly at her words.

“Well said! Time is too precious to waste it on moments already gone.”

“Timur, you told me yesterday that this is your second trip between Tanais and Samarkand with Hiram’s caravan. Which way will we go by?”

“Well, normally we would use the established road going through Persia but, with the war in the Pontus still fresh and with the Romans still busy looting the region and chasing down the remnants of King Mithridates’ army, that way is presently too risky. Romans have the nasty habit of taking whatever tempts them and Hiram has no wish to stimulate the greed of those Romans by parading a rich caravan down their noses. So, instead of heading Southeast towards Armenia and Persia, we will go straight East and follow the old Steppe Route towards the Sea of Oxus¹⁶. Once we reach its northwest shores, we will bifurcate southward and follow the Oxus River towards the cities of Urgench and Bukhara. Once in Bukhara, we will then get on the main Silk Road trail and follow it towards Samarkand, the terminus of our caravan.”

“What about the Tanais River? It is quite deep and wide at this time of the year.”

“Hiram knows a fording site a few hours north of here. Don’t worry about it.”

Nauca then fell silent, concentrating her attention on the way taken by Hiram, who was leading the caravan on his horse, accompanied by Gorudos, the third guard of their group of travelers.

¹⁶ Sea of Oxus: Ancient name of the Aral Sea.

The caravan followed at first the northern shores of the Tanais River, going through grassy plains sprinkled with trees. It stopped for lunch near the banks of the river where Hiram claimed there was a fording site practicable by his camels. As Nauca ate a quick, frugal meal of dried fish with the other members of the caravan, Gorudos was sent by Hiram across the river, to verify if the sand bar he had used previously was still usable as a fording site. To everybody's relief, the short but beefy man came back with only the belly of his horse being wet from the crossing. Hiram smiled at that sight and looked at Nauca and Timur.

"Timur, Nauca, cross the river now and make sure that no bandits are hiding on the other side. Then, you will stay on that side to protect our caravan while we cross the Tanais."

"Right away, Hiram!" replied Nauca, jumping on her feet at once and then walking towards her horse. Timur, slightly slower than her in reacting, followed her to his own horse, tied near Tamat. A few seconds later, both were galloping towards the water, slowing down to an amble before entering the river.

On her horse Tamat, Nauca kept scanning carefully the opposite bank of the river as she was wading across: Hiram had been correct in wanting to inspect the other shore for bandits, as such a crossing point would be a natural focal point for marauders intent on attacking a caravan in order to steal its precious merchandises. However, her acute eyesight did not locate anything suspect during her crossing of the Tanais River. Still, she was on alert as Tamat trotted out of the river and started climbing the soft sand incline of the southern bank.

"I'M GOING TO GO RIGHT AND CHECK THE SHORELINE ON THAT SIDE, TIMUR. DO THE SAME ON THE LEFT."

At first, Timur felt a bit insulted on having a girl give him orders, but her directive was a correct, logical one, so he turned his horse to the left without making a comment or protesting her ordering around. He did take his time to check his portion of the shoreline, intent on doing as thorough and careful a job as he could. When he returned to the crossing point, Nauca had herself just returned to it and was waving for the caravan to start crossing the river. She then pointed to Timur the nearest patch of woods, some forty meters away.

"I am going to check out that patch of woods, in case someone would hide in it."

“Good idea! Be careful, though: you would make a nice target to an archer hiding behind a tree.”

“I know, but someone has to do it, right?”

Not letting time to Timur to reply to that, Nauca then galloped away towards the line of trees. The young Mongol man smiled in appreciation when he saw her gallop in a zigzag pattern, in order to offer a more difficult target to any potential archer: that girl sure had both good instincts and lots of common sense. It didn't hurt that she also happened to be a beautiful girl.

Hiram, at the head of the line of camels, had just reached the southern shore when Nauca came back at a gallop, to stop next to Timur.

“The woods are clear.”

“Good! Let's go take a point position some 200 paces ahead of the caravan, in order to be able to detect in advance any possible ambush by bandits. I know the way, so just follow next to me.”

“Got it!”

Timur then informed Hiram of their intent before galloping forward with Nauca, slowing to a lazy trot once well ahead of the caravan. The clearing they were in however soon changed to a sparsely wooded area that also contained many bushes and lots of long grass, so they had to redouble their degree of attention once in it. Without needing to communicate together, both Timur and Nauca grabbed their bows at the same time and put arrows in place, in order to be able to react faster in case of a sudden ambush while guiding their horses via pressures from their knees and feet. The young Mongol man, who prided himself in being an expert horseman, was pleased to see that Nauca displayed a degree of expertise at least equal to his own.

‘Decidedly, any Mongol man would be proud to call such a girl his wife.’ thought Timur to himself.

Things were quite uneventful for the next couple of hours, except for the occasional sighting of a deer or boar among the trees. As the duo was crossing yet another grassy area, Nauca suddenly pointed at something to their left while speaking urgently.

“There! I see a horseman hiding among that line of trees, some 300 paces away.”

Timur barely had time to locate the said horseman before the latter turned his horse around and fled among the trees, making Nauca growl in frustration.

"Damn! We can't pursue him without risking to fall into some trap. However, I am sure that this man was acting as a lookout. For whom and why, I don't know, but it all appears suspicious to me."

"The same here. Stay here, while I gallop back to inform Hiram of this. We may have to be extra vigilant when we will stop for the night to establish our camp."

Nauca simply nodded her head at that and kept scanning the tree line on both sides as Timur galloped back. The young Mongol was back after a few minutes and spoke to Nauca as soon as he stopped his horse next to her.

"Hiram knows a good spot for a camp along the shores of a stream, some two hours ahead. We will stop there for the night. Once near that spot, Hiram wants us to thoroughly check the woods around it ahead of the caravan's arrival."

"A good idea. Hiram is indeed a cautious, experienced merchant and traveler." That made Timur smile to her.

"You would be cautious as well if all that you possessed was traveling with you. If this caravan did get robbed and looted, then Hiram might as well slit his own throat, as he would then have lost about everything."

Nauca nodded at that: it may sound cruel, but such was life these days. She herself had lived that way, free to move around but also vulnerable to all kinds of threats, before coming to Tanais after the loss of her family to marauding bandits.

Two and a half hours later, as the Sun was already quite low on the horizon, they arrived at the spot described by Timur, a large clearing with a four-meter-wide stream running through it. Nauca looked critically at the woods surrounding the clearing before speaking.

"Well, this clearing may give us a clear field of view against anyone emerging from those trees, but it also makes us plainly visible to any lookout or passersby."

"That's why we will now do a full circle around this clearing, in order to smoke out any hidden man before the caravan's arrival. Let's stay together for that: this is no time to split up and be alone to face any surprise attack."

"I concur! Lead on!"

Timur then turned his horse towards their left and started trotting just short of the tree line, his eyes scanning the woods past the first trees. They had crossed the stream and

were halfway down the tree line on the left side of the clearing when Nauca suddenly stopped her horse.

“STOP! I SEE SOMETHING!”

She then jumped off her horse, her bow ready to shoot, before entering the woods at a cautious step. With his own bow at the ready, Timur anxiously waited while scanning the thick woods. Nauca came back a few minutes later, a concerned expression on her face.

“I found a spot just beyond the first trees where some kind of lookout position had been made by cutting branches and forming a camouflage wall with them. The position was empty but I found some feces and urine which smelled like they were quite recent. I believe that one or two men were hiding there for a while before leaving only a few minutes ago. I could track them, but that would leave the caravan short by one guard.”

“You are right about that. By the way, you do have some great talent in spotting things around a forest, Nauca.”

Nauca could not help smile at that compliment.

“Well, I was born and raised in a region of the steppes covered by the Taiga, which is made mostly of thick coniferous forests. I am accustomed to hunt and track through dense woods.”

“Your talents are proving to be quite useful right now to our caravan, Nauca. While we can't do much right now about those lookouts, at least we will be on our guards tonight. Let's go to the caravan and inform Hiram of this.”

Galloping back to the caravan, which was starting to circle its camels around a spot next to the stream, where they would be able to drink, Nauca and Timur stopped next to Hiram, who had dismounted and was directing the setting up of their camp. Nauca let Timur speak to Hiram while listening on as he described what she had discovered. Worry appeared on the merchant's face, who caressed his short beard while thinking.

“Well, the Sun will soon come down, while we won't find a better spot than this for the night. We will still establish our camp here, but we will have to be extra vigilant tonight. You two better grab some sleep right now after making your horses drink, so that you could be rested for the incoming night watch shift.”

Both Nauca and Timur nodded their heads at that judicious decision and led their horses to the stream after unloading them and taking their saddles off. They then tied down their horses to a lone tree via long ropes, to let them eat the surrounding grass. Nauca didn't bother to deploy her small tent for the night, simply lying down in the grass and using her saddle as a headrest before quickly falling asleep, quite tired by her long hours of riding.

It was completely dark, with only the light of a half-moon to provide visibility, when Gorudos, who had been on the evening watch shift, awoke her and Timur, shaking them gently while speaking in a low voice.

"Wake up! Time for your night shift!"

Still groggy at first, Nauca sat up and stretched herself to fully wake up, then got on her feet and started putting on her scale armor vest and helmet and grabbing her weapons, buckling the wide belt supporting her sword, dagger, war axe and purse around her waist and slinging her gorytos containing her bow and arrows. Lifting her saddle up from the grass, she fitted it back on Tamat and finally grabbed her 'Pelta' half-moon-shaped shield and her long lance before taking position behind one of the big bundles which had been carried by the camels of the caravan. Her position was actually on one flank of the camp, well away from the campfire that was still slowly burning: only an idiot would stand watch near a fire, where the flames would silhouette him to attackers and would also ruin his night vision. Timur, no young fool, did the same but at the other extremity of the camp.

The night was quiet at first, with the clear, starry sky offering a fascinating view to anyone who would care looking up and eye the wide swath of the Milky Way crossing the night sky. However, Nauca kept her eyes firmly towards the trees surrounding the wide clearing, scanning back and forth from one side to the other and looking for any glint of movement. At night, both movement and noise were much better as warning signs than actual sighting, at least at first. Such a warning sign came well past midnight, when Nauca's eyes caught on moving branches among the tree line facing her. Concentrating her vision in that direction, she soon was able to distinguish the dark silhouettes of over a dozen horsemen emerging from the trees while trying to stay as silent as they could. Her senses now going to full alert, she turned her head towards Timur's position, some fifty paces away from her, and imitated the cry of an owl, their

prearranged signal that something was approaching. On hearing that, Timur hurried at once to Gorudos to wake him up, then returned to his position and readied his bow. By then, the newcomers were fully out of the woods and were quietly advancing in the long grass of the clearing, going towards the stream that separated them from the caravan's camp. Nauca tightened her jaws on seeing that their attackers numbered a good fourteen men, all holding either bows, lances or war axes: that made for heavy odds indeed. Wanting to cut down on that number as soon as possible, Nauca pulled her bow and aimed carefully at one of the silhouettes, then let fly an arrow. She was already putting in place a second arrow when her first projectile hit, striking one of the horsemen in the chest and making him bowl off his horse with a scream of pain. The other horsemen, surprised by that sudden outcome, took a full second to react to it, giving time to Nauca to aim at a second target. That horseman barely had time to start shouting orders in a Sarmatian dialect Nauca recognized as Circassian before being killed by an arrow in his left eye. Barely a second later, a third horseman fell from his horse, shot by Timur. The remaining horsemen, forgetting about stealth, then started shouting war cries while pushing their horses to full gallop, charging towards the campsite. Shooting arrows at a rhythm of one arrow every four seconds, Nauca still managed to stay deadly accurate, the attackers being well within 200 meters, her usual limit for pinpoint accuracy. With Timur proving nearly as deadly as her, the attackers' number melted quickly, with only six of them still on their horses by the time that they started splashing across the small stream. Gorudos then added his fire to the rain of arrows, shooting dead the leading horseman at the same time that yet another attacker was bowled over by one of Nauca's arrows. Now down to four men, the attackers understood that they stood little chances now and decided to turn around and flee. However, neither Nauca, Timur or Gorudos felt like showing mercy, as they knew full well what those bandits would have done to the people of the caravan if their attack had proved successful. They thus continued to shoot arrows, until the last of the attackers fell down from his horse. That was when Nauca shouted out loud at her companions.

"TIMUR, GET YOUR HORSE AND LET'S CATCH THOSE RIDER-LESS HORSES! WE WILL ALSO FINISH OFF ANY WOUNDED MAN WE WILL FIND STILL ALIVE. GORUDOS, KEEP WATCHING THE CAMP."

Running to her own horse, on whom she had put back her saddle when she had awakened, she jumped on top of it and pushed it to a gallop while pushing a savage cry.

"YAAH! FORWARD, TAMAT!"

Holding her lasso rather than her bow, Nauca urged her horse across the stream, passing by the corpse of one of the attackers. Ignoring the dead man, Nauca went after one of the rider-less horses, which was galloping back towards the nearby forest. That horse however soon slowed down, hesitant about where to go. That gave a chance to Nauca to throw her lasso and catch it well before getting to the tree line. Tying the end of her lasso to the pommel of her saddle, Nauca then grabbed the lasso carried by the horse she had just captured and went after another horse, which had stopped just short of the first trees, along with a number of master-less horses. Seeing that those horses were not trying to flee anymore, she took the time to grab their reins one by one, then tying them to each other, forming a long line of beasts under her control. Slowly trotting back towards the camp, she stopped and dismounted next to each body she found, using first her war axe to make sure that the man was dead, then collecting anything of value, like coins, jewels, weapons and pieces of armor, loading those on the horses she had captured. Looking briefly at Timur, visible some sixty paces away, she saw that Timur had collected three horses of his own and was also looting a body. Some would have objected to this systematic looting of dead men but, in the harsh life and environment of the steppes, one did not waste anything. For one thing, horses and weapons could both fetch large prices on most markets and Hiram would be able to sell those once in a city, maximizing his profit for this trip. Second, while Nauca was not the greedy type, that loot was going to nicely inflate her meager wages as a caravan guard, while that extra money would in turn allow her to buy more and even better equipment, on top of helping her pay for things like food and lodging during future trips.

When she and Timur got back to the camp, they found Hiram waiting for them, a big grin on his face.

“Well done, you two! If not for you and Gorudos, our caravan would have been easy pickings for those bandits and we would be all dead by now. Your decision to go after those horses and of looting those dead bandits was also an inspired one. I have only one word, thus you will have the right to keep half of the loot from the bandits you personally killed. I will let you three decide between yourselves how many bandits you killed. Just don't kill each other in the process. We will then do the splitting of the loot in the early morning, before we will leave this camp. Again, well done!”

Hiram, visibly quite happy, then walked away towards the central camp fire, leaving Nauca alone with Timur and Gorudos. The latter smiled at his two companions and

spoke in Greek, the one language with Sogdian that everybody in the caravan could understand.

"So, can we decided this in a friendly way, or should we decide on the loot splitting the hard way?"

"Now, that would truly be something: to save this caravan only to then kill each other over the loot." said Nauca, catching on the humor. Timur grinned in response.

"I know a lot of men who would be stupid enough to do just that."

"Hey, I'm a woman, remember? Don't include me in that lot!"

All three laughed briefly before become serious, with Gorudos speaking first.

"Alright, I will start with me. I can honestly claim to have shot for sure three men, including the one that fell in the stream."

"Talking of that guy, I hope that you pulled his body out of the water, Gorudos: I don't like it when my drinking water tastes like blood." replied Nauca, attracting a smile on the man's face.

"Don't worry about that, Nauca: your delicate senses will be spared. So, anyone is disputing my claim to three riders?"

"I accept it!" replied at once Timur. "I saw you shoot them. What do you say, Nauca?"

"I also accept it. So, this would leave eleven riders to split between me and Timur. On my part, I claim six riders for me."

"Ooh, a Sarmatian girl who can count! You keep surprising me, Nauca." said Gorudos in a sarcastic tone. Nauca replied with a fake offended look.

"That Sarmatian girl will surprise you with a boot up your ass if you continue like this, Gorudos."

The three of them laughed again before Timur nodded his head.

"I accept your claim, Nauca: you were the first to give the alert and you shot at least twice before I could let go my first arrow."

"So, three for me, six for Nauca and five for you, Timur." said Gorudos. "I think that we have a deal."

It was Timur's turn to look at Gorudos with fake wonderment.

"A Parthian like you can count that high?"

"That was easy enough for him: it was a lesser number than 21." replied Nauca, getting into the game. The two men looked at her with incomprehension.

"A lesser number than 21? What do you mean by that, Nauca?" asked Gorudos.

“Well, any man can count to at least 21, no? Ten toes, plus ten fingers, plus one dick.”

Both Gorudos and Timur then bent forward in two, laughing hard, accompanied by Nauca.

07:44 (Caucasus Time)

Monday, June 20, 63 B.C.E.

Caravan’s campsite east of Tanais

Circassian territory

Having taken one hour to evaluate the loot from the dead bandits, Hiram made a few calculations with the help of his abacus, noting down the results before going to see his three caravan guards, who were finishing to eat breakfast around the campfire.

“Well, I believe that you will like those numbers about the loot you took last night. With the horses, weapons, pieces of armor and the few coins and pieces of jewelry these bandits had on them, it averages 600 drachmas per dead bandit. This means that, with the half of the loot I promised you before leaving Tanais, you are entitled to 300 drachmas per bandit you killed. Gorudos, this means that I owe you 900 drachmas. Timur, you are owed 1,500 drachmas, while Nauca is owed 1,800 drachmas. Now, this represents quite a heavy load for your purses to carry if given in either gold or silver. If you wish so, I can give you your part of the loot in either coins, precious stones, horses or weapons or other pieces from the pile of loot. You may take your time to think about it and give me your choice later, when we will stop for the night this evening.”

“Uh, what could I buy with 900 drachmas, Hiram?” asked Gorudos, unsure. Hiram didn’t laugh at that, as the sums he had just quoted represented a few years of wages for even a skilled laborer. Most people could simply not imagine what such sums represented.

“To put it in the simplest terms, Gorudos, your 900 drachmas would buy you a horse of the utmost quality, three pretty slaves, a nice house somewhere, or you could spend over forty days in total debauchery with a temple prostitute...if you can survive that!”

That last remark, along with the face that Gorudos then made, got both Nauca and Timur laughing hard for a moment. Hiram waited for them to quiet down before looking at Nauca.

"Nauca, you are owed the most: 1,800 drachmas. That is a huge sum and also a very cumbersome load if you take it in silver or gold coinage. I thus strongly counsel you to think seriously about an alternate mode of payment."

"My mind is already made, Hiram, as my purse is already fairly heavy with coins. I will take my part of the loot in precious stones, which are very valuable while also being easy to carry."

"A judicious choice, Nauca. Once we are in Bukhara, the first great city we will pass by, I will visit with you a local goldsmith in order to get you for 1,800 drachmas-worth of precious gems. Will that do?"

"Very much so, Hiram."

"Then, let's pack up and continue on our trip. Once at the Sea of Oxus, we will follow the Oxus River¹⁷ up to Urgench, the first city on our way. We should arrive there in about three months, weather permitting."

¹⁷ Oxus River: Ancient name of the Amu Darya River.

CHAPTER 7 – URGENCH



Central Asia in the 1st Century B.C.E.



Fortress of Kyrkmolla, ancient Urgench.



Historical migrations of the Yuezhi.

17:06 (Central Asia Time)

Tuesday, September 20, 63 B.C.E.

Southern shore of the Oxus River (Amu Darya River)

Near ancient Urgench, Khwarzem Province (Chorasmlia)

Region controlled by Yuezhi nomads

“I SEE URGENCH ON THE HORIZON!”

“At last!” said in turn Hiram on hearing the shout from Gorudos. “Tomorrow, we will be able to sleep in real beds and eat good meals at the caravanserai in Urgench.”

Nauca, who was riding beside Hiram, looked at him questioningly.

“Is Urgench a big place, Hiram?”

“Not really, Nauca. It is an old, medium-size city which exists mostly to service and shelter passing caravans like ours. The local ruler’s biggest source of income is in fact the taxes he is imposing on us traders and merchants.”

“And whose king is he representing?”

“He is mostly representing himself. Before, he would be answerable to the King of Greco-Bactria, but nomads from the Northeast named the Yuezhi invaded this land decades ago and loosely control it. However, those Yuezhi are formed into many tribes and have no real central leaders, so they let the various city rulers do pretty much as they wish, as long as they don’t try to rebel or impede the flow of caravans, which benefit about everybody.”

“Sounds a bit like the state of affairs in my native Sarmatia.”

Hiram nodded his head at that.

“You would probably find the Yuezhi quite similar to you, Nauca. Like you, they are nomads who fight on horseback and shoot bows as their main weapon. They were in turn pushed out of their original lands by other mounted nomads, the Xiongnu. Those Xiongnu are by the way considered by the Chinese as their biggest threat and they often clash with Chinese imperial armies. The tribe to which our own Timur belonged, the Mongols, is actually part of the Xiongnu Federation.”

“Oh?! And why did Timur join your caravan, Hiram? He always refused to tell me about that.”

Hiram hesitated for a moment, then answered her in a low voice, so that others could not hear him.

“Keep this to yourself, Nauca, as Timur wishes this to stay confidential. Timur had to flee his tribe after he killed the son of his tribal leader, who had raped and killed Timur’s sister. Normally, that tribal chief’s son should have been punished for that, according to tribal traditions and customs, but his father protected him and instead put the blame on Timur. Timur then had no choice but to flee and he eventually ended up in Samarkand, where I accepted to hire him as a caravan guard. If he is ever caught by the Mongols, then he will most certainly be killed. Now, promise me that you will not repeat that story to anyone, Nauca. I appreciate Timur very much and I wouldn’t want to see him get into trouble.”

"You have my word, Hiram." replied at once Nauca. She then thought about that for a while as she rode next to Hiram.

Seeing that his caravan would not be able to reach Urgench before nightfall, Hiram soon decided to stop and establish a camp near the shore of the Oxus River, which was quite shallow and narrow in this hot and dry season. Nauca's first task once they stopped was in fact to lead the horses of the caravan to the river to let them drink, with young Timur to assist her. As their herd of horses meant to be sold in Samarkand drank, Nauca looked longingly at the water flowing past her.

"I would really love to be able to take a bath after supper: the countryside we passed through during those last couple of weeks was as dry as a rock."

"Then, do it, Nauca! You won't be the only one who wants to bathe." Nauca threw a critical look at the young man.

"Me, the sole girl in this whole caravan, bathe with the rest of our group? Those merchants may be good men, but they are still men."

"Then, go bathe at a spot away from the camp."

"And leave my things lying on the shore, at the mercy of a passing thief?"

"I could stand guard over them while you swim around." replied Timur, a slight smile on his lips, attracting an instant reply.

"So that you could watch me naked?"

Timur sighed and lowered his eyes at her words.

"Nauca, I had a sister who was pretty much the same age as you. If anything, you remind me of her a lot and I would never dare to show disrespect to you. Yes, I find you very pretty, but I would never abuse you."

Staring into his eyes, Nauca finally decided that he was telling the truth and gently patted his right shoulder.

"Very well, Timur: I accept your offer to watch my things while I bathe tonight. I will do the same for your things afterward, so that you can also bathe."

"Thank you, Nauca: you are a real friend."

After making the horses drink, Nauca and Timur led them to a grassy area along the shoreline near the camp where they would be able to feed and used ropes tied to the few dispersed local trees to create an improvised corral. Once that was done, they were replaced by Gorudos, who had been tasked by Hiram to watch over the precious horses,

and were able to go eat and mount their respective tents. Nauca waited until darkness fell to go get Timur, who then grabbed a set of fresh clothes and walked some 200 meters away with her, following the river's shore. Stopping at a group of five small trees which provided some intimacy, Nauca then started shedding her clothes, removing first her scale armor vest and helmet. She appreciated the fact that Timur turned around to face away from her the moment she started undressing. Now fairly reassured about his intentions, Nauca finished undressing and, once naked, ran into the river. She felt pure delight as she was able to crouch into the low, lukewarm water, with only her head sticking out. Swimming around a bit and rubbing off the accumulated dirt from her body, she finally walked out of the river to return to her clothes, finding Timur still facing outward. Drying herself up and putting on a set of clean clothes took her only a few minutes, after which she called out to Timur.

"I AM FINISHED, TIMUR. YOU CAN COME WASH YOURSELF NOW."

"COMING!"

With her armor back on and her weapons on her, Nauca took the place of Timur next to one of the trees and started watching around as he undressed and went into the river. His own bathing took only a couple of minutes and he was back and dressed quickly.

"I am ready, Nauca: we can go back to our camp."

"Do you know if we will find a place in Urgench where I will be able to have my dirty clothes washed?"

"There certainly are, Nauca. In fact, there is such a laundry room at the local caravanserai, which also maintains a bathhouse, which is very popular with passing merchants. Another bathhouse in town is also frequented by local prostitutes, making it even more popular with travelers."

"I see!" said Nauca in a sarcastic tone. In turn, Timur gave her a cautious look.

"And you, Nauca? You are young and healthy. Don't you frequent men from time to time?"

"No!" replied Nauca at once, surprising the young man. "I am presently engaged in a long sightseeing trip around the World. How far do you think I could go if I ever get pregnant during my trip? I have thus vowed to stay away from men for the time being, in order not to risk a pregnancy."

"Oh! I see! Be careful, though: some men don't know how to accept a 'no'."

"Don't worry, Timur: I have a dagger ready just for such men. When I was still a young girl, a bandit tried to attack me. He ended with my dagger stuck in his balls."

Timur winced on hearing that.

“Ouch! That definitely would ruin any man’s day.”

“Exactly!” replied Nauca, grinning.

16:25 (Central Asia Time)

Wednesday, September 21, 63 B.C.E.

Local caravanserai, old city of Urgench, Koreshmia



Old caravanserai along the Silk Road, Central Asia.

The Urgench caravanserai was actually situated just outside the limits of the town, in order to avoid large camel caravans from causing traffic jams inside the narrow streets of Urgench. As Hiram had told Nauca a day earlier, guards of the local ruler were posted outside of the gate of the fortified caravanserai and collected a tax from Hiram based on the number of horses and camels he had in his caravan. Once that was done, the caravan was allowed inside the large fortified compound, where a well sat in the middle of the wide courtyard. A bearded man with a bit of a large gut ran to Hiram as the later was stepping down from his horse, shouting in Sogdian.

“HIRAM, MY FRIEND! YOU ARE BACK FROM THE WEST!”

“And with lots of furs, amber and horses, Amachios. How is business going at your caravanserai?”

The said Amachios shared a happy hug with Hiram before answering him.

“Business is actually quite good, my friend. With the pandemonium those Romans are throwing around the normal caravan route through Persia because of their

cleanup campaign against what remains of the forces of King Mithridates, many more caravans pass through Urgench these days, instead of through Susia,¹⁸ Ecbatana¹⁹ and Damascus. Hopefully, those Romans will keep at it for a few more years, time for me to get rich.”

Hiram giggled at that and patted the shoulder of his friend caravanserai master.

“Like they say: the misfortunes of some make the fortune of others. Well, I have a total of 25 loaded camels, 37 good horses for sale and fifteen tired and hungry riders to take care of. You have enough space for us tonight, I hope?”

“Of course, my friend! I will tell Touranos to prepare at once rooms for sixteen men.”

“Make it fifteen men and one girl, Amachios: one of my caravan guards is a Sarmatian girl.”

The caravanserai master gave a stunned look at Nauca, who was still on her horse nearby, before looking back at Hiram.

“A Sarmatian girl? One of the famed Amazons?”

“Exactly, and one you don’t want to trifle with: she may be young and pretty but she is positively deadly with a bow. Her name is Nauca. I will pay for her room and meals, as lodging and food was the agreed wages for her services as a guard...and I mean that as the only services she will give.”

Amachios, no fool, understood at once the warning in that last sentence and nodded his head.”

“Then, I will make sure that the bunch of grubby Bactrians presently lodged in Touranos’ inn keep their hands to themselves. Judging from the mass of weapons she is carrying, that girl would probably cut off the hands of any man who will try his luck with her.”

“You got that right, my friend.”

“So, how long do you intend to stay here in Urgench, Hiram?”

“Only a couple of days, time to rest our mounts and to check if there is any worthwhile exchange or business to be done here.”

¹⁸ Susia : Ancient name of Bagram, in Northern Afghanistan.

¹⁹ Ecbatana : Ancient name of Hamadan, in Iran.

"Then, you are in luck, my friend. I presently am sheltering a small group of Indian merchants who came all the way from Pataliputra²⁰ and were on their way to the West. They however decided to change their route when they heard about the infinite greed of the Roman soldiers marching around Parthia. I believe that you would want to talk to them."

Hiram smiled and rubbed his hands together.

"Now you are really interesting me, my friend. Once we will have our rooms and will go have supper, I will definitely want to discuss with those Indian merchants."

"Then, I will tell Touranos to arrange a meeting with them. Let's go see him while my people take care of your beasts."

Some forty minutes later, having checked that all his people had been given rooms and that his camels and horses were being cared for, with their precious bundles of goods stored inside a stall now guarded by Nauca, Hiram went to the main hall of the caravanserai's inn with Touranos, the inn's manager, in order to have supper. Touranos used that occasion to make him visit the inn's kitchen, where he showed to Hiram the choice of meals on the menu.

"Tonight, we have both roast pork and a chicken and vegetable stew on the menu, along with rice and bread."

Hiram bent down over the big pot in which a chicken stew was simmering and sniffed its odor with delight. However, he found the large piece of pork roasting over a fire equally appetizing. Having seen that most of his caravan people had just arrived in the hall, he took a quick decision.

"Bring both that rack of roast pork and that pot of stew to the tables where my people are sitting, along with a small pot of rice, four loaves of bread and two pitchers of wine. I believe that this will be more than enough to cover the cost of those items."

Touranos quickly accepted the six silver coins Hiram produced and bowed to him.

"I will have that food and drinks brought to your tables at once, along with plates, bowls and cups."

"Thank you!" replied Hiram before walking out of the kitchen, entering the hall and going to the table where his three Sogdian associates, his Persian horse trader and

²⁰ Pataliputra: Ancient name of Patna, in Northeast India.

his Chinese gem trader and interpreter were sitting, where he took place next to Kassim, his most trusted associate.

"Food will soon be brought to our table, my friends. We have roast pork, chicken stew, rice, bread and wine on the menu."

The eyes of Xiao, the Chinese gem trader and interpret employed by Hiram, lit up at the mention of rice.

"Aah, I have been wanting to taste rice again for months, Hiram. We really should stock up on rice for our travel provisions: it keeps well in most conditions, is filling and is comparatively cheap."

"I think that you are right about that, Xiao. I will go see after supper if there is any rice to be bought here."

Hiram then saw five inn servants come out of the kitchen, loaded down with food, plates, cups and wine pitchers.

"Aah, here is our food! I was starving!"

Looking towards the two other tables occupied by his camel drivers and guards, he shouted out to young Timur.

"TIMUR, AS SOON AS YOU WILL HAVE EATEN, GO REPLACE NAUCA AT THE STABLES, SO THAT SHE COULD COME HERE AND EAT."

"YES, HIRAM!"

Their tables were soon supporting a number of pans, pots and plates, with the caravan men hungrily diving into the hot food. Most of them also broke pieces of bread for themselves, while Xiao happily filled his plate with steamy rice, then poured some chicken stew on top of his rice before starting to wolf down his food. As he ate a large slice of roast pork accompanied by rice and vegetables, Hiram looked around the hall at the other persons present for supper. There were actually some 26 other travelers present, not counting Hiram's people. Those 26 travelers were obviously from varied places, if one considered their clothes and listened to what language they spoke. In truth, that kind of kaleidoscope of dresses, languages and customs had attracted Hiram to trading as much as the prospect of making money, as he was by nature a curious man with an open mind. Many of those travelers inside the hall appeared to be Persian, but a group of five men with brown skins and black hair and beards attracted the attention of Hiram: their clothes were typical of those worn by Indian merchants he had met in the past. Discretely pointing them to Kassim, he spoke to him in a low voice.

"You see those five men over there? They must be the Indian merchants Amachios told me about. It could be wise to go speak with them after eating, to see if we could do some good trading with them. How is your Sanskrit?"

"A bit rusty, but I believe that I could still discuss with those men."

"Excellent! Eat quickly then, so that we could go see them before they retire to their rooms."

Hurrying himself to eat his food, Hiram got up from his bench some fifteen minutes later and then walked to the table occupied by the Indians, Kassim in tow. Stopping near their table, he and Kassim then bowed politely to them, with Kassim speaking a few words in Sanskrit.

"Good evening, good men! Could we discuss trade with you?"

The older Indian, who seemed to be the leader of the group and who bore a rather spectacular-looking spiral-shaped moustache, immediately pointed at an empty part of the bench facing him from across the table.

"Please, sit! It is always a good time to talk trade. My name is Sajith Sing."

"And I am Kassim. This is my associate, Hiram."

Kassim and Hiram then sat down, facing Sing. Sing presented first his own associates before eyeing critically his two interlocutors.

"So, what do you have to offer as wares?"

"We have 38 good, strong horses from the plains north of the Pontus Euxinus²¹, amber, furs, weapons, gems, gold, silver and jewels. What about you?"

"We mostly have items that are both valuable and easy to carry in quantity: spices, gems and a few weapons and pieces of armor."

Kassim exchanged a glance with Hiram before looking back at Sing.

"Then, we would definitely be interested in your wares. We would in exchange let you look at our own wares. When would you like that we do our mutual inspections?"

"There is no time like the present time!" declared the graying Indian merchant, getting up on his feet. Kassim and Hiram did the same, pleased by his eagerness.

"Then, since your wares are more compact, how about we start by looking at them first?"

"A logical suggestion. Follow me!"

²¹ Pontus Euxinus: Ancient name of the Black Sea.

As they were following the Indian merchants out of the hall, Hiram shouted at his associates still eating.

“XIAO, IMAN, HERAKLYON, DEMOSTHENE, NURTAS, COME! WE HAVE BUSINESS TO CONDUCT!”

The word ‘business’ was enough to convince the five men sitting and eating to leave their plates, although Xiao took the time to gobble up a last ball of rice before hurrying to Hiram and the Indians. However, instead of going to the stables, where their mounts were, the Indians led Hiram and his associates upstairs, to their rooms. Entering the largest of the two rooms they used, Sing spoke in Sanskrit to a young man sitting on top of a pile formed by two chests while firmly holding a curved sword.

“Najib, I brought prospective customers for our wares. You can get up from those chests.”

“Yes, Father!” said the young man, who could be about twenty-years-old. Sing then smiled to Hiram and Kassim.

“My son Najib: I use him as a night guard for our wares, while we sleep.”

“Can’t find a more dependable guard than him, I must say.” replied Kassim, making a malicious smile appear on Sing’s lips.

“Well, we have a saying in Pataliputra: you can choose your friends, but not your family.”

“We have the same saying back in Sogdiana. It seems that family backstabbing is a universal problem.”

“Indeed, my friend!” said Sing, grinning. “I will show you first my precious stones and my spices before you look at my weapons and armor.”

“That will be fine with us, Sajith: our associate Xiao is a gem trader who will be able to evaluate your stones at once. Xiao, get ready to show us your expertise.”

Sajith Sing first lit two extra oil lamps sitting on the small table in the room, then extracted from under his tunic a set of keys hanging by a leather strap from his neck and unlocked the two chests on which Najib had been sitting. Opening the top chest, Sing took a good dozen small leather purses from it and put them down on the table. However, he stayed very close to them and pushed forward only one purse towards Xiao, who was taking his small weighing scale from its protective box, along with a series of small weights, lining them up on the table while sitting down on a stool. Sing then spoke in halting Sogdian, the lingua franca of the Silk Road.

"You will excuse me if I let you look at only one purse at a time: even one gem stolen would represent a significant loss for me. I will thus count out the gems in each purse before you start examining my stones."

Xiao, who was keenly aware of the high trading value and attractiveness of gems, nodded his head at that.

"I fully understand that, my friend. Many men had their throats cut for a single nice stone."

Watched by Xiao, Hiram and Kassim, Sing then emptied the first purse on the table, making seventeen big, deep red polished stones roll on the table. Xiao, like his associates, opened wide his eyes at the sight of the stones.

"Rubies! And what rubies! They look magnificent!"

"They come from a place called Burma, across the Bay of Bengal. Burma is justly reputed to produce the nicest rubies one can find in the whole World."

Using a small tweezer to pick up one of the rubies, Xiao raised it close to the light from one of the oil lamps and examined it with growing emotion.

"By my ancestors' spirits, this ruby must be the most perfect I ever saw."

Then putting the ruby down on his jeweler's scale and measuring carefully its weight, Xiao then looked up soberly at Hiram, speaking to him in Greek, so that the Indians would not understand him.

"That stone alone is easily worth 3,000 drachmas, Hiram. Paying 2,000 drachmas for it would still leave you with a nice profit."

While he kept a poker face on hearing that, Hiram's heart jumped in his chest: that stone alone was worth the price of three top-quality horses, or five years of wages for a skilled worker! No wonder that this Sajith Sing was guarding so closely his gems.

"Alright! Let's see if the other rubies are of the same quality and value range."

Xiao nodded once and grabbed a second ruby after giving back the first to Sing, who immediately put it back in its purse. After a few minutes of intense concentration and close examination, Xiao was ready to give his verdict to Hiram.

"They are all rubies of top quality, with the smallest one still worth a good thousand drachmas. Just that one purse would be enough to buy all of our horses meant for trading."

"I'll keep that in mind, Xiao. Let's see what the other purses contain."

Xiao nodded again and pointed the next purse to Sing, who was just finishing to tie back the purse full of rubies.

"What is in that purse?"

"Emeralds from Bactria. They are as valuables as my rubies."

Sing then untied the leather string closing the purse and made about twenty dark green stones roll on the table, then pushed one of them in front of Xiao, who looked at it with near veneration before picking it up and examining and weighing it.

"This emerald is worth about 2,600 drachmas, resale price, Hiram. The other emeralds from this purse look about of the same value."

A few minutes of work by Xiao was enough to confirm his initial judgment. Now firmly decided to buy as many of Sing's gems as he possibly could, them being wares in high demand by various nobles and royalties everywhere and also being very easy to carry, Hiram made Xiao look at all of the gems offered by Sing, which included diamonds, star rubies, aquamarines and turquoises. Sing then opened his second chest, which contained small and medium-sized jute bags of various spices which, per weight, were about as valuable as silver or even gold. Once spice in particular that he tasted made his eyes open wide.

"By Mithra! What is this spice? I love it!"

Sing smiled proudly on hearing that.

"That, my friend, is called 'curry'. It is actually a mix of a number of specific spices and it comes in a variety of degree of hotness. What you just tasted is a mild variant."

"Can I taste your stronger variants?" asked eagerly Hiram, making Sing nod his head.

"Of course, my friend. Be careful, though: the truly hot variant could put your tongue on fire."

"We'll see!"

It didn't take long for Hiram to find out that Sing had not exaggerated. The third and last curry sample made him open his mouth wide, while tears came out of his eyes.

"By Mithra, I'm on fire! Water! Water, please!"

Sing, having anticipated that need, presented at once a goblet full of water to Hiram, who avidly drank it dry before looking at the Indian merchant with wide eyes.

"That hot curry of yours is like fire! And your people actually eat that?"

"Yes, but not in pure form. Curry, parsimoniously sprinkled on a piece of meat, in a sauce or mixed with cooked rice, adds a fantastic flavor to recipes."

"Then, I will certainly want to buy some of it. Let me confer for a moment with my associates."

"Go right ahead, my friend."

Going to one corner of the room and speaking Sogdian in a very low voice with his associates for a couple of minutes, Hiram finally returned to face Sing.

"We will definitely want to buy some of your best gems, plus a few bags of your curry spice. How about you come down and inspect the horses, amber and other wares I have to offer, so that we could decide on what we will exchange between us?"

"That sounds like a good idea, but I also have some pieces of armor and weapons for sale. Aren't you interested in them?"

Hiram's expression was a response by itself.

"Well, we also have weapons and armor to sell, but maybe our caravan guards could be interested in what you have."

It was the turn of Sing to look skeptical.

"Your caravan guards would be rich enough to buy top quality pieces of armor and weapons?"

"Well, let's say that they killed quite a few bandits along the way and that they earned half of the loot from those dead bandits, including horses. Yes, they could possibly have enough money to buy things from you."

"Alright then, I will show you what I have."

Hiram, who had a more than fair knowledge about the value and quality of various weapons and armor, patiently waited while Sing and his associates unpacked and lined up in front of him a few dozen pieces of armor and a variety of weapons. Reviewing them quickly, Hiram was not very convinced about their worth. One item however attracted his curiosity and he pointed at a round shield of unusual aspect.

"What is that shield made of? That's not metal, nor is it cow leather."

Picking up the shield and holding it in front of him, Sing looked soberly at Hiram.

"That, my friend, is a Dhal shield made of rhinoceros skin. It is the most prized kind of shield in India and is certified arrow-proof. It also is quite light for its size, lighter in fact than wooden or metal shields. I have them in three different sizes. Here, take it, so that you can see how light it is."

Taking the shield from Sing, Hiram was effectively surprised by its lightness, despite the fact that it was a good fifty centimeters in diameter. Rapping his knuckles against the outer surface of the shield produced a muffled sound. Hiram then looked at Sing.

“You said that you had other such shields in different sizes?”

“Yes!”

“Then at least one of my guards would probably be interested in these shields. Indian Dahl shield made of rhinoceros hide Demosthenes, could you go down to the hall and bring our three guards here? Replace temporarily the one on duty at the stables, so that he could come as well.”

“Right away, Hiram!” replied the Sogdian before running out of the room. While they waited for him to return with their caravan guards, Hiram eyed the pieces of armor and weapons with a fresh eye and pointed at another item.

“And this? It looks like an arm protector.”

“It is a Hastaghna, worn on the left arm and meant to protect the arm and hand of an archer while he shoots his bow. It is considered by archers to be a very useful item. This particular model has the added advantage that, since the glove part incorporates Bagh Nakh²² steel knuckles, you can also use it to strike hard the face of an opponent in close combat.”

Hiram winced on hearing that.

“Ouch! That should hurt!”

“It sure does, my friend!” replied Sing, smiling.



Indian Dahl shield made of rhinoceros hide



Indian Hastaghna arm protector

Hiram took the time while waiting for his guards to continue inspecting more closely the weapons and pieces of armor on display. If he would have been some kind of general, military commander or elite warrior, then he would certainly have been highly

²² Bagh Nakh: Ancient Indian knuckledusters.

interested by the wares offered by those Indian traders. However, most of his customers were no elite warriors but rather aristocrats and rich merchants, so the gems and spices offered by Sing were definitely more attractive items for him. Gorudos, Timur and Nauca finally showed up after a few minutes, with the Indians immediately staring at Nauca with unmitigated surprise.

“One of your guards is a woman?” nearly exclaimed Sing, making Hiram grin with malice.

“A girl, actually, but she is one of the best, I assure you. She killed by herself six bandits during one attack and also is about the best hunter you could find. She is a Sarmatian nomad and warrior, one that the Greeks call ‘Amazon’.”

Sing, like his associates, examined Nauca for a few seconds before going over his surprise.

“Well, since your guards are here, I will show them the weapons and pieces of armor I have while quoting my opening price for each item. You may help them by translating if needed.”

“Fair enough!” said Hiram before looking at his three guards and speaking to them in Greek.

“These are merchants from India. They brought with them precious gems, rare spices and a variety of weapons and pieces of armor. I still owe you your part of the loot taken on the bandits you killed. You may now use part or all of your loot owed to you to purchase things from those Indian merchants, be it either gems, spices or weapons and armor. I will help you by haggling for the pieces you would like to get and obtain the cheapest price possible for them. Are you ready to trust me in this?”

“Yes, Hiram!” replied in unison the three guards.

“Good! Sajith Sing will now show you what he has in terms of weapons and armor. Sajith?”

Sing then showed to Hiram and his associates that he was no beginner in trading and was a master salesman with haggling talents equal to those of Hiram. The hour that followed was full of melodrama and passion as Hiram and Sing engaged in a memorable haggling session, with Hiram doing his best to obtain the cheapest prices for his guards. At the end of it, Gorudos ended up spending half of his owed loot value on a Kavacha plate and chainmail armored vest, while Timur bought a fine Hinduwani steel curved sword, a steel helmet to replace his old bronze helmet and a small buckler shield made

of rhinoceros hide. As for Nauca, since her part of the loot was significantly larger than those of her two comrades and since she had plenty of gold and silver coins on top of that, she had ample money to buy an arm guard with knuckledusters, a large rhinoceros hide shield, plus four of Sing's largest aquamarines and two bags of curry spice. Once that was done, Hiram guided the Indian merchants down to the stables, where he exchanged all of his 38 horses on sale for two small but incredibly valuable purses full of rubies and emeralds and a dozen one-kilo bags of curry spice. Both groups of merchants, most satisfied with their evening of trading, then went to celebrate at the inn, with lots of wine flowing.

The next day was used by Hiram and his associates to buy fresh provisions for the next leg of their trip, with Bukhara as their destination. To Xiao's contentment, those fresh provisions included a good quantity of dry rice. Then, on the early morning of their third day in Urgench, the caravan left the caravanserai in a long procession of camels and a few horses, with Amachios on hand to wave goodbye to his friend Hiram.

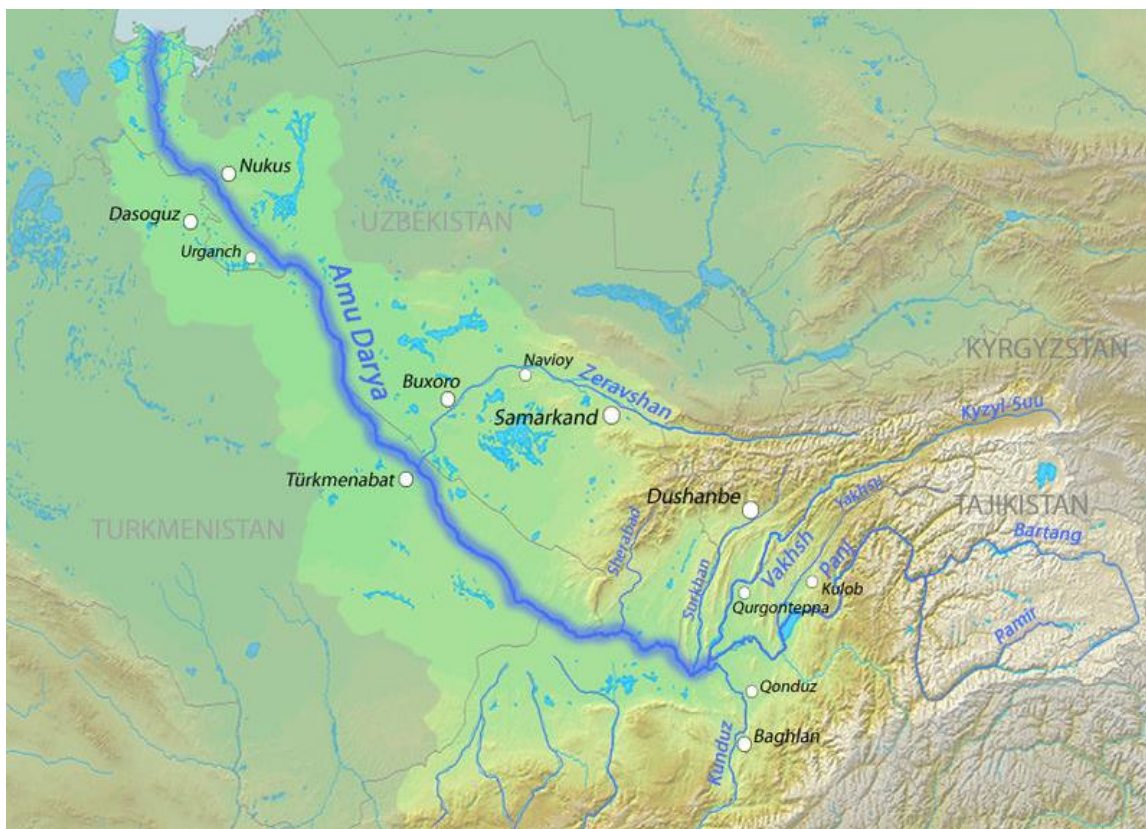
CHAPTER 8 – ON THE ROAD TO SAMARKAND

09:52 (Central Asia Time)

Friday, September 23, 63 B.C.E.

Dirt road along the south bank of the Oxus River

**Sixteen kilometers south of Urgench, 800 kilometers from Buxoro
(Bukhara)**



Physical map of modern Central Asia and of the Amu Darya (Oxus River) Basin.

Nauca felt at ease in this portion of her voyage as the caravan was following the shores of the Oxus River, which irrigated a wide expanse of green lands with farms, villages and pastures sprinkled around. While not as forested as her native region of Sarmatia, it was a most livable region where the horses and camels of the caravan could find plenty of water and grass and where the temperatures were not extreme. For a nomad like her, that was all that one could want. As for the dirt road the caravan was on, it seemed to be fairly frequented, with one other caravan having already crossed

their path, heading towards Urgench, and with a few isolated carts and pack mules also encountered. With no thick forests to cut the range of her vision, Nauca's job of point guard for the caravan was made quite easy, while the experienced Gorudos riding next to her showed her the significant locations and physical orientation points along the route, teaching her the way of the land.

"This whole region irrigated by the Oxus River forms what amounts to a huge oasis bordered on both sides by deserts, the Kara Kum Desert and the Kyzyl Kum Desert. The terrain will stay quite flat until we reach Samarkand, which is situated close to the mountains of the Pamir. Then the terrain will become truly rough. Beyond the Pamir, you have the huge Taklamakan Desert, then China."

"Have you ever been all the way to China, Gorudos?"

The Tokharian man nodded his head once.

"I once was part of a caravan that went all the way to the imperial capital of Chang'an. That caravan had a large number of horses to deliver and it needed extra men who were good riders and knew horses."

"And how was China and this Chang'an?"

"To be truthful, it was a mixed experience. There are certainly many things worth the look in China and Chang'an is a very impressive place, full of resplendent palaces and large temples but, as an obvious stranger and apparent nomad horseman and archer, I was looked at with a lot of suspicion and distrust and was made to feel unwelcome in many places. The Chinese are a proud people, while some people would call them arrogant and xenophobic. In truth, the majority of the Chinese believe that they are superior to foreigners and often call them, in their backs, barbarians. Don't forget that the Chinese have been fighting off invasions from the North by Xiongnu nomads for centuries."

Nauca took the time to digest that information before asking another question.

"And women? How do the Chinese treat women?"

"In that aspect, the Chinese are quite similar to the Greeks, Nauca. Women, unless of royal blood, are firmly kept under the authority of their men and must obey them in everything. Most jobs and positions are reserved for men only and you will not see any women warriors similar to you in China. In fact, you will attract a lot of attention, most of it not friendly, in China, as the Xiongnu nomads are known to have female warriors and you will thus be taken by many Chinese to be one of them. If you ever travel all the way to China, be ready to be harassed and constantly questioned and

watched by Chinese soldiers and officials. The same happened to me, but to a lesser degree, because I was a man and not a woman.”

Seeing some discouragement appear on Nauca’s face, Gorudos decided to give her some extra advice.

“Nauca, you are a brave and adventurous girl with a curious mind and I know that you truly wanted to see China: you spoke often enough about that during our night stops. I will thus tell you this: if you travel to China, stay with a caravan and don’t venture around by yourself, alone. That way, you will enjoy the protection from the caravan, while you will end up staying mostly at Chinese caravanserais, whose staff are accustomed to serve foreigners.”

Feeling better now, Nauca nodded her head as a thank you.

“I will take your advice at heart, Gorudos. Thank you for your counsels. I really wanted to visit this mysterious China one day.”

“It is indeed a mysterious place, Nauca.” replied philosophically the Tokharian man.

14:08 (Central Asia Time)

Thursday, November 10, 63 B.C.E.

Samarkand, Sogdiana



Ancient Samarkand.

“MY BELOVED SAMARKAND, MY FRIENDS!”

The obvious enthusiasm and joy in Hiram’s voice made Nauca smile as she eyed the city visible in the distance. It was definitely much larger than either Tanais or Urgench and was bigger than Buxoro²³, in which the caravan had briefly stopped two weeks ago. While it was still too distant to see details about it, Samarkand was defended by a high wall surrounded by a water-filled moat. The dirt road the caravan was presently on connected to one of the gates of the city and there was a fair amount of traffic through that gate, both pedestrian and mounted. Nauca’s mind then returned to a subject she had been mulling about for quite a few days already. Hiram had announced while in Buxoro that Samarkand would be the terminus for his caravan and that, once there, he would spend the coming Winter months in selling his remaining wares from Tanais, acquire more goods from the East and prepare to ride again to Tanais in a few months, when the temperature would become more clement. That thus left her with two possible future courses of action: either spend the next few months in Samarkand and return towards Tanais with Hiram’s caravan; or link up with another caravan in Samarkand and continue her eastward trip to China. Being still inexperienced with this part of the World, she decided to seek counsel from Hiram and pushed her horse Tamat to a trot to join up with the caravan master. Once level with his horse, she looked at him to ask a question.

“Hiram, do you know some caravan master with whom I could continue my trip to China and whom I could trust?”

Having expecting that line of questioning from her for a while already, Hiram nodded his head at once.

“I do know a merchant whom you could fully trust and whom often travels to China to exchange goods and bring back silk to Samarkand. If he is back from his last trip to China, then I will present you to him. However, if you decide to return to Tanais, you will be more than welcome to be part of my next caravan: you proved to be an excellent caravan guard, Nauca.”

“Thank you, Hiram! I would like to say in return that you are a most decent and fair man...for a merchant.”

Hiram briefly laughed at her pun and smiled to her.

²³ Buxoro: Ancient name of Bukhara.

"I see that you are learning about human nature, my good Nauca. If he is in Samarkand, I will warmly recommend you to Yurkan, a friend of mine who leads caravans between Samarkand and China. In the meantime, you are welcome to stay at my family house, along with Timur and Gorudos."

"You are too kind, Hiram. I happily accept your generous offer."

"Pah! I'm just taking care of good employees." said dismissively the Sogdian merchant. "If you knew how hard it is these days to find good, dependable employees..."

Satisfied, Nauca let it at that and returned to her previous position in the caravan as it approached the city at the slow pace of its camels.

Some three hours later, the caravan arrived at the city gate connected to their road. There, local guards collected the usual tax from Hiram, who then led his caravan through the large portal. A relatively wide avenue started on the other side of the gate, which Hiram followed for about sixty meters before turning left and entering the walled courtyard of what appeared to be a caravanserai. While not truly vast, that courtyard, with its animal stalls lining the inside of its wall, proved big enough to easily accommodate all the camels and horses of the caravan. As Hiram dismounted from his horse next to one of the stalls, a woman, a teenage girl and a preteen boy got out of the main building of the complex and ran to him.

"HIRAM, YOU ARE BACK! MAY THE GODS BE PRAISED!" shouted the woman before jumping into the arms of the merchant and hugging him. Hiram eagerly returned her kisses and also hugged the girl and boy as they joined with him.

"Seda, it is so nice to hold you again. Come closer, Dinkha and Jakand!"

Understanding that this was Hiram's wife and two children, Nauca left them alone and drove her two horses to one empty stall, where she dismounted and took her saddle, equipment and supplies off their back, to then fetch two buckets full of water for them. As her two horses drank, she carefully brushed them while a stable boy brought some extra hay into the stall. Once she was finished with that, she went to see Gorudos and Timur, whose horses occupied the adjacent stall.

"So, what's next, guys?"

"We grab our valuables and go store them inside Hiram's secure storeroom. Then, we will go have supper in Hiram's inn." answered Gorudos, making Nauca's eyes open wide from the surprise.

"You mean that this caravanserai belongs to Hiram?"

"It actually belongs to his family, which is a well-established merchant family in Samarkand. His family, getting tired of spending much of their hard-earned profits on lodging and care at other caravanserais in the city, finally decided to build their own family caravanserai, where their own beasts and wares could be safely kept at no cost, while the extra space left could be rented to passing merchants. All in all, that proved to be a wise commercial investment."

"Indeed!" replied Nauca at this extra proof of Hiram's wisdom. "Well, my horses have been taken care of, so I'm ready to follow you to that secure storeroom."

"Just give me another minute to help that laggard." said Gorudos, smiling while glancing at Timur, who was still brushing his own horse. Nauca giggled on seeing the young Mongol reply by pulling his tongue out.

Once Timur's horse was taken care of, the trio, led by Gorudos, crossed the courtyard and went to an annex built out of stone rather than out of clay bricks. The door of that annex looked quite solid and was guarded by an armed and armored man whom Gorudos greeted politely.

"Good day, Luen! Could you unlock the door, so that we could store our things inside?"

"No problem, Gorudos! How was your trip to and from Tanais this time?"

"Fairly quiet: bandits attacked us only once, but they bitterly regretted it, mostly thanks to young Nauca here."

The guard glanced at Nauca while unlocking the door of the annex with a large key.

"A Sarmatian girl? From what I heard of them, their reputation is a well-earned one."

"Damn right it is! She killed six bandits by herself and shoots a bow even better than me."

The guard nodded his head, visibly impressed, before pushing open the door of the annex.

"Here you go, Gorudos. You will find a number of still empty chests inside, each of them with a padlock still open and with its key in it. Choose a chest, put your things in and lock it, then keep the key until your next departure."

"I know the drill, Luen. Thanks anyway."

Entering the semi-dark room, which was lit by a few high-placed, very narrow slits, Gorudos went to the nearest empty wooden and iron chest and put inside it his travel purse, new armor and weapons, only keeping his dagger on him. He then closed the chest and locked the padlock, putting the key in his belt purse. Timur and Nauca imitated him, each taking a separate chest as Hiram's associates came in and also took secure chests, using what amounted in these days to bank safety boxes. As for Nauca, she hesitated about putting in the chest her personal strong box and the small purse in which she kept her highly valuable collection of precious gems and which she carried on her at all times to prevent its theft. Gorudos saw her hesitate and gave her a reassuring look.

"You can put your purse in that chest, Nauca: it will be as safe in it as if it would be on you."

"But someone could still carry away the whole chest after killing the guard outside."

Her objection brought a malicious smile on Gorudos' lips.

"Just try to lift that chest, Nauca."

Intrigued, Nauca nonetheless grabbed one of the two side handles of the large wooden reinforced chest and tried to lift it. She nearly popped an artery doing that, while the chest barely moved. After repeated and futile efforts, she looked at Gorudos with incomprehension.

"But I am considered to be strong for a girl, yet I can't lift that chest! How come? Is it anchored to the ground?"

"No! It has a false double bottom and that false bottom hides a bunch of lead ingots. It would take four strong men to barely lift this chest or the other chests here and they wouldn't be able to carry them very far, while no horse or camel would be able to support that kind of load."

"Wow! That's quite a clever trick!"

"Nobody ever said that Hiram was a stupid man." Replied philosophically Gorudos. Now convinced, Nauca took the purse hanging from her neck by a chain and put it alongside her arms, armor and bags of spices before closing and locking the chest.

Feeling much reassured, Nauca then followed her two travel companions out of the secure storeroom and walked to the inn that was part of the caravanserai complex. The aroma that greeted them once inside made Nauca take a deep breath.

“Something smells really good here! I’m so hungry!”

A female servant then came to them and bowed.

“If you came to eat, I can tell you that we have a side of roast beef on the menu, along with chicken. Please follow me.”

The servant then led them to an empty table next to a table at which Hiram’s associates were already sitting, drinking wine. Giving their orders to the servants, Nauca and her two companions had to wait only a few minutes before getting their foods and drinks. The first bite in her portion of beef made Nauca close her eyes with obvious delight.

“Hmm, they put salt and black pepper on that meat. I wish that all inns would do that.”

“Do you realize how expensive that would make eating in those inns, Nauca?” said Kassim, sitting at the adjacent table. “This is a welcome menu after returning from a long trip: normal daily menus here do not include spices, except for salt.”

“So, my bags of black and red pepper, along with the bags of curry I bought in Urgench, are really worth a lot?”

“Worth a lot? Thieves would be ready to cut your throat to grab those bags! They are about as valuable as precious gems and they constitute much sought-after trading items.”

“Oh! I will certainly remember that. Thank you, Kassim!”

“You’re welcome, Nauca!”

One hour later, as Nauca was arranging her things inside the small room she had been given on the upper floor of the inn, Hiram showed up, accompanied by another man of about the same age as him. Nauca nodded at once her head as a welcome.

“Thank you again for your hospitality, Hiram: you are most generous and kind.”

“Thank you, Nauca. May I present you my elder brother, Yurkan?”

That left Nauca speechless for an instant.

“Your brother? He is also a caravan master?”

“My whole family is in the caravan business, Nauca.” replied Hiram, grinning. “To get to the reason of our visit, it turned out that Yurkan has returned a month ago from his latest trip to China and is now nearly ready to head East again. He is ready to take you as a caravan guard for that voyage...on one condition.”

Nauca, who was about to jump up in joy, froze and stared at Hiram.

“Uh, what condition, Hiram?”

It was Yurkan who answered her, a friendly smile on his face.

“That you accept to be paid, like I pay my other caravan guards. You will also be lodged and fed at my expense during our trip. I may be a merchant and trader, but I don’t rob my own employees, just my customers.”

“Then, I accept your offer, Yurkan. When do you intend to leave and up to where do you plan to go, if I may ask?”

“I was basically waiting for Hiram’s caravan to return, so that I could buy his goods from the West and carry them for resale in China, so we will leave in a few days at the most. As for my final destination, I plan to go all the way to the imperial capital, Chang’an. Are you still interested in coming?”

“You bet I am, Yurkan!”

“Good! Consider that you have at least two days free to you before our departure, starting tomorrow morning. Take that chance to visit Samarkand and purchase a few things for yourself: you can find about anything from many places around the World in this city.”

Hiram then left the room with Yurkan. Waiting until they were out of earshot from her, he spoke in a low voice to his brother.

“So, what do you think of her?”

“She definitely gave me a good first impression, Hiram. If she is even half as good an archer and hunter as you told me, then she will make an excellent guard for my caravan.”

“Oh, I did not exaggerate one bit about her, Brother.” replied Hiram without a hesitation.

10:09 (Central Asia Time)

Friday, November 11, 63 B.C.E.

Samarkand’s central market place

Having decided after having breakfast to go visit the city’s central market with Timur, Nauca had arrived half an hour ago at the wide public place that lodged the open-air market. The variety of wares and of different people she had seen up to date in the market had truly boggled her mind and also tempted her into spending freely her silver and gold. She had however been able to resist that urge, reminding herself that she had a long and risky voyage ahead of her, a voyage during which she may need her money

for things more important than frivolous spur-of-the-moment purchases. Her frugal habits as a nomad had also helped her resist her impulses. There was however something that she deemed worthy of buying today...if she could find it here. Timur, who was walking beside her along the narrow alleys traced between the rows of temporary shops and displays, asked her a question as they turned onto another lane of shops.

“So, what are you precisely after, Nauca?”

“I am looking for a nice costume, preferably made out of silk, that I could wear while visiting some city, when I am not riding along the Silk Road. Not being dressed like a typical nomad may also lessen the popular attraction towards me while in China.”

“Hum, not a bad idea, actually. Nomad riders tend to attract a lot of suspicion, not to say hostility, when they travel through China.”

“Exactly! Oh, I see a shop selling silk clothes! Let’s go check it out!”

Making their way through the fairly dense crowd of shoppers and merchants, Nauca and Timur soon arrived at a rough wooden table set in front of a tent used as a temporary shop. There was a variety of costumes and dresses made of silk displayed on top of the table or hooked to an improvised clothes rack, while more silk wares were visible inside the tent. An old man with graying beard and an equally old woman stood behind the table and bowed at once to Nauca and Timur.

“What may we do for the honorable customers?” said the man in Sogdian. Having just spent five months traveling with Sogdian merchants, Nauca’s own Sogdian was now more than fair and she answered the old man.

“I am looking for a nice dress or costume made of silk that I could wear while not traveling along the Silk Road. If that dress or costume could allow horse-riding to a degree, then the better.”

The old man caressed his beard while thinking for a moment before speaking.

“Uh, horse-riding is not a very common requirement when customers ask for a silk dress. Traditional Chinese dresses have very long skirts, with their hemline often dragging on the ground. Riding a horse while wearing one could be problematic. I however may have something nice that you could find more practical for you: it is a fine embroidered silk costume which came from the Punjab, a region of India. That costume consists in a long tunic worn over a pair of baggy pants.”

“That sounds just right for me!” said at once Nauca, immediately interested. “Do you have more than one example of such Punjabi costumes?”

"I have five of them in stock, all made of a different silk and with a varying degree of embroidering. Let me get them for you."

Nauca waited patiently while the old man entered his tent and foraged for a moment in an open bundle. The old man, helped by his wife, then spread five costumes on top of his display table.

"Here you are, good woman: five of the finest costumes produced in India."

While the man's description was undoubtedly an exaggeration, Nauca had to recognize that the five costumes were both very colorful and quite attractive. Caressing their tissue, she nodded her head in appreciation: during her trip from Tanais, she had learned much more than just to speak correctly the Sogdian language. Xiao and Hiram had shown her various grades of silk cloth and taught her what to watch for in order to judge the quality of the silk fabric. That silk was of top quality, while the embroidering work was exquisite. She particularly liked the baggy pants which came with the costumes, as they would make it easy for her to ride Tamat while wearing such a costume. Apart from the baggy pants and knee-length tunics, which were split along both sides under their waist, the costumes also included long, colorful shawls embroidered with either gold or silver treads. Slowly examining in turn the five costumes, she finally pointed one ochre-colored costume with silver and gold embroidering.

"I like this one and it looks the right size for me. Can I try it?"



Sarmatian costume. Punjabi traditional costume. Chinese Han Dynasty era dress.

"Of course, good lady! Go inside my tent, where my wife will help you."

"Thank you!" said Nauca before following the old woman inside the tent. The woman then closed the front flap of the tent. Left alone with the old man, Timur started a friendly conversation with him.

"So, is business good these days?"

"Things are fair. The trade along the Silk Road was disrupted for a while by the war between the Romans and King Mithridates, but things are starting to get back to normal. A Chinese imperial envoy is presently visiting Samarkand to discuss with our local Satrap²⁴, so more people have recently visited my shop to buy Chinese silk dresses."

"A Chinese delegation is here, in Samarkand?" asked Timur, hiding his sudden worry: Chinese soldiers and officials tended to react badly at the sight of someone who looked in any way like a Xiongnu nomad, something he actually was...or rather had been.

"Yes! Such delegations are actually quite frequent, as the Chinese are anxious to keep the trade flowing along the Silk Road, so that they could sell their silk and jade."

"An understandable wish. When in town, do these Chinese tend to make trouble?"

The old man looked quickly left and right before answering Timur in a near whisper.

"They in fact tend to be quite arrogant while going around, but our Satrap doesn't want to antagonize them, so pretty much let them do as they wish."

"I see!" replied Timur, displeased by that. He however did not comment on that and continued waiting for Nauca. The latter emerged from the tent a few minutes later, wearing the Punjabi costume she had chosen and smiling to Timur.

"It fits me perfectly, Timur! What do you think?"

Timur had to restraint himself before answering, as Nauca was truly striking in that Punjabi costume.

"You look great, Nauca!"

"Then, I will take it." said Nauca, breaking the golden rule of trading, which said that you shouldn't declare your like of a ware before having properly haggled a price for it. The old man, no beginner in that domain, grinned and rubbed his hands together.

²⁴ Satrap: Title for a regional ruler inside the Persian and Parthian Empires.

“For you, young lady, I will make a special price for this costume: it looks so good on you. I will let it go for the modest sum of 300 drachmas.”

Timur face-palmed himself then, as Nauca did only a bit of cursory haggling before accepting to pay 280 drachmas for the costume. Nauca then paid the happy merchant before returning into the tent to take off her new costume and put back on her Sarmatian outfit. Timur was both polite and diplomatic enough not to chide her about her poor haggling skills when she reemerged from the tent, her new costume rolled inside a piece of cloth. He also didn't want to play the killjoy then, as Nauca appeared genuinely happy about her latest acquisition.

“This costume is really nice. I would have liked to buy more things today, but I nearly emptied my purse to get this.”

‘No wonder!’ thought Timur before speaking out loud to her. “Well, I am going to look around to see if there would be some kind of interesting thing for me to buy.”

“Then, lead on, Timur!”

The duo then went on their visit of the market, with Timur seemingly interested mostly in knives and camp tools and instruments. As they were turning into yet another alley lined with shops, Timur abruptly stopped, forcing Nauca to suddenly brake.

“Hey! Why did you stop like this, Timur?”

“Back up, Nauca! Quickly!”

Intrigued and becoming on alert, Nauca obeyed and backpedaled to let Timur return into their previous lane. She then saw the cause of his alarm: a troupe of heavily armed and armored guards was approaching, escorting an ornate sedan-chair carried by eight servants and in which sat a man wearing an embroidered silk dress. Timur then spoke to her, explaining what was happening.

“Chinese soldiers! I was told by the old merchant that there was a Chinese delegation in town. This must be the Chinese imperial ambassador and his escort.”

That made Nauca look critically at the approaching procession. She then noticed something that intrigued her.

“Hey, some of these soldiers are carrying some kind of small, weird-looking bows.”

“Those are Chinese crossbows: Chinese soldiers use them in large numbers to repel attacks by mounted archers like the Xiongnu.”

“How good are those ‘crossbows’?”

“Well, they have less range and are less accurate than your bow, but they are very easy to use and soldiers can shoot them accurately at fair ranges with little training. If you ever have to face a Chinese army, be careful about those crossbows.”

As Timur was speaking to her, Nauca noticed that the officer in charge of the Chinese escort was eyeing Timur with suspicion. She also saw that Timur had not been the only one to react with apprehension to those Chinese. That told her that those Chinese were probably accustomed to have their way here in Samarkand, with the local Satrap exercising little or no control on them. That did not surprise her, in view of the importance for Samarkand of keeping an open commercial link with China. She thus pushed Timur back and stepped in front of him.

“Stay behind me and don’t stare at those Chinese, Timur.”

While it hurt his personal pride to hide like this behind her, Timur understood that Nauca was right and was only trying to avoid an unnecessary confrontation. He thus did not object and made a point of examining the wares on display at the nearest shop. Once the Chinese were out of sight, Nauca nudged Timur to make him move.

“Let’s forget those Chinese and continue your shopping, Timur.”

The young Mongol was too happy to do just that, but went in the opposite direction to that of the Chinese procession.

Some two hours later, the duo took the time to eat on the fly some grilled meat bought from a food stall, then made its way back to Hiram’s caravanserai. There, they found Yurkan busy inspecting big bundles of various wares piled inside a couple of the courtyard’s stalls.

“Aah, you’re back from the market, Nauca. Did you find anything that was to your taste?”

Nauca smiled and showed him the bundle she had been carrying under one arm.

“I sure did, Yurkan! I found myself a really nice new outfit: it came from India and I got it at a fair price.”

Yurkan did not miss the way Timur rolled his eyes then and understood that she had been fleeced, but did not comment on that.

“Well, I am happy to tell you that I was able to acquire 26 good horses, which I will bring with me to China for resale. Would you be ready to help care for them during our trip? I would give you some extra pay for that, on top of your wages as a guard.”

"I like horses: they are like friends to me. Yes, I will be happy to care for them. Uh, will there be enough grass for them to graze on the way to China? Hiram told me that there is a huge desert between here and China."

"There is one: the Taklamakan Desert. It will in fact be the biggest obstacle we will have to face during our trip. However, I intend to skirt its southern limits, where temperatures are less extreme. Still, that will mean that I will have to bring with us bags of feed grain and reserves of water for those 26 horses. Two of my associates have already gone to buy grain and procure extra water pouches. How many water gourds do you have for your personal use?"

"Uh, two. Why?"

"Then, you better go get a few more, including some for your two horses: once in that desert, the only water we will find will be the one we are carrying with us."

Nauca looked at Timur on hearing Yurkan's counsel.

"Well, I guess that I will go back to the central market. You know where to find waterproof pouches, Timur?"

"I do! Follow me!"

The duo then turned around and walked out of the caravanserai for the second time that day.

06:15 (Central Asia Time)

Sunday, November 13, 63 B.C.E.

Hiram's caravanserai, Samarkand

As Yurkan rechecked on some details concerning his caravan, which was about ready to depart Samarkand and head towards China, Nauca went to see Hiram, who was standing with his wife Seda and Yurkan's wife Tansa in the courtyard and was watching the preparations for departure. Nauca had a sober expression on her face as she stopped in front of Hiram, her personal strong box in her hands.

"Hiram, I have a favor to ask of you. This is my valuables box: it contains my most precious and valuable possessions and its content is worth a fortune. While I certainly intend to complete intact my journey to China, we still could encounter major obstacles on the way, or even inside China. The chances for me not to return from this trip are thus not negligible but I don't want some thieves or corrupt Chinese officials to be able to get their hands on this box. I would thus like to leave it in your care and that

of your family during my absence. If I am not back within three years, then consider this box as yours. It is presently locked and I will keep the key with me but I am sure that opening it in three years won't be a problem for you. Also, I am confident that your wife will safeguard it here when you will be gone on some future trip to the West. Will you safeguard it for me?"

Touched by this mark of high confidence in him from Nauca, Hiram gently took the ornated wooden box, which was of a fair size and weighed about three kilos, then bowed his head to the Sarmatian girl.

"I am honored by the confidence you put in me and you can count on me and my wife, Nauca. We will pray for your safe return from China."

"Thank you, my friend. I will now be able to depart with less worries. Be careful during your own future trips, Hiram."

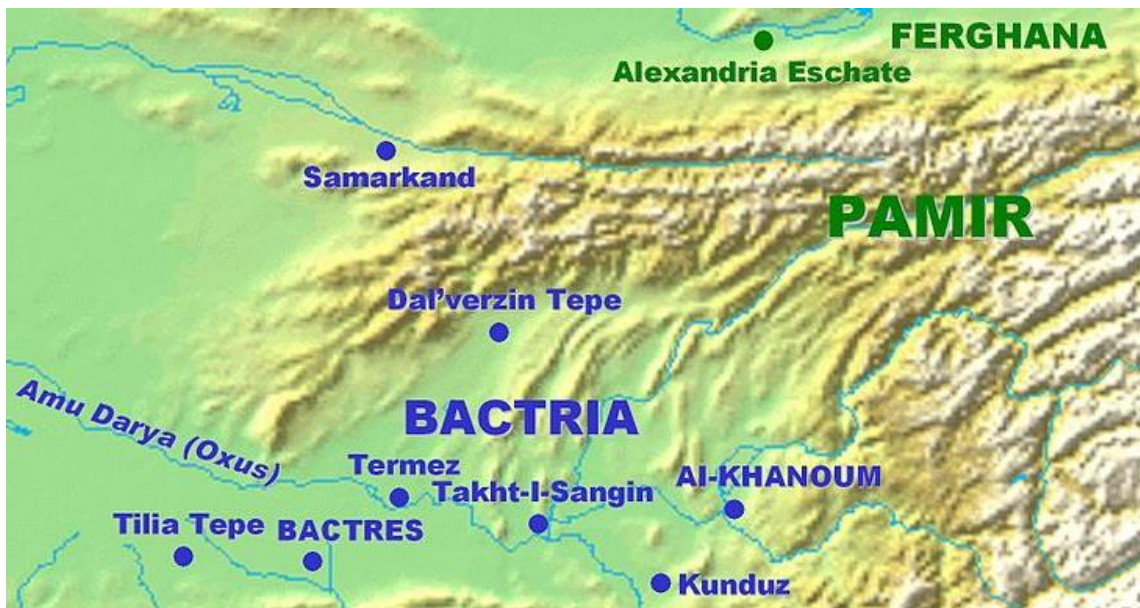
Bowing to him and Seda, Nauca then went to Timur and Gorudos, who were also watching the preparations of Yurkan's caravan. She hugged each of them in turn, patting their backs.

"Goodbye, my friends! With luck, we will see each other again in a couple of years."

"Please be careful, Nauca." replied Timur, near tears. He then let her go with difficulty and watched her return to her two horses. Her pack horse and spare mount, Minad, had a long rope tied to its saddle and to which the 26 horses belonging to Yurkan were tied by their respective bridles. That way, she would be able to lead and control all those horses while still able to quickly detach her own primary mount, Tamat, in case of an emergency.

Half an hour later, Yurkan, mounted on his horse, gave the signal to leave the caravanserai and trotted out, followed by Nauca and 25 other riders, plus 26 unmounted horses and 43 camels loaded with large bundles. Timur felt his heart heavy as Nauca disappeared from his sight. Then, even more than before, he regretted not having had the courage to ask for her hand.

CHAPTER 9 – THE PAMIR



Old settlement and Kalai Sar Fort watch tower on hill, Ferghana Valley, near Bunjikat.

06:36 (Central Asia Time)

Tuesday, December 6, 63 B.C.E.

Twenty kilometers west of Bunjikat, Ferghana Valley

Sogdiana, at the foot of the Pamir mountains

It was snowing and a cold wind was sweeping the small valley where the caravan had established its camp for the night, when Nauca woke up in her small tent. Quickly dressing up and putting on last her fur coat made of wolf hides, she buckled her

weapons belt, to which was hooked her gorytos containing her bow and arrows, around her waist and grabbed her shield before going out of her tent, as her turn at guard duty would soon come. It was fairly cold outside but it was still a more clement place than in the rest of the Pamir area, as the Ferghana Valley constituted a fertile, more hospitable region in this mountainous area. Up to now, the caravan had not needed to use its reserves of feed grain or water and a small stream ran in fact next to the camp site. Going to the herd of horses tied to pickets nearby, Nauca then started to lead them by groups of four to the nearby stream, breaking the thin crust of ice on it with her battle-axe to allow the horses to drink from the pure water of the mountain stream. In maybe one day, the caravan would be in Bunjikat, one of the settlements located along the Ferghana Valley, which led to the western end of the Taklamakan Desert. There, the caravan would be able to rest for a day or two, get fresh supplies and maybe buy or exchange a few goods.

Nauca had just returned a group of horses to their pickets after leading them to the stream and was about to take a new group of horses out to drink when her acute eyesight suddenly detected some movement behind a large rock about sixty meters away, across the stream. Freezing momentarily and concentrating her vision in that direction, she soon was able to see that a number of dark shapes were slowly approaching in the semi-darkness of the early morning, using rocks and trees as cover. Understanding at once what this meant, she grabbed her large rhinoceros hide shield while starting to shout out loud.

"ALARM! ALARM! BANDITS APPROACHING FROM ACROSS THE STREAM!"

The said bandits, now knowing that they had been seen, then jumped on their feet and emerged from behind the rocks and trees they had used to stealthily approach the camp, pushing savage cries and running towards the camp. Seeing a large rock some five meters from her, near the stream, Nauca ran to it, then kneeled behind it, using her left foot and knee to hold her shield in a vertical position between the rock and herself. Next, she grabbed her bow and quickly fitted an arrow in place as the nearest bandits were about to splash across the stream. The first bandit to get his feet wet was also the first to die, Nauca's first arrow hitting him squarely in the chest. Another bandit crumbled to the ground some five seconds later. Nauca took the time to scream some more warnings while putting in place her third arrow.

“ALARM! WE ARE UNDER ATTACK!”

Her screams however attracted a few arrows to her. Thankfully, they either missed her or bounced against her shield and were deflected. She had time to shoot two more bandits before she had to face two bandits charging her, their swords held high. Letting go her bow and grabbing both her shield and sword, she hurriedly got on her feet, just in time to stop a sword strike with her shield. Replying with her own sword, she jabbed one bandit in his guts, making him scream with pain, then side-stepped just in time to avoid a slashing attack by the second bandit. Using her large shield like a ram, she hit the bandit hard in the face, making him lose his balance and quickly backpedal before tripping on a rock and falling on his back. Not letting the bandit time to recover his wits, Nauca stabbed him in the stomach, then viciously twisted her blade inside his guts, making the man scream horribly. Ignoring that bandit from then on, she quickly returned to her bow, lying on the ground behind the large rock, and retrieved it. A quick look around her showed her that the remaining bandits were now among the tents of the camp, with the night guard, Borund, furiously defending himself against two of the bandits. Letting her shield drop and grabbing a fresh arrow from her gorytos, Nauca started shooting arrows as quickly and as accurately as she could. With adrenaline stimulating her and with the range to her targets being under thirty meters, she shot in succession six of the attackers in less than twenty seconds, starting with the men fighting with Borund. The bandits, who seemingly wore no armor at all and who were mostly turning their backs to her in their haste to grab the first pieces of loot available, proved to be sitting ducks for her arrows. Only when their number was halved did the bandits realize how dangerous she was. Some of the surviving bandits then charged her, but even more simply fled in panic, not having expected such resistance from a caravan camp site. Continuing to fire arrows as fast as she could, Nauca shot down three more bandits, the last one a mere three paces from her, before the surviving ones gave up and fled, running across the stream. However, Nauca was in no mood to show mercy to them: she knew too well that those bandits would have shown no mercy to the caravan men if their attack had been successful. She thus continued to shoot arrows until she had no more targets in her sight. With one arrow still in place and breathing fast from the surge of adrenaline and from excitement, she slowly scanned the terrain across the stream, looking for any surviving bandits who would be hiding in the nearby woods. The one movement she detected then was from a wounded bandit trying to crawl back to cover. One arrow then dropped that bandit for good. Lowering her bow,

Nauca looked around the camp to see if any caravan man had been hurt. What she saw was merchants belatedly coming out of their tents, having obviously taken the time to put some clothes on. As for Borund, he was slowly approaching her while prodding the bodies of the bandits he encountered with the point of his lance.

“Are you okay, Borund?”

“I am, thanks to you, Nauca. That was some fantastic shooting on your part. I will never bother a Sarmatian woman after this.”

That remark made Nauca smile and helped her to relax some of the tension still in her.

“Glad to be of help, Borund. I don’t believe that the remaining bandits who fled will come back for more, but we still should keep our guard up, at least until the caravan can resume its trip.”

“I agree! I will watch the eastern side of our camp while you stay here and cover the stream.”

“Got it!”

Some three minutes later, Yurkan came to Nauca, eyeing her with new respect.

“Nauca, I don’t know how to thank you for your valor and courage. You nearly single-handedly saved all of us from those bandits. I just counted the dead or dying bandits in and around the camp, which numbered 22, all of them except one with arrows stuck in them. You were simply fantastic!”

“I was simply doing my job, Yurkan, on top of defending myself.”

“Still, I owe you. We all owe you. Once everybody will be up and ready to leave, go around those dead bandits you shot and take whatever they have that has value: it’s all yours!”

“Thank you, Yurkan.” Replied Nauca, feeling pride swell in her as Yurkan walked away. More than the loot she was going to collect, she prized the fact that her actions had saved her companions. Having stories chanting her prowess around future campfires counted more for her than riches. However, she did not expect to retrieve much of value from what appeared to her to having been a band of low-grade thieves. She was in fact going to count herself lucky if she ended up collecting more than a few copper and silver coins.

Some twenty minutes later, with the Sun fully up now, she was able to go around the camp to inspect the bodies of the bandits she had killed, using the occasion at the

same time to recuperate her arrows, at least the ones which were still usable. That inspection actually proved surprisingly more fruitful than expected, as the bandits had been carrying on them the loot from previous attacks on travelers. However, on top of the copper, silver and gold pieces she collected from the dead bandits, she also found a number of objects that, while obviously valuable, also appeared to her to be of a religious nature or function, including what appeared to be an incense burner made of bronze. She thus went to Yurkan to show him those objects. The caravan master's face became somber when he recognized what the said objects were.

"Buddhist cult objects. Those bastards must have attacked and killed a group of traveling Buddhist monks."

"Buddhist? I don't know that religion, Yurkan."

"Buddhism is found mostly in Tibet and India but has started to spread around China. It preaches peace but has no gods. Instead, it pushes its believers into improving their inner self and becoming non-violent and peaceful under the guidance of its founder's philosophy."

Nauca looked down at the objects she was holding, her own face becoming somber.

"Then, I can't possibly keep or sell those objects: it would be wrong. Do you know if we could find a Buddhist temple along our way, where I could give those objects to priests?"

Yurkan nodded his head slowly at that while looking at her. He then put gently one hand over her left shoulder.

"Nauca, know that I am a practicing believer of Zoroastrianism, a religion that teaches the duality between Good and Evil and advocates for the ultimate triumph of Good. You are not only brave and valorous, Nauca: you are also a good person. I believe that there is a Buddhist temple in Bunjikat. You will be able to personally give those objects to the main priest there."

16:29 (Central Asia Time)

Seven kilometers west of Bunjikat

Seeing that the Sun was getting low and that his caravan should soon stop for the night, Yurkan was looking for a favorable spot for a camp when a shout from Nauca, who was riding point with Borund, made him tense up.

"YURKAN, I SEE NUMEROUS BODIES LYING BY THE SIDE OF THE TRAIL!"

Pushing his horse to a gallop, Yurkan covered a hundred meters, following a bend in the road in the process before joining up with Nauca and Borund. He didn't need to ask where the bodies were, as they were in plain sight, lying on both sides of the trail, which was bordered by trees. One look was enough for Yurkan to identify the dead men: all of them had their heads shaved and all wore orange-red robes.

"Buddhist monks! They must be the ones robbed by the bandits we killed this morning. Buddhist monks travel unarmed, if you discount walking sticks: they didn't stand a chance. Yet, those bandits massacred them instead of simply robbing them and then letting them go."

"We can't leave them to the wolves and other beasts, Yurkan." said Nauca. "We should bury them."

Yurkan shook his head at that.

"No! We will burn their bodies instead. Fire is a purifying force in Zoroastrianism and I know that Buddhists also burn their dead in India. We needed anyway to stop and make camp for the night. We will mount our camp here, then will build a funeral pyre for those poor monks."

Gallopig back to his caravan, Yurkan gave a few orders, then returned to the site of the massacre, where he helped his two point guards to pick up the bodies and respectfully lay them in a spot away from the trail, near a clump of trees. He then ordered Nauca and Borund to start cutting small trees and branches to build a funeral pyre and went to organize the mounting of their camp.

Nobody was allowed to eat or rest before the funeral pyre was ready and the bodies of the monks were gently deposed on top of it. Using some of his reserves of lamp oil to help light the pyre on fire, Yurkan then recited out loud a Zoroastrian prayer as the bodies of the monks were cremated and as the merchants, drivers and guards of the caravan stood silently while watching. Only after that did they start preparing their supper.

09:11 (Central Asia Time)

Wednesday, December 7, 63 B.C.E.

Sogdian town of Bunjikat, Ferghana Valley

Nauca became increasingly angry as she passed by in succession local guards at the city's main gate, at the central market place and in front of the local king's palace. Slowing down her horse in order to ride next to Yurkan, she spoke to him in a low voice tainted with anger.

"How come that a group of monks was butchered only two hours from here, when I see so many guards around this town? Does that so-called king really care about his people and about the travelers passing by his city? He could at least send patrols down the road from time to time."

"All valid points, Nauca. Unfortunately, that king can basically do what he wants here, including doing nothing. As for trying to shame him, I doubt that it would influence him a bit, apart from attracting his ire on us. As much as I hate to say this, we will have to keep our peace with him and mind our own business. This is a lesson that applies everywhere, Nauca. Short of leading your own army, there is little else that you could do in such circumstances."

Nauca, understanding that Yurkan had just given her an important piece of advice, swallowed her anger and nodded her head.

"I understand what you meant, Yurkan. I will refrain myself while in town."

"Good! Know that Chinese officials also tend to be sensitive about their powers and privileges, especially when it is a woman who is admonishing them. Diplomacy will be the key word for us once inside China."

Nauca nodded her head again, then stayed silent while riding next to Yurkan. The latter led his caravan to the local caravanserai, where he thankfully found enough space and accommodations for his people and for his horses and camels. Taking the time first to see that his people got installed and paying in advance the caravanserai manager for one night of occupancy, Yurkan then led Nauca out of the caravanserai and walked with her for maybe 150 meters through the narrow streets of Bunjikat, finally arriving at a small religious temple. There, he spoke briefly with a monk sitting next to the main entrance, prompting the monk in getting up and going inside. The monk returned some three minutes later and spoke to them in Sogdian.

"You may come, but you must leave your weapons and your shoes outside. Don't worry about them: nobody will steal them."

Nauca was nearly tempted to reply by saying that she didn't believe that after seeing monks being butchered, but managed to keep her mouth shut and removed her

weapons and boots before following the monk and Yurkan inside. The interior main hall of the temple proved quite small and strongly smelled of burned incense, while four monks in orange-red robes and a priest wearing a more elaborate robe sat around, praying. Imitating Yurkan, Nauca knelt, then bowed deep in front of the priest. She stayed on her knees as Yurkan spoke to the priest, explaining the goal of their visit. The news of the death of the group of monks on the trail evidently struck the priest hard, as he started shedding tears while trying to contain his crying.

“That is a dreadful news indeed, Yurkan of Samarkand. That group of monks, led by a lama, had come from the Tibet and was on its way westward to make our religion better known in Sogdiana. You said that you burned their bodies on a funeral pyre after finding them on the trail?”

“Yes, Enlightened One! It was the best that we could do for them. We were however able to recuperate some religious objects which had belonged to them when those same bandits attacked our camp the previous night and got killed by our guards. This woman with me is one of my caravan guards and killed most of those bandits with her arrows. She found the religious objects on the dead bandits and brought them to me, saying that it would not be right for her to keep or sell them.”

The priest looked down at Nauca for a moment, then bowed his head to her.

“Your heart was in the right place, my child. Do you have those objects with you?”

“Yes, Enlightened One!”

Nauca then took a small bundle from her haversack and unfolded the rolled piece of cloth on the temple’s floor in front of her, revealing a dozen objects inside the cloth. The priest then called to one of his monks, who got up and went to gather the cloth and its content, bringing it to the priest and lying it in front of him. The priest emotionally felt each object with his fingers before looking back at Yurkan and Nauca.

“You did very well indeed, good people. We will make special prayers for the safety of your caravan during your long trip.”

Understanding that it was now time for them to leave, Yurkan bowed again to the priest.

“And we will pray for your dead brothers, Enlightened One.”

Crawling back on his knees until he and Nauca were close to the door, Yurkan then signaled to her that she could now get up and left the temple with her. Recuperating their boots and weapons first, they then walked back towards the caravanserai, staying

silent at first. Nauca finally spoke in a low voice, still affected by her visit to the Buddhist temple.

“Do you think that this incident about the massacre of those monks will have any repercussions, Yurkan?”

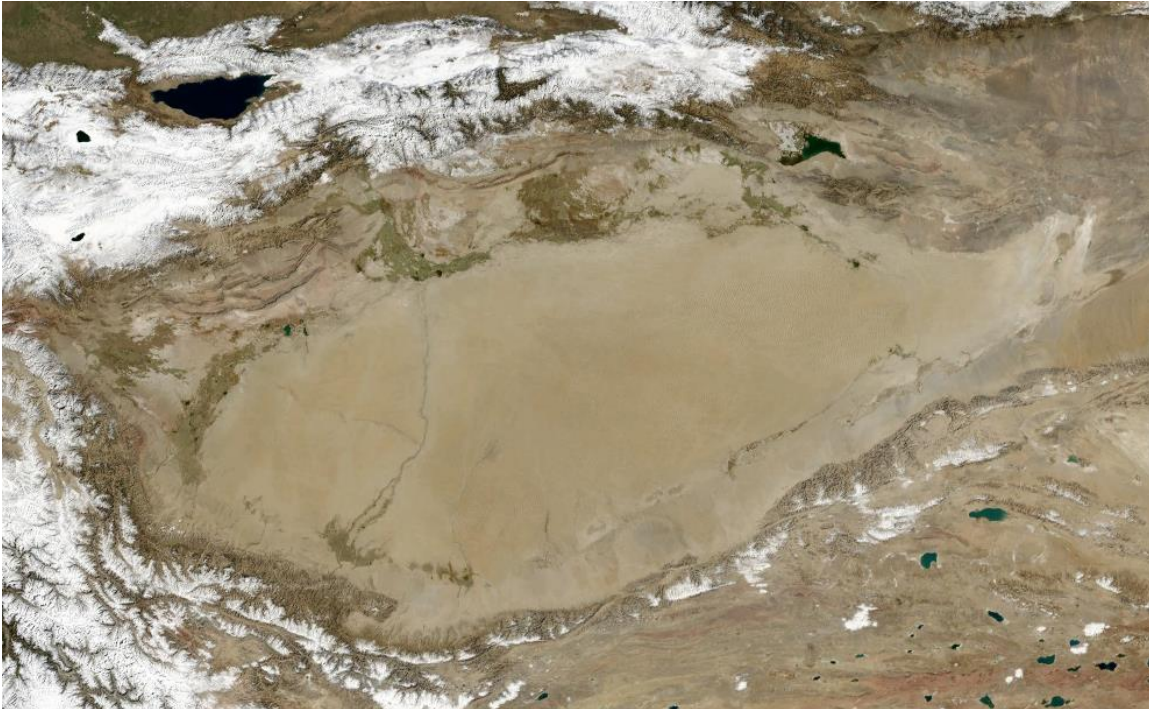
“I don’t know, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the priest we just saw soon paid a visit to the local king, to ask him for better protection for the travelers going through his city.”

“And do you think that this so-called ‘king’ will listen or care?”

“You never know, Nauca. Religion sometimes has a way to intimidate the most powerful rulers.”

That day, Yurkan took the time to buy fresh provisions to top up his supplies and also did some trading at the town’s market. Early the next morning, the caravan left Bunjikat and resumed its eastward trip, on its way to the dreaded Taklamakan Desert, 337,000 square kilometers of arid rocks and sand where travelers alternatively baked and froze under the rain shadows of the Himalayas.

CHAPTER 10 – THE TAKLAMAKAN DESERT



View of the Taklamakan Desert from Space, covering 337,000 square kilometers.

15:30 (Central Asia Time)

Tuesday, January 3, 62 B.C.E.

Somewhere between Tashgar and Khotan

Southwestern section of the Taklamakan Desert

Yurkan did not like what he saw as he examined the horizon from atop his horse: he had seen that kind of gray sky before and it didn't bring good news. The sub-zero temperature was also getting even colder as a strong wind kept getting stronger. He finally decided not to take any chances and started shouting orders to his caravan men...and girl.

"A SAND STORM IS APPROACHING! FORM AT ONCE A TIGHT CIRCLE WITH OUR CAMELS, WITH THE HORSES IN THE MIDDLE. MAKE IT QUICK!"

While Nauca, not having lived yet this kind of experience, obeyed by imitating the others around her, the men of the caravan, seasoned travelers who had crossed the Taklamakan Desert before, hurried to assemble the camels and horses strung into a long file and form a circle, with the more fragile horses led inside the circle formed by the kneeling camels. Once the circle was formed, the big bundles carried by the camels were taken off their backs and piled to form a protective wall on the side from which the wind was blowing. They were still building that wind barrier when Nauca saw a wall of dust and sand that was about to reach the caravan. She froze for a moment, prompting Borund in grabbing the left sleeve of her coat and shouting at her over the strong wind.

"QUICK, GET BEHIND THE WALL AND PROTECT YOUR FACE!"

Shaking off her lethargy, Nauca stepped behind the wall of bundles, which also protected their valuable horses, and sat down on the sand, joining the caravan men. Seconds later, visibility abruptly fell to zero, with a whirlwind of dust and sand enveloping the whole caravan. Nauca couldn't even see her hand when extended in front of her, while the fierce, howling wind made the freezing temperature drop even more. She tried to speak to Borund, sitting close to her, but couldn't be heard by him over the wind. That attempt at communicating in fact only resulted in her having to spit out dust and sand. She thus gave up on that and waited, praying that her horses would survive this ordeal.

What felt like an eternity passed before the sandstorm exhausted itself, by which time night had fallen. Half buried in sand, Nauca dug herself out and got on her feet, then looked around at their camels and horses, to see if they were all alive and well. The camels appeared well, having endured the storm stoically. However, one of their horses was down on its side, not a good sign for a horse. Hurrying to it, she checked the animal quickly, only to feel sadness after a few seconds: the poor beast was dead. Seeing Yurkan approach, she looked up at him while still kneeling next to the dead horse's head.

"It is dead, Yurkan. On the other hand, we could now use its meat to supplement our food supplies. I can do the butchering job."

"A good idea! Get some help to drag its body away from our circle before starting to quarter it. In the meantime, I will get a fire going."

Nauca didn't need to ask with what Yurkan would feed his fire, as Sarmatian nomads used the same combustible in Winter: dried animal excrements. Both camels and horses produced lots of them while moving, while the cold air of this desert quickly froze them solid. Enlisting the help of a dozen men, she had the dead horse carried to a spot some twenty meters away, where a small sand dune would hide her butchering job from the horses of the caravan: there was no point in making them more nervous by quartering one of their own in plain sight.

Some two hours later, pieces of horse meat were roasting over a small campfire, with hungry caravan men looking on. Letting Borund check on the meat, Nauca went to see Yurkan to speak to him.

"Do you know where we are and when we could arrive in Khotan, Yurkan?"

"Where we are exactly right now, I don't know. However, we are still heading the right way, judging from the stars and from the position of the Himalaya mountains to our right. With luck, we should arrive in the Khotan oasis in a few days. Even if we miss Khotan, we will be able to find it by following the dry bed of the Karakash River, which flows by Khotan."

"You reassure me, Yurkan: I was wondering how you could find your way in this immense desert."

"Well, we are following the southern fringe of the Taklamakan, instead of cutting straight across it, for a good reason, Nauca. If a caravan master would be foolish enough to want to cut his way straight across, then his caravan would never survive to get to the other end, as there is no water to be found in the middle of the Taklamakan Desert. On the other hand, by following the southern fringe of the desert, we can use the string of oasis cities built at the feet of the Himalayas, where mountain rivers flow and where there are a number of important mountain passes which allow caravans from India to link up with the Silk Road. We may very well meet one or more of these Indian caravans once in Khotan."

“Really?” said Nauca, grinning. “I met Indian merchants while passing in Urgench with Hiram’s caravan. I got my rhinoceros hide shield from them. A good thing I did by buying it: it saved me from a few bandits’ arrows near Bunjikat.”

Yurkan smiled at her enthusiasm on that subject.

“I must say that India seems to be a fascinating country, from what I heard of it. One day, I just may visit it while pushing a caravan south.”

“I too would like to visit it one day. After all, I left Tanais to see the World.”

“And what do you think of your traveling to date, Nauca?”

“Well, it is tough going at times, but it sure beats spending Winter in the Taiga milking mares day after day. I also get to see sights I would have never seen otherwise, while I also get to know good people...like you.”

“Nauca, you do have a way with words. Maybe you should one day write an account of your trips. You do know how to write in Greek, right?”

“Yes, I do, but I didn’t think about buying some ink and parchment before leaving Tanais.”

“Then, buy some once in Khotan: with all the Chinese merchants passing by there, I am sure that you will find writing supplies there. I am also certain that you will be able to write a fascinating story about your travels. Maybe it will end up one day in a famous library somewhere. Then, you will be able to say that your name will endure.”

On that, Yurkan walked away, leaving Nauca to dream about such a prospect.

13:56 (Central Asia Time)

Monday, January 9, 62 B.C.E.

Khotan Oasis, Taklamakan Desert

Everyone in the caravan, including Nauca, pushed a sigh of relief on seeing the Khotan Oasis appear ahead in the distance: they had to endure three days earlier a second sand storm, in which they had lost a further two horses. Thankfully, both Tamat and Minad had survived that new ordeal, to Nauca’s immense relief. She smiled to Yurkan, who was riding alongside her horse.

“I have been dreaming about getting a hot bath for the last few weeks. I hope that they have a bathhouse in Khotan.”

“They do have more than one bathhouse, Nauca. Don’t worry about that.”

The tone used by Yurkan surprised Nauca, who eyed questioningly the caravan master.

"You don't appear overly thrilled to arrive in Khotan, Yurkan. Why?"

"Oh, I am happy to arrive there, so that we and our beasts could rest, have fresh water and food and so that we could do some trading with other caravans passing by the oasis. However, the gate toll we have to pay per beast to enter Khotan has been climbing steeply in the last three years, going from two to five silver pieces per animal. That has seriously hurt my profit margin but, unfortunately, I have no choice but to pay those tolls, as Khotan is a vital point to get water and food while crossing the Taklamakan Desert."

"Five silver pieces per animal? That's outright theft! What are the other caravan masters saying about that?"

"They are also fuming about this but they can't do anything: it is the Chinese soldiers of the Imperial garrison in Khotan who are forcing us to pay that toll. Those who refuse to pay are turned away or, if they protest too loudly, have their goods seized. Those Chinese soldiers also don't hesitate to become violent if they wish so."

"There is a Chinese garrison in Khotan? What about the local king?"

"That king is a mere puppet, Nauca. While not officially so, Khotan is in effect a protectorate of the Han Empire, has been so for decades."

"And how big is that Chinese garrison, Yurkan?"

"It numbers about 2,000 soldiers, led by a Chinese general named Huo Qing. That Qing is a true bastard and a thoroughly corrupt one at that. Once in Chang'an, I will make an official complaint about him with the imperial administration."

"But will they listen to you, Yurkan?"

"I believe so. Emperor Xuan is said to be an honest, hard working man who cares for his people and who has been fighting government corruption since he acceded to the throne. Anyway, registering an official complaint won't hurt us and could get that Qing bastard relieved."

Nauca could only nod at those words: fighting with the local powers could only bring bad things to caravan merchants and she and the two other caravan guards employed by Yurkan could do very little when faced with 2,000 Chinese soldiers. As infuriating as it was, they thus would have no other choice but to pay those gate tolls.

Two hours later, the caravan arrived at Khotan, which was contained within a fortification wall that was about three kilometers-long in circumference. However, before entering the city, Yurkan led his caravan to the nearby river irrigating the oasis

surrounding Khotan and had his horses and camels drink to their content, while his men refilled their water pouches. He also let his beasts graze the grass and vegetation for a couple of hours, wanting to cut the costs of his stay in Khotan as much as possible before entering the city. The Sun was low on the horizon when the caravan finally showed itself up at one of the gates, which was guarded by a mix of local guards and of Chinese soldiers. Judging by their meek attitude, it was quickly evident to Nauca that the local king's guards wholly deferred to the Chinese soldiers, with the latter proving quite arrogant in their dealings with newcomers. Those Chinese soldiers were actually the ones who collected Yurkan's payment to enter the city. Keeping her thoughts about this to herself, Nauca followed Yurkan at a trot through the gate, entering a city whose buildings were built mostly out of clay bricks. The local caravanserai proved to be situated near the city gate they had just passed through, but it also reserved a nasty surprise to the caravan when it entered its compound: the place was about as full as an egg! Thoroughly pissed by now, Yurkan nearly shouted in the face of the caravanserai master who came to him after he dismounted.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, YOU HAVE NO ROOMS LEFT? I JUST PAID 465 SILVER PIECES FOR THE RIGHT TO ENTER THIS CITY AND YOU TELL ME THAT YOU CAN'T ACCOMMODATE MY CARAVAN?"

The caravanserai master shrugged his shoulders in response, looking very apologetic.

"I am sorry, but two caravans from India arrived in quick succession yesterday, while a caravan from China arrived this morning. This is actually the first time that I see four caravans show up within two days and I am struggling to cope with this. I however can provide shelter to your horses and camels once I juggle the beasts from the other caravans and tighten them a bit inside a few less corrals. I will also try to see if the other merchants will accept to squeeze themselves in order to free a few rooms for your people, but I can't promise that they will go along with that."

"Do you at least have enough food, feed grain and hay for our stay?"

"That I have, but just. A Chinese imperial delegation arrived here two days ago and requisitioned much of my surplus but, thankfully, they then went to the local Chinese fort for lodging, so they didn't take any of my rooms. I doubt anyway that those fancy Imperial people would have been satisfied with the standards of my rooms or of my food. Look, I know that this is not ideal, but I am ready to sweeten the pot for you in view of the present conditions at my caravanserai. I am thus going to ask only half of my normal

lodging fees for your caravan. However, I must still charge normal prices for meals: I just can't afford to do better."

Yurkan sighed but patted the man's shoulder in response.

"I understand, Azes. Is your bathhouse still in operation?"

"Oh, it is and I added a new feature to it a few months ago, in order to attract customers: I hired a few young and pretty girls to help operate it and you will find them quite willing and welcoming...in exchange for a few coins."

Yurkan had a slight smile at this description of what were in essence prostitutes. However, one thought made his smile quickly fade away.

"Uh, I have a girl with me in my caravan. Do you have a separate bathroom available for her?"

While surprised by that, Azes nodded his head quickly enough.

"I do have a separate bathroom used by my female cooks, maids and servants. Your girl will be welcome to use it."

"Good! About that Chinese delegation, do you know why it is here? Are they on a trip to somewhere further west from here?"

"Frankly, I don't know and I didn't dare to ask. The Chinese in charge of the delegation looked to be an important man and he was accompanied by his wife and daughter."

That last piece of information made Yurkan raise an eyebrow in surprise: Chinese imperial officials did not normally travel with their families, unless they were being sent to occupy some new post inside the Han Empire.

"Oh? Maybe that official is on his way to establish a new embassy, possibly in Sogdiana. I will have to find more about that. Well, let's go see if you can squeeze my people and beasts inside your caravanserai. Also, tell your innkeeper that he will have an extra 27 mouths to feed for supper tonight."

"Will do! Follow me!"

Thankfully, the other caravan masters presently lodging in the caravanserai proved most accommodating and cooperative, accepting at once to tighten themselves up in order to let some space for Yurkan's caravan. By the time that the juggling of beasts' corrals and customers' rooms was completed, Yurkan was already discussing trade matters with those caravan masters as they all went to have supper together at the great hall of the inn. Seeing his people busy eating at a group of tables in one corner of

the hall, Yurkan excused himself for a moment with the other caravan masters and went to one table, stopping near Borund, his senior caravan guard.

“Who is guarding our corrals at this time, Borund?”

“Nauca is! She took the shift from now to midnight. I was planning to temporarily relieve her after I will have eaten, so that she could eat supper herself. Gurak will relieve her at midnight.”

“Good! Tell her to be vigilant: with so many merchants in town with their merchandises, local thieves will be quite tempted to try their luck tonight.”

“Understood!”

Satisfied, Yurkan then went back to join the other caravan masters at a table a few paces away.

22:51 (Central Asia Time)

Corrals of the Khotan caravanserai

Nauca was wearing her full set of armor and weapons and was also holding her Kontos long lance and her rhinoceros hide shield for her guard shift, making her a most intimidating sight for those passing near the corrals containing the camels, horses and bundles belonging to Yurkan’s caravan. That intimidation factor was actually something she was counting on to deter potential thieves. Up to now, as the time at which Gurak was due to relieve her approached, it seemed to have worked well.

Distant shouts, screams and noises of some sort of fight coming from the direction of the nearby fort sheltering the Chinese garrison in Khotan suddenly made her come to full alert in the night’s darkness. At this late hour, very few people in Khotan were still up,



Early Sarmatian woman warrior in full armor

if you excepted the men getting drunk in the few inns and taverns of the city, as lamp oil and wax candles were expensive and only gave up a poor level of illumination. Inside the caravanserai's walls, only a few torches actually added to the moonlight, but Nauca's high visual acuity helped her compensate for the low light level. Making a few steps from the corrals and coming out of the caravanserai's entry gate, which had been left open to allow late drinkers to come back in, she looked towards the Chinese fort while listening attentively. It took her only a couple of seconds to realize that there was effectively some kind of fighting happening either inside or near the fort. The noises and screams soon increased in volume, as if the fighting was getting nearer. As Nauca was watching a street intersection some sixty meters away that led to the Chinese fort, she suddenly saw two shapes appear, running out of the street leading to the fort and turning the corner to head towards the general direction of the caravanserai. Pointing her Kontos lance and raising her shield to take a defensive posture, Nauca realized after a few seconds that the two persons running towards her were a woman and a child, both wearing what appeared to be expensive silk dresses. While staying fully alert and ready to react, she returned her lance to the vertical, now wondering what was truly going on. The woman, who was holding the hand of the child, then veered towards Nauca while shouting in Chinese at her. While Nauca couldn't understand her, not knowing Mandarin Chinese, the desperation and fear in the woman's voice was easy enough to recognize. As the duo got closer, Nauca was able to see that the child was actually a girl, a young one that could not be more than ten years old. As for the woman, she was in her early thirties and wore jewels worthy of a noble. The duo soon stopped two steps in front of Nauca, with the woman's shouts turning to desperate pleas in Chinese. The noise from the fighting was now close to the street intersection, as if a group was doing a fighting retreat against a superior enemy. Faced with a dilemma between helping the Chinese duo and ensuring the safety of Yurkan's caravan beasts and goods, Nauca quickly let her heart win over and she motioned with her lance for the woman and girl to enter the caravanserai's courtyard, speaking to them in Sogdian.

"Follow me, quickly!"

Her tone and gesture were apparently understood by the woman, who followed her inside the courtyard while dragging the girl by the hand. Going to the corral containing her own horses and those of the merchants of her caravan, Nauca quickly opened partially its gate and invited the woman and girl inside. She then used the tip of her

lance and one foot to hurriedly create a hole in the large stack of hay filling the back of the corral, pointing the cavity to the woman.

“Crouch down in there, quick!”

The woman again understood quickly what she meant and pushed the girl into the stack, making her roll in a tight ball before crouching close to her. Nauca then made a sign with one finger across her mouth to keep quiet, then quickly piled hay over the two Chinese. Once that was done, she grabbed back her lance and left the corral, closing back its gate before running back to her previous position just outside the gate of the caravanserai. Just as she was back at her post outside the gate, the dark silhouettes of four men slowly backing off while fighting with swords and lances appeared at the distant street intersection. As they moved back step by step, their attackers also started to be visible to Nauca, who then felt confusion: both the defenders and attackers appeared to be Chinese! She also noticed that one of the four men defending themselves was dressed like a Chinese noble, while the three others appeared to be soldiers or guards. The armors worn by those three soldiers also appeared to be more elaborate than those of their attackers, possibly indicating that they were elite soldiers. The noble and three soldiers were resisting the assault of more than triple their numbers and their valiance impressed Nauca, who wished that she could have helped them in their unequal fight. However, her duty was to protect the caravan’s beasts and goods.



Han Dynasty Chinese soldier in armor

The noble and his guards were then finally submerged by their adversaries and cut to pieces. On seeing that, Nauca took a few steps back to position herself to block the gate of the caravanserai and shouted out in Sogdian as loud as she could.

“ALARM! ALARM! ALARM!”

Hoping that Gurak, who had been due to relieve her soon, would react and come quickly, Nauca then lowered her lance and held her shield high, ready to defend the gate of the caravanserai. Taking a few steps forward in order to see what was now

happening at the street intersection, she saw that part of the attackers were now dragging the bodies of the nobleman and of his guards towards the Chinese fort, while four Chinese soldiers were walking up the street towards her, looking around every house corner and alley entrance. It was obvious to her that those four were looking for the woman and girl she had just hidden. Thankfully, Gurak showed up at a run, armed and armored, just as the four Chinese soldiers were about to arrive at the gate of the caravanserai.

“NAUCA, WHAT IS HAPPENING?”

“I don’t know, Gurak.” lied Nauca while pointing her lance at the four Chinese soldiers, stopping them from entering the caravanserai. “I saw a fight between two groups of Chinese men at that street corner over there. Four men fighting against a much more numerous group were then massacred and their bodies were dragged away, while those four came towards the caravanserai.”

One of the Chinese soldiers then said something in Chinese, addressing Nauca and Gurak in a harsh, commanding tone.

“What are they saying, Gurak?”

“I don’t know: I don’t speak Chinese.”

“Then, you better get Baoyu or Lushan, so that they could ask these assholes what they want.”

“Right!”

To Nauca’s relief, Yurkan, Borund and Lushan, an associate of Yurkan, arrived at a run at that moment, holding either swords or axes.

“WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE?” shouted Yurkan. Nauca took on her to answer him.

“I saw a hard fight between two groups of Chinese down the street. One group, which was vastly outnumbered, was massacred and then had their bodies dragged away. Those four here were part of the larger group but I can’t understand what they are saying.”

A look at the Chinese soldiers was enough for Yurkan to identify them.

“They are part of the Chinese garrison of Khotan. You said that those killed were also Chinese?”

“Yes! They looked to me like a Chinese nobleman and three of his bodyguards. I don’t like the smell of all this, Yurkan.”

“Me neither! Lushan, could you ask those soldiers what they want?”

Lushan, who specialized in the commerce of gems, jewels and spices, nodded his head and spoke with the senior Chinese soldier in a short exchange before looking at Yurkan.

“That soldier says that they are looking for two fugitives, a woman and a young girl. They are the wife and daughter of a traitor, or so he says.”

Yurkan, who was no fool, quickly started to understand what could possibly be happening here: he had heard plenty in the past about court intrigues in China, which could well turn bloody. He next looked at Nauca, who still had her lance down and pointed, and spoke to her in Greek.

“Did you see that woman and child, Nauca? Tell me the full truth.”

Understanding that the whole caravan could now be at risk because of her actions, Nauca answered Yurkan reluctantly, hiding her frustration.

“Yes, I saw them! The nobleman and his guards were covering their escape. The woman came to me, obviously desperate, and I hid them inside one of our corrals. You are not going to let those bastards slaughter a mother and her young daughter, are you?”

Yurkan did not answer her, instead looking at Lushan, who didn't understand Greek, speaking to him in Sogdian.

“Tell those soldiers that Nauca saw one woman and a girl run past the gate of the caravanserai a few minutes ago. They then disappeared in a side street to the left, six houses away.”

Lushan translated that into Mandarin Chinese for the benefit of the senior soldier, who seemed to believe him and who then disappeared at a run in the night after giving an order to his three companions, heading towards the street corner indicated by Lushan. Yurkan let out a sigh of relief once the soldiers were gone and spoke to Nauca in Greek, keeping his voice low.

“I think that you did the right thing by hiding those two Chinese, Nauca, but we will now have to play things very carefully. If that woman and girl are truly important persons victims of some kind of intrigue, then the local general will search the whole city to find them. I was told earlier that a Chinese imperial delegation had arrived from China and went to the garrison's fort for lodging. Maybe the nobleman you saw being massacred with his bodyguards was an imperial envoy who was a threat to the local Chinese general, a Huo Qing. If that general finds out that we helped that woman and girl, then he will probably have us all killed.”

"I...I'm sorry if my actions put our caravan at risk, Yurkan." said Nauca, lowering her head. Yurkan's reply, made in Greek, surprised her.

"Don't be, Nauca! That General Huo Qing has been abusing his powers here by arbitrarily raising the tolls caravan masters like me have to pay to enter Khotan. I would not be surprised if complaints about his abuses reached Chang'an and caused the sending of an imperial envoy. It would actually make me happy if we could actually help expose that bastard. I will however ask you to keep all this to yourself. Only you and me will know about that woman and girl hiding in our corrals: the fewer people know about this, the better."

"Thanks, Yurkan: you are a good man."

"And you are a girl with a big heart, Nauca." replied Yurkan, who then shouted around him in Sogdian.

"ALRIGHT, LET'S GO BACK TO BED! THIS SHOW IS OVER!"

Yurkan waited until the others, except for Gurak, who was now taking up his guard duty, were all back inside the inn, then made Nauca walk with him, heading towards the corrals used by his caravan. He spoke again in Greek while keeping his voice to a near whisper.

"Let's do as if we are inspecting our corrals and show me discretely where these two Chinese are hiding."

Nauca nodded her head in comprehension and started walking slowly past each corral, to finally make a discreet gesture when passing in front of the corral where the woman and girl were hiding.

"They are hiding under the hay in this corral, Yurkan. What do we do now?"

"Go inside and do as if you are paying a visit to your horses. In the meantime, I will go speak with the woman."

"But you can't speak Mandarin, no?"

Nauca's remark made Yurkan grin, exposing the white of his teeth in the darkness.

"A merchant who can't speak the language of his principal customers is a poor merchant indeed, Nauca. I am not exactly fluent in Mandarin but I can get by. Go give water to your horses now."

"Understood!"

Opening the gate of the corral just wide enough for them to walk in, Nauca and Yurkan entered it and went to Tamat and Minad, Nauca's mount and pack horses

respectively. As Nauca grabbed a bucket of water in one corner to present it to her horses, Yurkan bent to a crouch and went to the big pile of hay at the back of the corral. Stopping and kneeling next to it, he then spoke in a low voice, using Mandarin Chinese.

"I am a friend. I need to speak with you."

A couple of seconds went by before part of the hay moved and the head of a woman appeared, looking at him with fear and anxiousness. She was still fairly young and was certainly pretty.

"Who are you?"

"I am a caravan master. You are hiding inside one of my corrals. Why are Chinese soldiers after you and your daughter?"

The woman hesitated for only a second before answering him.

"My husband, Prince Wei Shan, was sent here by the Emperor to investigate complaints of corruption and abuse against General Huo Qing, the commander of the local garrison. When my husband confronted Huo Qing tonight about those complaints, Huo had his soldiers attack us. My husband and his surviving guards fought hard to allow us to escape, but I am afraid that they are now dead, killed by the soldiers of that bastard Huo Qing."

"Unfortunately, you are right about them being dead now. Why did you and your daughter travel with your husband to Khotan if he was simply coming to do an investigation?"

"Because the Emperor had named him as the new commander of the Khotan garrison. We were supposed to establish ourselves here, after sending back General Huo Qing to Chang'an in chains. Now, if we are found, we will be as good as dead, me and my daughter."

The desperate tone in the woman's voice moved Yurkan, who then gently patted the woman's shoulder.

"You won't die, as I will do my best to get you out of Khotan and back towards Chang'an. What is your name?"

"I am Lady Wei Zu, and my daughter's name is Zhang."

"And I am Yurkan, a Sogdian merchant. Stay hidden here, under the hay, while I go try to find new, more anonymous clothes for both of you. By the way, my guard who hid you is named Nauca and you can trust her, although she can't speak Mandarin. Again, stay here and be quiet. I will be back."

Yurkan then helped pile more hay over the woman's head before getting up and leaving the corral with Nauca. Walking with her towards the entrance of the inn, he asked her a question in a low voice.

"Do you have spare travel clothes that could fit this Chinese woman?"

"Yes, although they will kind of float around her: she is much smaller than me. However, I have nothing that could fit her daughter."

"I will see what I could find for her. Go get that spare set of clothes and then go to my room and wait for me there. Keep your weapons with you."

With that said, the duo entered the inn and climbed the wooden staircase leading to the rooms on the upper floor.

Instead of going to his room, Yurkan went to the baths section, where he found a couple of prostitutes still there, waiting for prospective customers. Signaling the youngest and smallest to approach him, he then put a silver coin in her hand and spoke to her in a whisper.

"Come with me, girl."

Smiling and thinking that she had found a customer for the night, the girl happily followed Yurkan to his small room, of which he was the sole occupant, thanks to his status as a caravan master. Once inside with the teenage prostitute, Yurkan made her take off her rough robe and sandals but then stopped her as she was about to lay on her back to receive him.

"Wait! Do you have a spare set of clothes in your own room in the inn?"

"Uh, yes! Why?"

"Because you will need it. Here are two more silver coins for your present clothes: I am going to keep them."

"Do you still want to use my body, sir?"

Yurkan hesitated a bit then and eyed the young, naked body of the prostitute. He hadn't had a woman in months and she was far from ugly, plus was fairly clean, since she worked in the baths section. He thus smiled to her and nodded his head.

"Why not? I will honor your body once a friend of mine pays me a quick visit here."

Just as he said that, someone knocked on the door, making Yurkan go quickly to it to open it partially. Nauca, standing in the hallway, then handed him a rolled bundle of clothes through the half-opened door.

"Here you go, Yurkan."

"Thanks! Now, go rest but keep your weapons near you. I will take care of our two hidden guests. Thinking about it, I just may bring them to your room once they will be wearing their new clothes, so that they could hide under your protection."

"I will be ready to receive them, Yurkan."

"Thanks, Nauca." replied Yurkan before closing and locking the door. Turning around and facing the young prostitute, he smiled widely to her and threw the bundle of clothes on his mattress before hugging the girl and kissing her all over: he might as well be done with her first before getting to more serious business.

Some 25 minutes later, Yurkan left his room, carrying two bundles of clothes under one arm, and went out to the corrals, where he entered the horses stall after telling Gurak that he was visiting his horse. Going to the pile of hay, he then spoke in Mandarin, fervently hoping that the two Chinese were still hiding there. They were. Yurkan then handed the two bundles to the woman.

"Here are two sets of commoners' clothes. Change into them, then hand me your noble outfits, so that I could hide them. Take off as well any jewels you may be wearing: they would be dead giveaways to the garrison soldiers. I am going to do as if I was brushing my horse. Make it quick but don't make noises and keep low."

"How will you make us exit the city safely? All the gates will be guarded."

"I will think of something. Now, please change."

Turning his back to the woman, Yurkan went to his horse and started brushing it calmly while speaking softly to calm the beast, all the while avoiding to look towards the haystack, in order to provide some privacy to the two Chinese. A couple of minute later, Lady Zu whispered to him.

"We have changed. What do we do now?"

"Give me your fancy clothes and your jewels: I must hide them in my baggage."

Lady Zu hesitated for a second, but decided that she had no choice but to put her full confidence in that Sogdian merchant. Handing two sets of fine silk robes to him, she then gave him a bulging embroidered silk purse. Going to his pack horse, Yurkan emptied one of his large saddle bags and stuffed the silk clothes and the purse inside it before packing over them the original content. Once he had buckled the straps closing his saddle bag, he signaled to the two Chinese to follow him and keep silent.

“if someone address you inside the inn, do not answer and let me speak. Let’s go!”

The woman and girl, their hearts beating furiously, followed closely behind Yurkan as he went back inside the inn and climbed the stairs to the upper floor. Thankfully, everybody inside was sleeping at this late hour, everybody that is except Nauca, who promptly opened the door of her room when Yurkan knocked lightly on it. The caravan master then made the Chinese lady and her daughter enter the room in a hurry and spoke to them in Mandarin while pointing Nauca to them.

“This is one of my caravan guards. Her name is Nauca and you can trust her. I will come and get you at dawn, to lead you back to the corrals, where we will find a way to hide you in our bundles of goods. Try to grab some sleep in the meantime.”

Yurkan then closed the door and left, not leaving time to Lady Zu to ask any question. Now alone with her daughter and the tall, heavily armed and armored Nauca, Lady Zu eyed the Sarmatian cautiously, prompting Nauca into making a reassuring smile to her and pointing to the Chinese her mattress made of hay.

“Please, use my bed. I will watch over you.”

While Zu did not understand her Sogdian words, she did understand their meaning and encouraged her daughter Zhang to go rest on the mattress before joining her and putting one arm around her. Being both apprehensive and fearful, it took them a few minutes before they could fall asleep.

05:46 (Central Asia Time)

Wednesday, January 4, 62 B.C.E.

Inn of the Khotan caravanserai

When Wei Zu opened her eyes after being gently shaken, she found that the room she was in was still dark, save for the poor illumination provided by an oil lamp. She then saw that the Sarmatian young woman and the Sogdian caravan master were bent down over her. The Sogdian merchant then spoke to her in Mandarin Chinese.

“It is time to go, Lady Zu: dawn is about to arrive and we want to leave as soon as possible, before General Huo Qin could organize a city-wide search for you. Wake your daughter up and follow us quietly.”

“And how are you going to make us leave the city? All the gates must be guarded, no?”

"Yes, they are." answered Yurkan in a patient tone. "Just have confidence in us and do exactly what I will say and you will be alright. Now, follow me: time is of the essence."

The Chinese noblewoman, realizing that she had no choice but to obey Yurkan if she was going to live, gently woke her daughter and took her hand, encouraging her to follow the Sogdian. Yurkan, who was wearing a long and wide cloak in order to combat the cold outside, then surprised Zu by making her daughter Zhang ride against his back, passing both of her legs inside his belt and telling the girl to hold tightly to his back. With the cloak covering her, tiny Zhang then became nearly unnoticeable to casual onlookers. As for Zu, Nauca gave her a long scarf, rolling it around her neck so that it would cover the lower half of her face. The small group then went downstairs, mixing up with the other members of the caravan who were heading towards the stables of the inn. The single inn maid busy cleaning the great hall watched them file out but didn't appear to take special notice of them: it was common for merchants to leave very early in the day in order to cover the most distance possible before nightfall. With her heart beating furiously from apprehension and fear, Lady Zu followed Yurkan and Nauca to one of the corrals containing a half dozen camels and their pack loads, where Yurkan took off the tops of two large baskets used to transport feed grain. She was able to see then that those baskets were nearly empty. The Sogdian merchant, making Zhang get back on the ground, then lifted her and put her down inside one of the baskets, which was easily big enough to accommodate the small girl.

"Zhang, you will now have to do exactly as I tell you now, or you will be found and then killed, along with your mother and all of us. Do you understand me?"

"Yes!" replied the girl, fear in her voice.

"Good! Now, take this reed stem and put one end in your mouth, then sit on the bottom of this basket. We will then fill the basket with feed grain until you are completely covered. The reed will help you breathe while you are hidden. Once you will be covered with feed grain, do not move or make any noise until you are told that you can safely come out of your hiding place. Understood?"

"Y...yes!"

"Then, sit down and keep your reed stem vertical."

As soon as the girl was sitting and rolled in a tight ball atop the bottom layer of grain inside the basket, Yurkan and Nauca started pouring bucket after bucket of the feed grain provided by the inn inside the basket, careful not to hurt the girl in the process or fill

her reed stem with grains. Soon, Zhang was completely covered up, with only a small portion of her reed stem sticking out of the grain. Bending over the basket for a moment and listening to make sure that the girl was effectively able to breathe through the tube, Yurkan then put back and tied in place the basket cover, then showed the second basket to Lady Zu.

“Your turn, Lady Zu.”

Now having some hope of escaping Khotan, Zu obeyed him at once and sat inside the basket, rolling herself in as tight a ball as she could while biting on one end of her reed stem. It took only a minute before she was completely covered with feed grain. Once that was done, Yurkan looked at his associate Lushan, on whose camel the two baskets were going to be hooked. As a merchant dealing in gems and spices, the lightest types of loads found with the caravan, his camel routinely carried some of the feed grain used by the caravan’s beasts. Since he also could speak Mandarin, that had made him the natural choice as the one to carry the two fugitives on his pack animal, so Yurkan had put him into his confidence and gained his cooperation last night.

“Okay, let’s hook those baskets to your camel and let’s get the hell out of here!”

With Yurkan encouraging and pushing his associates to get ready as quickly as possible, the whole caravan was ready to leave after another ten minutes. Saluting Azes, the caravanserai owner, one last time, Yurkan then gave the signal to move.

“FORWARD TO NIYA²⁵, MY FRIENDS!”

Yurkan would have lied if he had then said that he was not worried as his horse trotted out of the caravanserai. In truth, his heart was beating furiously as he led his caravan towards the nearest city gate: right now, he gave himself a fifty-fifty chance to succeed in leaving Khotan without trouble. However, he could not in good conscience abandon to their fate an innocent woman and her daughter. Another factor, albeit a secondary one, that had pushed him into this was the slight possibility that he would be rewarded once in Chang’an for saving the family of an imperial envoy. Still, he could see that five Chinese soldiers, including one officer, were guarding the city gate next to the caravanserai, along with two local guards. His three caravan guards, briefed by him last night, either led or followed closely his horse and Lushan’s camel, ready to react with force if anything went wrong. On her part, Nauca had prepared in advance her long

²⁵ Niya : Ancient name of the oasis town of Minfeng.

lance and her two javelins, so that they would be close and handy if she needed to use them. She also had her war axe and her sword, a razor-sharp Greek-style Xiphos sword made of Hinduwani steel, plus of course her bow and arrows, ready for use. Her own heart was also beating furiously, although she kept an impassive expression as they approached the gate. If one of the two fugitives made any noise or moved, or if the Chinese officer in charge of the gate proved particularly sharp, then they would have no choice but fight their way through. Simply surrendering then would not save them from near-certain execution at the hands of this General Huo Qing. She then noticed that both the Chinese and local guards at the gate appeared tired, probably because they had been on duty most of the night and had not been relieved yet. That was in fact another reason why Yurkan had made his caravan leave so early in the morning.

When Yurkan and Borund, riding their horses at the head of the caravan, came within ten paces from the gate, the Chinese officer stepped in the middle of the road and raised one arm while shouting an order.

“HALT!”

With the whole caravan coming to a halt, the officer then walked to Yurkan’s horse and spoke in a fair Sogdian.

“Who are you and where are you going so early in the morning?”

“My name is Yurkan and I am a Sogdian merchant from Samarkand. My caravan is heading East and we have a long road to cover to China, where I am going to sell my goods. I am leaving at dawn so that I could travel the furthest before nightfall.”

The officer nodded his head in comprehension, having heard that kind of answer many times in the past from merchants originating from many various places.

“Very well, but I have orders to search everyone leaving the city.”

“As you wish!” said Yurkan calmly. The Chinese officer then ordered two of his soldiers to accompany him and started going down the long line of horses and camels. Yurkan didn’t miss the fact that the officer then inspected his caravan rather perfunctorily, simply eyeing each of the caravan riders and tapping once on each bundle and basket big enough to hide a person. The officer however hesitated a bit when he got close to Nauca, eyeing her suspiciously for a moment before deciding that she was no Chinese woman. On her part, Nauca held her breath when the officer tapped on the basket containing little Zhang. Thankfully, the little girl obeyed her instructions and neither moved nor said anything then. Nauca discretely blew air out once the Chinese

officer and his two soldiers completed their inspection and returned to the gate, which was then opened on the order of the officer. Yurkan was then able to lead his caravan out of the oasis city, forcing himself to keep a nonchalant pace. Once the whole caravan was out of the city walls, it turned left to join the trail heading towards Niya, some 300 kilometers away to the East.

Yurkan waited until a line of sand dunes hid the caravan from the city, now some four kilometers behind them, before going to Lushan's camel, which was at the tail end of the caravan with Nauca, who was acting as tail guard. Telling Lushan to stop his camel for a moment, Yurkan, still mounted on his horse, undid the cover of the basket containing Lady Zu and quickly dug in the feed grain inside to uncover her head.

"You may come out now, Lady Zu: we are now safely out of Khotan."

The noblewoman blew air out in relief on hearing that and dug herself out of the grain, ending up standing in the basket.

"I will be eternally grateful to you and your people, Yurkan of Samarkand. What will my daughter and I do now?"

"You will both sit between the two humps of this camel and ride it. You can use again the hooded cloak provided by Nauca to protect you from the cold wind and blowing sand. We however will stay vigilant and not take any chances, in case this General Huo Qing gets suspicious about my caravan once he won't find you inside Khotan. Also, only a few of my associates know that you and your daughter are with us, so keep your presence discreet. We should be in Niya in about two weeks and will only take the time there to top off our reserves of water, feed and food before continuing on to Miran and Dunhuang. With luck and if the weather cooperates, we should reach Chang'an in less than six months. Now, when do you want to reveal yourself to Chinese officials? We will have to pass by a number of Chinese garrisons and forts along our way. Maybe they could then escort you to Chang'an?"

"No!" replied at once the noblewoman, showing alarm. "General Huo Qing is an influential man, with many friends highly placed within the imperial army. We thus can't trust anyone until we are in Chang'an, under the direct protection of the Emperor."

Yurkan caressed his short beard, a bit frustrated by Zu's answer. However, what she said made sense and this was clearly a situation in which caution had to be paramount...for everybody's sake.

“Very well: we will continue to hide you from Chinese officials and soldiers until we reach Chang’an. However, our trip will be a long, hard one and I can’t offer you more than what me and my people have to live with. You will however be able to sleep in Nauca’s tent at night, as she is the only other woman in this caravan.”

Zu glanced at Nauca, riding next to her camel, and nodded her head.

“I will accept my part of the hardships of this trip. I must say that your Sarmatian female guard impresses me: she seems quite able and strong, on top of having a good heart.”

“She is definitely someone good to have with you when things get rough, Lady Zu. Let’s install you and your daughter atop this camel, then we will continue on our way.”

14:08 (Central Asia Time)

Friday, January 6, 62 B.C.E.

Forty-six kilometers east of Khotan

Taklamakan Desert

Nauca, who was still acting as tail-end guard for the caravan, grimaced when she saw a cloud of dust to the West, in the direction of Khotan. In her experience as a steppe nomad, this could be only one thing: a cavalry column heading their way. No sane merchant would push his horses this hard in the middle of a desert, unless he was being himself pursued by bandits or soldiers. Pushing her horse Tamat to a gallop, she rode up the caravan to join with Yurkan, slowing her horse to a trot once level with him.

“Bad news, Yurkan: a cavalry troupe is approaching from Khotan. From the dust it raises, I would estimate their numbers at a few dozens and they should catch up with us within two hours at the most. I doubt that they came to wish us a nice trip.”

It was the turn of Yurkan to make a grimace then.

“By Ahura Mazda²⁶! Things were going too well to be true. General Huo Qing must have sent this column after he couldn’t find Lady Zu and her daughter inside Khotan. This time, they will search us thoroughly and are then bound to find our two protégés. We thus have to either hide from those Chinese soldiers or fight.”

²⁶ Ahura Mazda : God of Good in the Zoroastrian religion.

"We can't hide a caravan as large as yours, Yurkan: the wind is moderate and there is no blowing sand to cover the tracks of our horses and camels. Only a complete idiot could miss our tracks. We will thus have to either fight or surrender, in which later case we can only expect to be all executed with refined cruelty. Personally, I am not too hot about the second alternative."

"Me neither! You are an experienced warrior, Nauca: how would you proceed now?"

"You keep going with your caravan while me, Borund and Gurak prepare an ambush for those Chinese cavalymen. All three of us are good archers and we should be able to shoot those Chinese full of arrows as they gallop by."

"But you could end up being overwhelmed and killed, Nauca." objected at once the merchant. In response, Nauca stared resolutely into his eyes.

"And dying under Chinese tortures would be better? We have no other realistic choice, Yurkan. As for your associates and camel drivers, now may be a good time for them to take out and ready the few bows and crossbows they have, in case that some of the Chinese get pass me."

"Very well! Go get Borund and Gurak and prepare your ambush. I will get our camel drivers to push their beasts. Good luck and may Ahura Mazda be with you, Nauca."

With Yurkan alerting his associates and camel drivers and making them accelerate their pace, Nauca galloped to join Borund and Gurak, who were riding at the head of the caravan.

"Prepare for combat, my friends: a column of Chinese cavalymen from Khotan is after us and will catch up with us in less than two hours. If they catch us, then we will be all as good as dead."

The two male guards, who by now knew about Lady Zu and her daughter, exchanged a quick glance before Borund asked a question to Nauca.

"Do you have a plan, Nauca?"

"Yes! We will prepare an ambush while the caravan keeps going and we will shoot those Chinese soldiers full of arrows."

"What about their crossbows? In large enough numbers and at short distances, their shooting may overwhelm us." objected Gurak, a young man in his mid-twenties.

"Their rate of fire will be much less than our own rate of fire, especially if they stay on top of their horses. If this may encourage you, think of all the loot we could take from those Chinese soldiers once we will have killed them all. That last point is important: not a single Chinese soldier should be able to escape and return to Khotan to give the alert. Grab all the arrows you can get and follow me!"

Galloping back to the tail-end of the caravan, Nauca went to her pack horse, Minad, which was tied to Lushan's camel by a long rope. There, she filled her gorytos with arrows from her reserves and also took two javelins and her long Kontos lance, putting them in their special leather holders attached to her saddle. Lady Zu, sitting atop Lushan's camel with her daughter, watched her gravely as Nauca armed herself, understanding quickly what was going on. She then said something to Nauca in Mandarin Chinese. Nauca didn't understand her words but she did catch the tone of them, prompting Nauca into nodding somberly to Lady Zu and speaking to her in Sogdian.

"We will prevail, Lady Zu."

She then galloped away towards the West, with Borund and Gurak close behind her. Zu passed a protective arm around her daughter Zhang while watching the trio gallop away.

"May the Ancestral Spirits be with them."

Nauca, followed by Borund and Gurak, galloped hard westward for about fifteen minutes before arriving at a spot which appeared to her to be appropriate for an ambush. She examined the terrain for a moment the way an experienced hunter, something she definitely was, would, then spoke up.

"This looks like a good place for an ambush to me. The trail used by our caravan is flanked on both sides by these low sand and rock ridges which will provide us good cover and concealment. If we could catch and trap the Chinese in this small depression, we will then be able to systematically shoot them to pieces."

"It is effectively a good spot for an ambush," agreed Borund, "but the problem is that we still don't know how many Chinese we will be facing. We could get overwhelmed by their crossbow fire."

"Then, we will have to shoot straighter and faster than them." replied Nauca with a disarming smile. "My plan is to post myself on that left ridge and shoot first at the Chinese. With any luck, they will then make the mistake of all discharging their

crossbows at me at the same time. That would leave you two free to shoot them down from that ridge to the right while they are busy reloading their weapons.”

“Sounds like a plan.” said Borund approvingly. “Let’s take our positions now.”

“Don’t forget: wait for me to shoot the first Chinese and thus attract the fire from the others before starting to shoot your arrows.”

“Got it!” replied young Gurak before making his horse leave the trail and take a wide detour towards the right-side ridge, followed by Borund. On her part, Nauca made her horse go back by about a hundred meters before heading for the left-side ridge, so that her traces heading off the trail would not alert the Chinese to her ambush. Making Tamat climb a moderate slope leading to the ridgeline, she soon stopped her mount atop that ridgeline and surveyed the terrain around her. She now dominated from her new position a sand and rock area measuring about 300 meters by 150 meters, with the said area, through which the caravan had passed, being flanked by low ridgelines. The range from her position to the trail was about seventy paces, a long distance for the average Bowman but a manageable one for an expert archer like herself. There were also dispersed rocks of various sizes covering the ridgeline which would provide her with some cover and protection from enemy arrows and crossbow bolts. One look towards the West told her that the Chinese column would be here in about half an hour. Jumping off her horse, she then led Tamat away from the ridgeline, making it trot down the opposite slope until she got to a large boulder that would give her horse good protection against arrows. There, she solidly planted in the ground the iron picket she used at night to tie her horse to a specific spot while she slept, then tied Tamat’s reins to the picket before running back up the slope with all her weapons and her rhinoceros hide shield. Carefully choosing her fighting position first, which was flanked on both sides by boulders set close to each other, Nauca then dug a small, shallow furrow in the sand between the boulders. Next, she planted the base of her shield in the furrow, at the vertical, and used loose rocks to help keep her shield solidly up. She finally planted to the vertical in the ground a dozen arrows, in order to be able to keep a fast firing rate once the fight started. Looking at the opposite ridgeline on the other side of the trail, she waved her arms high to signal her position to her comrades. In return, she promptly got a wave back from behind a large boulder atop that ridgeline. Now satisfied that her ambush was ready to be sprung, she sat down and patiently waited for the enemy to show up.

When the Chinese came within direct line of sight some twenty minutes later, Nauca felt some relief, for a number of reasons. First, the Chinese were not as numerous as she had feared, counting maybe thirty cavalymen riding in a double column. Second, twenty of them were armed with lances rather than with crossbows, with the remaining ten being unarmed mounted archers armed with short composite bows. Her own Sarmatian composite bow was longer and more powerful than the bows and crossbows the Chinese used and outranged them by a comfortable margin, something she had found out through a friendly shooting competition against other caravan guards during a stop in Barkand, to the northwest of Khotan. Finally, the Chinese arrived at a gallop and had probably been pushing their horses for a few hours already, while their mounts definitely showed signs of fatigue. All that combined to make Nauca's task notably less difficult. Grabbing her bow and putting in place an arrow, she then aimed carefully at the Chinese officer commanding the cavalry column and riding at its head. Letting her first arrow fly, Nauca immediately grabbed and put in place a second arrow while watching if her first shot went true. It did, piercing the neck of the Chinese officer and making him bowl off his saddle, dead. The Chinese soldiers following him reacted at first with confusion, slowing down their horses while trying to see where that arrow had come from. That gave the chance to Nauca to shoot a second Chinese dead before a soldier pointed in her direction while yelling something in Mandarin Chinese. The remaining nineteen lancers then turned ninety degrees to form a double extended line and charged in Nauca's direction, screaming as they went, while the ten archers in the column took out their bows and started notching arrows to shoot back at her. The reactions of the Chinese were actually sound ones, except for the fact that they now all presented their backs to Borund and Gurak, who seized that occasion at once and started shooting arrows of their own. Nauca was happy to see that their first targets were the enemy archers, who were presently the biggest potential threat to them and Nauca. Concentrated on either charging on horseback Nauca's position up the ridgeline or aiming at her with their bows, the Chinese soldiers did not realize at first that they were now caught in the middle of a crossfire and the two first archers to fall were not noticed by their comrades for a few seconds. That cost them three more dead men in the next six seconds, with one lancer shot down by Nauca and two archers shot by Borund and Gurak. Shooting arrows at a rhythm of one per four seconds, Nauca shot down three more Chinese lancers before they could even get to the base of the slope leading up to her position on the ridgeline. Her two companions, on their part, were able

to shoot and kill two more Chinese archers before the remainder finally realized that they were receiving arrows in their backs, with some of the surviving archers switching their aim to the positions of Borund and Gurak. However, that still left fourteen Chinese lancers charging Nauca and six Chinese archers able to shoot back. Two arrows hit Nauca's shield with audible 'THUNKS' but proved unable to penetrate the tough rhinoceros hide of her shield. Sticking her head and upper torso up for a couple of second, Nauca let go her seventh arrow of the fight and then crouched back behind her shield, in time to avoid three more arrows. The Chinese lancers were now starting to get up the slope but had to slow down their horses, due to the inclination of the ground. Being slower also meant for them being easier targets and two more lancers fell from their horses in the next seconds. As for Borund and Gurak, they were now engaged in a shooting match against the surviving six Chinese archers. However, the two caravan guards were enjoying the protection of rock boulders, while the unarmored Chinese archers were still sitting on top of their horses, in the middle of the open trail area. That shootout went very badly for the Chinese archers, with the last surviving one then panicking and turning his horse around to flee back towards Khotan. However, his horse was then shot from under him and he flew to the ground, landing heavily on the arid desert floor. Bruised and bloodied, the unfortunate Chinese archer was then hit squarely in the back by an arrow from Borund and he collapsed on the ground, inert.

On the slope leading up to Nauca's position, the seven surviving Chinese lancers belatedly realized the extent of their losses and, giving up their charge in disgust, turned their horses around to go back down the slope. In doing so, they gave to Nauca easy targets from less than thirty meters. Aiming carefully each shot, she hit in succession the seven remaining lancers before they could get back on the trail, with the last lancer also getting an arrow from Gurak. Slowly getting up from behind her shield, Nauca scanned the ground below her, making sure that no Chinese had been able to escape the ambush. Seeing a few Chinese still moaning and moving slightly, she put back her bow and arrows in her gorytos and grabbed her Kontos long lance and shield, then went to get her horse. Staying on foot and leading Tamat by its reins, Nauca went to the nearest Chinese corpse lying on the slope and made sure that the man was dead, then took the purse hooked to his belt. Going methodically around the bodies lying around, she snatched their purses and whatever jewels they were wearing, finishing off in the process four wounded lancers. Down at the trail, Borund and Gurak did the same with

the archers lying in the dirt and also started to collect the master-less horses now wandering around. Mounting back on Tamat, Nauca trotted up to her two companions and patted them gently on their heads.

“Nice shooting guys! Our caravan is now safe. I am going to help you collect the remaining Chinese horses, then we will be able to properly strip those Chinese of anything of value, including their armor and weapons. I noticed that the Chinese lancers were also carrying crossbows and bolts on their horses: those crossbows will be most useful in arming our caravan merchants and camel drivers, as they are quite easy to use.”

Borund looked around at the corpses littering the field and the slopes and looked at Nauca with renewed respect.

“Remind me never to piss you off when you have your bow nearby, Nauca: you must be about the best archer I ever met.”

“Practice makes perfect, they say.” Replied Nauca, smiling at the compliment. “Well, Yurkan will be happy to see those thirty extra horses, while our respective purses are now quite full from this loot. All in all, a very nice day for us and our caravan.”

18:39 (Central Asia Time)

Small desert depression 54 kilometers east of Khotan

Lady Zu, closely followed by her daughter Zhang, timidly approached Yurkan, who was facing East and watching at the edge of their camp, scanning visually the night.

“Do you think that your guards succeeded in stopping that cavalry column, Yurkan of Samarkand?”

“I hope so, Lady Zu. If they failed and got killed, then we will be in deep trouble. Apart from that, losing them would greatly pain me: all three of them are brave and skillful and their deaths would represent a grievous loss for my caravan. I...”

A movement in the night, along with the noise of horses’ hooves going at a trot then interrupted Yurkan, who felt a mix of hope and dread fill him: if those newcomers were Chinese soldiers, then he and his caravan would be massacred in the minutes to come. Now as tense as an iron bar, he watched a group of dark silhouettes approach the camp, finally shouting with joy when he recognized Nauca, mounted on her horse, followed by Borund, Gurak and a large troupe of rider-less horses.

“YES! THEY WON THEIR FIGHT!”

Running to Nauca, Yurkan stopped next to her horse and vigorously shook her hand.

“Thank Ahura Mazda: you are safe! What did you encounter?”

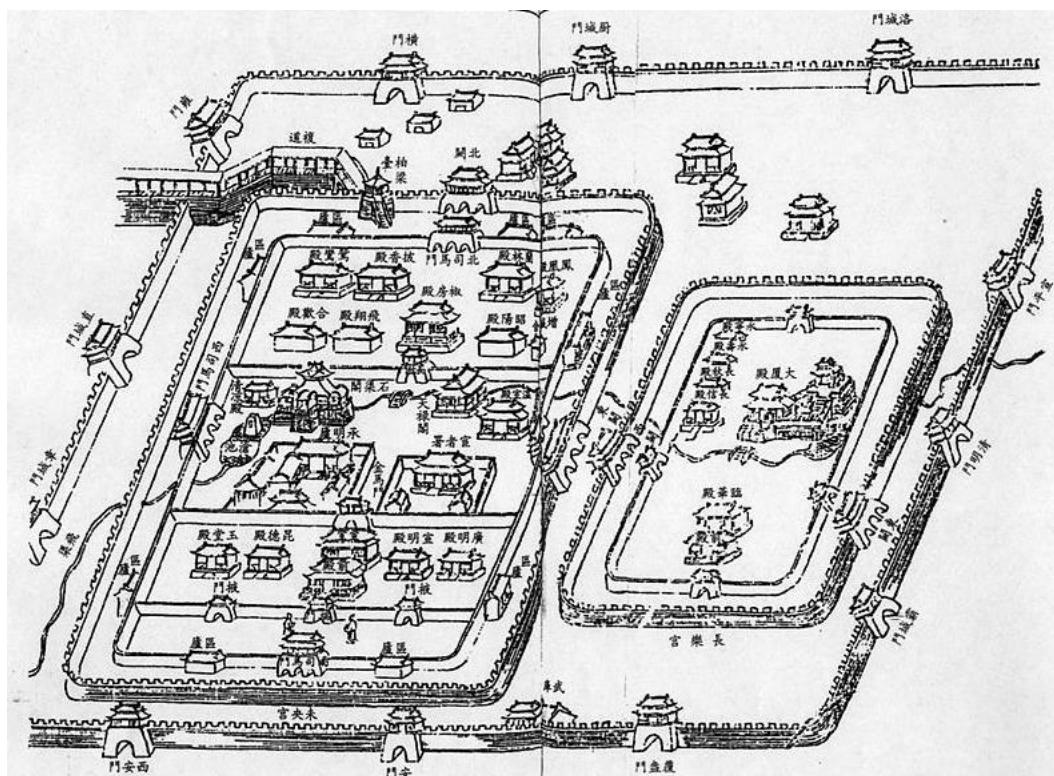
“A Chinese cavalry company of 31 men. We were able to ambush them and take them by surprise. We killed them to the last one, then looted their bodies and grabbed their horses. You will have thirty more horses to sell in China, while our purses are now quite fat. You will also be able to arm your camel drivers and associates with the twenty Chinese crossbows we took on the enemy.”

Yurkan grinned and rubbed his hands together while eyeing the large troupe of horses now being led past him by Borund and Gurak.

“That should be ironic indeed: to sell to the Chinese horses taken from them. Well, they say that there is no small profit. Again, well done, all three of you. Go rest and eat now: tomorrow, we will resume our trip to Chang’an.”

Some distance behind Yurkan, Lady Zu felt renewed hope, along with joy, as a passing Nauca gave her a victorious sign: she now had good hopes of getting safely to Chang’an with young Zhang, and this in six months or less.

CHAPTER 11 – CHANG'AN



Chinese map of Chang'an during the Han Dynasty

14:24 (China Time)

Northwest gate of the imperial capital of Chang'an

Central China

Lady Zu, wearing her noblewoman's outfit and jewels and riding one of the captured horses led by Nauca, couldn't help cry with joy at the sight of the imperial capital and its 25.7-kilometer-long walls.

"CHANG'AN, AT LAST! MAY THE ANCESTORS BE PRAISED!"

She then hugged her equally happy daughter, who was riding a horse next to hers and was also wearing her original silk outfit.

"Soon, we will be able to see the Emperor and to tell him how this traitorous Huo Qing murdered your father. Then, that bastard will finally pay for his crimes."

On her part, Nauca was detailing what she could see of the vast walled city ahead of the caravan. Since entering China proper, the caravan had encountered numerous villages, small cities and farming communities, all of them not too different from what she had seen around Tanais, Bactriana and Sogdiana. Chang'an, on the other hand, was a totally different and most impressive affair. The Chinese imperial capital was defended by a triple line of walls, themselves surrounded by a large moat which partly followed the bed of the Wei River, which flowed past the city. Those walls, built of bricks, were a good twelve-meter-high and appeared very thick. The city's northwest wall, towards which the caravan was traveling, was pierced by three large gate towers, each pierced by three large gates. Another large walled complex, which Yurkan had told her was the Jianzhang imperial palace complex, sat to the East of the city proper, separated from it by a tributary of the Wei River. Chang'an was by far the largest city she had ever seen and Nauca could easily picture the kind of power it represented. Before the caravan got to the limits of the northern suburbs of the city, which spread out beyond the walls, Yurkan had stopped his caravan to have lunch. He had then told his people to wash and change into clean clothes after eating, so that they would look at their best when entering the imperial city. While Lady Zu and her daughter had happily changed into their original silk dresses, Nauca had put on the fine Punjabi silk outfit she had purchased (at an inflated price) in Samarkand, which consisted of an embroidered red and gold tunic over orange baggy trousers. She had also stored away on her pack horse most of her weapons, keeping only her battle-axe and dagger on her. The one thing she had kept on her all along, a small leather purse hanging from her neck by a bronze chain and containing the collection of precious gems which constituted much of her wealth, was still hanging between her breasts, safe from pickpockets and purse snatchers.

Nauca smiled when she saw that watching caravans come and go was a popular spectator sport for the inhabitants of the city's northern suburbs, with young children in particular eyeing with intense curiosity the riders and their long files of camels and horses loaded with bundles and bags. Maybe some of those children would one day grow up to become merchants themselves. What was also apparent to Nauca was that she, a woman traveling with a caravan and mounting a horse of unusual height and strength, attracted more than her fair share of the popular attention. As she passed by

an old beggar sitting against a wall, she threw him a silver coin while saying in Mandarin Chinese a sentence she had learned during her trip since leaving Khotan.

"May the Ancestors be with you, old man."

The beggar quickly caught the coin and bowed his head, thanking her profusely.

"May life be kind to you, pretty stranger."

The caravan soon arrived at one of the northwestern gates of the city, which was guarded by no less than thirty soldiers. However, contrary to the reception they had received in Khotan, they were not made to pay an entry toll, something that surprised Nauca. Trotting up to Yurkan's horse, she asked the merchant about that, bringing a benevolent smile on his lips.

"They don't need to collect tolls at the gates, Nauca: the imperial administration takes in more than enough money via the sales taxes applied to the trading of goods coming from caravans like ours. Here, every commercial transaction is taxed, although at a rate that is still reasonable."

"Oh, I see! How long are we going to stay in Chang'an before heading back towards Samarkand?"

"We will stay here for at least two weeks, time to sell our wares from the West and to buy new wares to bring to Samarkand. That will also give a chance to our horses and camels to recuperate from their long, arduous trip. You will have plenty of time to visit Chang'an in the meantime, my good Nauca. However, as soon as we will be installed in one of the caravanserais adjacent to the main market, you, me and Lushan will escort Lady Zu and her daughter to the imperial palace. I will feel a lot better once she is our responsibility no more."

Nauca could only nod to that: she and Yurkan had feared that a second cavalry column would have been sent by General Huo Qing after the first one had been ambushed and destroyed. Thankfully, the caravan had not been threatened after that.

Passing through the monumental gate, with its thick, iron-reinforced wooden doors, the caravan then followed a long, 45-meter-wide avenue split into three parallel lanes. That avenue, intersecting at regular intervals with side streets, was bordered by a succession of walled residential districts which lodged the population of the capital. Soon, the caravan arrived at the limits of a huge market plaza, where Yurkan made it turn left and follow the limits of the plaza until they arrived at the gate of one of the

numerous walled caravanserais built around the plaza. Entering the caravanserai with his horses and camels, Yurkan quickly jumped down on the ground to go see a thin Chinese man who was watching the Sogdian caravan enter the courtyard.

"Lu, you old bastard! It is nice to see you again after all these months." shouted in Sogdian Yurkan, making the man grin.

"And it is nice to see you again, you thieving merchant! I will get the best fodder for your beasts right away. Follow me and I will show you which stalls to use."

With Yurkan telling his associates and camel drivers to follow him, he went with the caravanserai owner to a long line of empty stalls. Yurkan, who had used this caravanserai many times in the past, had his pack beasts drop their loads in front of a nearby warehouse before distributing his beasts among the empty stalls, where stable boys got busy at once feeding the horses and camels and providing them with fresh water. Looking at the people composing the caravan, Lu was not a little surprised to see two women and a little girl in the lot.

"Women? This must be the first time that I see women as part of your caravan. From their outfits, I take it that they are not slaves you brought here to be sold, right?"

"Lu, you know very well that I never deal in slavery: Ahura Mazda would not approve. The one there is Nauca, one of my caravan guards and possibly the best archer I ever met. As for the Chinese woman and girl, they joined my caravan in Khotan."

Yurkan let it at that, not wanting for Lady Zu's story to be known until she was safely at the imperial palace. Lu, who understood the value of privacy and confidentiality, simply nodded his head at that.

"So, you will need lodging for 26 men and three females: thankfully for you, I still have plenty of rooms available for you and your people. I hope that your caravan is carrying some spices: I could use fresh supplies for my inn's kitchens."

"Don't worry, my friend: we have plenty of spices with us, including lots of curry spice from India."

"Aah, excellent! I love curry!"

The two men then discussed the cost of food and lodging for the caravan, quickly arriving at an understanding based on a two-week stay period. With that done and after paying in advance the discussed price, Yurkan next went to supervise the storing away under key of the merchandise brought by the caravan in the nearby warehouse. With Lu giving him the key to that warehouse, Yurkan then told Artaios, one of his associates

from Samarkand, to lead their people to their respective rooms, then went to see Nauca, Lushan, Lady Zu and little Zhang.

“We can now go to the imperial palace. With luck, the Emperor will accept to see us today.”

“He will, once he knows why we want to speak with him.” affirmed Lady Zu, sounding quite sure of herself. Yurkan, despite not sharing her optimism, simply shrugged, then got back on his horse and pointed the gate of the caravanserai to the Chinese noblewoman.

“Please lead the way, Lady Zu. I will let you discuss with the imperial guards at the palace.”

Lady Zu, who had plenty of time to learn how to properly mount and control a horse during her months of travel with the caravan, on top of learning some Sogdian, gracefully took his offer and, followed by her daughter, Yurkan, Lushan and Nauca, trotted out of the compound.

They rode along the periphery of the central market plaza, known as the ‘Nine Markets’, then took a westward avenue leading out of the city walls. Once there, they found themselves on a road leading to a bridge over a small river linking the city with the imperial palace complex. A large group of imperial guards then stopped them at the entrance to the bridge, with their officer then approaching Lady Zu.

“Who are you and what is the purpose of your presence here, Lady?”

“I am Lady Wei Zu, wife of imperial envoy Wei Shan, who was assassinated in Khotan by the local general when he tried to arrest him for corruption. Those merchants helped me evade that general’s soldiers and protected me while bringing me to the capital. I need to report at once the malfeasances of that general to the Emperor.”

The officer, who had already dealt in the past with numerous cases and claims of corruption and criminal behavior by officials and who knew how the Emperor took those claims seriously, bowed his head to Lady Zu.

“I will escort you to the palace complex’ gate proper, where I will hand you to one of the Emperor’s personal retainers. May I ask who your three companions are?”

“You certainly may! They are the master of the caravan who protected me, one of his associates who speaks Mandarin Chinese, plus the female guard who initially hid and protected me from the renegade soldiers in Khotan.”

The officer gave a critical look at Nauca at those words, noting her war axe and dagger, before nodding again.

“Then follow me, Lady Zu.”

The officer then walked across the bridge, leading the five riders at a quick pace. Once on the other side of the bridge, he spoke with the officer defending that extremity of the bridge, then proceeded to the fortified gate in the wall protecting the palace complex. Lady Zu felt relief when she recognized the imperial official who came out to listen to the officer’s story. In turn, that official also recognized her and bowed to her.

“Lady Zu! What brought you back so soon to Chang’an from Khotan?”

“The corruption and treason of General Huo Qing, the commander of the Khotan garrison, my good Zhenjun.”

She then took a minute to tell her story to the official, whose face became progressively sober.

“A most scandalous story indeed, Lady Zu, and one the Emperor will be eager to hear. I will escort Lady Zu and her companions to the imperial palace, Commander. You may return to your post.”

The officer bowed down in response and walked back across the bridge, leaving Lady Zu’s party with the official, who showed his knowledge of Sogdian by addressing Yurkan.

“You and your associates will have to leave your weapons on your horses, which will then be led to nearby stalls. We will continue on foot to the palace.”

Yurkan, imitated by Nauca and Lushan, agreed readily to that and jumped off their horses before slipping their few weapons in their saddlebags. As an imperial soldier led their horses to a nearby barn, eight more soldiers formed an escort around the official, Lady Zu, little Zhang and the three caravan persons. Walking at a measured pace, the group then headed towards one of the impressive, magnificently decorated pagoda-style buildings of the complex, crossing on its way numerous imperial functionaries and quite a few noble ladies with their servants’ retinues. Those noble ladies in turn eyed Nauca in particular, sometimes with evident arrogant disdain. Nauca did her best to ignore them, although she would have loved to teach those aristocrat women some humility.

Their group finally arrived at the foot of the stairs of a palace building that was positively covered with gold decorations and was guarded by a good hundred imperial guards. There, Zhenjun spoke at length to the officer in charge of the palace guards,

who then let him go inside the palace while telling Lady Zu and her companions to wait. After a fifteen-minute wait, Zhenjun was back and bowed to Lady Zu.

“The Emperor will receive you in the Throne Room. Please follow me.”

As he led Lady Zu and her daughter up the stairs, the retainer explained quickly to Yurkan, Lushan and Nauca the rules of etiquette to be followed.

“You three will have to stop and wait once inside the Throne Room, where you will kneel and bow while Lady Zu goes forward to tell her story to the Emperor. You are not to speak, unless the Emperor directly asks you a question. Any disrespect shown towards the Emperor could cost you your lives. Do you understand me?”

“Completely!” replied Yurkan, while Lushan and Nauca bowed their heads in understanding. Passing by more guards standing at the entrance of the palace, they soon entered a splendidly decorated hall in which a golden throne sat atop a dais at one end of the hall. On the throne sat a man in his late twenties or early thirties dressed in a rich silk robe and sporting a long, thin beard and moustache. On a sign from Zhenjun, Yurkan, Lushan and Nauca knelt and bowed deep, with their heads touching the floor. Lady Zu and little Zhang were then escorted towards the throne, stopping and kneeling once within ten paces of it. A fast conversation in Mandarin followed, with Lady Zu telling her story and then answering multiple questions from Emperor Xuan. Nauca, who had learned a few words and sentences in Mandarin with the help of Lushan during their trip, did not understand more than a few of the words that were said, but she could tell from the Emperor’s expression that he was listening most seriously to Lady Zu’s story. To Nauca’s surprise, Emperor Xuan stood up from his throne after proclaiming some edict in Mandarin that was noted down by a scribe, then walked down from his dais to go meet Lady Zu, who he then gently made come to her feet, along with her daughter. He then kissed both on their cheeks and hugged them before having a court lady advance and escort away the noblewoman and her daughter. What followed stunned Nauca as well as the imperial retainer: Emperor Xuan actually walked to her group and, stopping three paces from them, gave an order in Mandarin Chinese, which Zhenjun translated in Sogdian.

“You are to get back on your feet, but keep your head bowed, unless the Emperor says otherwise.”

Lushan, who was Chinese, started sweating as he got up: such courtesy shown by the Emperor to commoners was unheard of! Emperor Xuan examined the trio with interest

for a few seconds, showing particular attention to Nauca, then spoke in a friendly tone, translated by Zhenjun.

“The Emperor thank you for protecting Lady Zu the way you did and is most grateful to you.”

The Emperor then pointed at Nauca and spoke further, his words translated at once.

“The Emperor wishes to see your face, woman. He wants to know why you risked yourself and your caravan to hide and protect Lady Zu.”

Realizing how important this moment was, Nauca looked straight into the eyes of the Emperor and answered him with complete frankness.

“I did so because I saw the ultimate fight and death of Lady Zu’s husband and of his last bodyguards, who heroically resisted vastly more numerous opponents in order to give a chance to Lady Zu and her daughter to escape their assassins. I simply could not make their sacrifice go in vain and let those jackals massacre a mother and her young daughter. When Lady Zu came to me, pleading for help, I hid her and her daughter inside one of the stalls occupied by Yurkan’s caravan. Yurkan then misdirected the soldiers who were looking for Lady Zu.”

Emperor Xuan listened to the translation by Zhenjun, then nodded soberly at Nauca and said a few more words.

“You have shown both compassion and courage, young woman, and you are to be admired for that. Your caravan master also showed commendable courage by supporting your actions, risking dire consequences for his whole caravan if those soldiers would have then found Lady Zu. You have both merited greatly and will be rewarded accordingly. First, though, I would like to know where you came from originally, young woman: I never saw the likes of you before, since the caravans who come to Chang’an rarely include women.”

“Your Majesty, my name is Nauca and I was born in the steppes of Sarmatia, north of the Pontus Euxinus. The Greeks called us Sarmatian female warriors ‘Amazons’ and many Sarmatians fought for King Mithridates of Pontus against the Romans, until King Mithridates was finally defeated some two years ago.”

To Nauca’s surprise, Emperor Xuan’s eyes opened wide at the mention of ‘Amazons’.

“You are one of those famed ‘Amazons’? I have read many stories imported from Greece, particularly following the wars fought by the celebrated Alexander of Macedonia, and was struck by the stories about mounted female warriors. The courage you showed in Khotan certainly honors the reputation of those Amazons.”

Feeling pride fill her, Nauca bowed low to the Emperor while replying to his compliment.

“I am greatly honored by your words, Your Majesty.”

Turning sideways and signaling Zhenjun to approach him, Emperor Xuan then whispered a few words to him, making him bow in response, before saying a few ultimate words to Nauca.

“I wish you a long and prosperous life, Nauca of Sarmatia. Enjoy your stay in my capital.”

“You are too kind, Your Majesty.”

Making a last smile, the Emperor then turned around and walked away, leaving Yurkan, Nauca and Lushan alone with Zhenjun and four imperial guards. As Nauca blew air out following her surprise exchange with Emperor Xuan, Zhenjun showed them the entrance of the Throne Room.

“If you may go out and wait outside, by this door, I will go take care of something, then will escort you back to the city gates.”

Obeying at once, the three caravan persons left the Throne Room and went to wait outside in the main hallway of the building as Zhenjun quickly walked away. Lushan, still shaking a bit from the emotion, wiped away sweat from his forehead.

“By the Spirits! I would have never believed that I would one day be received like this by the Emperor.”

Yurkan, equally impressed, nodded his head at that.

“And neither would I! I will have something to brag about to my brother Hiram once we are back in Samarkand. As for you, Nauca, you sure seemed to make an impression on Emperor Xuan. This is a moment truly worthy of remembering.”

“What could come next, Yurkan?”

“The Emperor promised that we would be rewarded for our acts. I thus expect this Zhenjun to return soon with our reward, probably lots of gold.”

“Gold is always good!” said a smiling Lushan, attracting a retort from Nauca.

“Yes, but I will be most happy when that bastard of General Huo Qing will pay for his crimes. The World will then be a better place without him.”

Yurkan patted gently her shoulder in response, looking fondly at her.”

“Nauca, you would make an exemplary disciple of Ahura Mazda: you have true good in your heart.”

Some twenty minutes later, Zhenjun was back, followed by two male servants carrying a compact but apparently heavy wooden coffer. Lushan's eyes glistened at the sight of the coffer.

"I already feel that I will like our reward."

On their part, Yurkan and Nauca kept silent as Zhenjun made the two servants put down the coffer in front of them and smiled to them.

"Please accept this small gift with the heartfelt gratitude of the Emperor. This coffer is now yours. You may open it if you wish so."

Unable to resist that offer, Yurkan knelt and slowly opened the coffer. His eyes opened wide at the sight of the hundreds of glistening gold coins filling the coffer. There was however a flat, polished and sculpted jade-covered box atop the gold coins. Zhenjun then bent down and grabbed the box, to then offer it to Nauca.

"The Emperor thought that simple gold coins would not be appropriate to truly show his admiration towards your beauty and courage, Nauca of Sarmatia."

Taking the box and gently opening it, Nauca felt blood rush to her head at the view of the magnificent set of jewels inside, which included a sort of tiara that included a golden chain meant to lie across one's forehead, two bracelets and a pair of earrings. All of them were made of splendid, polished precious gems mounted on gold chains or plaques. She looked back at Zhenjun, gratitude and happiness in her eyes.

"These are truly magnificent! Please thank the Emperor on my part for such a splendid gift to me."

"These are meant to thank you, Nauca of Sarmatia." replied the retainer, smiling with malice. "But I will tell him that you liked them. If you will now follow me, we will go back to the bridge leading to the city gates."



With the precious jade box in her hands, **Reproduction of ancient Chinese set of jewels** Nauca then left the palace behind the retainer, while Yurkan and Lushan teamed up to carry the heavy coffer full of gold. They did not comment between themselves until they were back on their horses and had crossed the bridge leading to the city gates.

"Wow!" exclaimed Lushan once out of hearing range of the imperial guards. "Those jewels you got are truly worthy of a queen, Nauca. They are probably worth as much as the gold coins we are carrying."

"Maybe, but both Borund and Gurak deserve to be rewarded as well: they fought with me against those Chinese cavalymen."

"Don't worry about them, Nauca: they will get their fair share of gold...and so will you! Those jewels you received as gifts are undoubtedly worth a fortune, but they won't help you buy food and fodder during our return trip and I would hate to see such royal jewels being peddled away. You should consider them as a personal gift from the Emperor to you, to be worn on important occasions in the future, so you will get your share of gold coins."

Lushan was about to protest that but was cut by Yurkan with a raised finger.

"if Nauca would not have decided on her own at night to hide and protect Lady Zu and her daughter in Khotan, then we would have received none of this gold, Lushan. That she now asks that Borund and Gurak be rewarded as well showed her sense of fairness and honesty, which I can only admire. Don't worry, Lushan: you will also get rich."

The Chinese gems and spices merchant had to recognize the truth in his arguments and clamed up.

21:49 (China Time)

Nauca's room, inn of Chang'an Caravanserai # 6

Having drank only moderately during the party thrown by Yurkan to celebrate their safe arrival in Chang'an and the reward received from Emperor Xuan, Nauca had returned early to the room she occupied alone in the inn of the caravanserai in which the caravan was staying. Removing her clothes except for her loincloth, she sat on her bed, made of a straw mattress resting on a wooden frame, ready to go to sleep. However, the same conflicting thoughts that had been running in her head since she had left the imperial palace were still present. Getting up and searching under her bed, she pulled out the precious jade-decorated box she had received as a gift from the Emperor and sat down, then opened it to contemplate the set of magnificent jewels inside. While she truly admired their visual beauty, what they represented was what was troubling her at the present. She had been born in the wilderness of the steppes and had spent most of her

young life living in community with raw nature, hunting, trapping, helping raise horses and moving to new grounds with her family at the start of every Winter and Spring. She had been content with that life until she had lost her family to bandits, some four years ago. Then, she had been left with little choice but to establish herself in Tanais on a semi-permanent basis in order to survive and have a point of operation that would allow her to launch on hunting and trapping trips. She had not disliked her three years spent in Tanais at the caravanserai run by Thanos, while she had made a very good friend in Artemisia, but it had not felt like how she truly wanted to live. The urge to move around and explore had finally decided her to join Hiram's caravan and travel all the way to Samarkand, where she had then joined Yurkan's caravan to go to China. Up to now, she had not regretted leaving Tanais to travel eastward, if she excepted the loss of her friend Artemisia. She had been travelling to her content, seeing new vistas and people nearly every day while being one with her horse Tamat and hunting to provide food to the caravan when the occasion permitted. She had also lived through a few adventurous moments, like when they had been attacked by bandits and when she had ambushed that Chinese cavalry column. However, her arrival in Chang'an and this gift from Emperor Xuan was now reviving her questions about what she truly wanted to do of the rest of her life. Both the loot she had been accumulating during her trip and the gifts she had received, including the jewels and precious objects she had received from King Mithridates when he had stopped overnight at her camp in the Taiga, had made her technically rich, if she compared herself to the average commoner. However, that had also created a dilemma for her. There was no truly safe way to hold on to and protect those riches while traveling with them, especially when alone. One day, she was bound to get robbed of them while sleeping or, worse, their mere possession would cause her to be attacked and killed by people wanting to grab them. She didn't want to become paranoiac about safeguarding her treasure while travelling far and wide. There was also the added factor that she was a young and pretty woman, something else that could likely attract attacks on her. She was realistic enough to accept the fact that this World was often a cruel, merciless one where a lone traveling young woman was at even greater risks than merchants and peasants. If that traveling young woman also happened to carry a fortune in gold and jewels, then her safety prospects became grim indeed. What was she to do then? Renounce her life on the trail and establish herself for good in some place like Samarkand or Tanais? Nauca rejected that option about as quickly as it had come to her mind. She was not and never would be a city-dwelling

person, except for short periods between long distance trips and voyages. Maybe, when she became too old to continue doing long and arduous trips, she would become more sedentary, maybe. However, she was still only eighteen-years-old and in excellent health and had decades of adventurous life ahead of her. Unable to take a firm decision at this time, she resolved herself to search next morning for the counsels of a much wiser and seasoned person. Hiding back the precious box under her bed, Nauca then laid down and went to sleep.

08:05 (China Time)

Friday, June 30, 62 B.C.E.

Great hall of the inn of Chang'an Caravanserai # 6

Yurkan was about finished eating his breakfast when Nauca came to sit at his table in a corner of the inn's great hall, a reserved expression on her young face.

"Good morning, Yurkan! Could we speak in private for a moment?"

Looking around him and seeing that the nearest other occupant of the hall was a good six paces away, Yurkan nodded once and spoke in Greek.

"Go ahead, Nauca. Is something bothering you?"

"In a way, but not because of you or of your caravan." replied Nauca, also using Greek. She then spent a couple of minutes to expose to the caravan master her life dilemma, ending with a question.

"What would you counsel me to do, Yurkan?"

The Sogdian merchant, his expression now most serious, put down the knife he had been using to cut pieces of cheese and stared in silence for a moment at Nauca.

"I can understand your dilemma about this, Nauca, truly. Part of the reason I became a caravan merchant was precisely to be able to travel around and not stay fixed to a single place. For a nomad like you, that is even more of an important factor. On the other hand, you are absolutely correct about the dangers that a young woman carrying gold and jewels would face while traveling alone. You could even end up too easily being captured, robbed, raped and then turned into a slave. I would not wish that even on my worst enemy. You obviously agreed with the life of a caravan member and proved most useful as a guard and hunter to my own caravan, while my brother Hiram said a lot of good about you. I would thus be more than happy to keep you with my

caravan in your present role. While with us, you could benefit from the security provided by the group and thus could sleep without the fear of getting robbed by some bandits.”

“And what if I wish one day to go somewhere other than the destination of your caravan? You do depend on regular customers and known places of commerce, after all.”

“Well, in that case you wouldn’t be able to avoid the dangers associated with traveling by yourself, but you could mitigate your risks by carrying only a minimum of valuables with you. You already have a few precious objects stowed in the safety of one of my family’s strong coffers in Samarkand and you will be more than welcome to store more of your valuables there prior to leaving on a long trip.”

“That is most interesting, Yurkan, but what good is it to accumulate gold and riches if they are to spend years inside a secure coffer? A lot of good things and deeds could be accomplished with that stashed gold, if I plan things well.”

That last sentence brought a smile to Yurkan’s face.

“Aah! Those are words that I like as a merchant. You are very right about dormant gold being next to useless. I have seen many men who stashed away their treasure, often by burying it in some hidden location, only to die before they could retrieve it and profit from the money. As a good disciple of Ahura Mazda, to do good deeds with your gold also appeals to me, on top of proving that you have a great heart. I would indeed have been proud to have you as my daughter, Nauca.”

Nauca reddened a bit with embarrassment at his compliment, then looked back at him, still indecisive.

“So, how could I live the kind of life I enjoy while using well my gold?”

“Easy, Nauca: join me as an associate, invest in our caravan and keep working under me when accompanying my caravan. If you ever decide to go somewhere I don’t go, then I could refer you to some other trustworthy caravan master heading the same way as you do, so that you could travel as part of a group. Caravans come to Samarkand from many places in this World, while my brother Hiram knows caravan masters and merchants who come to Tanais from many other places, like Greece and the Nordic countries to the Northwest of your own Sarmatia.”

Those words struck Nauca at once, making her grin with enthusiasm.

“I like that! Uh, when you said that I could invest in your caravan, how could I do that exactly? I know little about trading and the prices of various goods.”

“Oh, I would be more than happy to counsel you on that, Nauca. I know that you are already very knowledgeable about both horses and furs and can judge well their overall quality. You also have shown interest in various spices, which are both high value goods and easy ones to transport. If you agree to become one of my associates, then I will help you buy here the kind of things which could bring you a good profit in Samarkand or in Tanais. And if you really wish to spend some of your gold to do good deeds, then there are no shortages of people who would deserve help in Samarkand. So, what do you say, Nauca?”

“That you convinced me, Yurkan.” replied a smiling Nauca, sharing a forearm shake with the Sogdian.

08:10 (China Time)

Saturday, July 15, 62 B.C.E.

Courtyard of Caravanserai # 6

Chang’an, China

“CARAVAN, FORWARD!”

At Yurkan’s shouted command the long line of camels and horse riders started filing out of the caravanserai’s courtyard, heading towards Samarkand with new loads of merchandises acquired in Chang’an during the previous two weeks. One of the new acquisitions of the caravan was a pair of extra camels, bought by Nauca and loaded with sacs of spices and bundles of silk, dried tea leaves and sculpted jade artifacts, also bought by Nauca with her large reserve of gold coins. While she would still act as a caravan guard for this trip, she would be ending up protecting some goods of her own as well as a new business associate to Yurkan.

CHAPTER 12 – BACK IN SAMARKAND



17:11 (Central Asia Time)

Wednesday, February 21, 61 B.C.E.

Yurkan's family caravanserai, city of Samarkand

Sogdiana

Yurkan felt both joy and satisfaction as he led his caravan inside his family caravanserai, which he co-owned with his brother Hiram: he had just completed safely another long trip from Chang'an, and this without losing a single beast or suffering a single attack by bandits. As for his fears concerning General Huo Qing as he got close to Khotan, he had not needed to worry about Qing: an imperial army of 5,000 men had preceded his caravan and had promptly convinced Qing's own soldiers to surrender him to the imperial army, following which Qing had been beheaded in view of his troops as an example, along with his principal officers. Yurkan had thus been able to conduct some proper business in Khotan this time, where he had made some profitable trading with caravans from India. Young Nauca had also found that stop in Khotan profitable, being able to acquire a sizeable stock of the Indian curry spice she appreciated so much and which she was promising to herself to sell in Tanais, once she could accompany Hiram's next caravan heading West.

Yurkan felt more joy on seeing his wife Tansa come out of the family house at a run while shouting his name. Jumping off his horse, he ran to meet her, receiving her in his opened arms before kissing her passionately.

“By Ahura Mazda, those months away from you felt like eternity, my lovely Tansa!”

“And I missed you horribly, Yurkan. I hope that your trip has not tired you too much?”

“Not enough to prevent me from honoring you tonight. Is Hiram home or is he still traveling with his caravan?”

“He has returned from his latest trip to Tanais a month ago. In fact, here he is, coming out of the house.”

“Then, let me talk to him for a moment. I will return my attention back on you after that.”

“Go ahead, my dear husband.” replied Tansa with a smirk. “I know how important business talk is for you.”

Jokingly patting his wife’s bum in reply, Yurkan then met his brother in the middle of the courtyard as his caravan split up to go to the various stalls still available. The two men exchanged solid forearm shakes and vigorous pats on the back before looking in each other’s eyes.

“So, how was your return trip to China?” asked first Hiram, making Yurkan smile.

“A bit agitated but also very profitable, Brother.” Said Yurkan, who then spent a few minutes describing how he and Nauca had helped and protected Lady Zu in Khotan and how Emperor Xuan had personally rewarded them. That story made Hiram open big eyes.

“Wow! You met the Emperor in person and was rewarded by him? I must say that my own return trip to and from Tanais was rather lackluster compared to your trip.”

“And how did your trip to Tanais go?”

Yurkan didn’t miss the way Hiram’s enthusiasm somewhat cooled down.

“It was rather uneventful but the business in Tanais was not as good as I hoped for.”

“Oh? Why?”

“Because a Roman delegation showed up in Tanais in the last few months and established a Roman trade counter there, complete with a garrison of about a hundred legionnaires. The Romans then started to levy some extra taxes of their own over the

protests of the local Archon. We are still free to conduct trade in Tanais but those new Roman taxes are severely eating into our profit margins. The rumors and sayings about Roman infinite greed sure proved correct.”

“Damn! Tanais was an important destination for us as a relay for our goods. Where do you think that we could go instead of Tanais, to avoid those Roman taxes?”

“Frankly, I don’t know and I am not too optimistic, Brother: the Romans firmly control the whole area of the Pontus Euxinus and of the old Kingdom of Pontus. They have as well occupied Greece and Thracia a few decades ago. They are now said to be advancing in force eastward from Syria towards Parthia and Bactriana. If someone doesn’t stop soon those damn Romans, we are liable to see them here within a few years.”

Yurkan mulled for a moment that information before an idea came to his mind.

“Maybe we should switch your caravan southward instead of westward and go into India. There are plenty of interesting goods there...and no Romans.”

Hiram caressed his beard as he thought that over.

“That’s not a bad idea, actually. From India, we could also use ships to reach Africa to the West and Asia to the East and make exchanges with many new customers. However, those new trading routes could prove quite hazardous, especially if we have to risk ourselves at sea.”

“Then, take Nauca with you as a caravan guard. She is also now one of our associates and has invested part of her gold into our business by buying two camels and large stocks of spices, silk and tea.”

“Nauca is now one of our associates?” said Hiram, breaking into a happy grin. “Good for her! That girl deserves to go far in life, even if her goals and motivations are not the same as ours. How did you manage to convince her to get into our business?”

“I didn’t! She was the one who came to me and asked me my counsel about how to use her gold.”

Yurkan then took a minute to tell Hiram about the conversation he had with Nauca in Chang’an, making Hiram look at Nauca, who was busy taking his saddle and bags off her horses.

“Decidedly, that girl will never stop surprising me with her level of maturity for her age. Many men I know who are much older than her would have simply spent their gold on wine and women.”

"I know! She also amply proved to me that she has as well a heart of gold, with real compassion for others, on top of being most honest and dependable. We gained a good, useful associate with her, Hiram."

"True! Well, I better go tell our cook at the inn to put some extra pieces of meat on the fire for supper."

In the stables of the caravanserai, Nauca made sure that her two horses and two camels had ample feed and water, then worked for an hour with the other caravan members to store their precious merchandises inside the secure warehouse of the caravanserai. She was positively famished when she walked in the great hall of the inn with the others, their work done. She suddenly shouted out in joy at the sight of two men already sitting at a table.

"TIMUR! GORUDOS!"

She then ran to them as the two men, equally happy to see her, got up from their benches to greet her with open arms. The three of them hugged each other for a long moment before they sat down at the table, where two covers had already been served for Timur and Gorudos. The latter didn't waste any time into ordering a maid to bring food and drinks to Nauca, then smiled to her.

"So, how was your trip to China, Nauca?"

"Most interesting and also profitable." said Nauca before spending long minutes describing her trip to Chang'an, concentrating particularly on the Lady Zu Affair. The mention of a personal gift from Emperor Xuan made both men look at her with some disbelief.

"The Emperor of China gave you a gift, in his own palace?" said Gorudos. Without saying a word in reply, Nauca broke into a smile and took out of a haversack she was carrying via a strap passed across her chest the jade-decorated box containing her imperial gift and, putting the box on the table, opened it to expose its content to Timur and Gorudos. Timur nearly spilled his cup of wine at the sight of the set of jewels.

"Wow! Those would be worthy of a princess...but you are one, aren't you, Nauca?"

"Nice try, Timur! I see that you have something in mind for tonight, no?"

"And why would I not be having ideas concerning you, Nauca?" replied Timur, grinning.

Nauca did not reply to that at once, being somewhat conflicted on that subject. She did like Timur very much, but she was afraid that he would ask her to marry him if she slept with him. However, her long-term projects excluded marriage for the next few years, at the least, and she didn't want to risk a pregnancy just before going on another long trip. She thus gently took one of his hands and stared into his eyes.

"Timur, you know that I want to stay independent as much as possible, so that I could continue to travel around. We are friends, but I can't promise more than that for the moment."

While disappointed, Timur was not surprised by her response: she had already told him many times before her departure for China about her desire to follow a free life, unencumbered by a family. Himself an ex-nomad, he could understand her wishes but still felt some hurt. Sighing heavily, he pressed in turn her hand.

"The day that you will be available, I will be there for you, Nauca." Gorudos, who was much older than both Timur and Nauca, watched that exchange with an amused smile.

"Wow! Burning love in the open!"

In response, both Nauca and Timur pulled out their tongues at him. They were still laughing together when Yurkan and Hiram came to their table and asked to speak with Nauca in private. The two male guards obliged and moved their food to another table, letting the two merchants sit opposite Nauca. Hiram spoke to her first.

"Nauca, Yurkan told me that you have become one of our associates and also told me why you did so. I perfectly understand your motives and can only applaud the way you are steering your life: it shows great maturity on your part. As both a caravan guard and an associate merchant, we are most happy to have you with us."

"Thank you, Hiram. When are you planning another trip to Tanais?"

"Uh, normally I would wait a couple of months before leaving Samarkand, in order to avoid the worst of Winter, but I am still not sure anymore about my next destination. When I arrived in Tanais, I found that the Romans had established a commercial counter there, along with a small military garrison. Those Romans had also instituted new taxes on traded merchandises, despite the protests of the Archon. Those taxes in turn impacted heavily on the anticipated profits of my caravan and I ended up only a bit above breaking even point once back in Samarkand. I thus am still undecided about where my caravan will head on my next trip. However, Yurkan suggested to me

that I go South, towards India, and I am strongly tempted to take his advice. If I go to India, would you accept to accompany my caravan there, Nauca?"

Nauca did not have to think twice before answering Hiram. Getting up from her bench, she presented her right arm for a shake and spoke in a firm voice.

"You can count on me, Hiram. India it will be!"

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