

21 New Princes

1317, 10th month, 14th day:

The captured invaders were brought to the castle and are being housed in a camp two leagues from the city. Twenty five survived plus one officer. He is residing in our prison. That is all I can write about this now.

The pretend merchants are being closely watched by the Argonauts and the army is forcing them further into the heart of the state and away from the important military roads.

Word came today that Dios' mother had died in her sleep. Dios was inconsolable for the remainder of the day, crying his little eyes out in Volos' arms. We can only hope his father returns safely.

1317, 10th month, 15th day

On our return from the university we encountered a monk from the Apollo's Temple Complex. It was the young man whose life was saved during the sanctuary caper four years past. He had been waiting for us by the drawbridge. It was obvious he was greatly agitated by something but did not wish to speak about it in public. Damao invited our old friend to share our mid day meal.

He told us that while delivering some nostrums, to the wounded but recovering invaders, he overheard some of them talking. They did not realize he spoke Italian and specifically the military slang of Genoa based mercenaries. We had to assure him no one would ever know that he told us anything. He said they were speculating among themselves, that in about a week, weapons would be smuggled into the camp and they could overpower the guards and cause much mischief. How this was to pass they did not say. When for sure they did not know.

I know he was concerned about his position as the monks were sworn to be politically neutral, making their nostrums available to all. We assured him on this. He went on to say that he did not believe these men were acting honorably as they were making jokes about how stupid their captors had been. This made him very sad and angry. Sad because his countrymen were not willing to abide by their word and angry because he knew how fair and honorable this Kingdom was.

Heron told him he would see that their plans fail. We thanked him profusely and commissioned him visit my sister and brother in law with our greetings and good wishes.

Later we had a conference with General Zokitos. He developed a plan that would require a number of the former sanctuary seekers into a kind of secret service.

(TN: At this point your translator feels it necessary to give a thumbnail of Byzantine and Epirus history. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Despotate_of_Epirus) Arden is living in it and does not say much about it. Epirus was a pre forth crusade provence of the Byzantine Empire. Parga is on the cost and in the middle of this area. These are turbulent times with everyone attempting to grab up what ever they can. I feel it puts Arden's comments into a context for the reader. Please keep in mind that Parga never submitted to any of this. In fact, it was an island in a stormy sea. Much of what I have translated as Byzantine is in fact Epirusian. Their current difficulties are sourced in Epirus' stormy political situation.)

Several letters arrived from our people in Epirus, Athens and Constantinople. All suggesting great internal turmoil was brewing. The place had been mostly in chaos since the 4th crusade anyway. All in all it was somewhat disastrous from the start. It was convoluted and complex in political terms anyway. All that was going on during Iason 3's time. Our history professor was incredulous and could not understand how these people failed to learn anything from their past.

The most worrisome was in Epirus. Thomas I Komneons Doukas was in some kind of power struggle with his nephew Nikholas Orisini who was a vassal of Napioe. Our spies have told us that Nikholas was quietly building court alliances. Just why Thomas' court was pressuring Parga was not clear. Perhaps it

was but a diversion to take Thomas' attention way from Nikholas and his clique or to give an excuse for strengthening their positions as Thomas had more than his share of difficulties anyway. Uncle Iason was furious with this. He could see no good coming from what was happening in that court or what would happen in the long run. Since they had lost most of the northern land and only held some islands and the area from the Gulf of Corinth north to Jahina; it seemed foolish to bother with us since we were not rich, not populous, no strategic location and never bothered anyone else.

Since their navy is not that strong and Nikholas' centered in Kephalaria; neither as modern, we are not concerned about them. We are concerned that they will be foolish enough to try some kind of land invasion. Karyakos thinks that this is more the work of a few courtiers than of Thomas himself. He would gain nothing but they would stand to gain by doing what no one else has been able. Much Greek blood will be spilled in the attempt, he fears.

I think all that is happening is a Trojan Horse. It is designed to anger Parga and provoke us into military action against them. One that we could not possibly win. One that gives Nik an excuse to move his army from Kephalaria to Epirus proper.

(Another Translator's note: Arden would have known almost all of the following in much greater detail than reported here. Only Thomas' untimely murder in 1318 would not have been known, as it had not yet happened. Thomas I Komnenos Doukas, (c. 1285–1318) ruler of Epirus from c. 1297 until his death in 1318.

Thomas was the son of Nikephoros I Komnenos Doukas and Anna Kantakouzene, a niece of Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos. In 1290 he was conferred the court dignity of despotes by his mother's cousin, Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos. Thomas' succession to his father's principality was endangered by the marriage of his sister Thamar to Philip I of Taranto, a son of King Charles II of Naples and Maria of Hungary in 1294. Although Philip had been promised to inherit Epirus in his wife's right, when Nikephoros died between September 1296 and July 1298, Anna secured the succession of her son Thomas and assumed the regency.

This isolated Epirus from its strongest ally and left it practically without outside support. Charles II of Naples demanded that Epirus be turned over to Philip and Thamar, but Anna refused, claiming that the arrangement had been broken when Thamar had been forced to abandon her Orthodox faith. To remedy this, Anna arranged for an alliance with the Byzantine Empire and the marriage of young Thomas to Anna Palaiologina, the daughter of the co-Emperor Michael IX Palaiologos. The actual marriage took place in 1307 or 1313. In the meantime Charles II sent troops into Epirus, but they were repulsed and the Epirotes advanced into the Angevin lands in the western Balkans, recovering Butrinto and Naupaktos in 1304–1305. A new Angevin invasion in 1307 ended with a compromise by which Philip of Taranto was ceded many of the fortresses that had been retaken by the Epirotes in the previous war.

Epirus gravitated increasingly into the Byzantine orbit until a private dispute between Epirus and Byzantine commanders sparked off a new conflict in 1315. The Byzantines raided as far as Arta, and Thomas imprisoned his wife and entered into negotiations with Philip of Taranto. But before Epirus could enter into a new alliance with the Angevins he was murdered by his nephew, Count Nikholas Orsini of Kephalaria.)

The decision to move the Dioskourol from pages to our personal service has opened two new positions in their ranks and caused Ikaros no end of consternation in organizing our apartments. Fortunately they only desire one bed chamber. In other places the Crown Prince, and in fact all princes, are given their own estates or marry into them but Parga is just too small for this. Since we desire our closest aids and advisors to live in common with us, at least for the next several years, some new construction will need be done.

Father and Uncle Iason joined the four of us and we all fucked as we had done the first time all six of us got together, so long ago. Before the pleasure however, a small private ceremony took place. We would have a public ceremony in a few days. Dysme and Ikaros assisted The Dioskourol to nakedness. While they rubbed their bodies with oils, Princes: Helladios, Lysandros, Tertius and the three terrors were summoned. Lysandros in the arms of his uncle, thought it all very grand and Helladios at 9 wanted to be

like his older brothers. At almost five Lysandros was delighted to be present with his brothers and all the other men. The pages, guardians and a few others close to us gathered to witness this play. Iason and I did not quite know what was going on but we figured the Royal Couple wanted to make some kind of family, non political statement.

When all had assembled, Kastor and Polydeukus knelt before King and Consort, their uncle and father. "Kastor, Polydeukus, you have agreed to the service of Crown Prince Iason and his Consort Prince Arden, you are by blood brothers of each other and of the other princes in this room. You are the sons of this Royal couple Prince Karyakos and myself." He placed one hand on each of their heads. "In Parga we are not like other places. We only have five titles. Citizens, Knight, Prince, Princess and King. The only titles that are directly inherited are Citizen and Crown Prince. The Crown Prince is the eldest son of the reigning monarch and his wife the Princess Consort. All other titles are earned or granted to those under 18 in provision. Once earned the title can not be revoked, the duties that accompany that title, except for one, are also earned and held at the pleasure of the King, his Consort and Council. Unlike most other places the titles of royalty do not signify the sovereignty of state or the person but they do represent the sovereignty of the people, the citizens of this state and by extension the state itself. Being a Prince of Parga brings with it heavy responsibilities. The most important of which is your loyalty to its citizens. Unlike other places the citizens are not your subjects they are your family and clansmen. The citizens of Parga will be and are loyal to us in direct response to our loyalty to them and the quality of our service in the discharge of their sovereignty. Our loyalty to each other results from our love and respect for each other and our shared loyalty to Parga.

From this time forward you shall be know as Prince Kastor and Prince Polydeukus advisors and confidants of Crown Prince Iason and his Consort Prince Arden."

They rose and the King and Consort kissed both most passionately. Ikaros and Dysme stepped forward with their new tunics and kilts. These had the symbol of the crown prince with a hand over like mine and an olive branch below and gold laurels placed on their heads. After a short time while Lysandros was given much attention from all but mostly his father, Dysme took him and Helladios to the Princess and we toasted our new brother princes with wine. Uncle Iason told them that the council would confirm their new positions at its next meeting. I could see that Father had a look of great pride and satisfaction. The three twins were delighted, especially the twins who had taken well and strongly to the Dioskouroi.

During all of this Tertius was quite quiet. He was obviously pleased and paid much attention to Nikias, who was paying much attention to him. It did not take long for us to consummate our new relationship. With the others watching and encouraging us, Iason and I were soundly fucked by Kastor and Polydeukus. We were on our knees on the bed with our heads in Joulous' and Justus' crotches while the Dioskouroi took turns in our butts switching off between us. After they ejaculated in our bowls we switched positions, with them on the bottom and us on top switching off. Justus and Joulous were being serviced by their fathers and Nikias was in hot passion with his uncle Tertius bouncing up and down on his long hard erection.

Our fathers departed but our bed was still filled with princes. Uncle Tertius told us a little history that none of the scholars ever mentioned. Nor did our fathers. He explained why he was the only other prince of his generation. His father, Iason 6 had 3 younger brothers, his uncles. One of those uncles became insanely jealous of his father's consort, Plato. This jealousy was fostered and fermented by his grandmother. "He began plotting against my Uncle Plato and attempted to get his brothers to join in killing him and forcing King Iason 6 into exile. Why he thought the council would even go along with this no one ever said. In my later years I realized he was crazy and overly fond of wine and ale."

The other two brothers refused to help but they did not warn my father either. I was often told they did not believe him, thinking it was only the wine talking. My uncle attacked Plato, almost killing him. It was my father that heard the noise and was forced to kill his own brother in defense of his consort, who had been stabbed in the back by someone he trusted. Choosing between your lover and your brother is a truly painful decision, even if that brother is not right in the head; perhaps more so if that be the case. "I was just a lad of 9 when this happened and my brother just 11. I know this distressed my father greatly, I could see it. He was hurt badly by his brothers' betrayal and the choice he had been forced to make. Father banished my grandmother and uncles to the Eastern Hunting Lodge. He never spoke to or saw my

grandmother again, neither did I. She had sinned the unpardonable sin of setting brother against brother. I once heard him tell Plato she too was crazy. He never slept with my mother again, refusing to sire any more princes.

My mother seemed to understand, although I was never sure how much of that was real and how much duty. I always felt they did love each other and she did have 6 children counting my sisters. He just refused to have sex with her. It was Plato and later Karyakos that talked some sense into him. My father was a bitter and at times a sad, miserable person for many years. I am sure he loved his brothers very much. It was him that set the pattern for us and now for you boys. After my grandmother died he allowed my uncles to have families of their own and manage the Eastern and Southern estates. They were forced by the council to give up their titles. They were old men before I ever saw them again and my cousins were almost grown but I never really knew them. My father and Plato would often visit them after grandmother died. I know on a family and personal level they had long been forgiven. He once told me that he could never trust his brothers again to take a court or government responsibility. If they failed in a duty founded in love and brotherhood, could they be trusted in duty to the people and the state? I then understood why council removed their titles.

He was deeply hurt that they would stand aside and by their silence aid harm to Plato. Now you know why they place such emphasis on building this brotherhood based on sex, love and duty. My Grandmother was a deeply religious Christine person and had nothing but disdain for Uncle Plato. She believed that their male union was a sin and against her God's Will. She would not listen to the scholars who showed this belief was not in scripture but in the thoughts of men, mostly Roman and ancient Hebrew men. Fortunately my mother had a much different view. Now you know why my brother is so against all religious beliefs being mixed into the affairs of state, why they and you all have personal bodyguards. I know my father and Plato were generous men. Like my brothers they would have shared authority and responsibility, just as my brothers do. My father once told me that the hardest thing he ever did was kill his brother. The easiest was to forgive him. The most puzzling, why he did not have the courage to confront Plato on a field of honor but attacked him, when unarmed and from the back. I know my father thought him a fool and believed him a coward. My uncle must have suffered from some kind of delusions as my grandmother.

Now you know why the young princes of this kingdom, you boys, are encouraged to mutual loyalty and so frequently tested for soundness of reason." He turned to the others. "Their will be times when you will question Arden and Iason's leadership. You must do so to them, not just between yourselves. Their will be times when you will feel slighted. Never let that stay to fester. Come forward and make it known. Arden and Iason are good men and worthy of their offices. They are wise beyond their years and have proven their competence. They are not readers of minds, diviners or oracles. When in doubt take them to your bed share your passions, your fears, your thoughts, your doubts and your feelings. They will do right by you just as my brothers have done right by me." He turned to us. "Iason, Arden, my advice applies to you as to them. They too will do right by you. We must all first do right by the people we represent.

We princes will not always agree on everything. When ever we do take that as a warning sign and reexamine. We can and do all agree on a few things such as our duty, our loyalty, our love and our respect. Remember when we fail and boys, we, every one of us will fail at some point, we not only fail ourselves but each other. Iason and Karyakos are first among equals. Some day Iason and Arden will be first among equals. What that means is simply this, they get to share the credit for our successes and get most of the blame for our failures. That is the price they pay for their perks of office.

On the other hand their bed has always been open to me and we have built so strong a love between that only the thought is enough to give me strength when I am ever in need of it. And now I am in that need." He kissed each of us and slipped out of our chamber. All are now asleep but me. My lamp is low on oil and it is time for me to sleep also. Sleep in the arms of my lover and my brothers.

1317, 10th month, 18th day:

In the council the appointments were confirmed and the Dioskourol congratulated. Two new pages were proposed, boys of 14, sons of knights we did not know very well. Thanatos announced that he was

appointing two more bodyguards to our complement. What he did not announce was the creation of a new Royal Guard division to gather intelligence. For years now Venice has placed ambassadors in states it trades with. These people send detailed and regular reports home. They were not being spies as such but their reports were never made public either. We would formalize this process like them, often through counsels or trade offices. We will place as many spies as we can in all the courts that may have political designs on us, as well as Ambassadors at our most important trading partners. Perhaps we can employ Dario in Venice as our Ambassador.

Prince Tertius came up to us after the meeting, "Princes a word with you please." Iason and I had to grab on to Kastor and Polydeukus who had not yet adjusted to their new titles. "Dario has asked my brother to find him a wife. Being a wise delegator he chose me to do the looking." I asked if he had experience in such matters. "I found you Arden, I can find a wife for Dario." I had often wondered just how I was found, father would never tell me. Now I know at least part of the story. "I am thinking of your cousin Olympia. You four know them both, what say you." We all agreed she was pleasant to look at and of a kind and gentle temperament. Knowing both we agreed Dario would approve and she would not be opposed as he is handsome, learned and of a good nature. "Good I will write to him today."

Iason asked, "What will her parents say when they find out the newly weds will be living in Venice," Iason asked.

He shrugged his shoulders and replied, "Karyakos' problem, she is his niece. I was not aware that he was not returning."

That is because we haven't told him yet, by the way Uncle our ambassador and his wife should have companions, perhaps a Palace Boy and Girl couple," Kastor added.

"Yes that is right and I know just such a couple. Say nothing of this, my work here is not yet done." He scurried off to do what ever it was he needed to do. Polydeukus suggested he would choose Thoren and his wife Gaiane.

"Isn't she with child soon," Iason asked?

"Yes and if we keep sending the young ones away the place will soon have a shortage of children," Kastor remarked.

"Perhaps you two should follow Arden and I in our best efforts to correct the situation." With that everyone laughed and patted each other on the back and butt.

Dios was playing with the other palace children, Odo was with the language scholars and the pages all engaged in what pages do, when not being pages. That left the four of us to our own fucking devices.

1317, 10th month, 22nd day:

Two days ago, while we were attending classes: King Iason sealed our eastern broader to all traffic and closed our port to ships from Epirus. Dios' father's ship returned to port and the plan to capture the pretend merchants in the act to attempting to free the crossbow prisoners was implemented.

Our day started off with some of the most delightful sex we have shared in some weeks. Having risen early from Euthalia's and my bed I met Iason in the hall. We kissed briefly savoring the smell of sex on each others bodies and strode hand in hand along the narrow passage. When we came into our bedchamber we found the twins asleep in our bed. The smell of sex in this room was even stronger then on our bodies and our maleness reacted as the gods had built it to. (TN: In Arden's writings he often interchanges god or the gods for nature or things natural. He is what we would call an atheist or perhaps an agnostic, so far he has not declared himself. Arden is respectful of the faith that others hold or profess to hold but he himself seems to favor reason above all.) We looked at each other and wide smiles broke across our faces. Quickly we were disrobed and snuggling against the back sides of our brothers. My erection pressed against Kastor's buttocks and as if by command he raised his leg giving me entrance. I

doubt he was even awake or Poly for that. Soon, as my hips drove my stiff cock evenly into his treasure place, I noticed him kissing Poly passionately and could feel Iason's easy thrusts being transmitted through their bodies into mine.

The only complaint was made by Ikaros as he attempted to wake us. His concern was focused on our singular lack of attention to his bottom. He was not serious and soon all were laughing and jesting. None of us four were motivated to move until the room was invaded by naked boys, each one attacking his man to collect their morning kisses. Dios was the only one to complain, it was the smell of Iason's breath. We had not as yet cleaned our teeth.

In the afternoon of the next day, at the council meeting, Prince Tertius was assisted by the new Sir Adonis. He had recently been elevated to the rank of first level Knight, that is Class one. Admiral Pantaleon came in with an officer I did not recognize but Dios did. I think his surprise was as great as Dios'. Before anyone could stop him Dios was running across the room in flying into his daddy's arms. I was quite surprised also as he is a very young man to be an officer and have a son of 10. Since the proceedings had not yet started, general chaos was soon the order of the afternoon. Hermogenes pretended not to know how Dios had come to be an honorary page. Dios began telling his version of events in one long sentence. I began to wonder if he even stopped to breathe. Karyakos sent Odo and the three terrors to bring Dios back to the page's station. Hermogenes would sit with them and Dios until his time to speak. Several other Navel officers came in and at long last the King.

Uncle Iason went directly to Hermogenes and Dios. He greeted Hermogenes warmly and expressed his condolences. "Uncle Iason please make Uncle Pantaleon keep my daddy in port." Hermogenes was quite taken aback that his son would be so familiar with the king. The Three Terrors chimed in, "you promised dad." Uncle Iason just touched Dios' head, "The young princes, with or without titles always get their wishes." As Uncle Iason went back to start the meeting I heard Nikias telling Hermogenes, "daddy wants all the children to call him Uncle Iason when he is not being the King." I guess to his twelve year old mind being King is like any other job. From my observations being the a king or his consort is all consuming and try as one might it is always all or nothing. Would that Iason and I be half the men our fathers when we assume that mantle. He is correct, Uncle Iason and Prince Karyakos do not encourage official titles when not performing official functions. It is often a fine line between being a King or Prince and being a father, brother or friend.

Tertius had Adonis moved little figures around on the huge map table in the middle of the council chamber. Since the Knights were all gathered around the table the pages and ourselves had to stand up on our little platform to see over their heads.

"I have several related incidents to review," he started out. "General Zokitos and his staff are defending our western border as we speak. The last reports indicate our army has everything under control, as under control as these things ever are, of course. Several days ago we allowed several of the merchant spies to leave through the western portal; knowing they would be taking the information we wanted the invaders to know. As they approached our most sensitive staging area a small patrol of our calvary caught up with them, five in all and escorted them right to the border crossing. We must protect against bandits, must we not.

The others were making their way to this area with the intention of arming our prisoners of war. They are in our dungeon as of last night. The men they tried to arm were our soldiers posing as prisoners. Timed with their planned mischief in this area, a moderate force of invaders advanced on our border crossing. I must say that their tactics were sound, it was just their intelligence that was faulty; for which they were charged a very high price." He tossed a sack of coins to one of the scribes for counting and a receipt.

The force of 50 that came across the snow were obviously supposed to prepare for a larger force that would cross just before the battle, at a point closer to the pass. Our scouts retraced their steps and from that figured what the plan obviously was. Had they been more prudent and not killed the two shepherds and stolen their flock they might have succeeded in alluding us. Why they just didn't purchase the food they needed is beyond me. Not being mountain men to begin with, they were only partly prepared for what they faced, their officers did have money." He pointed to the sack the scribe was counting.

“We anticipated a force of several hundred crossing the ice and snow field south of the pass. Zokitos stationed 500 in waiting and as they came down in the meadows surrounded them and demanded surrender. They refused but after two volleys from our 125 Longbows the remaining 227 quickly surrendered. We sent some of our mountain fighters back along their trail to destroy the ice bridges over the glacier's crevasses. They were able to do that and remove any safe trail markers. We left a small contingent to watch that route for infiltrators.

Just as we expected, what seemed like a large force appeared at the border crossing. These men were well prepared. They sent a large siege machine in their advance, followed by many long ladders and men with large shields. The machine had huge wheels to overcome the many boulders we placed to discourage smaller machines and wagons. We let them cross the border and come into the narrowest part of the pass. Our large catapults smashed it with huge rocks. Our light catapults dumped many casks of pitch and “Greek Fire”. Our long bows and cross bows devastated the first wave leaving the ladders and siege machine burning. The shields could not stop the long bows at such close range, most arrows went through and killed the man behind. Our Koalhurst long bows can penetrate a knight's full body armor at over 2 stadion and these men were much closer than that. Being at close range they were able to return crossbow bolts but with much less effectiveness, as the defenders are behind cover and high up on the canyon walls.

With their burning siege machine and scaling materials blocking their path and no real cover the invaders retired.

We set the newly captured prisoners to the job of taking the dead and wounded back across the border as well as their burned equipment hulks. It now blocks their path as ours but we have no intention of invading them anyway. We do not anticipate another advance, however we are prepared if one should come.

In the spring we will build obstacles such that these machines can no longer penetrate. Archimedes has already begun the designs.” In response to questions Tertius added. “The siege machine was covered with copper and iron plates. The large rocks broke it badly and the fire and pitch ran into the cracks and joints lighting the wood below. The wheels were wood and quickly burned. This machine was not unlike those of antiquity, designed to give protection to men and a bridge across our deep and fast flowing river. Archimedes had prepared large levers for disrupting such things, should they be needed.

Had it worked they would have found themselves in a narrow valley that opened into a meadow, where our cavalry and archers would make short work of them. Once on the down hill side retreat is almost impossible. The terrain is such, quite steep, that the Greek Square or the tight shielded formations of the Roman Legions will not work well. Our longbows have the power to kill an armored knight at over 2 stadion, twice the effective range of their cross bows or Greek short bows and the long bow can shoot 10 to 12 arrows a minute, a cross bow at 2 to 3, it would not be a contest.”

General Zokitos and his staff have many more tricks and methods of defense. “If they try again we will use different tactics and we have machines of war of our own. If they are successful in getting substantial forces behind us it will not matter much, since at best we can only deploy one in ten at the pass and our force is at least four times greater than they believe it to be.”

Admiral Pantaleon was next to speak. He had little to say except that the navy was ready for any kind of invasion from the sea. He had a rather strange look on his face I suspected some kind of surprise was yet to come. He asked one of captains to speak next. The captain was Hermogenes' who came forward. The captain described how when passing the island of Zakynthos several Epirusian navy ships came out to challenge them. “When we were in Constantinople we learned that the Eastern Empire is still in dispute with the Despot of Epirus. Thomas is being anything but cooperative. We do not know what prompted the problem but it is some dispute between the commanders of each side. Since we are apparently outside his influence they were seeking our alliance against him. I told them they should make representations to King Iason the 7th not a mere captain of his navy. This displeased them but they said nothing. We departed immediately taking on fresh water and food at Naxos.”

Hermogenes began telling about the little chase. “The three ships were recognized to be on an intercept

course with us. I was the officer of the day. My orders were to make for Parga with all speed and not to engage anyone if it could be avoided. I immediately called for all the sail we could set and summoned the captain to the bridge. I set our course a few degrees to the east to gain more room as we were on the eastern side of the island. The Epirusians were pulling hard on their oars but we were able to keep a good distance between us and they soon began to fade. They attempted to follow us but failed. As we sailed passed Kephalaria a small fleet of ships came at us and again I was the officer of the day. This time the Epirusians or Kephalonians were already at sea and trying to block our progress. They were sailing in a line astern from west to east. I turned east by 10 degrees and after they committed to their new courses swing back to my original course; since they were moving across our course this split their fleet isolating two ship on our east side and three on our west. The three on the west side were still line astern. The idea is to intersect our path and turn parallel to it. My intention was to let them make that commitment and just go around them; since we were moving much faster, having a good following wind. The two ships most astern in the second group now altered their courses, one slightly northward and the other southward. This would have the effect of intersecting us should we avoid the first ship. Now that they had committed I could see an opening to avoid battle.

I sent armed lookouts to the top of the masts. They lashed themselves to it, to free both hands. Both are marines and skilled archers. At the first sign of committing to a turn they would signal. Since they would be turning into the wind a complete reset of their sails would be required and the rhythm of the oars must by necessity change. We readied our cannons and prepared to repel boarders. Knowing it would take one stadion to answer the tiller we used the new range finder device mounted on our bow and at 2 stadion pulled gently to move us several degrees to the east, making the slightest adjustment on our sails to keep them as full as possible. The signal came that our advisory was turning sharply south and had dropped their sails, the archers prepared. At one stadion the archers began shooting at them. They reported 6 of the arrows found home. This sent the ship's crew into a minor panic and they could not react fast enough to correct for our widening gap. Once we passed them I steered to the west just enough to pass the other two ships that had committed by this time to intercept my original course and to assist their sister if necessary."

The captain answered a few questions saying that he was in deed on the bridge but saw no need to take over from Hermogenes, as he was doing exactly what he would and as he had been trained to do. "Captain, do you think Lieutenant Hermogenes is ready for a promotion," King Iason asked? "Yes sir, he is ready and deserving." The king looked at Admiral Pantaleon. "Page." the Admiral called. Dios came running out from behind the throne wearing Justus' hat which was just a bit to big for him. I know everyone wanted to laugh but no one did. Everyone knew how bitter sweet this must be for Hermogenes, an honor for sure but grieving for his lost wife also. He handed the captain's insignia to the Admiral. You could just see the pride on his little face as he looked up at his dad and having had the privilege of being a real page, even if he needed to continuously adjust his hat of office, which kept falling off.

Everyone was sent away except the most senior members of the council. We debated what the response to these provocations should be and what it will be. On the land side we should just do what we have been doing in the east. In the west we should prepare for raids and a possible invasion from both the north and south. They would be using many small boats that hold close to the shore. Again we must pull our fishers from the water and their villages.

"I know Thomas, not well, but well enough to know him no fool. He has nothing to gain from this venture and only to loose. This is not his doing," King Iason proclaimed. Iason and I agree with that assessment and we don't know Thomas. We do know he has all the troubles with the Eastern Empire that he needs and his resources are more limited than theirs. He needs allies not enemies.

Father believes someone in Thomas' court, with help from the Eastern Empire is attempting to weaken him. He did not mention any names but I know he thinks he knows. He feels that if we are provoked to action it will cause problems for Thomas and take away a potential ally. They see us not a truly neutral but as a potential allies of Thomas, all be it one that can not contribute much to him. Kastor suggested that as long as we are friendly to Thomas he could always seek asylum or safe passage.

It was decided to send two messages to Thomas, one official protesting and describing the attacks and incursions, demanding reparations and stating flat out we will not get drawn into whatever political

intrigues the Despot has going on. We will also restate that we have been a Free and Sovereign people since the time before Homer. Since the time of Alexander many an empire has claimed to include us, none have ever been welcomed or successful. We would also ask what should become of the surviving would be assassins, spies and captured mercenaries with their Epirusian officer, now in our dungeon. The other, a private message in King Iason's own hand, offering him asylum and our protection, no questions asked, if events force him to it.

Since the two churches have made some kind of peace between themselves our Bishop now reports to the Patriarch of Constantinople not the Pope. We will get him to carry the messages on an official visit to his neighboring Patriarch at Thomas' Court.

As we relaxed in the baths Volos told me that Captain Hermogenes was taking Dios to live with him while he is in port but he would return to us when he sailed. The daughters would remain with Pantaleon's family. "Dios will continue his education at the castle and we will see him every day. You know he expects to run with you every afternoon. Heron and I are sure going to miss him. Even his practice on the bagpipes."

(Note: Greek pipes are called Tsampouna (also tsambouna, tsabouna, etc.) or Gaida (also Gazhda). Greek island bagpipe with a double chanter, no drone or sometimes a drone and a bag made from an entire goatskin. They are also known from Thibis and Athens. The Gaida is a mainland pipe with a single chanter and single drone. Since Arden does not describe it all we know is Dios was learning to play it.)

"Tell me Arden, is Euthalia with child yet?" I told him the truth, I thought so but would not know for sure for some weeks yet. He grinned widely. "A strong boy to be your son's bodyguard who I shall train personally, you will see." I had not thought about it but yes, I hope his comments are prophetic.

Our peace was short lived as the younger pages invaded on mass and began engaging in the type of boy play common to their age. The exuberance of youth is great and the effect on us older boys is also great. I now think I understand why our fathers insist on spending so much time with boys this age. It keeps them young and vital since the kind and quality of sex with us older ones is superior and they have no shortage from any age group.

I know our guardians were concerned that once Iason and I began sleeping with the females our ardor toward them might diminish or disappear all together. From what I am told by many who have wives that was their experience. So far Iason and I have not lost any desire for each other or our close circle. It would seem that the more sex we share the more we want, male or female is less important than pleasure shared. It is Nikias that I am most drawn to, other than Iason, of late. Now that he has grown sufficiently to engage me our love making is even more pleasurable. Nikias will be our Tertius when we are older, I am sure of that. I can not quite imagine how we will function with so many princes in such a small kingdom.

I am not sure how a mentor ever lets his student-lover go from his embrace. It must be as a parent who nurtures his children and as built into us by the gods, helps that child mature and go into the world. My mentor and parents have done so with me. I can only assume the gods have built this into us as well and I will, at the right time, do the same. I am so glad we have kept the old ways here.

My beloveds sleep so peacefully. I love them all, each for his own qualities. Since we love, we give and receive from each other. That must be the true gift of the gods.