

Leon's Story

328 B.C.

"What in Hades makes you want to go east, boy?" Philokles grumbled. His breath already smelled of wine. The sun was rising in the east, just the first edge of fire visible above the eastern mountains.

Across the Jaxartes River, a handful of Sogdians watched the Sakje like caribou watch a pack of wolves. The Sogdian cavalry were the last rearguard of Iskander's army, which had marched away to better fodder and better supplies at Alexander Eschate. They weren't watching the army of the Massagetae. That host had dispersed within hours of the battle's end, every band headed for better grass and winter hunting. The summer had been hard, and because of it, the winter would be harder.

What they watched was a column of horsemen that stretched along the river for more than a stade, and at the head of the column, a group of riders gathered close. At the center of the group, a dark-haired woman in a golden gorget, her eyes swollen from weeping, sat on a piebald mare and next to her a red bearded Greek in a gilded helmet that reflected the rising sun's fire, and a dark-skinned man on a beautiful black horse.

"You're sure you won't come with us?" Diodorus asked.

Leon the Numidian thought that the Athenian was holding himself together very tightly, while the Spartan showed the power of his grief openly. He imagined the Athenian's soul bound with strips of forged bronze to keep it together. "We're sure," Leon said. His horse was fretting. She wanted to move. He looked at Srayanka and sneered inwardly. *Crying for your lover? Or your lost war leader?* he asked inside his head. Srayanka treated him as a child, and one of the reasons he was leaving was to avoid her.

His fascination with the Qu'in had started in the camp of the Sauromatae, when he had seen the silk and the mechanical bow and the startling lacquer work on the bow that Temerix now carried in his *gorytos*. An empire of master craftsmen, with goods that would sell for fantastic prices. And all he had to do was to cross another thousand parasanges to the east. A thousand parasanges where *he* would be the chief, not the outsider, not the former slave, and not, absolutely not, anyone's child or plaything.

He had money – more money than any former slave he knew, more money than most rich men in most of the cities of the Euxine. His former master (Leon started, even half-way across the world, at the instant memory of scent and feeling, hate and love, that had been Nicomedes) had left him half his fortune. So now, at the end of the world, he had hired the *Prodromoi*, the semi-tribe of elite

Sakje and Sindii led by Ataelus and Samahe and the smith, Temerix. Kineas had chosen them to lead his scouts.

Kineas had chosen all of them, and now Kineas was dead. There it was again, and Leon's eyes filled up again and he turned his head away to hide his tears.

Ataelus and Samahe and all of the *Prodromoi* waited patiently, a little apart. They had already said their farewells. Many were leaving their kin for the first time, but parting sat lightly on the Sakje, and the Sindii sat on their ponies with no look beyond expectation of another day in the saddle. There was always tomorrow, and the Sea of Grass ran everywhere.

Diodorus leaned forward, ignored Leon's flinch, and embraced him. "Go with Hermes at your shoulder, and return rich!" he said.

Leon was surprised by the warmth of the embrace, and surprised to find himself crying again. "I'm sorry that I will miss the building – the raising –" he broke off with an ignominious snuffle.

Srayanka extended a hand. "He will have a mighty kurgan. You will come and leave a gift from the east." She leaned over and kissed him, and Leon asked himself *why am I leaving these people*. "Go well," she said, with none of her accustomed acerbity, and Leon wondered if he had her wrong.

Leon wiped his face with his forearm. “I want to find the Qu’in,” he said. “I want to see both ends of the trade.” He found that even now, he couldn’t fully explain his need to ride east – east and further east. To do something for himself.

Srayanka managed a smile. “Go make us all rich,” she said, because her children would gain by his success – if he succeeded. Kineas’s children. Leon looked at them, then bent to kiss their heads. The last remnant of the man he had worshipped. He would succeed – for them, if not for himself.

Srayanka looked past Leon at Ataelus, and the small Sakje man grinned. “Don’t get lost without me!” he said in Sakje.

His wife punched him in the shoulder, and Srayanka rode over and kissed him on the cheek, and he, too, gripped hands with Diodorus.

They all looked at each other for too long, and the tears never stopped, except from Diodorus. But when the silence stretched away, too long and too deep, Diodorus raised his hand. “Farewell, Leon!” he shouted. “Listen to Ataelus!” With that last admonishment – another jibe from the older and wiser – he brought his hand down sharply. “Column! March!”

They all rode away. Srayanka led all the Assagetae, and Diodorus led the Olbians and the Keltoi, and Gwair Blackhorse led the Sauromatae. Prince Lot, who had led his armoured knights on a dozen fields, lay bundled and wrapped

in honey on the travois, headed into the sun where he would have a kurgan raised in his honor a thousand stades away.

And on another travois, his body carefully tended, the mortal remains of Kineas of Athens bumped along the parched earth, headed home, and beside him rode Philokles, head down. And above them, at the height of the ridge down which they had ridden like avenging gods, the burnished gold of Hephaestion's helmet caught the first of the sun at the top of the trophy and threw a point of light like a golden star that could be seen for a parasange.

Leon watched them until the first long curve of the Jaxartes took the leaders out of sight, his mare fidgeting between his knees, anxious to move. She loved to run.

"Shush, Jugina," he said, and reached down to pat the side of her gleaming neck. Then he watched the dust cloud for a while, until Ataelus rode up next to him and tugged at his bridle.

"Horses for riding, not for standing. Let's ride." The Sakje raised both his eyebrows, making the statement a question.

Leon nodded, a summer of resentment draining away into longing. He was mature enough to know that much of his resentment was self-inflicted; no one had called him African, barbarian, or slave in months, but the images stuck to him like the sweat of an unwanted lover.

Kineas's cavalry was full of such men, but Leon felt the stings of each distinction like so many thorns in his flesh. And yet, now that he was leaving, the summer seemed idyllic in memory, despite its end in blood.

Or perhaps, like the others, he was just mourning Kineas.

He pulled his straw hat up from his back and secured it on his head. "Let's go," he agreed. The rising dust stuck to his tears.

Leon had purchased all the mules taken in a summer of skirmishes. He packed them with armour from the battlefield and put them in the charge of Temerix and all of his Sindii, tough men from north of Olbia, all mounted on tough steppe ponies. Twenty Sakje and Sauromatae scouts led by Ataelus, Kineas's hand-picked scout captain, provided his escort. With the Prodrmoi as scouts and as insurance against other Sakje on the plains, they made good time. In ten days riding, they were out of the near desert that the Sea of Grass became in high summer. They rode along the vale of the Jaxartes as she flowed down out of the Askantankas Mountains that rose on either hand. The valley was fertile, and peasants stopped their tilling and weeding to watch the caravan ride by. Twice, village elders came out to trade. Leon spoke to them about the route east, about the rise in the mountains and the pass east of the next real town, which they called *Zurabasat* or something like it.

Ataelus shook his head. "Not a Sakje name," he said. The man was not happy with the encroaching mountains. He was not happy about sharing the leadership with a boy, either, and he criticized Leon's arrangements for pickets and seemed to enjoy showing Leon why the campsites he picked could have been improved.

Leon bit down on his replies, as he always did – one of the virtues of having been a slave is that you never, ever said what you thought. And when the heat of the criticism was past, Leon was forced to acknowledge that his campsite had been too far from the water, and his picket post had been screened by a stand of pine trees that left the pickets blind to horse thieves coming up a gully.

So the next time Leon had to choose a camp, he asked Temerix, the Sindii smith. "Look," he said, aware that he was explaining too much to the older man. "All the grass is in that bowl. Thieves can't even see the horses unless they're up on those hillsides. The water is close and plentiful. And someone else had built an oven."

Temerix shrugged. "Ask Ataelus," he said.

Leon glanced at the Sindii. "I asked you," he said.

Temerix shrugged again. "Ask Ataelus," he repeated, and frowned. Temerix didn't talk much, and he was not in the habit of repeating himself.

So Leon rode over to where Samahe was watching their back trail, a bow in her fist, with her husband drinking water from a skin. Below them, in the river bed, a dozen Sakje and a pair of Sindii were watering the ponies.

“What do you think of that hillside for a camp? There’s a bowl of grass where—” Leon didn’t get into his defense before Ataelus flicked his eyes around the valley and grinned.

“It is good,” he said. He smiled, and Leon had to wonder what the smile meant.

Samahe smiled too. “It is just the kind of camp that Kineax liked,” she said.

Leon felt the warmth spread to his cheeks and then his neck. “Thanks!” he said, and then, “I’m learning.”

Ataelus raised an eyebrow, but said nothing, and Leon rode back to the column, fetched his personal pack animal and began to strip off his camp kit. Temerix shared space on the mule—pack animals were at a premium with all the goods and the silver that Leon had loaded. The two men unloaded the animal in silence, picketed the pack animal and their own mounts, and then trudged over to the pre-built stone fireplaces and the domed oven where the other members of their caravan, Sakje and Sindii, were erecting a camp. Their camp had no tents and no structures. When it rained they were wet. Leon stretched a heavy wool cloak over three of his javelins tied at the corners, which served to keep rain off

for a few minutes – when it rained. The little shelter always made Ataelus smile, and that forced Leon to keep building it.

Besides, Kineas had always built such a shelter, when they were moving fast and didn't have tents or wagons. Philokles had shown him how to tie the knots.

Leon rubbed his chin. Two weeks of traveling had done a great deal to dull the pain of loss, and it almost felt as if he had been traveling forever like this, with a wheel of stars at night and Temerix coughing at his side every morning. "The last man didn't even know who Iskander was," he said, chewing a blade of grass, his eyes looking up the endless valley. The shelter was up, and he and Temerix were sitting by the fire with Ataelus and Samahe.

Ataelus nodded. "The war never for coming up Jaxartes." He pointed at the young river bubbling down the slope between huge rocks. "Not enough water for that army."

Temerix grunted, rolled in his cloak, and seemed to sleep. Leon knew from sharing the man's space that he didn't sleep much.

Two days ride more, and the nights were too cold for a single man and his cloak. Leon shared with Temerix, who had become his file-mate by virtue of the fact that each man was alone.

For several nights he found it hard to sleep with a man's body touching him, and he had bad dreams, but the Sindii leader was unmoved and wanted only warmth, and by the third night Leon unrolled a sheepskin he had bought from a farmer. He pressed himself against the Sindii smith without a shudder and fell straight asleep. In the morning, the Sindii made tea from herbs they had gathered and Leon was thankful for it, his cold hands clutched around a warm pottery cup that had been made fifteen thousand stades to the west in Olbia.

Temerix built up the fire, adding twigs and carefully split wood to get a flame under the bronze cauldron for the second serving of tea. He had a bronze knife, sharp enough to shave, and he used it to whittle or split fine, dry bits of wood. He looked up at Leon. "You have bad dreams," he said. He was looking for a word, and after a while, he found it. "*Every* night," he said.

Leon blew on the steam rising off of his cup. "Yes," he said.

"Huh," the Sindii grunted. He nodded. "Me, too."

Their eyes met. They both nodded.

The Jaxartes was now a swift flowing river, clean and deep, with villages perched right on the banks every parasange or so, and they bought grain for their mounts and millet for food and saved the time of foraging. Leon paid in Olbian silver or in bronze. He had loaded pack mules with weapons from the

battlefield on the lower Jaxartes, where Kineas had died, and Sogdian axes sold well on the upper Jaxartes.

Temerix saved him coins in many villages. The Sindii smith was highly skilled, far better than most villages had ever seen, and although the wagon with his forge was thousands of stades to the east, he could use any village forge to repair bronze pots or iron implements. Charcoal and an anvil was all he needed to open his business, and twice the Sakje watched in amused idleness as Temerix earned their food. He was training a pair of his young men as smiths, and they became adept enough at straightening bent plow blades and restoring the edge on a bronze knife.

Leon loved to watch Temerix work, because the man's fastidious craftsmanship reminded him of his father, who had been a hornsmith, cutting and bending cow horn to make cups and lamps and many other things. Like Leon's father, Temerix wasted nothing; if he cut metal or polished it, he did so over a small piece of leather so that he could save every scrap of bronze. Often, when an old implement was too damaged to repair, he took its weight in metal as partial trade. At his waist he wore a pouch of goatskin that held his latest scraps of bronze. He would dismount in the middle of the plains if he saw so much as a single bronze arrowhead in the dirt.

Temerix was a legend even among the Prodrmoi. The Olbians had rescued his village from the Getae, but too late to save his wife and his children, who he had killed with his own hands to keep them from slavery before throwing himself into the fight. Tyche – or Nike – had preserved him despite his death-mad fury. Since that day, he had fought ten actions and failed to find the road to Hades every time. Now he worked in silence, spoke seldom, and was absolutely respected. The younger Sindii – like Curti, the prankster, and Nikon, the half-Greek – whispered that he was the avatar of the lame smith.

Villagers brought Temerix business, and sometimes they put wreaths of flowers on his borrowed forge, and twice in small villages he was offered libations. On such occasions, he only grunted with embarrassment and went on working.

The villagers were attracted by the silent smith, but they stayed to stare at the Sakje and Sauromatae of the Prodrmoi, outlandish figures from the plains in gold and iron, with silk tunics over their armour and long hair in braids, all carrying the heavy leather bow case called the *gorytos*. Leon suspected from the frightened fascination that these were the first Sakje that the villagers had ever seen except over the length of an arrow.

Hubash was an hospitable village on a spur of the highest mountains. The river curved in a long arc at their feet, and the women of the village walked a

stade down a steep hill to reach the water, and had legs like athletes. The people called themselves *Tochari* and were used to travelers. They were far more cosmopolitan than the farmers of the last two weeks, and their headman knew that there had been fighting lower on the Jaxartes and had a son off raiding with Spitamenes.

“You one caravan this summer,” he said ruefully, in barbarous Greek. “Just one. Iskander kill trade.”

“What about westbound?” Leon asked via Ataelus. The man’s Sakje was impenetrable to Leon, but Ataelus seemed to understand it.

The old man shook his head. He wore a beautiful long wool shirt with embroidery as good as the best of Greece or Egypt, and a tall cap of wrapped wool. He spoke, using his hands expressively, and after a while Ataelus translated, “No for going west. None at all. Something *wrong*, maybe high passes closed with snow. For not knowing. And for saying – other caravans for going north across the Sea of Grass.” Ataelus shrugged, because he had pushed that same route on Leon, and Leon had insisted on taking the shorter route through the mountains. Ataelus gave Leon an “I told you so” look.

Leon rubbed his chin, where a beard was starting to grow. It itched all the time. “Are we too late for the passes?” he asked.

The chieftain shrugged. “With gods, yes?” he answered.

In the morning, when the sun had colored the rock faces pink and salmon and they were re-packing their wares, Leon offered the chief a handful of silver for six embroidered wool robes. Leon thought that the fellow's price was high by a whole silver coin, and he stood under the tree at the middle of the tiny village square, tugging at his beard and calculating prices, when there was an altercation in the horse lines by the river. The shouts carried easily up the hill.

"Excuse me," Leon said slowly, pointing at the coins he had laid out on a table and shaking his head. "Twelve is too high." The shouts were getting louder, and Leon swept the coins off the table into his pouch and stood up. "I will be right back."

The chieftain frowned. "With you," he said. He waved to emphasize his meaning. The two of them went down the steep hill together, the old man bounding from rock to rock like a mountain goat.

A group of local men stood by the horses. They had daggers long enough to be short swords in their fists, and one of them had a bow with an arrow nocked.

Three of Temerix's Sindii stood with their own weapons drawn, and behind them cowered a girl.

While the chieftain yelled at the villagers, Leon turned on the Sindii. "Is this about the girl?" he asked.

Three pairs of eyes flicked to the girl and then down to the sand at their feet. "They started it," mumbled the oldest Sindii, a youth of eighteen or so named Curti.

Leon walked over to the girl as Temerix ran up. He had been working in the local forge, helping the first capable smith he'd met in weeks. He roared in Sindii and the young men cringed.

The girl raised her head and Leon was looking into a pair of startling black-brown eyes with the curious shape that he had seen in some of the eastern Massagetae. Her face was very flat. She pointed at herself and at the horses, repeated the gesture and then shrugged in resignation.

Leon walked back to the headman. "Slave?" he asked. He mimed chains on his arms.

The headman made thrusting motions with his pelvis and some of the villagers laughed. Then he held a finger next to his ear and made circular motions, and pointed at the girl.

She pulled her hair over her face, pulled her knees up and curled into a ball. One of the villagers threw a rock and hit her, and they all laughed again.

Ataelus slid down the hill, and Samahe after him. They were sullen, having drunk too much wine the night before. Leon beckoned to the Sakje leader and pointed to the girl.

“Talk to her in Sakje,” Leon suggested.

Ataelus walked to the girl and stood over her. She looked up and motioned at the horses. When Ataelus greeted her in Sakje, she looked hopeful for a moment and then her face closed down and she stuck out her bottom lip and gave a cry, and covered her face with her hair again.

The headman came over and muttered something, and Ataelus translated.

“Say she for stupid whore. Paid good silver for she—for her. Now always tries to run. Are we for wanting buy her?” Ataelus turned and called to his wife. Samahe came up and crouched in the dust with the girl. Up close, Leon could see that she was dirty and covered in bruises. She smelled ripe.

Samahe and Ataelus tried scraps of a dozen plains languages on the girl, and Leon tried Greek and Numidian and what little he knew of Phoenician. None of their attempts even got her to toss back her hair.

“Girl for fucking make blood flow,” Ataelus said, pointing at his riders. Half of his scouts were women, and they were eyeing the girl with distaste.

“Girl from other side of the mountains,” Ataelus added after the chief spoke.

Leon nodded. He counted out eleven silver coins on the big rock by the horse lines. The coins were a mix of Macedonian coinages, Olbian, and two silver denarii of Amphipolis. “Six robes, as discussed, and the girl.”

Now it was the turn of the elder to rub his chin. He tapped the table again for another coin.

“Remind him that at the top of the hill, he knew how to speak Greek.” Leon shot a look of disgust at the headman.

“Twelve,” the headman said.

Leon shook his head. “Twelve?” he asked slowly, to emphasize his position. “The girl’s virtually worthless and I’m doing the whole village a favor.”

Samahe spat. “We don’t want her,” she said.

The chieftain said a few words in his own tongue and then made a comment to Ataelus in Sakje.

“Tell him to speak Greek or we just ride away,” Leon said.

Ataelus shrugged. “Young men will want her, he for saying.”

Leon nodded. “I’ll free her. I just can’t stand to see – this. I know *just* how it works.”

Samahe shrugged. “If that girl fucks two men, we’ll have blood on the grass before the sun is high.” She looked back at her troop. “Or the girls will kill her.”

Leon nodded. “If I buy her, she’s mine.” He looked at the girl. She didn’t even seem to know what was going on. “Twelve for the girl, the robes, and as much grain as fills two of my baskets.” He pointed at the baskets that Curti was sullenly strapping to a mule.

Samahe nodded. "Good. Your problem."

The chieftain watched the altercation between his customers and assumed that his position was getting worse. He thumped the table and offered his hand.

"Yes!" he said in Greek.

Leon took his hand and clasped it, and the chieftain swept the coins off the rock.

The girl couldn't ride, and she didn't seem to have a name, either. By the time they camped, she was weeping with the pain of riding a mule, her thighs, already in poor shape, blistered from the exercise and full of the salt-sweat of the animal. Leon picketed his horse and saw to it that the mules were fed, and then walked the weeping girl along the row of campfires until he found Derva.

Derva was a Sauromatae girl who had left her camp to join Ataelus's "tribe" in the Prodrmoi. She had come fleeing the embraces of Upazan, a Sauromatae chief, and Leon had protected her and helped her lover among the Prodrmoi, Garait, to raise her dowry.

Garait offered him a cup of hot tea. "Pretty girl," he said. "Flat face, but still pretty."

Leon shook his head. "Derva, I need a favor," Leon said.

Derva tossed her braids off her face. "Anything you wish, lord," she said.

Leon pulled the girl forward. "Wash her. Teach her to ride. Put salve on her thighs." He shook his head in frustration. "She's afraid of men. She has reason. Just fix her up. Please?"

Derva laughed. She walked over to the girl and pulled her hair out of her eyes. "She stinks," Derva said.

Leon nodded.

"Sure," Derva said. She shrugged at the unfairness of life. "I owe you, lord. Sure." She made a face that let Leon know that the first thing she'd teach the girl was *look at my man and I'll slit your nose*.

The next evening they rode up a steep slope to a gate. *Zurabasat* was a walled town at the top of the Jaxartes valley, and her east gates looked up at the high pass over the mountains to the east. The town was surrounded by cleared land with walled animal pens where big caravans could rest their stock before or after crossing the passes, but the hearths were cold and not a camel spat in the fields below the town.

Two elders rode out to them as soon as they made camp, surrounded by a dozen archers in scale armour. Leon greeted them in Greek and was pleasantly surprised to find their Greek was passable. "Two silver owls to camp," said the older of the two.

“Two silver? For twenty mules and forty horses?” Leon didn’t have to feign annoyance.

The older man had a long white beard. He ran his hand down its length, as if displaying a bolt of fabric. “Pay it, or camp somewhere else!” He looked at the Sakje warriors with some trepidation.

“Do you send us grain for that fee?” Leon asked.

“Wheat at a silver coin for every ten measures,” said the younger man. He had a helmet on his head, a silvered-bronze bowl of unfamiliar design. It didn’t fit him.

Ataelus was still mounted. He rode over and all the bowmen watched him, their eyes narrowed. Several had a hand on their quivers.

“Don’t take shit,” Ataelus said. He looked around at the empty camps significantly. “They for need us more than we for need them. Yes?”

Leon nodded, chewing on his upper lip. He looked at the mountains to the east, and reached into his belt pouch. He extracted two silver owls – real ones, from Athens. He tossed them up to the younger man.

“Fine,” he said. “We’ll move in the morning. Good night.”

The two elders looked at each other. “Your animals will need rest,” he said.

Leon shrugged. “No,” he said. “Many caravans this year?” he asked.

The two men exchanged another look. “No,” the younger said, before the older could stop him.

“I heard in Marakanda that the trade was going north, around the mountains,” Leon said. He was lying – he had never gotten within twenty parasanges of Marakanda – but his shot went straight home. Both of the local elders looked more sullen. “The war on the Jaxartes is over. I’ll tell you that for nothing. Any more news from the west will cost you two silvers. Now if you’ll pardon me, my dinner is waiting.”

The procession of elders and their guards marched back into the town.

Ataelus watched them go. “For buying camels,” he said. “Bastard animals, but good in high desert. Buy camels tomorrow.”

Samahe shook her head. “I don’t know camels, except the ones we took this summer. Disgusting!”

Ataelus shrugged. “Massagetæ use camels all year,” he said. “Make me think of boying.”

Leon shook his head. “Boying? By the gods, Ataelus, you’ve been with Greeks for years and you can’t speak better than that? Samahe, how long have you been speaking Greek?”

Samahe smiled until her dimples blossomed. “This summer and last.”

“Get Ataelus to learn some Greek,” Leon said.

“For what?” Ataelus asked, and he had a wicked light in his eye.

“How much should I pay for a camel?” Leon asked.

Ataelus drew a short knife and started to clean his nails. “Trade mules,” he said. “Army mules always good.” He nodded. “Sindii men not know how for packing camels. Camels *bite*.”

Leon stared into the fire. “How long will it take us to learn to pack camels?” he asked. He didn’t like the whine his voice was developing, but the constant problem of pack animals was wearing on his desire to explore the world.

Ataelus drew a set of apparently random scratches in the dust with his knife. “Mountains,” he said. On the far side he drew gentle swirls. “Desert,” he said. “Serica, yes? Twenty days, maybe more.” He shrugged. “Never been there.” He stuck the knife into the ground for emphasis. “Need guides. Guides can pack camels and teach Sindii-men. You pay. I watch for – how you say? Dirty trade.”

Leon nodded. He could see his supply of silver draining away. “Let’s sell some of the swords and armour,” he said.

Ataelus shook his head. “No market,” he said. “No caravans. People poor and scared.”

Leon sighed. Getting rich was proving to be complicated.

So was virtue. The nameless foreign girl followed him around and smelled bad. She had a fresh bruise, and her eyes never rose to meet his, and he knew all

the signs of a badly treated slave. Leon wasn't sure whether he'd rescued her or made her life more miserable.

It was five days before they cleared *Zurabasad*. Leon was poorer by only thirty silver coins, and most of that had been paid in advance wages for five men who swore that they were veteran guides who knew the passes and the lands beyond. Their chief was a rough looking scoundrel named Aleph. The other men were his relatives. They all came with bows and armour and they did seem to know how to pack camels, although they were reticent about teaching the skill to the Sindii.

Leon overcame their reticence in part by using Temerix's skills to help the town's smiths, and in part by paying them half their wage in advance. He also provided a succinct brief on the events of Iskander's summer campaign against Spitamenes and against the Sakje.

The Sakje spent some of their own pay on trinkets in the bazaar, and for a few days the heart of the town lived a little, but Leon could tell that the trade had moved on. Alexander's campaigns and his forts on the Jaxartes would make merchants shy about this route for a generation. But Leon bought new equipment, a light bronze kettle and a stack of heavy felted blankets recommended by Ataelus.

All the more reason for the locals to look favorably on a merchant from the west who promised to come this way every year or so. On the last night, Leon sat companionably with Karix, the town's leader, more like an archon than a lord.

"If I come back this way," Leon said, "I'll buy space for a warehouse."

Karix nodded. "In the old days, many merchants had sheds here," he said. "The desert didn't used to be so bad." He gave a very Greek shrug. "Iskander isn't helping."

Leon shrugged. "Alexander has cleared a great many bad men out of the mountains," he said. "Maybe more caravans next year. If I return, I will buy a shed."

Karix nodded. "Go with the gods, then."

Leon's horse hated the camels. Every time he rode down his own caravan, he had to take her off the trail and well wide of the offending beasts or she would become like a wild thing between his legs. He sensed the problem too early to have a disaster, but he was nearly thrown twice.

But the camels were hardy, and they seemed to go forever on a handful of feed and a minimum of water. The first day out of *Zurabasat* they made less than twenty stades through an arid pass, often one animal wide. The only water was

at the campsite, which appeared to be at the summit of the pass until they reached it.

Leon walked with his bridle in his hand, happy to be over the worst of the terrain, and then got the same feeling in his gut that he had when a man drew his knife in a fight. As he crested the last little rise, the ground fell away in a single drop. Far below, an eagle turned on an updraft. And beyond the drop, there was another wall of hills, some capped in snow, and the thin line of the trail was picked out in the late afternoon sun, rising again from the deep valley at his feet to a height far above before vanishing between two of the lower peaks.

That night he pulled a heavy blanket over Temerix and rolled in under it. The felted blanket stopped the incessant wind and he was warm in a few heartbeats.

“How far to Sina?” Temerix asked.

Leon smiled at the dark, because the Sindii almost never spoke. “Farther than I thought,” Leon said.

Temerix grunted.

Leon lay, warm for the first time in some hours, and watched the stars in a great wheel over his head. After a while, he pulled a corner of the blanket over his head and carefully arranged a fold for fresh air.

Somewhere close by, he could hear someone’s teeth chattering.

And then he was asleep.

The next day, Leon wasn't able to estimate the distance they traveled. From the height of their mountain camp, they followed the rivulet of a stream that had watered their camp the night before until it fell away in a waterfall, and then they rode back and forth across the steep slope until they emerged to the thin grass of the high valley floor. They made camp early, so that the animals could have a good feed. Leon's mare turned her nose up at the thin stuff that went for grass in this valley, and her sides were heaving in the thin air. She shivered.

"What do you do for your horses?" Leon asked Ataelus.

Ataelus was rigging his smoke tent. He looked at Leon's mare. "Blanket," he said. He went to the packs and extracted one of the blankets purchased in *Zurabasat*, and then a second one. "Sew this," he said, holding two edges together.

Leon didn't often look helpless, but now he did. "How?" he asked.

Samahe made a disgusted noise. She called in Sakje, "Derva! Come and bring a needle."

Derva didn't exactly hurry, and Leon was left standing alone in the falling dark with a pair of heavy blankets in his outstretched arms, feeling like a fool.

Ataelus came back with the Sauromatae girl and the former whore at her side.

“Sew here to here,” Ataelus said.

“Can you sew?” Derva asked the flat-faced girl, speaking slowly.

She looked blank. She had dark circles under her eyes, like she had been beaten. Leon felt a touch of anger – if she died, it was on him. Some rescue.

Flat-face took the needle with a grunt of impatience. She sat down in the near-dark and started to sew.

“And then here,” Ataelus said, picking up another corner. “All the way to here,” he said. “Understand?”

“Ai!” said the strange girl.

Leon, relieved of his blankets, turned to go make camp, and then went back to Derva. “She looks as if you beat her,” he said.

Derva shook her head. “No Sakje beats a slave,” she said with contempt.

Leon tried again. “She looks bad,”

“She’s stubborn like a mare in heat and she tries to snuggle with my man. Now she sleep alone with no blanket.” Derva nodded at Leon. “Tonight I wash her.” She smiled and pointed at the rivulet that flowed from the heights above them, where it came straight off the ice.

Leon nodded. “Send her to me for sleeping,” he said.

Derva gave a knowing leer. Leon ignored her and went to do his share of camp chores. He couldn’t help but notice that, when he looked up to see the

waterfall, he could actually see the scrubby pine that had grown above last night's camp. He couldn't remember a time when he'd spend two travel nights in camps where you could see one from another.

He and Temerix had two-day-old cold soup boiling away merrily in no time. In fact, it boiled too fast, as everything did in the strange mountain world. Leon added a little water and let it boil again. The steam coming off the stew made his stomach roil in anticipation.

Curti had the knack of making unleavened bread, and he was excused cooking while he made a mess with flour and water and salt. Pardo, the largest of the Sindii and the strongest next to Temerix, came back from the streambed with a big flat rock, which he propped up next to the fire.

"This good?" he asked. He spoke Sakje. In fact, Sakje had conquered Greek as the common language of the caravans, even for the Sindii, who spoke a form of Greek at home alongside their own tongue.

"Closer to the fire," Curti said. "Can I have a cup?"

Leon reached into his pack, a light leather shoulder bag, and handed over his cup.

Curti took the cup. "Could you get this filled with milk?" he asked.

Leon made a disgusted noise, but he went and found one of the Sakje who had a mare in foal – the only source of milk in the caravan. He returned five

minutes later to find that the dough was made. Curti took the cup of milk and drank it off and smiled.

“Thanks, boss!” he said, and the other Sindii laughed.

“I thought that you needed it for the bread,” Leon spat.

“Sorry. Sorry!” Curti said, his eyes round with laughter. “Pardo dared me!” he said.

Leon shook his head, because Kineas had always taken the ribbing of his men with humour, and Leon knew he shouldn't feel ashamed. So he made himself laugh. “I'll wash it,” he said, staring into it and affecting to find some filth.

The other men in his mess group all laughed. Pardo shrugged.

Everyone fetched their dishes from their packs. Sindii men carried big leather wallets the size of a small shield on a shoulder strap. Sakje tended to roll all of their belongings in a spare blanket and put it behind their saddle-pad as a backrest.

Leon did both. He had too much stuff, and he knew it, but he liked to have things. Now he needed a sewing kit.

Curti finished mixing his dough. He dipped a hand in the water bucket and flicked it at his rock. Nothing happened.

“Shit,” he said, and scooped coals on the rock.

Pardo poked at the soup with clean stick and grinned. "Hot all the way through," he said in Greek. In Sakje, he called, "Let's eat!" He looked around his group. "I have to go on watch. Let's get this served!"

"May I use your shield, lord?" Curti asked.

Leon nodded. "Only to roll out the dough," he said. "Not for any of your other foul personal habits," he added.

The outer face of the shield was smooth ox hide. The inner face was cowhide with the hair left on, comfortable against the arm. Curti put the hair side down, pulled a roller out of his own bag and started rolling out the dough into flat cakes. "Always wait long enough for the dough to rise," he said. "Long enough for water to boil."

Pardo grunted and slurped some soup. "Water boils in a heartbeat here," he said.

Curti rubbed his jaw. "Shit," he said. "Did I wait long enough?"

Leon shrugged. "I don't know. Do I look like a baker?"

Temerix grunted. "Good soup," he said.

Leon propped his bedroll against a round rock and leaned back against it. "If you keep talking like this, you'll lose your reputation as the silent man," he said to the Sindii smith.

"Huh," Temerix grunted back. But the shadow of a smile creased his lips.

Curti was still working. It wasn't for nothing that they let him off camp work on the nights he made bread. He swept the coals off his broad rock with a handful of ferns and flicked water at the resulting surface. The water spit and vanished.

"Nice rock," he said to Pardo. "Didn't crack."

"I do my best," Pardo said. He wasn't smug, just plain spoken.

Curti took the first cake of dough and placed it carefully on the rock and was rewarded with an immediate smell of *bread*. He watched it like a predator, a short, broad fighting knife in his hand, and as the bread bubbled, he slipped the blade under the cake and flipped it with a grunt of satisfaction. The ash on the smooth rock spackled the bread, but none of the dough stuck to the rock.

"Hah! Curti the baker, open for business," Curti called out. "Hey, you bastards, save some fucking soup for the baker, eh?"

Leon felt a nudge at his back. He looked up to find the foreign woman looming over him, a bundle of blankets in her arms. Her face was averted.

Leon stood up and took the blankets. "Thanks," he said. Then, on impulse, he held out his dish of soup. "Soup?" he asked.

He thought she might bite his hand, she seized the bowl so eagerly. She ate it like a wolf, her eyes on him all the time. She reached into his dish with her hand, scooping soup into her mouth as fast as she could. She drank the dregs.

“Give her another,” Leon said.

Curti popped the first cake of unleavened bread off the rock and put the second circle of dough on the rock. Then he ripped a steaming piece off the first loaf. “Here, girl,” he said.

Temerix dipped Leon’s plate into the cauldron and brought it up brim full.

She crouched at the edge of the firelight like an animal and ate the food in wary gulps.

“I don’t think Derva has fed her,” Leon mused.

Temerix shook his head. Curti grinned. “I heard she tried to get a piece of Garait on the first cold night, and Derva—” Curti made a sign.

Leon thought for a moment about how much went on that he did not see. And about his attempt to farm out a job he should have done himself. “Girl,” he said.

She scuttled over.

“Clean the bowl, and wash yourself.”

She stood in blank confusion. Leon pointed her at the water that glistened in the last sunlight. “Wash!” he said.

“Ahhgh!” she said, or something like it. She took the dish and walked toward the water.

Leon scooped up the blankets. “Ataelus!” he shouted.

The Sakje chief came out of the dark.

“Show me how to get this thing on my horse!” Leon said.

“For giving too many fucking orders,” Ataelus grumbled.

Leon stopped as if struck. He had a counter-jab ready — *just do your job*, he might have said. But he swallowed it as the truth of the comment hit him.

“Sorry, Ataelus. Would you please help me make my mare comfortable?”

Ataelus grunted. “Hold this end,” he said. He opened one end of the blankets and peered through the resulting hole. “Good for sewing,” he said. Together, they walked over to Jugina, who they had to pry apart from the other horses, her head down. Ataelus pulled the open end over her head and she complained, backing suddenly, but as fast as she could panic, Ataelus was done and the two blankets settled over her like a chiton made for a horse.

“Nice,” Leon said.

Jugina’s head came up. She made a “chuuf” noise and Leon gave her a handful of grain from his bag. Her tongue was warm on his hand, and as soon as she’d had her treat, she sidestepped to the next horse on the picket, also blanketed, and they stood close, sharing warmth.

“Thanks,” Leon said.

Ataelus smacked him on the back. “Not so much ass-cunt,” he said. His grin took some of the sting out of his words. Some.

Any rejoinder he might have made was cut off by the sound of cheering from the river. Most of the Sindii and all of the Prodrmoi were watching Derva pour water over the naked foreign girl. It was too dark for their comments to be sexual, and their hilarity was confined to the freezing cold water and its effect on the girl. She screamed each time another pot of water hit her.

The Sakje thought that this was as good as entertainment could get. The Sindii agreed.

As Leon came up, Derva caught sight of him. "How clean do you want her?" she asked, and some suggestions were offered.

"Better wash her cunt!" one of the guides offered.

"Does she have lice?" Leon asked. The poor girl was shivering and her skin was so white in the darkness that she was like a battlefield corpse.

Derva shook her head. "No, lord," she said.

"Scrub her hair anyway," Leon said.

"Yech!" Derva said. "I don't want to touch her."

Leon had had about enough of Derva. "I asked you a favour and you've responded by nearly killing my slave," he said. "Wash her hair. Warm the water at a fire."

"And if I don't?" Derva asked.

"I'll pour water on your blankets," Leon said, and all the Sakje laughed. Then he walked off into the darkness toward the baggage. The camels were restless. Leon listened to them and to the darkness while he searched the bundles of merchandise by feel. He found the depleted blanket bundle and took another, pulling it impatiently against its rope ties, and then he stood in the midst of the camels and watched the hills above them, wondering if he had just seen movement there or whether he had imagined the whole thing. The horses were moving a little, anxious.

Leon walked back to the fires, going carefully to avoid tripping in the dark. He tossed the blanket on top of his own roll and then walked around his mess's fire to find Ataelus, who was already lying in his blankets with Samahe.

"Excuse me!" Leon said politely.

Ataelus's head emerged from the blankets. "Yes?" he asked.

"I think that we need more men on watch," Leon said.

"Why?" Ataelus asked.

Leon thought for a moment. "I saw somebody moving above us on the mountain."

Ataelus went very still for a moment. Then he nodded. "You right."

Samahe's head appeared out of the blankets. "Send Derva. She's been a bitch — let her suffer."

Ataelus scratched his beard. "Good. That good with you?"

Leon smiled. "Excellent," he said, aiming for Kineas's tone.

Back at the fire, Curti had heated water in the cauldron and Derva was making a hasty job of washing the foreign girl's hair. Steam rose off the water and off the flat-faced girl. Leon took a hank of her hair and smelled it. It smelled like woodsmoke and wet.

"Good enough," he said. "Rub her dry and go on watch."

"What do we do with these?" Curti asked, holding up the girl's tunic. Leon could smell it, even on a cold night in thin air.

"Into the fire," Leon said. He rooted in his leather bag and pulled out his second wool chiton. It helped to have extra things. "Put this on," he said to the foreign girl.

She grabbed it from his hand and pulled it over her head, her eyes sunk to slits with anger and fear.

Derva wiped her hands on a piece of linen and then used it roughly on the girl's hair. "Why am *I* on watch?"

Leon considered mentioning Samahe and Ataelus. He felt that his standing with the Sakje had suffered on account of the girl, or something. But he swallowed his own hesitation. "Because I said so," Leon said. "But you can take Garait with you."

Garait sputtered. "It's cold!"

Leon raised his voice. "We're thousands of stades from home with foreign guides in a place none of us know. And there's someone in a cold camp on the hillside above us." That got everyone's attention.

"Fuck," said Aleph the guide. "You sure, lord?"

"Yes," Leon said, although he wasn't sure.

Aleph flicked his eyes around the fire, and Leon's trust in the man plummeted.

"Who's out there now?" he asked.

Temerix shrugged. "Pardo," he said.

Leon went over to where Derva was crouched by her blanket roll, fetching out a heavy felt coat and her *akinake*. "Watch the guides," he said quietly.

"So you're not just fucking with us?" Garait asked. He had a bow in his hand.

Leon shook his head. "I hope not." He watched the night for a few heartbeats. "Be careful. And find Pardo first. He's alone on watch."

Derva put her belt on and checked the hang of her *gorytos*. "We'll find him," she said.

Leon went back to his own fire, where Temerix was already bedded down with Curti. The Sindii had put all of their blankets together in a single bed.

Leon nodded approval. It was *cold*. He pulled his chalmys tighter and fetched his pair of javelins from the baggage, sticking them butt-first into the ground by where he intended to sleep.

"Where's the girl?" Leon asked.

"Right here," Temerix said. He flicked the blankets back to show her huddled by his side, already asleep.

"Poor thing," Leon said.

"Warm thing," Temerix said. "Get in the blankets."

"Something moving out there," Leon said. But he got in the blankets. The foreign woman was warm, and she fit herself along his back without fuss. Leon gave one long shiver as the warmth of the mess group hit him. He rolled his chalmys under his head, pulled the foreign girl's arm across his chest so that she wouldn't fidget, and fell asleep.

No one cut their throats during the night, and the whole caravan awoke to fresh bread and hot water for breakfast. The redoubled guard had decided to bank the fires high to keep warm.

Aleph, sensing some suspicion, was first out of his blankets. "No wood next site," he said. "Better load the camels with extra wood."

Leon didn't trust him, but the advice seemed good. They had camels now where they had had mules before, and the camels were stronger. Leon spent an hour with Curti, Onesimos, and Nikon cutting firewood in the pine trees. They cut a tree and split it, then cut the splits into sections with axes. It got them warm and blistered Leon's hands.

When they had enough wood cut, they all collapsed for a rest except Leon, whose hands hurt and who needed to piss and required privacy, even now. He walked apart, deeper into the glade of pines where the stream wound around their roots. There, under a downed pine as big through as his thing, he found a tiny fire circle – really, just a tripod of small rocks that were blackened from a small fire. Under the downed tree was a good-sized bed of cut pine boughs. Down by the water was a footprint. Leon walked apart to urinate and then walked back to camp to fetch Ataelus.

The Sakje scout looked at the camp for some time, pacing back and forth, measuring the footprint with his hand.

"Two," he said finally. "Not for telling others," he said. He gave Leon a long look, until Leon nodded.

"Why?" he asked.

"Giants," Ataelus said. "Make men scared."

Aleph and his men did do a very professional job of attaching the billets of wood to the loads.

After a feast of bread, they mounted up and began the climb out of the valley, and there was no time in the whole day that Leon couldn't see the bend in the stream where the foreign girl had been washed by turning his head and looking over his left shoulder – or the stand of pines where he'd found the camp. The track they climbed ran over bare rock and dry gravel, and Leon's sensitivity to ambush was like a man with sunburn forced to ride without a hat as they traveled from one ideal ambush spot to another.

The Sakje were as sensitive as Leon, and Samahe took half a dozen of her cousins and rode ahead. Leon had ridden from birth, but his heart was in his mouth as he watched the plains riders trot their ponies up the steep trail. Garait waved at him as he went past, his riding whip glinting in the cold sun.

At noon they came to an opening where a high marsh drained across the flat ground between two ridges. Ducks like those who wintered in Northern Africa sat on the open water of the marsh, and Ataelus shot eight of them with carefully placed bird arrows, moving cautiously to make sure that his arrows could be recovered. After each shot the birds would rise and wheel around before settling back.

The foreign girl stripped naked and swam after the birds and the arrows. She did the freezing job cheerfully, laughing as she swam, and thus earned a little credit with the Sakje. Derva helped her get dry without complaint. Few of the Sakje were much at swimming.

“I’d like to learn her name,” Leon commented to Temerix.

“Huh,” Temerix said. His eyes were on the mountains, but then he flicked his eyes at Leon and gave a wry smile. It held for a few heartbeats, and then his eyes went back to the hillsides above them. He pulled the bronze knife he always wore and ran his thumb across the edge. He took a stone out of his belt and began moving it in careful circles along the length of the blade, his eyes still on the hills – then back to the naked woman who stood by the marsh. He shook his head, ran his thumb over the edge again, and grunted. As Leon watched, he began to whet his axe.

“You think we’re being watched?” Leon asked. *Foolish question, really.*

Temerix raised an eyebrow and shoved his rump back against his pack to rest his thighs. He tested the edge on his ax and then tucked the handle back under his pack, leaving the blade bare. “Yes,” he said.

Samahe’s riders came in as the rest of the caravan ate their noon meal, and Ataelus joined Leon where he was coaxing a handful of twigs into a fast fire to make hot water. He held out his hand. In it was an arrow. “Not ours,” he said.

The fletchings were fresh and new, and the shaft had a daub of red paint on the nock. Ataelus shrugged. The arrow had a broad bronze head, razor sharp. “Not for Sakje bow,” Ataelus said.

Leon nodded. “Could be from any time in the last week,” he said.

Temerix held it for a moment, and then snapped the head off and dropped it in his shoulder bag. “Anytime since it rained,” he said. His longest speech of the day.

Leon walked over to where Aleph and his cousins sat on smooth rocks, saying very little; obviously aware of the tension of the party they were with. Leon held out the arrow. “Do you know it?” he said, holding it out.

Aleph’s face was a study in concentration, and Leon didn’t know whether he was watching an accomplished actor or a genuine effort. “Not like ours,” one of the cousins said. He drew one of his own – cane, shorter than a Sakje arrow, with a three-sided head like those Temerix cast when he had enough charcoal. The arrow that the scouts had found was heavier and thicker.

Leon was young, but he’d been a slave and he’d seen a great deal of fear, and he knew fear when he saw it on the smallest of the cousins. He glanced back at Aleph in time to see him wearing a similar look.

They’re all afraid, he realized.

Leon walked back to his mare and tucked the arrow shaft into his blanket roll. Then he checked his own sword, drawing it and testing the edge. He fetched two of his fighting javelins from the camels. Coming back, he found Temerix touching up the edge on one of Derva's two *akinakes*.

Leon mounted up and rode over to where Ataelus and Samahe were watching the hills above them. "Let's ride before we spook ourselves," he said.

Samahe nodded. Ataelus grinned mirthlessly. "Too late for that," he said.

After the rest break, Ataelus took a different group of riders out first. They cantered across the causeway that crossed the marsh and vanished almost immediately around the next turn in the trail. Leon sent a pair of Sakje ahead next, and then the caravan of camels with the Sindii and the spare horses, herded by the youngest Sakje girl, Nihmu. In the rearguard he placed the rest of the Sakje under Samahe, and she concurred with his arrangements. He went with the camels and the Sindii himself. He wondered why he suddenly seemed to be in charge.

Ataelus should be in charge, he thought. We're all risking our lives.

The foreign girl had graduated from her mule to a Sakje pony. She didn't seem afraid, or at least any more afraid than usual. Leon glanced at her and she raised her head far enough for him to see her eyes. He smiled. Her eyes went

down, but the hint of a smile came to her face, like a cat cautiously entering a room with strangers in it.

“Leon,” he said, pointing at his chest.

“Leon,” she said, her pronunciation excellent. She nodded. “Leon,” she said again.

Leon inclined his head to one side and raised his eyebrows like a comic actor. He pointed at her. She shrugged. “Lu,” she said. She pointed at her face—an odd gesture.

“Lu,” Temerix said.

“Lu,” Leon said, raising an eyebrow at the taciturn Sindii.

Temerix grinned and then his head came up. Leon stopped to listen and he heard it—hoof beats pounding from ahead. Leon touched his heels to his horse and she burst ahead. Derva came around the next precipitous turn at a speed that endangered both of them, but she got her pony to a stop without tipping either of them over the edge.

“Campfire,” she said. “Still warm.”

Leon followed her up the trail, leaving the camels and their escort to canter ahead, trying not to look down to his left as the ground fell away a stade to the valley where they had camped the night before.

Ataelus was sitting in a cleft between two rocks. A turn in the trail hid the cleft from the valley floor. There was a pile of ash and a small pile of twigs – willow twigs and pine bark from the valley far below. No tree grew up here.

Ataelus held up a length of cord. Leon took it. He spent a moment looking at it before he realized that it was made of silk. The cord had been cut with something very sharp.

“Oh,” Leon said.

Ataelus shrugged. “Today,” he said.

Who ever had taken shelter in the cleft had come there from the marsh. There were duck bones deep in the cleft and a pile of grass as a bed. At least two bodies had shared the warmth of the grass.

Whoever they were, they were big men. As big as Kineas’s bodyguard, Carlus, and perhaps a span of fingers taller.

Leon couldn’t stop himself from scanning the heights around them. Then he rode back down to get the column. Temerix raised an eyebrow and Leon shrugged. “See for yourself,” he said. Then he did his part to lead the camels right past the cleft, and the hair on the back of his neck rose when the lead camel turned its head unerringly toward the cleft and sniffed, then spat. The other camels all looked into the cleft and walked as far from it as the trail allowed.

Temerix raised an eyebrow. He dismounted and went into the cleft, and didn't rejoin them for more than a stade of steady upward travel.

By late afternoon, Leon was exhausted from thin air and a day of fear. He touched Jugina with his heels and trotted ahead to find Ataelus.

Ataelus had already chosen a campsite and the scouts were already settling down to a cold camp. There was no wood, but a meadow with a tiny rivulet that ran the length of a stadium before it fell over the edge of the cliff to the south. At the north end it sloped gradually up towards yet another pass.

Leon watched until the camels and the horses were picketed. They were all getting used to each other, but the camels still spooked the horses when they were too close. Jugina was better from a day spent close to the brutes.

"Double watch," Leon said to Ataelus.

"Damn right," Ataelus said. He looked around and made sure they weren't in earshot of any of the others. "For *fucking* worried," he said.

Leon rubbed his beard. "Me, too," he said, feeling better for sharing it. "I'll take a watch."

Ataelus nodded. "Me too. I for taking—hmm." He counted off on his fingers and called to Samahe, who trotted over. In Sakje, he said, "Nikon, Kala, Arqua, me, Leon here, and Temerix. Three watches. First watch until the Dog Star rises, second watch when the North Star sets? That sounds fair?"

Samahe nodded, and Leon thought *so she's really the commander. We both ask her permission.*

"I'll go with Nikon," Leon said.

Ataelus nodded, and Leon knew that his stock with the two Sakje had improved over the last couple of days. *We may all die at the hands of invisible giant barbarians, he thought, but I've proven that I have a brain in my head.*

"No fire." Ataelus said.

"We cut all that wood," Leon protested. His hands still hurt.

Ataelus shook his head. "Too much light for showing us," he said. "Cook breakfast when darkness goes."

Dinner was bread and old mutton, served cold. Night fell hard, and the air was cold enough for a man to see his breath. Leon snuggled down next to Lu and found that Temerix had his axe laid out by his head and his bow under the blankets. Leon had his own short sword rolled in his chalmys and his javelins were ready to hand. He hadn't tried to build his shelter with them for several nights, and the thought would have made him smile at himself if he hadn't been so *cold*.

The next thing he knew, Ataelus was rubbing his cheek with two fingers. Leon came fully awake at once, aware in a glance that the night was colder and there was snow falling. The cold hit him like a bucket of water when he came

out from under the heavy felt blanket, and he thought that he might die of exposure while he got his sword belt over his shoulder and his chalmys wrapped around him. He couldn't find the fibula pin in the dark, and one of his riding boots had drifted an unbelievable distance from his blankets while he slept, and his teeth were chattering by the time he got dressed and had all of his weapons ready.

Ataelus knelt on his haunches, watching, making no comment despite Leon's repeated apologies for taking so long.

Nikon was dressed. He had two cloaks on, pinned crosswise on his shoulders. He had a fur-lined Sakje hood on his head, and he was just barely visible in the star-light.

"Fucking *cold*," Nikon muttered. The fur on his hood was speckled with snow that caught the fire light from the guard fire like a circlet of tiny jewels.

Leon didn't reply, because he was shivering so hard that his hips moved. "I've got to get moving," he said.

Nikon nodded. "Let's walk," he said. "The ground's clear. At least we're not on some fucking cliff top!"

The two sentries began to walk around the camp, cursing when they stepped on rocks in the dark or slipped on the snowy grass, but the ground was smooth,

and after a couple of revolutions they knew where it rose and fell. When the new snow got into Leon's open-toed boots, his toes burned.

After ten times around the horse lines, they were warm enough to consider a rest. The watch before them had constructed a rough hide with grass and ferns, and they burrowed into it. The ground was cold, but the absence of wind and snow seemed to help.

"Try this, boss," Nikon said, and handed Leon a small pottery flask. Leon smelled the wine before it was in his hand – he hadn't had any wine in two weeks.

"By the gods, Nikon!" he murmured. He poured a drop, no more, onto the ground and sub-vocalized his prayer to Zeus Sater, patron of slaves. Then he drank a single mouthful and felt the rough wine burn all the way down to his stomach. He handed the flask back.

Nikon tipped an equally small libation and took a mouthful himself. Then he put the stopper in the flask and put it away in his pouch. "I fucking love guard duty," he said.

"Really?" Leon asked.

All Leon could see was the gleam of Nikon's eyes. "Really," he said. "The night is so alive. Like a different world. The gods are closer."

Leon stiffened. "Look," he said.

"Ares wept," Nikon said.

Up on the nearer hillside, there was the unmistakable glint of a fire, a single orange point of light.

"Lucky bastards! They have a fire," Nikon said.

Leon lay still another few heartbeats, and then he heard the movement of the horses. "Somebody's out there," he said and sprang to his feet. He lost precious seconds getting his cold hands around the hafts of his javelins. Then he ran off toward the horses.

He heard the shrill cry of his own mare and then he *knew* that something was wrong. She was a very quiet horse. He changed his plan, swung wider, out into the darkness beyond the horses, determined to cut the retreat of the thief, trying not to think of the *size* of the footprints he'd found earlier in the day...

"Leon?" called Nikon, well away to the left.

Leon wished he'd told Nikon what he was going to do, but he hadn't even known when they'd been lying together and now it was too late. Leon was sure that someone was trying to steal the horses. He ran further into the darkness, almost directly away from the horse lines, and then he began to angle to the right.

All the horses moved in a surge and Jugina's cry emerged from a melee of horse noise. Leon leaned to his right and sprinted, now coming up on the horse

thieves from behind. He had a javelin in his fist, the throwing cord on his fingers. His feet crunched softly in the new snow.

He slowed, watching the horses against the horizon of stars. He crouched lower. None of the horses were making a sound, but the lead stallion was pulling his head back and forth against his picket, and all of the horses were shifting in agitation.

“Leon!” Nikon shouted. He was on the other side of the horses. “Alarm!” he cried, now set on waking the camp.

Leon threw himself onto his stomach – a shock of cold – and then rose up, supporting himself on his arms, trying to see over the grass.

Something moved in the grass between him and the horses, and the stallion, Ataelus’s favorite, gave a shrill trumpet and ripped his picket free of the ground. Beyond the horse line, the camels coughed and roared, and in the camp there were shouts.

Zeus Sator, Leon thought, I am the richest man for a thousand parasanges, except for the King of Macedon. Why am I alone in the dark clutching a spear, facing some nameless thing of shadow? The thing in the grass was so silent that Leon’s hair began to stand up. Zeus, who saw me surrender as a captive and made me a slave – Father, who saw me freed again – hear my prayer and grant me courage.

The thing was inhuman, drifting close to the ground in perfect silence, and then Leon saw a second one off to his left, belly down in the grass, and suddenly he knew what he was dealing with, and hours of childhood training guarding the herds took over from the crippling cold and fear in the starlit mountain meadow and he was on his feet, his arm cocked back and his throw sure.

The lead wolf took his javelin with a yelp and sank to the ground. Leon charged the second wolf, grabbing for his second javelin as he changed direction, but the beast broke cover and ran, and at least one more dark shape rose and fled with it. They fled in silence, and Leon didn't throw his second spear for fear of losing it in the dark.

"Wolves!" he shouted. His voice broke, betraying his fear, but there was elation, too.

"You all right?" Nikon shouted back. He was somewhere in the middle of the horses.

"I think I got one," Leon shouted back. Now he wasn't so sure. When he cast back, walking slowly and waving his arms, expecting to brush the haft, he couldn't find his javelin, although he felt cold, sticky moisture under his hands on the grass, and on his feet through his boots.

Ataelus was already securing the horses. "Sure it was for wolf?" he asked.

Leon wiped his hands on his chalmys. "Smell," he said, and held a hand under Ataelus's nose in the dark.

Ataelus wrinkled his face. "Blood," he said.

"Wolves," Leon said. "I know wolves."

Ataelus nodded. The light had doubled. "Good for guarding," he said.

Leon was surprised to find that the moon was rising. His watch was half over. "Sorry you had to get up," he said to the Sakje chief.

Ataelus gave his Greek shrug. "Better for lose sleep than for lose horse," he said, and walked away.

Leon assumed that that counted for praise.

When the others were back in their blankets, Leon went and apologized to Nikon. "Something in my brain must have known it was wolves," he said. "I went out into the dark to try and get behind them, just as my father taught me."

Nikon nodded. "That's what we do, too," he said. "You said you got one."

"I hit it," Leon said. "I can feel the blood in the grass, but it's gone. So's my javelin."

"Let's go find it!" Nikon said.

"In the darkness?" Leon asked. "No. I'll wait until morning."

“Ares, black man. You have the balls to go alone against wolves in the dark and then you want to wait ‘til morning to find the proof?” Nikon slapped him on the back.

Leon used snow to wash off the blood. “Zeus gave me the courage to face the wolves.” He grinned. “Any more would be hubris.”

Nikon laughed. “I thought you were such a prick,” he said. He shrugged, as if casting off his former opinion. “Another taste of wine?”

Leon reached for the flask with undisguised eagerness.

“You tell Ataelus about the fire?” Nikon asked, handing it over.

Leon raised his eyes. “I forgot.”

Nikon sounded resigned. “Me, too. We’ll tell him in the morning.”

The rest of their watch passed slowly, but they weren’t cold. They moved around constantly, going further out into the grass, more interested now in guarding against real wolves than against the possibility of thieves. Nikon showed all the signs of a young man who wanted a turn at the fight, and Leon restrained him from walking off into the dark alone.

Just before the end of their watch, Nikon was sitting with his back against Leon’s. The breeze had fallen and the day was not far off, and they were comfortable enough, although Leon’s feet were freezing.

“Any chance of a turn with that girl of yours?” Nikon asked.

Leon stiffened. "No."

"Aphrodite's tits, man. We're battle brothers, now!" Leon couldn't see Nikon's face, but the man was genuinely puzzled. "I won't hurt her."

Leon ran his tongue over his teeth. "No one is going to fuck her. Not until she wants it, and even then, I'd be careful."

Nikon leaned against him, his warmth reassuring, proof that he wasn't angry. "Funny way to deal with a whore. What'd you buy her for?"

Leon chewed on his upper lip. He liked being accepted, and he liked having a battle brother. "I know what its like to get fucked," he said.

Silence.

"Oh," Nikon said. "Fair enough." Leon could hear him swallow, could all but feel the other man thinking that over. He prepared for the shift of weight, the change of subject. Rejection. Nikon did shift his weight, but then he leaned back again, his warmth firm against Leon's back. "Fair enough. You pissed at me?"

Leon turned to look at the other young man. "No! But there's other girls. What about the Sakje?"

"Shit, they only look at each other. We're all dirt people – the chiefs treat us as equals, but the riders treat us like shit." Nikon laughed. "Besides, my dad was a Greek. That makes me nobody."

“You’re not nobody out here,” Leon said. He looked at the sky, and his smile returned. “Watch is over,” he said, and pointed at the morning star. He offered Nikon a hand to get up, and the Sindii grabbed it and stood, and they stood an extra second with their arms clasped.

“Wake me first thing and we’ll go find the wolf,” Nikon said.

Leon knelt beside Temerix and woke him the same way that Ataelus had woken him, rubbing two fingers on his face until the big smith shook his head and coughed. “I’m up,” he said.

He didn’t spend time finding his kit. He had it all to hand. In seconds, he was ready to take his post. Leon walked him around the camp, told the story of the wolves, and showed the big man where to find the guard post.

“Got it,” Temerix said when Kala, one of the youngest of the Sakje, came out of the pre-dawn murk.

Leon pointed at the nearest hillside. “We saw a fire,” he said, and pointed to where he thought that it had been.

Temerix grunted.

Leon slapped the man’s shoulder and went to bed. He felt happy.

He pushed back into the blankets until the foreign girl gave a small snore and threw an arm over him, and in a few contented minutes he was warm through, and then he was asleep.

Morning came too soon, Lu clambering over him to get free of the blankets and heat water. By tradition, night watch was allowed to sleep until the food was made, but Leon rose almost immediately, determined to find his javelin. He thought of leaving Nikon to sleep, but his partner of the night watch was sleeping just a few heads away in the blanket pile and he was out of the blankets as fast as Leon.

“Don’t you dare go without me,” he said. “Let me piss and I’m with you.”

Leon reported to Temerix at the fire – a year in the field had at least taught him that no one could leave camp without informing people where he was going.

Temerix made a sign to Samahe and picked up his *gorytos* with the magnificent gold-lacquered bow. “I’ll come,” he said.

Nikon gave Leon a look that indicated that the smith’s presence had stolen any chance of glory. Temerix was deadly, with the bow, with his axe, or with his hands. His presence made Leon feel much better.

They cast around the hillside meadow twice before Nikon found the blood. Leon had expected pools of the stuff, given how much he’d felt on his legs in the high grass, and all Nikon found was a depression in the grass where a heavy animal had lain, and some black stains on the grass.

Temerix rubbed a stem of grass between finger and thumb and held it to his nose. "Blood," he said.

The three men stood a few arm's lengths apart and began to search for the wolf's trail. Once Temerix found it, it wasn't hard to follow in the first strong sun – the wolf had dragged itself along, and there was blood, some feces, and the grass was bent just so – before the sun rose a finger's breadth, they were at the edge of the meadow, where the trail vanished into a tangle of rocks and a strange bush, almost like a standing willow.

"Good throw," Temerix said.

"How do you know?" Leon asked.

Temerix smiled. "Didn't fall out. In deep. Good throw." He put an arrow on his bow. "Want the spear back, Leon?"

Leon nodded. "Yes."

Temerix looked around – up at the sun, across the meadow at the camp. "He's in the scrub – he can probably hear us right now. Maybe dead. Maybe mean as Hades. You boys ready?" *Boys* wasn't said with any insult. Temerix was asking if either of them had the balls to go first.

Nikon stepped forward and began to wriggle between the stems. Leon pressed in behind him, and he could feel Temerix pushing through at his back. The vegetation instantly cut off all sightlines. They were in a world of green

spruce and red-gold sunlight reflected from new snow and sharp rock under foot and hand.

Leon put a hand on Nikon's outstretched leg. "Smell it?" he said.

Nikon gathered his legs under him and sat on his haunches. "Phewf! He dead?" he whispered.

Then a crashing erupted just to their right, and Temerix rose to his feet, bow arm powering out, muscles clear as cords for a second and he shot. The shaft rattled as it passed through the thicket and struck home with a snap and a pop.

Somewhere very close, almost within reach, the target gurgled and then gave a thin scream, abruptly cut off.

"Shit," Temerix said. He was backing away, fingers fumbling for another shaft.

The underbrush was too heavy for archery, too heavy for a javelin throw, and Leon had no idea what the target was. But Nikon shot forward with a shout, and Leon chose to follow him rather than leave him, an agonized decision that took him too long. He heard Temerix's bow *thrum* and another arrow went rattling through the brush.

"Run!" Temerix shouted, his deep voice ringing off the hillsides in a long echo lie the voices of the gods calling on them for speed.

Off to his left, there was a splintering and crashing as a big animal moved through the thicket. *If that's a wolf, I'm a dead man*, Leon thought. *Artemis, I made a clean cast. Grant me this not end in death, for me or mine!* Leon had to crawl under a big branch and when he rose to his feet, limbs weak with fear, it was to see Nikon standing under a stunted tree with a clearing of a few feet at its base. A big wolf lay there with Nikon's spear right through its head. He was grinning. "Found it!" he said, and then he saw something that made him go pale, and he tried to throw himself flat as a heavy spear came at him from the left. But the gods did not seek his death – the spear was tumbling, a bad throw or a throw that had caught on one of the many branches, and the head hit Nikon's arm while the rest of the tumbling shaft struck him in the head, knocking him down.

"Run!" Temerix shouted again.

Leon was on his feet. Something moved in the brush. He didn't throw. His arm was up, the javelin balanced on his fingers, but he wasn't going to waste his cast.

Nikon groaned.

Time slowed and stopped, so that there was just the snow under his feet and the wall of brush beyond the clearing, and the cool, clean feeling of the spear balanced on his hand and the terror, his heart pumping so hard that his temples were like independent organs beating out the time of his life.

And then Temerix was there. "Brave boys," he said. He was down on one knee, looking at Nikon, and then he scooped the Sindii up. "Follow me!" he said.

Leon came awake. He could sense that Temerix was scared. But he wasn't in his first fight, either. "They're gone," he said.

Temerix glanced back.

"They're gone," Leon said. He didn't know how he knew, but he was sure. Whatever had made the crashing sound had slithered silently away, like the wolves in the dark. He was sure, but he crawled out of the brush with Temerix, back up the meadow to camp, where Samahe and most of the girls were mounted and watching the hills. Leon breathed deeply and realized that he had been afraid. Now he felt alive. He wanted to talk.

Ataelus was peering at Nikon's wound. "Lucky!" he said. A flap of skin hung from Nikon's bicep where the passing spearhead had cut him. It was messy. Ataelus cut most of it away and put honey on the wound. Samahe wrapped it in clean linen.

The whole camp was up, silent and armed. Leon wanted to laugh at the spectacle of Derva naked except for a man's chiton worn off one shoulder, rucked up over her hips so that she could ride her horse, which had neither pad nor cinch—but there was nothing funny about it. Like the rest of them, she'd come out of her blankets ready to fight.

After a hurried meal, every eye on the surrounding ground, they went back into the thicket with twenty men, Sindii and Sakje together, armed with spears, and the women covered them from the meadow with bows. The hired guides stayed in camp with the foreign girl, sullen and clearly scared.

They went into the thicket in a rush, converging on the brush from three sides to flush any enemy, but all they found was the dead wolf and the spear that had hit Nikon, a spear the length and thickness of a hoplite spear, which had been thrown like a javelin. The head of the spear was stone, sharp as a razor and heavy in the hand. Leon had seen hunters in Africa who used stone, but the quality of the workmanship was superb, and somehow added to the awe of the piece.

Temerix and Leon skinned the wolf on the spot and took the hide. Leon's javelin was trapped under the dead animal and he retrieved it gratefully. Then Temerix began to search the brush for his arrows, which he prized. Leon felt honor bound to help, even though his courage was largely used up, and every noise in the bushes made him jump.

Sakarnes, the oldest of the Sakje, found one shaft. The same man found the bloodstains a few minutes later, and the trail of blood that led them to a gully behind the thicket and then down into the streambed. The blood trail ended in running water.

“Need a dog,” the Sakje said. He shook his head and Temerix agreed.

“No further,” Leon said. He was surprised at the tone of his own voice, and doubly surprised when Ataelus backed him up.

“Better lose for arrow than for friend,” Ataelus said to Temerix, who was gazing downstream.

Temerix nodded. “They scare me,” he said.

Leon swallowed. The Sindii smith was notorious as a man with no fear. This was a man who had sought death in ten actions and failed to find it, and now, on a pleasant autumn morning in the mountains, he was afraid. Leon was afraid of an ambush, but Temerix’s fear was something altogether different.

Ataelus nodded. “Me too. Let’s get gone.”

Leon couldn’t let go. “What scares you?” he said. He heard the false bravado in his own voice. But he had to ask.

Temerix frowned. “Giants,” he said.

Back in the meadow, the women were glad to see the men return, and together, the whole group walked or cantered up the grass to camp.

The camp was silent. It took Leon a moment to realize why.

Aleph and his friends were gone. Lu sat alone in the camp, tied tight with rope and gagged with a shawl. Leon cut her free while Ataelus looked at the camels. They hadn't been touched.

Samahe was for immediate pursuit. "They must be followed," she said.

Leon shook his head. "They sent us a clear message," he said. "They didn't hurt her. They didn't steal anything – not even food." He shrugged. He was exhausted. "They might have hamstringed every camel and taken the silver, but they didn't. Let them go."

Ataelus, who seldom disagreed with his wife, nodded, giving Leon an appraising look. In Sakje, he said, "Just as Leon says. Why follow them? They stole nothing but their wages."

"Who will manage the camels?" Samahe asked, but the manner of her asking showed that her mind was changed.

An hour later they were moving, although they had to stop twice in the first hour to rebalance loads for camels, and Pardo got bitten, his blood flowing bright red on the endless white of the snow. The pass was high and the season late; and the world was white and green and black around them. After Samahe had his hand bandaged, the wound well-washed, she motioned to Leon to join her at the head of the column. Ataelus, who had been scouting, came back, and Temerix rode forward. They had just started a steep down slope when the camel troubles

began, and they could see another river valley at their feet, free of snow and two stades below them.

“We don’t know where we are going,” Samahe said. She pointed at the valley, which was three times as broad as the last. The river seemed to flow east and north.

Leon rubbed his chin. “We can’t go wrong by heading east.”

Samahe raised an eyebrow. “Did that whoreson Aleph ever mention what our next day’s travel was?” She looked around.

Ataelus shook his head. “Not for saying, bastard. And we for wanting good camp – safe camp.” He looked at Temerix. The Sindii’s eyes never left the hillsides.

Leon looked at what he could see of the valley for another minute, waiting for someone to say something. Being in charge already felt different. If he was in charge, he didn’t really want it.

“Let’s get down in the valley, take a day to rest, and send out scouts,” he said.

Samahe nodded. “We have to go fast,” she said.

Everyone nodded.

The down slope of the mountains was so steep that most of the riders had to dismount, and the concept of “going fast” was limited to keeping the column

moving and requiring them to eat on the move – something Kineas had often insisted on, so it was hardly a major hardship. The sun was past the center of the sky before they were halfway down the endless switchback of the trail; and now they were in deep forest, big old trees of oak and pine and spruce in patches, with the kind of snow that can filter through the canopy of a mighty forest, so that the valley floor was hidden and the distances were all guesswork. As the shadows began to lengthen amidst the great trees, Leon knew he didn't want to be forced to camp there on the lower slopes.

In late afternoon, the scouts returned under Garait to say that the river was still an hour away.

“We have to push if we're not to be setting camp in the dark,” Samahe said.

Leon nodded. Ataelus began to shout orders at the Sakje, telling them to switch horses and move.

The Sindii who had second ponies did the same, and in a moment the column was in chaos as every man and woman tried to find their remount. Leon was satisfied with Jugina – he'd walked her most of the way down the mountains and she was fresher than he felt and sure-footed on the snow. More snow had started to fall and the wind cut through his cloak and both his chitons. He drank some water from his canteen, draining the last drops and tasting the silt in the bottom. He wondered how long he would have Oxus mud in the bottom of his canteen

when he saw Lu. She was as white as a corpse and she was staring up the hill on their right side, where the mountain they had just descended rose away in dark, ancient forest that had already lost the sun for the day.

As he watched her, she threw back her head and screamed, pointing up the hill. Leon saw an arrow shaft rise from the trees and fall, perfectly aimed, to strike a camel. The beast grunted and fell to its knees and then gradually subsided, all four legs splayed.

“Ares!” Leon said. He was mounted and had his wits about him. He rode up the chaos of the column and men got out of his way, and in a few heartbeats he was next to the dead camel.

Blankets, firewood, some bronze. “Leave it!” he shouted at the men around him. “Forget this one. Get the column moving! Ride, by Hades!” He tried to sound like Kineas and not like a panicked *ephebe*.

Temerix was mounted. He pushed another man onto his pony and the camels roared as they were pulled forward. Another arrow arched through the clear air above the column. This one struck a camel on top of the load, plunging into a sack of grain.

“Where are they coming from?” Derva asked at his elbow. She had her bow in her hand and an arrow nocked.

Leon frowned. "He's shooting down that avenue of trees, but I don't even see a flash of colour when he shoots."

Derva waited until the third shaft was in the air and then she leaned out and shot high, bending her whole body into the bow as she loosed so that the arrow leapt up, reversing the trajectory of the incoming arrow. It was an inspired shot, and her light cane arrow had better range than the javelin-sized bolts that were being shot at them, but she was shooting up a steep slope, and her arrow vanished into the twilight and snow murk of the trees and the shafts of light that cut through the canopy in bewildering profusion. Immediately, another arrow rose. Leon knew, too late, that it was aimed at him, or perhaps Derva. It seemed that he had all the time in the world to move, but both of them were locked in a jam of people and animals on a narrow trail with a steep hillside above them and another dropping off below. Before Leon could react, the arrow had buried itself to the feathers in Derva's horse's haunch, the sound of its passage burning in Leon's ears. Derva's horse panicked, screeching in shrill agony and rolling away off the trail. Leon got a hand on Derva's Persian coat and the fabric held, and she fell free of her mount, her *gorytos* and her pair of *akinakes* tangled between her legs and her head hitting the ground hard as Leon lost his grip. The screaming horse struck tree after tree, legs broken, until with a dull thud she struck a rock and was silent half a stade below them, Derva pushed herself to her feet.

“Fuck!” she said. “That’s my best horse!” She hobbled off down the column, favoring her right leg.

The camel and Derva’s charger were not the only casualties. Ataelus had the head of the column moving, so that the log-jam loosened and then broke, and the column moved off fast—too fast. A second camel was lost through speed, when she and her load fell off the trail, jostled by a dozen other beasts at the edge of panic, and her pain was trumpeted to the others and the Sindii had to take risks to restrain the big beasts and keep them from a stampede. Pardo got bitten again and Garait, fighting the whole weight of a camel, got his left leg broken against the load. Derva, up on her second pony, managed to keep him upright until the other Sakje came to his aid, but he passed out from the pain and no one suggested that they stop to set the bone.

Basparthax, one of Ataelus’s first recruits, rode back through the chaos of the trail. He was a big man, almost as big as Temerix, and he carried a big bow. He pulled up next to Leon. “Where?” he asked.

Leon and Samahe both pointed up the long avenues of trees that rose to a shelf of rock high above them, now visible in a shaft of sunlight. Basparthax nodded, choosing carefully from his *gorytos*. He chose a light arrow with a very small bronze head. Like Derva, he watched, apparently without fear, as the caravan melted away behind them in a panic of men and animals.

Basparthax must have seen something that Samahe and Leon didn't, because suddenly he sat straight and drew, curving his body forward and loosing with a shout. His arrow arced away, vanishing into the shadows.

Leon was so fixed on the flight of Basparthax's arrow that he missed the reprisal. The great arrow struck Basparthax through his guts and deep into his horse. The horse reared and toppled back off the trail, man and horse vanishing into the woods below them.

Temerix dismounted, his golden bow in his hand. He shot, watched his shot from the cover of a tree, and emerged to shoot again.

Samahe watched him for two shots and then ducked, smacking her whip into the withers of her mare, and the big horse jumped. An arrow the size of a boat-hook slammed into the trail beneath its hooves.

"Let Temerix shoot!" she said. "Ride, or we're dead!"

Leon cantered off a few horse-lengths and then turned back. The Sindii smith stepped out from behind his tree and drew the golden bow until it was a full semi-circle. He leaned forward as he loosed, giving a skip like a child when he shot from the weight of his effort.

"Fuck!" shouted the smith, and darted back behind his tree.

The return shot missed Temerix's pony by a hand's breadth, the bolt making the sound of a merchant ripping a length of cheap linen.

Leon rode back up the trail. He caught the dangling reins of the smith's horse, his side and back prickling with his awareness of the next shot. With the reins firmly in his hand, he turned his horse on the trail with his knees, keeping his head up to watch the corridor of trees for the next arrow.

Jugina was around like a circus horse, and Leon got the smith's horse around as well. Leon saw the next shot before it was launched – the flash of dull red up on the rock shelf, and Temerix was out from behind his tree and shooting, another deep draw and a skip even as the enemy shaft was falling, falling – Leon felt naked, but he was moving, Jugina flowing under him, and the shaft passed behind him.

“Come on!” Leon yelled.

Temerix gave one last look up the slope and vaulted onto the back of his horse, who grunted under his impact but kept his feet, and they were away, cantering down the trail too fast to be safe.

In two turns of the trail, Leon found himself with the self-appointed rearguard, which consisted of Sakarnes and Samahe.

“One man,” Temerix said. He had an arrow in his hand, a big arrow – the one that had stuck in the camel's load.

“One *thing*,” Samahe responded. She wiped the sweat from her face. “My people were routed by one *thing* with a bow.” She had her bow in her hand and an arrow on the string. “That *monster* killed Basparthax.”

Leon looked over his shoulder to see the last hurrying Sindii round the next bend in the trail. The ground was leveling. “Could have been worse,” he said.

Temerix grunted. He snapped the shaft off the arrowhead and offered it to Leon, but Leon already had one. The smith held the arrowhead next to the one from his belt pouch. They were from the same mold. The heads were wickedly barbed and the size of javelin heads.

“Bronze arrowheads but stone spears,” Samahe said. She spat in disgust. “Fucking mountains. Let me back on the flat and I’ll show your giants what I can do.”

“They’ve been with us for four or five days,” Leon said.

Temerix nodded, pulling his pony around to move down the trail.

“Curiosity? Thievery?” Leon asked.

“I hurt one this morning,” Temerix said. “Foolish. They hadn’t hurt us.” He shrugged, embarrassed. “I was surprised, so I shot.”

Leon turned to the big Sindii. “Ares, it’s not your fault. No one watches a camp with good intentions!”

Samahe was looking around. "Let's get out of here. The column's outrun the ambush, or I'm a Greek."

Temerix was the last to ride away. "Foolish," he repeated.

Leon looked back. "Did you hit him?" he asked, pointing back up the trail.

The Sindii grunted in disgust. "Arrows lost in trees," he said. "Arrows too heavy." He looked at the trees. "I need to make a new mold."

They made camp on a long, low island in the river, thrown up by generations of tumbling round rocks the size of children's balls, banks of gravel, and seasons of silt that allowed a sparse grass to grow through the pebbles even in winter.

"If the water came up in a hurry, we'd be in trouble," Leon said. Then he realized that it sounded as if he was criticizing Ataelus's choice of camp. "But secure. And there's not a cloud in the sky."

Ataelus nodded. He had heavy black circles under his eyes and his shoulders slumped. Leon knew he looked the same.

"Double watches," Ataelus said. "You take first. Me second. Temerix third."

Leon was tempted to say that he'd been on watch last night and had been in two skirmishes today, but the fact was that Ataelus was putting the most reliable men in charge and Leon was flattered to be included. "How're the wounded?" he asked. Rather than listening, he rode over to where Lu was washing Derva's

leg, deeply abraded and still bleeding. Behind them, Garait lay on his bedroll. Samahe had set his leg with a snap, and the Sauromatae man had cried out even in his coma, but now he seemed to be in a natural sleep.

Nikon was awake. He waved feebly to Leon as he dismounted. "Hermes, god of travelers!" Nikon whispered. "I hurt everywhere." The Sindii had spent the day strapped face down over a camel – luckily, not either of the beasts that had been lost. He had been conscious for much of it and had lines of pain on his face. "Ahh – the ride was worse than the wound!"

Leon unwrapped Samahe's bandage carefully and was pleased to see that the wound was dry around the edges. He sniffed it and smelled no putrefaction, but the edges of the wound were red with Apollo's wrath. "Fever tonight," he said.

Samahe came up behind him and took the bandage. She had a clean length of linen, and after another dollop of honey, she re-wrapped the wound. "Don't ever take the bandage off unless you're ready to put a clean one on," she said. "My mother taught me that. She was a great healer."

Leon nodded acceptance, but said, "My master – my former master – said that wounds needed to breathe."

"Did he?" Samahe was dismissive. "Who did he heal?"

"He read it in a book," Leon insisted, surprised at himself for defending Nicomedes. But Nicomedes had taught him to read, a precious gift.

Samahe shrugged. “Books?” she said, as if a small child had tried to tell her something about healing.

Leon gave up and went to look at the rest of the wounded.

Four warriors down, at least for a day, was as bad as a lost battle. The Prodrmoi weren’t used to losing, and they took the loss of Basparthax hard. Leon was mortified – the more so as he couldn’t imagine how he might have done any better. Should he have charged the giant? The thing – if indeed it was anything but a man – had been half a stade away, perhaps more, high above on a hillside. The idea of charging the thing was laughable. He shook his head and tried to concentrate on the tasks at hand.

The island camp was secure, for the whole caravan and for their horses. The watches were organized and they all took their turns. Leon’s watch lasted until the moon rose, and though he and the other men on his stint started at noises and shadows and the distant cries of wolves in the hills, they made it to their blankets without more than a little fear.

Lu took his hand in the blanket pile and tugged on it, and then put his hand on Nikon, who was hot. So Leon and Lu wrapped him in his blankets and kept him between them. Nikon had fever dreams and he moved around and kept them awake, and Leon rose twice to put wood on their fire, drink water and give more water to Nikon, who mumbled thanks and moaned. The sentries talked in

low voices. The fires burned well – the island was covered in driftwood. Leon worried that they were off the main trail – this valley didn't seem to have ever felt the hand of man.

Every time the wolves howled, Leon thought of Basparthax, left by his own in the rout. He was ashamed, guilty – and bone tired.

In the morning, Leon felt like he had been wrapped in thick wool and kicked. He hurt all over, and he was tired – more tired than he could ever remember in a summer of campaigning against Alexander. He was sure that the thin air had something to do with it. He stood in the cold morning air, stretching his muscles in the exercises that Nicomedes and Kineas had taught him. Leon thought of the Persian boy he had learned Pankration with, Darius. Leon had liked Darius, despite the boy's aristocratic airs. Where was he now?

"We're not going anywhere for a few days," Samahe said, coming up with a steaming cup of herbal tea.

Leon nodded. "Nikon's in a fever," he said.

Samahe made a face. "We should dip him in the river," she said.

Ataelus came up, chewing on a bone that had to be three days old. "We need for hunt." He looked around the valley. "Scout trails. Find way." He pointed his mutton at the hills behind them. "For wanting take scout to camels, dead

ones. Find Basparthax, find carcass. Get stuff." He shrugged. "Derva for wanting blankets!"

Leon beckoned to Temerix. "Would you be willing to take your men back along the trail and fetch Basparthax for burial? And Derva's kit off her charger?"

Temerix nodded slowly and made a wry face, as if dismissing his own fears. He grunted.

Leon turned to Samahe. "Send the women to hunt on the flat. Let the Sindii look for the charger and the camels – they're the best fighters on foot. The Sakje men scout ahead – east, down the valley. Each group leaves a volunteer in camp with the wounded." He looked around and was a little surprised when they agreed readily, as if his plan had some special merit.

Derva, who was counted with the wounded, helped Lu to bathe Nikon. He awoke under the cold water and sputtered, and all the color left him; and when they pulled him clear of the rushing cold water, he lay as if he'd been struck with a hammer. Lu wrapped him in blankets again after she dried him.

Leon put on his breastplate, a fine one of bronze made by Olbia's best armourer. He was thinner now than he'd been when it was made, and it was fitted wide for riding, but he felt better with the bronze on his chest and with his Boeitian helmet on his head. Even Temerix put on a heavy bronze helmet with hinged ear-flaps and a linen corselet scaled in bronze, and he took his axe. The

rest of the Sindii had light helmets of bronze, the spoils of a dozen battlefields. All had bows, most had scale shirts of Sakje work, and long knives, and axes.

Temerix stood a little apart, waiting for Leon. Leon walked over and shook his head. "You're in charge," he said. "I'm just another warrior."

Temerix nodded slowly. Then he turned and waved to the rest of the Sindii. "Come on, then," he said. Looking back, he pointed to Curti and Pardo. "Leon, with them. You command the rear. Stay twenty paces back of us, and if we run, you *hold*. Understand?"

Leon swallowed, trying to imagine the three of them holding a rush from creatures the size of gods. "Yes," he said.

Curti's eyes were round as saucers, but Pardo shrugged his wide shoulders. "I'm the biggest," he said, as if that explained everything.

"And you *suck* as an archer," Curti said.

"You're stuck back here, too," Pardo shot back.

"Silence," Leon said. They both looked at him. He ignored them; counting out the twenty paces he was supposed to follow Karn, the last Sindii in the main body. "Let's go."

He motioned for them to go first, and he took the last place. Fuck them if they thought it was cowardice.

They swept the lower slopes in an open line, twenty or thirty paces between men. The Sindii moved in pairs, so their line spread over a stade, with Temerix in the center, a big cow-horn in his hand. He ordered Leon to follow the center with his reserve and watch the rear. The higher they climbed, the more snow they found, until eventually their feet crunched and crackled as they walked, and men slipped and fell when their smooth soles found no purchase.

They found the first dead camel late in the morning, and Derva's horse just after. Leon watched while the Sindii made up packs from the camel's load, found Derva's kit, and distributed the packs among the worst archers. Leon took one as a sort of penance. The hides in which the bronze had been packed smelled, and the flax ropes bit into his hands, but the shoulder straps on his breastplate took the weight. He was determined not to complain.

They ate cold, stale bread around a thin rill of water that emerged from the hillside. There was an altar, a spiral carved in its surface and no sign of an offering. None of the Sindii sat on the altar. They ate in hushed anxiety, drank their water, refilled their skins and bottles with muttered prayers to the god of the place, and moved off to whispered orders. Despite the bright sun, the place was oppressive; the trees too big, the snow too bright for mortal eyes.

An hour later, Leon thought that he might not be able to continue. The weight of his breastplate and the bundle of old bronze together were wearing him down,

and they seemed to go up and up without pause. A steady stream of sweat ran down his back and down the middle of his chest under his armour.

Pardo started, just an arm's length to his left, and clutched at his throat. Then he retched, heaving the content of his stomach.

Leon dropped the pack he was carrying and got a javelin free. He stepped up beside the big Sindii and had trouble holding down his own lunch.

At first glance, he thought that monsters had raged over Basparthax and his horse. But the blood-soaked ground was covered in wolf-prints, and they had fed on the corpses. It was bad. Monsters couldn't have made the scene uglier.

Temerix hurried up, took one look, and gave orders in a harsh, unnatural voice, posting the men in a ring right around the body, well out. He turned to Leon. "Have the stomach for it?" he asked.

What could Leon say? "Yes," he said.

Together, they gathered what remained of the man. Leon went back to the load he'd carried all day and dumped it savagely, four pairs of Macedonian greaves rattling as they hit the rocks. They placed Basparthax's remains on the hide, found as much of him as they could stand to find, and rolled the hide into a tight bundle.

"No bones missing," Temerix said. He looked at Leon. "Sakje care. Bones missing are lost in the afterlife."

Leon nodded. "I'll carry him," he said, wondering why he had made such a statement."

"We'll take turns," Temerix said.

Having taken all morning to make it to the position of the body, they were back in camp in an hour. Temerix put the freshest men in the rearguard coming down the hill, but nothing happened, and they came into camp in good order. Samahe greeted them with a wave. She took the bundle that had been a man from Leon, went aside with it, and unrolled it a little despite Leon's protests. Then she rolled it up again and walked off, angry.

Ataelus was not back. Samahe was on edge, and the other Sakje and Sauromatae watched the eastern bank of the river constantly, their eyes flicking to the wrapped corpse of Basparthax every so often to emphasize their fears. After he had washed himself and cleaned his armour, Leon sought out Samahe where she stood on the biggest rock at the edge of the island. Derva was on sentry with a bow in her hand. Samahe stood and chewed grass.

"We found all his bones," Leon said.

Samahe shook her head. "He will go to the afterlife without his skin," she said. "Aiyee, it is a bad thing. Where is Ataelus?" She looked around. "I hate

these hills. Give me a flat plain and some grass, and I will never come here again.”

Leon took a deep breath. “I have an idea for Basparthax,” he said.

Samahe looked at him.

“What if we wrapped him in my wolf hide?” he asked. “For his skin?”

Derva hadn’t seemed to be paying attention. Sakje were very good at ignoring each other’s conversation – the only privacy among nomads was that granted by your peers as a gift – but now she shifted her weight and looked at Leon as if seeing a whole new person. “Oh!” she said.

Samahe stepped over to him and embraced him. “That would work.” She stepped back. “That would be good – skin for skin.” She nodded emphatically.

But then her glance went to the opposite bank, and the lines of worry returned.

The hunting party returned late with a rich haul, a pair of antlerless deer and a rich assortment of rabbits and other game, taken in their traditional circle hunt. Every cauldron that the caravan possessed was pressed into service, and the Sakje and the Sindii together searched the river valley for herbs they knew.

Samahe continued to watch the far bank. Other men and women did the same, their eyes straying there every so often as they cooked, cleaned a carcass, or pulled wild onions from the ground.

By last light they were full of food and still eating. Nikon was hot and cold by turns. Derva's leg was so stiff she could barely walk. Garait ground his teeth in pain. But hot food, good food, helped. The foreign girl fussed over Nikon, ate a pair of helpings of the rich meat stew, and then went to sit with Garait, singing softly over his leg.

Leon was sitting with Derva. "You don't mind?" he asked.

Derva shrugged. "He's not likely to fuck her just now, is he?" she responded in Sakje. Then she smiled. "I'm a witch, Leon. She's not bad. We just got off on the wrong side of the horse." The Sauromatae girl smiled. "She's not bad, for a dirt girl."

Leon laughed. After a moment, Derva joined him. No one else laughed, and the sound seemed thin and out of place, and they stopped.

"Where's Ataelus?" asked Nikon, suddenly conscious.

Lu got up from Geraint's leg and went back to Nikon, who moaned and slipped back into his fever.

Leon set the watches, taking the mid-watch himself. A thin freezing rain started just as he crawled from his blankets, and in two hours every rock and

blade of grass was coated in ice, absurdly dangerous for the easiest walking. The freezing rain went on and on through Leon's watch, and they sat in camp, miserable and cold, and listened to the sound of heavy branches breaking on the wooded slopes around them. The chorus of ice-shattered trees sounded like the movement of an army and its siege machines. No one slept much, except Lu, who snored.

Twice, the sentries called the alarm and everyone sprang from their damp blankets to gasp their weapons and stare out into the dark at the crashing sounds on the hillsides. Once Samahe loosed an arrow. She wouldn't say what had made her shoot, but Leon could sense that the whole camp was near panic.

It was impossible to read the stars or the moon, but Leon felt the change in light and thought they were an hour from dawn when the first heavy arrow fell on them, striking a bronze cauldron and penetrating it so that the contents oozed out into the coals of the fire, making steam and a shrill hiss.

"Stay clear of the fire," Leon said. "He's shooting *at* the fire."

Temerix put his bow under his blankets and took out his axe. His eyes appeared like skull sockets in the dull glow of the coals. "The boy's right," he said.

In Sakje, Samahe said, "Don't lose your nerve, Prodromoi!"

The rest of the night seemed to take ten nights to pass. Trees cracked and men shot arrows at random, and no new light came, and men started to pray for light.

“If they come,” Temerix said, “We must kill one at the first moment, or all of these will break like an old plow.” He waved at the Sakje. “They are terrified.”

Leon’s teeth were chattering, and in his colon he could feel the beginning of terror. He checked the hang of his sword and prepared to fight. He stood next to the Sindii smith, and he tried to emulate the man’s carriage, his shoulders square, his face to the enemy.

Leon realized that he could see. There was some light, stolen on him unawares.

“They’ll have light to shoot,” he said, just as a shaft came winging through the wolf’s tail of pre-dawn to bury itself in the icy ground with a snap.

“Let’s get them,” Leon said between chattering teeth. He could see it as if Kineas stood before him bellowing orders. They had to go out to meet these barbarians, and not huddle in their camp as a target. He looked around and caught the eyes of Curti and Pardo, who, despite his bandage, was on his feet with an axe in his hand.

“Come on!” Leon said. He ran through the shallow river, the icy water painful on his bare feet, and then up the far bank, towards the slope from which the last arrow had emerged. He slipped on the ice-coated rocks and fell heavily,

javelins rattling around him, and an arrow ripped over his head. He got to his feet, recovered his spears, and completed his climb; and Curti, who got up the bank first, reached down and gave him a hand and then they were in the meadow, running like deer.

Running like wolves.

Wolves can bring down elk. Wolves can bring down a horse, or a man, if they are patient, and determined. Leon ran on, his legs flowing over the ground, his brain clear of encumbering thoughts, his whole being focused on the tree line.

There were people all around him – even Samahe.

Something in the thick trees gave a shrill cry and then there was the sound of crashing in the underbrush.

At the east end of the valley, the sun cleared the top of the pass and the first golden rays struck the western slope above Leon, and unbidden he shouted “Apollo!”, the war cry of Olbia. He got a little burst of speed from the god and pulled in front, his feet skimming the snow and ice of the meadow. Curti fell. Leon was into the brush and the heavy branches at the edge of the tree line and it was dark like night – dark and full of noise. He could see a shape climbing the slope, and another.

“They run!” he shouted.

A volley of Sakje arrows followed the fleeing giants into the woods.

“Did you see them?” Samahe asked.

“Yes,” panted Leon. He nodded emphatically and raised his voice. “They are *just men!*”

Samahe gave him a quick hug. “Just men!” she shouted. “Men who run from us! Not magical creatures and not gods! So put away fear!”

Leon was watching the slope. “This is their valley,” he said. “Whoever it is, we need to get gone.”

Samahe shook her head. “They killed Basparthax,” she said. “I want revenge.” Her head turned and her eyes strayed away east, and her real fear showed for a moment.

Temerix shook his head. “There is no revenge,” he said. “Horse people like revenge, but dirt people know there are only more graves.”

Samahe spat. “Keep your wisdom,” she said. “You have filled more graves than anyone I know. Getae mothers weep at the mention of your name.”

Temerix shrugged. “Nonetheless,” he said.

They gathered up the excited warriors and made their way back across the meadow to camp. There were no more arrows, but Samahe pulled muscles falling on the ice-covered rocks, and Leon, no longer gifted with the strength and grace of Apollo, fell several times as he crossed the meadow.

They drank herb tea made by the foreign girl and tended their wounds – more abrasions and bruises from trying to run on ice than from the ambush. The glaze of ice took two hours of sunlight to melt away, and the horses wouldn't move on it at all, standing in a scared huddle and taking only cautious steps.

“We should ride,” Leon said.

“Ataelus will expect us to be here,” Samahe said.

“Ataelus is a wise man. And he went east. We will follow him and make his back-trail shorter. If he is in peril, we will rescue him.” Leon spoke with conviction. Samahe chewed her lower lip and then, suddenly, she nodded.

“It is good,” she said in Greek.

They took twice as long to pack the camels as they should have, tired from the bad night and tired again from the reckless charge across the meadow. But before the sun was high in the sky, the caravan moved off, Samahe leading a pair of scouts out ahead and Temerix leading the rearguard.

Curti led Leon's horse to him, the cloth already on and the girth tight. “You had other things to do,” he said, and handed Leon the reins.

Curti wasn't the only one to treat Leon differently.

They rode down the valley, headed north and east, and the ground was level and rolling and the river ran along next to them, growing gradually deeper and

wider. Ataelus's party had left a broad track of their own and in a few stades they came to a cairn of rocks – a marker for the trade road.

They rode ten more stades at a fast trot, changing horses as the sun hit his highest point, already twenty stades and more from their campsite. "Whatever they are," Leon told Samahe, "They can't keep pace with us."

"Giants may have long legs," Sakarnes said.

"There is still ice under the trees," Leon said. "And whole trees downed from the weight of ice." He gave a hard smile. "They have to come onto the valley floor to catch us."

The spirits of the caravan, better since the charge across the meadow, rose still further.

They ate in the saddle, to lengthen their lead over any possible pursuit, checked the camel's loads during a stop on a round hill in the middle of the valley with a view for parasanges and then rode on. Late afternoon brought them to camp on another low hill, where a stack of firewood and a pair of black-fletched arrows stuck like a letter "chi" in the ground showed that Ataelus had camped there the night before. There were footprints all around the camp but no signs of struggle, and the hoof prints went away to the east.

Temerix stood a long time at twilight, looking at the ground just to the east of camp. "Ataelus stood her a long time," he said. "This morning, after the rain."

Even in the failing light, it was a good vantage point, with the valley falling away for seven or eight parasanges to the east before it curved away. It appeared to meet another great valley up ahead.

“He saw something,” Leon said.

Temerix nodded.

They ate cold food and made small fires. The watches were cold, everything was damp, and every person formed a clump of bodies for warmth, so that you were either warm and crushed with the weight of others or freezing at the outside of the pile.

Leon went straight to sleep despite the conditions.

Nihmu joined them just after dawn, trotting her pony up the hill and received with shouts of joy. She slipped from her mount and went immediately to the small fire burning in the hilltop fireplace.

“We are all well, lady,” she said to Samahe. “Ataelus has found a caravan headed west. We saw it at first light yesterday, headed up that valley there.” She indicated the new valley that angled away to the west and north. “They were afraid of us at first, but now we camp together where the valleys join. Ataelus says, ‘come!’”

She grinned at Leon. "They are Qu'in!" she said. "Ataelus says, 'tell Leon, we are in Serica, at the edge of Sina.'"

Leon's heart soared. *The edge of Sina!*

Hope, excitement, the favor of the gods – the whole mood of the caravan changed, and in two hours they were riding east at a trot, and before the usual time to camp they were passing through the pickets of another caravan; tall, dark-haired men in tinned-bronze scale armour with lacquered bows like the one Temerix carried, who wore heavy mustaches and small black beards and looked very alien. In fact, they all looked like Lu. But their leader spoke enough Sakje to communicate well with all of them, and he was eager to trade on the spot.

"Hah!" he said as he showed his wares. "Silver! I come west for silver? Silver you got?"

"Silver I got," Leon said.

Li Gao, as Leon understood his name, was very taken with Leon's supply of silver. Leon had brought as much as he could, both of his own and what he could purchase in the days after Kineas's death, having heard from the Sauromatae and the Massagetae that silver was the thing that the Qu'in valued.

Li Gao's appetite for the stuff was prodigious, and his interest in the bronze that the camels had carried at so much risk and peril was minimal. He took the bronze, as if doing his new partner a favor. But for twenty talents in silver, he

traded most of the contents of his caravan – including bales of true silk, the real silk of Sina, not the coarse stuff that Cretans made, and beautiful pottery, and carved jade. Leon would take none of Li Gao's weapons, which he regarded as indifferent, except a single sword, short and sharp as a razor with a heavy hilt carved from a single piece of jade, which Li Gao offered in exchange for Leon's machaira with an ivory hilt. That deal seemed to seal all of the other deals.

Both caravans remained together for ten days, trading and feasting. Li Gao justified the time by insisting that Leon had saved him thirty days of travel to Marakanda. Leon questioned the Qu'in nobleman for hours about the route farther east, but he knew from the reactions of his escort that the Prodrmoi were deeply relieved to go back to the great plains.

Leon was cautious when he offered his next trade, but Li Gao was just as eager.

"Two years from now," he said, "I can meet you east of here ten days travel, at Zurabasat, at mid-summer."

"Here," Li Gao said. "Where the valleys meet, at mid summer." He shrugged. "These mountains full of bastards. Big bastards." He nodded. "Meet me here. I pay extra."

"I have to travel forty days to reach Zurabasat," Leon said. "Fifty days if the weather is hot."

Li Gao laughed and slapped his thighs. "I ride fifty days," he said, "and then I ride twenty days to get *here*." He reached up to adjust the gold pin that held his elaborate hair knot.

Leon thought about it – about the luck of meeting a late caravan in the mountain passes, about the gifts that the gods give to men. About how Tyche was rumored to have but three hairs, and how a man had but one chance to grasp them.

"Right here, at the feast of midsummer," he said. "Two years. I will bring *twice* this in silver."

Li Gao took his hand, and they shook.

On the last night, Leon offered Lu her freedom, but she shook her head. She spoke a little Sakje, now, and she said, "Go them, be slave. Go you?"

Leon looked around at Samahe and Ataelus and Temerix. Temerix, especially. The Sindii man took her hand. "Come with us," he said.

Lu tossed her hair over her eyes, but she smiled.

They turned back with the camels well-laden, and they moved fast, because winter was close and they feared the big men in the hills. But on the first night in the valley of the giants, Leon tried a different tack. He had arranged with Li

Pao's smith to smelt some of the bronze. So he lit a fire well clear of his camp and left three ingots of bronze on a cairn of rocks next to the fire.

In the morning, the bronze was gone and a single big spear was left in its place, stuck point up in the cairn.

On the last night in the mountains, Leon did the same again, leaving the spear and three more ingots of bronze. Both vanished. And not an arrow flew at them in all their time among the snow-girt passes. Samahe didn't like it, but Ataelus approved.

Winter caught them in Zurabatat, and Leon lost some of his profits keeping his party in food and wine and fodder, but the town was happy to have them and happier – far happier – to hear that they'd be back in two years and that there was to be a market where the great valley met.

"Word will spread," said one of the elders. "Men will come."

Leon narrowed his eyes. "I may not want that."

The man shook his head. "It is the way of merchants," he said. "And – it is your market. You make it. Yes?"

The thought made Leon smile. "My market," he said.