

CLEOPATRA 53-51 BC

Tales of Batnoam the Amazing Sailor

~ or ~

Stuff Just Happens to Me

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FORWARD

These are Sinbad type stories, with the addition of light humor and romance. Sail the Mediterranean in first century BCE and deal with high seas, pirates, slavers, seductresses, men lost at sea, a man with unbelievable luck (good and bad) and some pretty remarkable cetaceans. It is not a sequel to prior books: it just further explores the ancient world canvas.

Join priestesses, scribes, sailors, fisher folk, and the physicians of Alexandria in wry tales of love, adventure ... and a really inconvenient curse (or is it?). Struggle with languages. See a whole village of purebred women anxious for offspring from a single unwilling man. Explore the cave that leads to Hades, where costumed temple-staff play a game of make-believe. Realize the complex intelligence network of the time with high ranking priestesses of various deities who just can't seem to keep their hands off one sailor. Learn how love notes can be hidden in tiny intelligence messages transported by pigeons. Witness the creation of the first graphic novels.

This is a continuation of the "Young Cleopatra" series. It only contains Cleopatra in cameos, but continues the stories of some characters in her court, and adds a few. Adult situations but nothing vulgar. Not for the kiddies.

As in other books of the series, everything happens within the context of first century BCE and Cleopatra's court. There's lots of things that didn't happen, but there isn't anything that *couldn't* have happened ... well, maybe except *one* thing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Once again, I am indebted to my editor who was always
willing to bend an ear to discuss possibilities,
as well as editing the final product.

Cover Created by Kebab

While topsails, spinnakers, and three masted configurations
were known at the time, there is no evidence that such a ship with the combined
technologies ever existed during first century BCE.

I also did the maps (artists are expensive).

The Sacred Ibis comes from the mortuary temple of Userkaf in Saqqara

To Lucas

No one deserves that.

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Part I – Batnoam the Amazing Sailor

Chapter I – Nyx

Onboard Captain Hannibal Ahum's command ship at the Alexandrian intelligence docks, the Chief Mate was making his routine inspection of the interior of Hannibal's office, checking the integrity of the wood ... poking into cracks, looking for moisture and rot. Hannibal had finished up his last papyrus-work of the day, and had come out on deck to take in the sunset. One of the low level sailors named "Batnoam" was patiently waiting for him, with a little nervous shifting from foot to foot. Hannibal couldn't miss the little priestess on the dock with a huge hopeful smile.

"Business or personal?"

"Business, Captain."

Thank God.

<Eyeing the girl> "Shall we talk inside?"

"Yes, please, Captain."

"Take a deep breath. Let it out ... there's just us and the Chief ... talk."

"I would like to be put on track to be an officer, Captain."

"A new pay grade or a career?"

"Career, Captain."

"Third Mate ... Second Mate ... Chief?"

"As far as I can go, sir."

"Mmmmm ... Captain?"

"That would make me arrogant if I said 'yes', Captain."

"Good answer." <He winked at the Chief>

"What's brought this on, Batnoam? You're a good sailor ... absolutely on task, very dependable ... you're like a monkey in the rigging. A man your age usually wants to see the world with the least responsibilities: different ports, different ships, different crews, short trips, ... different girls."

"I've been thinking about my future, captain."

The Chief had moved behind Batnoam, and he clamped his hand over his mouth to cut back his chuckling.

"You know you'll be indentured for 5 years, Batnoam. You'll have to take classes in shipbuilding and load balancing, military training ... whatever languages you're missing ... and lots of long voyages. Are you SURE you want to leave that woman for months at a time? The higher the rank, the more sea time."

"Nyxie suggested it ... errr ... SUPPORTS it, Captain."

The Chief was doubled over, shaking with the effort to stay silent. Tears had started to form.

“Didn’t she show up around the same time you found out Astarte was your first cousin ... after pursuing her for a year?”

“That very night, sir.”

“Something like a great wave, I imagine?”

“Yes, sir.”

“... and does she let you come up for air?”

“My ship duties have become a form of relaxation, Captain.”

“I see, I see ... and have you, perhaps, thought of putting some distance between you?”

“NO! ... uh ... sorry, Captain ... I don’t want to do that, sir.”

The Chief was pounding his own leg, trying to create some pain to concentrate on, to stifle his laughter.

“She brings you to your first duty, picks you up after your last, makes sure you don’t spend any slack time with your shipmates, and fully occupies your time otherwise?”

“Yes, sir. Yes, she does, sir.”

“You wouldn’t be the first man to seek the sea to get away from a woman.”

“Oh! I don’t want to get away from her! ... but a little breathing space might be nice, Captain ... and planning for my future, sir.”

The Chief was past control. He was trying to convert his laughter into moaning, and his tears were flowing. When Batnoam noticed, Hannibal said “family tragedy ... keep it to yourself.”

“That’s it then: career track. There’s a mission leaving tomorrow, it’ll do both coasts of Italy. My recollection is that your Latin is barely ship-level?”

“Correct, Captain.”

“It will be MUCH better when you get back.”

“There might be a quick run at the end of that ... Two months? ... With good weather ... Then shipbuilding when you get back.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“Batnoam? Would you like a chore?”

“I’m sorry, sir. A chore, sir?”

“That little girl is about to tear you apart. You could check the bindings on the tops’l [top sail] ... take a break, relax. Prepare yourself for the next few hours.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

Batnoam left Hannibal’s office, gave Nyx a thumbs-up, then shot straight up the mast, pretending to futz with the bindings of the tops’l. As he locked his knees around the yard (tops’l is folded on top of the yard), and swayed back-and-forth with the ship’s roll, he relaxed for the first time in days: no duties, no building up his courage to talk to Hannibal, no thinking through answers to possible questions, no more pestering from Nyxie. His perch was dwarfed by the Pharos Lighthouse close by, but he was higher than

most of Alexandria and could see miles out to sea. In spite of his situation, his attention was somehow magnetically drawn to a tiny Nyx on the dock. He couldn't see her expression, but he could see her eyes ... sparkling at him ... and she was doing that thing ... with her hips ... oh God.

Hannibal shut his office door, closed the ports, then both he and the Chief burst into loud laughter. Hannibal was pounding his desk. The Chief was on the floor, kicking his legs in the air. It was a while before they could talk.

Chief: "I lost it the first time he said 'my future'. I looked out a port because I **knew** there had to be a female behind it ... Should we tell him?"

Hannibal: "Screw 'im. No one told us."

Φ Φ Φ

Phoenician women had been saying "goodbye" to Phoenician seafaring men for over 2500 years. Astarte knew it was part of her culture, but she didn't have to like it. Astarte only had three blood relatives left alive: Elissa her sister, Elissa's baby, and Batnoam. It would have been so much better if he didn't freeze up and look distressed when she gave him what could be a final embrace, and she fought back tears. Elissa and her baby (crying as usual) were there, but she never really got to know Batnoam with everything else that had been going on, so the exchange was merely "dutiful."

Astarte watched as Nyx gave him a send-off he would remember, far surpassing what other sailors got from their partners. Then, something got hold of him ... and he turned and stared right at her, signing in *Beautiful* (the elegant sign language from their island).

I'm sorry, cousin ... for everything.

He ran to her and picked her off the ground. Astarte wasn't used to having the breath squeezed out *her*. He kissed her on both cheeks ... multiple times. It was difficult for her to sign with her arms wrapped up, but Astarte could never be faulted for not being inventive.

"You're my only family ... and ... and ... for a year I wanted ..."

I KNOW *what you wanted!* <She punched him>

"I just couldn't get used to the idea of you being something else ... like a ... cousin."

You've got a lot of hugging and kissing to make up for it! Keep going!

"I've got to go, little fish. I'll make it right when I come back."

That girlfriend of yours doesn't look like the kind that shares!

"She'll just have to get used to my cousin ... *cousins* ... and ... ummm ... *nephew*?"

Batnoam put Astarte down, gave her a last hug, kissed Elissa on the cheek, and poked the baby ... which stopped crying and chuckled. Batnoam returned to Nyx.

Elissa: "What the hell **is it** with him and men?" <The baby noticed the absence of Batnoam, got a puzzled look, then resumed crying>

Φ Φ Φ

“**NYX!** What are you *doing?*”

“Hatti! Are you blind? I’m taking a well-deserved, relaxing bath.”

“There’s an all-hands temple-duties, thing. You’re gonna be late!”

“Don’t care.”

“They’ll stick you in the brick-yard ... *for a week!*”

“Don’t care. That’s easy duty after the last two months.”

“Cry me an ocean, Nyx. You’ve been tumbling with that handsome Batnoam all that time ... a *Phoenician* handsome sailor. That’s an activity that most of us would pursue in a heartbeat!”

“It did have its high points ... but that was *work!* A nice solid investment in my future.”

“Whaa ... ?”

“Anyone of us could have a nice handsome sailor. A lot of us do. The sailors that work for the High Priestess get paid more, live in better apartments ... some own tiny houses. It’s not a bad life, having a husband that makes petty thieves wet themselves, feeling those hard muscles in bed, ... popping out cute little urchins. I just ratcheted up my game. *I*’m going to be the wife of a CAPTAIN in the intelligence fleet.”

“Is that why you snatched him right away? Kept him hidden from the rest of us? Didn’t show him off?”

“I always wanted him in my bed, but his foolish months of chasing his cousin around gave me time to look into his prospects. He’s got some sort of family connection with that Captain Hannibal, so I figured he’s got an edge. I didn’t need anyone else noticing that. All the sailors say how solid he is at his job, and he was slowly moving up the ranks in a kind of lackadaisical way ... I just gave him a nudge. A lot of nudges, actually ... more like pushing a boulder ... with a lot of fun persuasion. I’ll invite you to my garden parties.”

“Isis Great Teat! Didn’t he smell a rat?”

“He’s a *man!* I kept him off-balance the whole time, he didn’t have a clue.”

“Aren’t you afraid ... you know ... sailors? ... foreign ports? ... easy women?”

“It’ll be quite a while before he thinks of getting frisky, then it will be *me* that comes to mind. I had my head, shoulders, and bust carved on a cameo he wears, that’ll be bouncing around on his chest every day.

...

If he’s foolish enough to stray, he’s the kind that will tell me ... and then I’ll have a handle on him forever.”

Hatti’s mouth was wide open.

“Yep, yep ... CAPTAIN’s wife. Thank God he’s gone! I don’t know how much longer I could’ve kept it up. Everything needs to just calm down ... in this nice warm bath ... My *legs!* I’m not sure I can get them to be straight again. I couldn’t stop a pig in an alley!”

“Too much information ... I don’t believe you. I think you really care about him. You couldn’t have spent all that time ... just ... just ... *manipulating* him.”

“Who said I didn’t care? He’s unbelievably sweet ... and going to be a CAPTAIN.”

“Don’t Phoenicians have family names?”

“Maybe?”

“Do you know *how* Astarte is a cousin ... parents, that kind of thing?”

“Nope.”

“Do you know his parents’ names?”

“Not a clue.”

“Ummm ... where he’s been, what he’s done ... what he likes?”

“He likes *me*.”

“Fair enough, I fell into that one. I’m getting the idea you didn’t talk much.”

“Not so much ... except about his career, of course. Did I mention I’m going to be a CAPTAIN’s wife?”

Chapter II – Over Before It Starts

Alexandria was home to three navies: the Egyptian Navy, the Royal Navy, and the Intelligence Navy. The Intelligence Navy was the smallest and loyal directly to the High Priestess of the Temple of Isis. The temple was second only to Delphi in gathering information about merchant vessels, weather, military data, and economies around the Mediterranean ... and selling the information to those who could afford it. Much information was transmitted by pigeon, but some things just needed a personal touch and a small fleet of “fast boats” were maintained to surreptitiously fly around the Med. These ships were staffed with hand-picked warrior-sailors should any trouble arise, and avoided some of the common “safety stops” to gain speed and avoid trouble.

Batnoam had been assigned to a routine intelligence run: across North Africa to Carthage, across the jump going around Sicily, ports in Italy, a stop in Sardinia then a loop around the Adriatic on the other side of Italy. They had no plans to do anything but an inflated mail run, but the Med comes with a complete set of hazards, both human and natural.

“Good evening, sir. I’m Batnoam.”

“I’m not a ‘sir’, boy. I’m the cook ... or did my missing hand make you think I was the Helmsman? Get out, boy.”

“I’m currently on odd watches. I’ll do all your slop work, all your cleaning, on any even watch ... cook.”

“Why?”

“You don’t remember me, but I remember *you*. You saved my life. You saved all our lives. It was the wreck of the *Tanithe* ... cook.”

“Ooof! That was a dicey one. Stuck on that barren island? It’s an act of the gods that ANY of us made it out. Did you just come to thank me?”

“No, cook. I want to learn how to keep men alive on nothing.”

Φ Φ Φ

“Good evening, Helmsman.”

“What is it, kitchen-boy? Looking to learn my job?”

“Not today. I heard you were a Roman.”

“... and is that a problem in some way?” <He tensed up>

“I need to learn Latin.”

The Helmsman took a long look at Batnoam.

“What do you know?”

“Greek, Egyptian, enough Parthian to feed myself ... and Phoenician.”

“Any Latin at all?”

“Ship terms only.”

“What exactly did you have in mind?”

“Middle watch can be a long stretch. I was thinking you could tell me about your country ... your family ... where you’ve been ... what you’ve seen.”

“In Latin.”

“I’ll just try to keep up, if you wouldn’t mind helping a little.”

In Latin –

“Our first port is Puteoli. Next to the dock master’s building is a street called *Nine Muses*.”

“Muses?”

<Greek> “What do YOU call them? Nine goddesses that inspire artists?”

“Got it.”

“That’s where the bordellos are.”

“Bordellos?”

<Greek> “Sonny, that’s the most important word I can teach you.”

Φ Φ Φ

Latin --

“Helmsman, how do you say: fish girl ... girl that does fish ... fish village.”

“Is this a bordello thing?”

“No. Umm ... people fish, live in village, men fish, girls fish.”

“Whoah! ‘Girl fish’ is like a mermaid. Mermaid? Yeah, you have to use a gerund of the verb form, not the noun. Following? ‘Fish girl’ is a mermaid ... ‘fishing girl’ is ‘girl who is fishing’ ... right now.”

“‘Fished’ girl? Fishing not now ... but in past?”

“What the hell are you going for?”

Greek --

“Suppose I wanted local details of a coast. Bordellos have all kinds of girls from all over. If I could find one that came from a fishing village, I could pay her to help me with an accurate coastline map of where ever. They’ll do anything for coins, right? Easiest job she’ll have.”

The Helmsman took a long look at Batnoam.

Latin --

“You’re a very unusual fellow. If you keep this up and make Chief, I’ll serve under you.”

“I’m not even ‘able bodied’.”

“**Yet** ... There’s no short form for what you want. Try ‘girl from a fishing village’. Be sure to use the ablative case, or you’ll just sound stupid. What would you say in Greek?”

<Greek> “Fisher girl.”

“No. That won’t work. Do it the long way ... Uh, just curious. You have a girlfriend that ... *encouraged* ... you to go career track?”

“Umm ... yeah.”

“Thought so.”

Φ Φ Φ

Captain: "Batnoam. Helmsman's down with the fever. Has he been training you?"

Batnoam: "Aye, sir."

Captain: "Can you take control of our lives?"

Batnoam: "Aye, sir."

Captain: "Take the helm."

Batnoam: "Aye, aye, Captain."

Helmsman was an officer rank: it was quite a surprise. Only the Helmsman knew that Batnoam's father had trained him on the helm and they had been taking turns. Batnoam finished the watch without making any mistakes despite constant scrutiny by the Captain and Chief. To make the duty sweeter, it got him out of his turn at scrubbing the foredeck.

It was already dark even before the start of first watch, and the men were settling down in any available spots to sleep on deck. They only went below decks in the worst of weather due to stuffiness of the air ... and odor ... but primarily because of the cat. The Helmsman that relieved Batnoam was late, and received some very pointed criticism ... and a penalty, but that meant all the good spots were taken by the time Batnoam looked for a place to sleep. The only reasonable spot was between the Second and Third Mates, who together made a sound like boulders tumbling down a steep ravine ... the deck shook.

Batnoam climbed up the mast and lashed himself to the reefed tops'l. His father had taught him how to do this and he had practiced many nights on a rig near their house as a child. It was a little secret that ... if you didn't mind the height ... and the swaying of the ship ... and being tied in place ... it was actually the softest spot a seaman could claim on the entire ship ... and the coolest ... and no one stepped on you. With the benefit of his youth and a hard day's work, Batnoam instantly fell asleep.

Sometime before second watch, Batnoam was jerked off his perch and was left hanging from his straps. The mast was angled at about 60 degrees and it wasn't swaying. It probably meant that they had been caught by a sandbar at low tide. Intelligence ships generally traveled at night at a good distance from shore, but sometimes sandbars moved around into unexpected places. There would be work to be done and Batnoam set about releasing himself (again, his father had done this sort of thing in the middle of the night to prepare him). Then he saw the swarm.

At a very close distance, another ship was anchored and floating normally ... clearly, not caught in the sandbar. A crewful of men was running across some temporary bridges across the sandbar and was "flowing" into the ship below him. They had obviously been waiting and were using the sandbar as a trap. They were well prepared and used speed and surprise to their best advantage. There was very little fighting and he watched his own crew frog-marched off his ship and onto the other one.

Goddammit! My first frickin' career mission! ***NO!*** ... *No, no, no, no ... This can't happen!* Spend the rest of my frickin' life as a SLAVE?!! ***HELL*** no!

Batnoam watched the systematic pillaging of his ship, with all the booty being hauled away. Then all the men left ... presumably to have a better look in daylight. Batnoam released himself, and went into the hold where he had hidden his throwing knives. He always carried one ... well ... that and the cutting knife.

With ropes and slippery decks everywhere, a sailor always had a cutting knife. Batnoam adjusted the throwing knives on a strap across his chest.

Batnoam would be spotted in an instant if he used the bridges, so he stripped to the bare minimum, covered most of his exposed skin with pitch, and swam in the shallows between the two ships, staying to the shadows. He hadn't come up with a plan and hoped that one would present itself. He had nothing to lose. They'd find him at first light and it would be all over. He had to try *something*.

As he moved around the other ship, looking for access, he had his hand on the wood. They'd done a decent job of barnacle scraping to keep their ship smooth and fast, but he couldn't help but notice the sloppy maintenance of the wood itself: big patches of pitch in cracks, holes plugged with who-knows-what.

The cook had started as a shipwright, then worked as a maintenance sailor on ships ... before he lost his hand in battle. He had some very strong ideas about maintenance, and exactly how things should be done ... and where the weakest points were. The casual talks about ships sparked an idea with Batnoam.

Barnacles, and other sea life attaching themselves to ship hulls, are a fact of life everywhere in the world. This is like telling a sailor the ocean is full of water. The wood itself doesn't remain unscathed, however. There are creatures like ship-worms that bore into the wood, weakening it, but the wood itself slowly becomes saturated with water, breaking down the strength of the wood and making it spongy. It can't be avoided, so the only solution is to periodically replace the wood: cut out the old, put in some new. Under Captain Hannibal, the intelligence fleet was on a strict schedule of inspection and replacement. Other ships, like pirates, tended not to be so fastidious and only replaced things when they absolutely had to.

Batnoam eventually found what he was looking for: wood that felt like leather. With a nervous eye to how close the Great Crocodile was rotating in the sky towards the horizon, he began to work.

Φ Φ Φ

Most ships didn't have any sort of cages for holding men. They just chained them, usually together. This is how Batnoam's crew found themselves, completely defenseless ... hopeless. In the morning, any with injuries from the brief fight would be killed. The others would be sold as slaves. No one was talking. Everyone was making their own peace.

Then, what appeared to be a naked, black-and-bloody Batnoam waved from a dark corner to get their attention. He was using common sign language.

WHERE . ? ... HOW . MANY . ?

The men looked to see if they were being watched, then held up fingers and pointed. They watched him move like a cat ... then heard some very unpleasant gurgling.

"Glaucus! Is that you? Can't hold your wine?"

More gurgling.

“What the HELL is ...”

Gurgling.

“The last guy has the keys.”

“Sshhhhhhhh”

Batnoam’s cameo of Nyx was snugly attached around his neck to keep it out of the way. Everyone knew he had some sort of fetish item around his upper arm as well: you just don’t ask people about religious things unless they bring it up. Of course, any locksmith would have recognized it as a group of various sized skeleton keys. On his way to get the pirate keys, Batnoam unlocked every man in a row. He threw the pirate keys to another sailor, and continued with another bunch of men.

Batnoam led them into another hold. They stepped over a few bodies to get there. Enough wood had been removed from the hull of the ship for a man to squeeze through, just above the waterline.

Batnoam signed: LAST . MAN . PULL <Indicating boards below the waterline that had also been cut and were leaking.>

The Chief was looking back behind them, and his eyes went wide. Batnoam whirled and the entire crew swore that steel appeared to shoot from the tips of his fingers. This was accompanied by the gurgling sound they had become familiar with as the pirate responded to the knife in his neck. Batnoam quickly retrieved it. Another pirate had the misfortune of coming down the ladder before they were all out.

When the last of Batnoam’s crew had escaped, Batnoam held onto a rope on the outside of the hull, and kicked at the boards he had weakened below the waterline. As the water rushed in, he shot up into the rigging, staying in the shadows. His crew were as quiet as they could be, but they were on the far side of the pirate ship and had to swim around to the bridges. The combined noise of them “silently” swimming was heard.

“THEY’RE GETTING AWAY!!”

... and then pirates started dropping dead from daggers.

“HE’S IN THE RIGGING!!”

They didn’t actually “know” about someone in the rigging ... they were guessing. All the pirates were looking up, as Batnoam crawled around on deck, retrieved the waterproof intelligence box, and dove over the side. That was a gift. He only had his cutting knife left and was running for his life, when he saw the box by accident, in a pile of booty.

By this time, the pirate ship had taken on enough water to start listing, and their panic had shifted to *this* emergency. As the ship started going down, it was pulling anything attached to it.

“GET OFF THE BRIDGES!”

The makeshift bridges across the top of the sandbar began following the pirate ship’s general descent ... and then everything just stopped. The side where Batnoam had removed wood was below water, but the other side of the deck was about ten feet above. It was shallower than Batnoam had expected.

Batnoam’s crew, now back on their own ship, looked at him expectedly. The Captain and Chief had fought the fiercest, and were wounded the most. The Dakka [ship’s doctor] was moving at a furious speed over the pair.

Batnoam: “Those idiots left us our weapons ... and they **do** have our stuff. What’s the law-of-the-sea here?”

With a great communal yell, Batnoam’s crew went back to where they had just escaped ... and finished the matter. Batnoam stayed behind: he just had the one knife, and he felt REALLY tired. He shuffled over to the Dakka, put down the box by the Captain, found a comfortable spot to sit, and passed out.



Φ Φ Φ

Batnoam had only been gone a week, but Nyx was very anxious. She was poking around the intelligence room ship reports looking for some word of him.

Tall Hatshepsut: "He won't be in any reports, Nyx. He's the lowest rank sailor there is."

Nyx: "Ummm ... they don't do status or something?"

"For **every** sailor? We'd be *swimming* in pigeon script."

"Hmmm ... what about his ship?"

"It's an intelligence ship. The only news would be bad news."

"Oh ... ahhh ..."

"You **miss him** don't you, Nyx?"

"NO! ... just checking ... just checking ... my *investment*."

"Of your *soul*."

"Shut up."

Nyx was stubborn and really didn't want to admit, even to herself, that Batnoam's "career" was seeming less important than she had imagined.

Φ Φ Φ

Dakka: "You were covered in a LOT of blood. I was surprised that so little was actually *yours* ... except for all that barnacle burn ... that's gonna sting ... then go really, really itchy ... You had rope burn in really odd places ... I couldn't get off all the pitch. You'll have to wear that off."

Batnoam: "Stuff happens. How's the Captain and Chief?"

"They'll come around in a few days. No punctures or really deep wounds: those are the worst. They just got what we call 'moderate to serious' battle wounds. They're on opium now, but are quite keen on chatting with you when their heads clear."

Dakka: "I imagine you were saving your junk for your girlfriend ... but why were you naked otherwise?"

Batnoam: "Skin dries really fast after swimming. Clothing drips ... leaves a trail, makes noises if the water hits the wrong things."

Dakka: "Phoenician?"

Batnoam: "As much as they come."

"Thought so."

Batnoam: "What watch is it?"

Second Mate: "Relax. We got you covered ... Third Mate."

"THIRD MATE! I don't know how to do that stuff!"

"No one has any doubts you can pick it up. We all agree you've done a fare job of keeping your ship safe already. Sinking that other one was a feat to behold. Boaz is working on a song about it."

"Without any women in it? I can't see him managing that."

"He's *very* inventive in the real sense of the word."

It was at this point, Batnoam realized there was an audience. It appeared that the entire crew, that didn't have current duties, was clustered around him. They presented him his throwing knives, retrieved and cleaned from the pirates' bodies.

On cue, they all pounded their chests with a fist and shouted: “HUAH!”

Φ Φ Φ

Chief: “Third Mate! A word?”

Batnoam: “Yes, Chief ... Captain. How are you feeling, sirs?”

“Better than you look ... between the rope and barnacle burns, and patches of pitch, you’re quite a sight!”

“Thank you, sir.”

Captain: “It was very fortunate your weapon is knives ... what made you pick them?”

Batnoam: “I just don’t have the body for a sword. If I practice every day, I can get adequate ... but someone bigger or stronger can always beat me down. A ship isn’t really a good place to practice swordplay so I gave it up, Captain.”

Chief: “Can you use a bow?”

Batnoam: “Better than adequate, but I have to practice every day ... it just doesn’t seem to stick. I get bad very quickly, sir.”

Captain: “... but knives *stick* with you?”

Batnoam: “Oh no, sir! I just found a way to practice on a ship, sir.”

There was a long pause as they waited for him to finish, but he had learned long ago to answer questions from an officer with the absolute minimum.

Chief: “OUT WITH IT!”

Batnoam: “I drag a target behind the stern, sir. No one hears anything. I don’t bother anyone, sir.”

Captain: “Aren’t you worried about losing knives?”

Batnoam: “How would that happen, Captain?”

Chief: “IF YOU MISSED!”

Batnoam: <looking genuinely puzzled> “I don’t understand, sir.”

Captain: “What would happen if you practiced with a bow that way?”

Batnoam: “I’d lose arrows, Captain. ... Oh! I see! ... No, that doesn’t happen with knives, Captain.”

Chief: “How did you know you could cut that hull?”

Batnoam: “I noticed their hull maintenance wasn’t up to fleet standards, sir. I just cut the weakest wood, sir ... Like the cook told me, sir.”

Captain: “... and saved all of us. I’d promote you to Second for your actions, but I really think you’ll enjoy crawling all over the ship as Third. Carry on.”

Batnoam: “Thank you, Captain. Thank you, Chief.”

Captain: “Unranked sailor saved the men and ship, and sunk pirates. Wish I had more of those.”

Chief: “How are we going to keep him? Once we get back home, other ships will be fighting over him, Captain.”

Captain: “I suspect we just need to find out what he wants to do ... and let him do it.”

Chapter III - Puteoli

Chief: "Captain! Take a look at this!"

Captain: "Chief! That's childish! Sophomoric ... crude ... vulgar. Why on Earth would you show me such a thing?"

Chief: "It's code, sir."

Captain: "Code for goddamn what? All I see are bosoms drawn all over a ship! It's not funny ... it's just stupid ... and overkill."

Chief: "Each one marks a problem with the ship that needs to be fixed, sir. This one ... at the tops'l? Mast has a crack: it's been ringed but needs work when we get back. This one, on the fore? Rot on the deck. All of them ... every single one, are problems, sir."

Captain: "Why bosoms?"

Chief: "Batnoam said he didn't want someone stealing his notes and then having a guide to our weaknesses, sir."

Captain: "I'm getting to really like that kid. Remind me to yell at him so his head doesn't swell up."

...

What are these huge ones?"

Chief: "He's pretty upset about it, sir. It's damage from something in the water, I'm guessing maybe part of another ship. The plank is damaged ... stove in a little. He found it by inspection ... hanging upside down from a rope. Batnoam explained the risk ... to the SHIPWRIGHT. It was pretty funny. It looked like the shipwright was going to sort him out, then six crew members appeared behind Batnoam ... BOTH of them are hanging over the side fixing it right now, sir."

Φ Φ Φ

The ship had docked in Puteoli. There was a grain transfer, but that was just for show. Puteoli was the business port for Alexandrian commerce, conveniently located near Herculaneum and Pompeii, but the intelligence ship crew wasn't allowed to go and play. They only stopped for two hours: time enough for the Chief to exchange intelligence with a temple. Batnoam had explained what he wanted to do, and he was allowed off-ship along with the Roman Helmsman as an escort. They lucked out on the very first tavern with a "fisher girl", but the Helmsman had to wait outside: house rules, one man per room.

Latin --

"Well, you're a mess. You were covered in pitch and dragged through cactus?"

"Stuff happens ... Are you coming to Ostia?"

"I'm not 'coming' anywhere. I'm sitting on a bed in my underwear."

"Ostia ... you coming?"

"It doesn't help to switch the words around. Latin is non-positional."

"FROM Ostia?"

"Jeeze, if you meant the ablative, why did you use the dative case? How am I supposed to figure this out?"

No . I . am . from . Populonia ... criminy."

"Good, Good, Thank you. Where Populonia?"

"Don't be so ... foreign. Say it correctly: 'Where is Populonia?'"

"Where is Populonia?"

"Let me see that map ... HERE!"

“Oh ... Great! You ... knows rock water coast?”
 “Hee hee ... now you’re just being funny. Try again.”
 “Coast rocks”
 “Coastline?”
 “Coastline”
 “What about it?”
 “You living coastline.”
 “Do I look like I’m made of sand, honey?”
 “Do you ...”
 “Stop! Past tense ...”
 “DID you to live ...”
 “I’m going to make you work for this one ... Don’t use the infinitive.”
 “Did you live ... near the coastline ... from Populonio?”
 “Genitive ...”
 “... of Populonio”
 “Feminine, singular”
 “Did you live near the coastline of Populonia?”
 “There! Was that so hard? ... and, yes, I did.”

It turns out Saphron knew the coastline well enough to help Batnoam modify his map. She was actually a *goldmine* of information. Then they ran into an impasse. She was using a word that Batnoam just didn’t know. There were cliffs on land, and a field of rocks or maybe a reef out at sea. There was something in-between them.

Saphron put her hands together like she was praying, and then opened them like a “V”, just a crack. Batnoam was lost. She got a very naughty look, pulled her clothes up to her knees to get his attention, then pointed just below the top of her hips. Batnoam jumped back in surprise. In frustration, Saphron cast her eyes around the room looking for ... anything. She settled on a table against the wall and grabbed a sandal.

She held up the sandal: “ship”
 She patted the wall: “cliff” ... and smashed the sandal into it.
 She pulled the table away from the wall, just a little: “rocks” ... and smashed the sandal into the table top.

Then she gently moved the sandal through the narrow, empty space between the wall and the table ... and used the new word.

“Oooohhhhh! A safe passage!”
 “Do you know ‘breakwater’? The rocks form a breakwater.”

“I’ll bet I could learn a lot from you.”
 “Oh, honey. Did you mean to say that out loud?”

“Saphron? If you were bought FROM this bordello and setting free ..”

“Gerund? REALLY?!”

“... and set free. What would you did ... DO?”

Batnoam had a very serious face. Saphron gave it serious thought.

“I’d go back ... to Populonia. It was a war ago. I’ll bet there’s no one that knows me. It would be a new start. Although I’m not sure how I’d get by without finding a quick husband.”

“Do they have an Isos temple?”

“Feminine, singular, objective case.”

“SHEESH! Do they have an Isis temple?”

“What an odd question. Yes ... they *did*. It was very small.”

“Not enough coins ... maybe back trip.”

“Can you please sort that out? Or do Phoenicians just speak in chunks?”

“How?”

“Silly boy! It couldn’t be clearer if you were wearing a sign.”

“I don’t have ... enough money. Maybe ... I can help you out ... next time.”

“Nicely done! You’re very sweet, but I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve heard that.

...

Are you in a hurry? We could ...”

“NO! Have fast going!!”

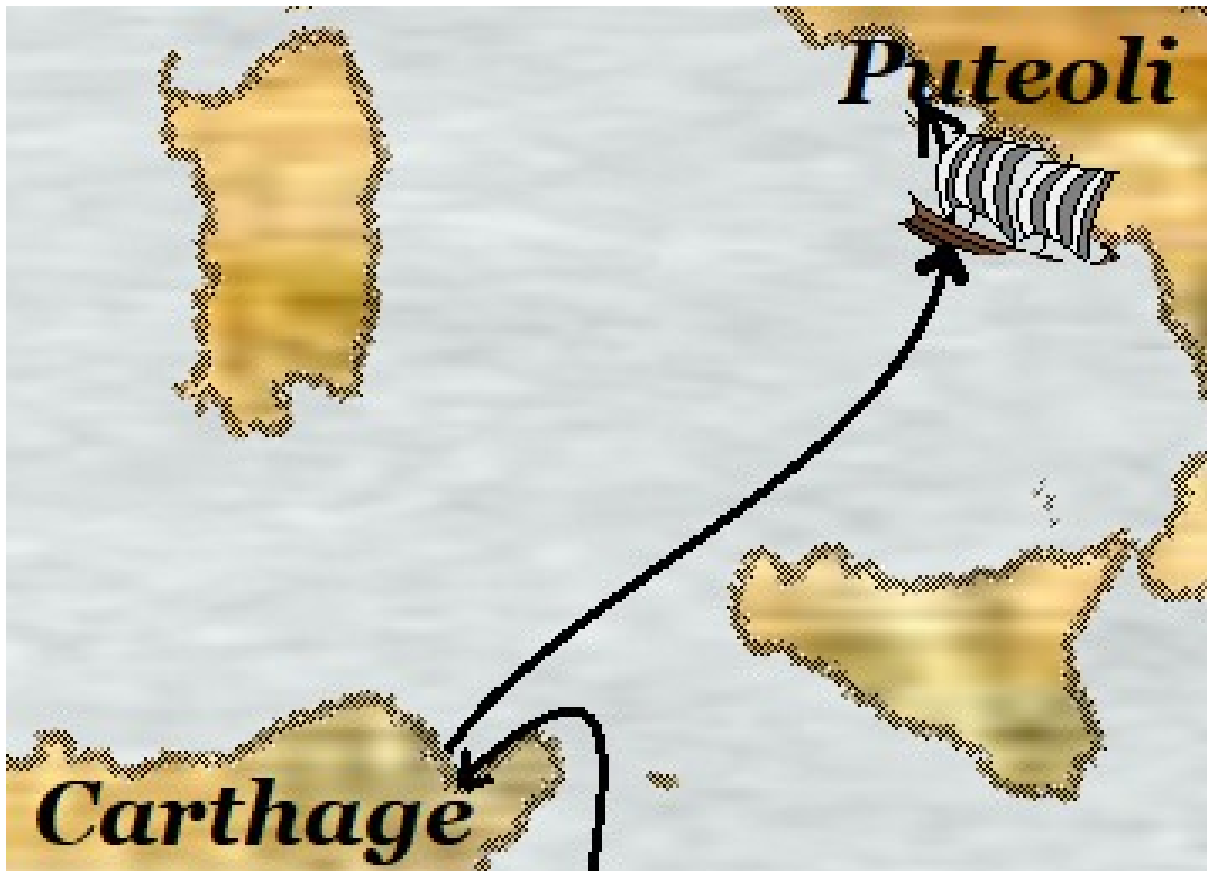
“Calm down, I was just teasing ... *sailor boy*.”

“Thanks for all your help.”

“Thanks for the coins ... and no work ... Are you *sure*?” <A hip rotated towards Batnoam>

Batnoam ran out.

“EEEEEE heee heee hee!”



Chapter IV – Populonia

The Captain and Chief were at the stern, with the Helmsman ... nervously looking at the open water behind them.

Captain: “Well, this is a bit unpleasant.”

Chief: “A ‘bit’, sir.”

“Only a fool would risk going across this reef at night ... and that’s us.”

“Couldn’t we throw anchor and go when the sky clears, sir?”

“... and what if it doesn’t. They’re only a couple of hours from catching us.”

They saw Batnoam running at full speed towards the Helmsman, clutching his map. They stepped into the shadows to avoid slowing things down with protocol.

Latin --

“Between the rocks and the cliffs, there’s a CLEFT!”

“A **WHAT?!?**”

“A **CLEFT!** ... You know, a ‘cleft’?”

“I **do** know what that is.”

“It’s a clear passage ... deep enough for a ship. Behind a breakwater. What’s so funny?”

“Nothing ... nothing at all. Got that from your little Cardamom, did you?”

“Saphron. She used to live here. Populonia, right? ... It took me *forever* to learn ‘cleft’.”

“I’ll just bet. Go tell the Bow Lookout ... be sure to tell him in Latin. Don’t use breakwater, use the other one.”

“Cleft?”

“Yeah”

The Helmsman squinted through the dark and was *just* able to catch the silhouette of the Bow Lookout, doubling over in laughter. Then, the Helmsman lost it ... he had nearly bitten through his lip, holding himself back. The Captain and Chief, who had heard everything, started laughing too.

Captain: “Helmsman! AT YOUR POST! ... Bwahahahahahah” <snort>

Saphron had been describing a geographic/nautical feature to Batnoam, but she had used an “anatomical” term.

Φ Φ Φ

“Got some news on your boyfriend’s ship, Nyx.”

“Oh no! **BAD** news?!”

“It was captured by pirates ... all the crew chained on their way to execution or slavery.”

“**OH GOD NOOOOooo!**”

“One got away, came back and saved all the others, sunk the pirate ship, completed the intelligence delivery ... back on track.”

“Oh Sweet Isis! ... Sweet, Sweet Isis ... was Batnoam hurt?”

“Yeah, he was ... a little ... He was the one that came back and saved everyone.”

“Wha ... whaa ... ?”

“He’s a hero. Got a battlefield promotion. Skipped a few ranks. You sure called it, Nyx.”

“He was ... *hurt*?”

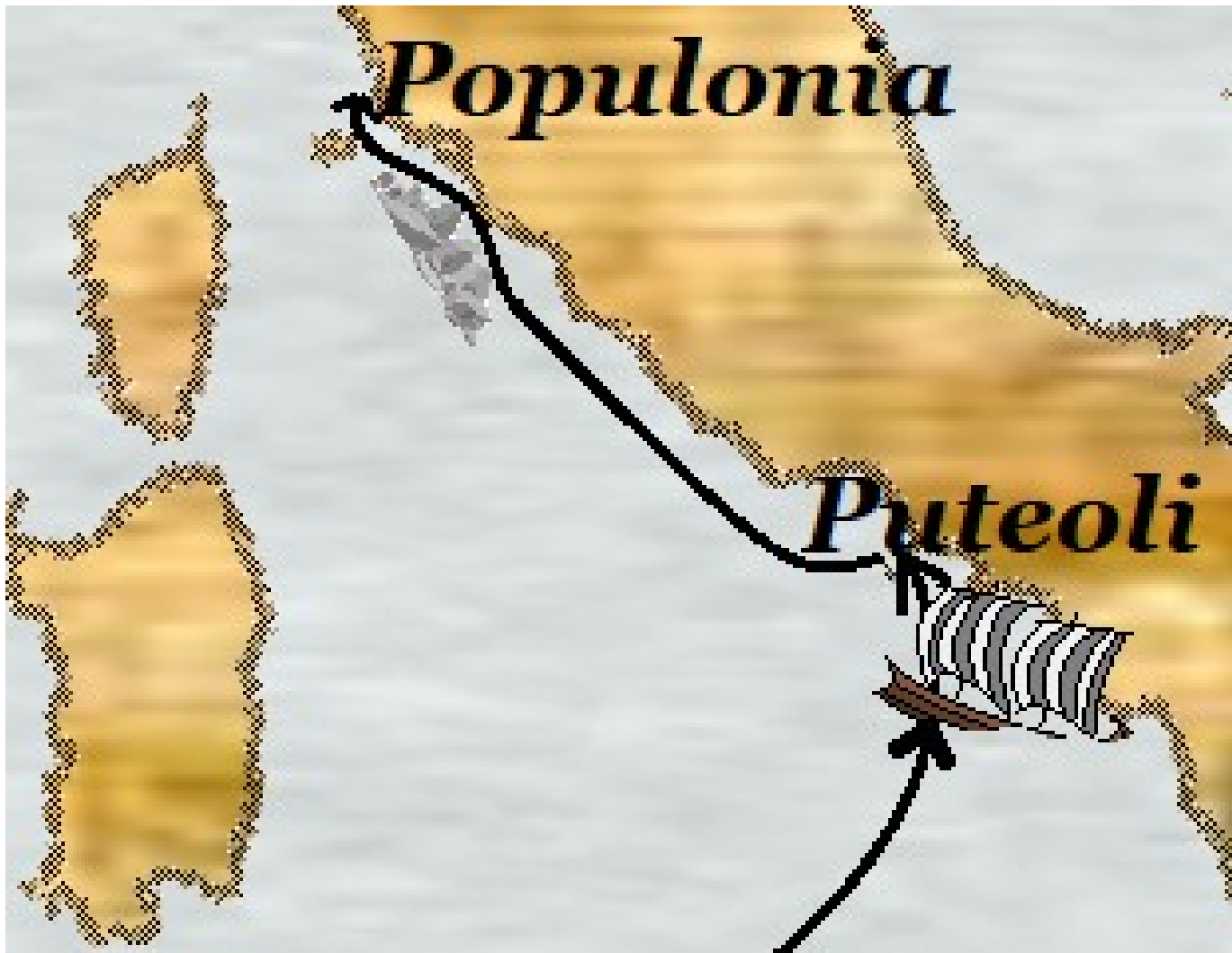
“Back to his job in a couple of days ... I *knew* it. You’re worried about **him** ... not his goddamn rank.”

“Shut up”

Nyx screwed up her face to look angry and stomped out. She didn’t get very far, ducked behind a column, and started to cry. Astarte had been looking for her to give her the update. She had watched Nyx stomping out then crying, and went over to hug her.

“He wasn’t supposed to risk his life! He wasn’t *SUPPOSED* to ... just, just ... be a *NORMAL* sailor ...”

Astarte had been quite upset as well, when she first heard the news. She was smiling now over Nyx’s shoulder: it was nice to know she really cared.



Chapter V - Sardinia

The ship had sailed from Populonia to the near coast of Sardinia. They stopped at a small port called Orosei, but there was too much Roman military activity for the captain. He dropped off Batnoam with an intelligence box, along with the Phoenician portion of the crew. The captain then moved the ship out into the bay and around a promontory where it wasn't so visible.

Batnoam: "Why did Captain just grab all the Phoenicians?"

Urumilki: "We need to visit a town in the mountains. They're all Phoenicians. They don't like strangers, and are VERY fond of other Phoenicians."

Batnoam: "None of that makes any sense. Phoenicians in mountains? What are you implying with your voice?"

Urumilki: "It has to be something you experience."

There was a 20 mile walk into the mountains to a city named Nuoro that had somehow survived the Punics and the Romans, and was a Phoenician holdout. Instead of grumbling about all the rocks and steep paths, the sailors seemed more energetic and enthusiastic the closer they got.

Urumilki was leading the group and waved to a lookout.

Urumilki: "May you live!"

"May you live!"

They were waved on. As they got to the borders of the village, a sea of women greeted them. They immediately linked up with the sailors, mostly two or three at a time, complete with toddlers in tow. A number of the women were concentrating on Batnoam.

Batnoam found his way to the Temple of Astarte, and showed his intelligence tattoo to the old priest in charge.

"May you live, I'm Batnoam."

"May you live, Sikarbaal ... What are you grinnin' about so much, sonny?"

"It's a long time since I've heard so much Phoenician, Sikarbaal. It's like taking a warm bath."

"You can thank Alexander" <spits> "for that. Gimme the box. What's in it?"

"Not a clue. Don't know, don't care. None of my business."

"You're a good little courier."

"What's the story with all the women?"

"Have you noticed there just aren't that many men, boy? Most have two or three wives. There's a penalty for holding on to our heritage. We're still at war with local tribes, and occasionally have to discourage Romans from a full onslaught. We're dying out, so the women are quite keen on new purebreds ... just like you, boyo. You'll have a bit of fun."

"But, but ... sailors don't hang around. It might be years before I come back again."

"Bedding with no consequences? Isn't that every sailor's dream?"

"WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?!! My dad *raised* me. I wouldn't want it any other way."

"We make do. Did you notice all the toddlers from your crew? No one seems to mind."

"**I** would mind."

"You may have to change your view. Our women are very determined, and, frankly, you're young, virile, and as Phoenician as they come. You're practically shining. If you look out the door, you'll see a cluster."

"Is there a back door? ... or a window?"

Φ Φ Φ

Batnoam tried to slip into a group of his sailors around an outdoor fire where there was food.

Sailor: "... the pirates were hot on our tail but we were stuck against a reef! Batnoam pulled out his own map and guided us into a deep breakwater where we escaped!"

Girl-1: "Where did he get the map?"

Sailor: "He modified one that he bought."

Girl-1: "How?"

Sailor: "He found a working girl in Puteoli from the area, and paid her for details of the coast."

Girl-1: "NOW it's getting interesting! Why didn't you lead with that? What ELSE did he do with her?"

Batnoam: "I was there by myself. I paid her for knowledge, nothing else. She was particularly hard on my Latin."

Girl-1: "So you say. Not even just a little playing?"

Batnoam: "No time. I was already stretching the captain's patience. No one else was allowed in that kind of place."

Girl-2: "That's pretty hard to believe ... given the situation."

Batnoam: "Believe, don't believe ... it's up to you. I was the only one there."

Girl-3: "... and what would you have done if you had more time?"

Girl-2: "I can help you with your Latin ... and anything else. No time limit."

Girl-3: "Is that your girlfriend around your throat?"

Batnoam: "Yeah" <He touched it with a happy, shy expression.>

Girl-2: "She marked you? Like a tomcat?"

Batnoam: "You can think that, if you like."

Girl-3: "I don't see her around ... Anyone else? ... No worries about breaking her heart. No one outside Nuoro will know."

Batnoam: "**I** will know."

Girl-1: "... and?"

Sailor: "I was waiting until he got here. This is the best one. He saved the ship and the entire crew from death and slavery ... and sunk the pirate ship by himself."

Batnoam: "Let me tell it."

Girl-3: "NO! We've heard how you tell stories. You've got some stupid humble thing going on."

Batnoam: "... and, in your experience, sailors don't exaggerate?"

Girl-1: "For a good story? Why not?"

Batnoam: "I was more lucky than heroic."

Girl-2: “See? SEE?! ... Batnoam, YOU shut up! ... You! Tell the story.”

As the sailor spun out the embellished events, all the women’s eyes bored into Batnoam.

Girl-4: “We all know about dripping fabric when you’re sneaking around. What, exactly, was he wearing?”

Sailor: “Nothing. Just look at his arms & legs.”

The women started a unified move towards Batnoam. He ran ... fast.

Φ Φ Φ

“May you live, Sikarbaal, I’d like your intelligence box. I’ll be able to relax if I know where it is ... particularly with all these ... people ... milling around.”

“May you live. Sure. Here. Taking in the local culture, are we? ... Where you from?”

“Does it matter? Alexander pretty much dispersed us.”

“You sound like Tyre.”

“Just educated is all.”

“One of the others said you survived an influenza epidemic.”

“He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. I was at sea when that happened.”

“Was that Arwad?”

“Yeah ... NO! ... Oh crap. It was somewhere else entirely ... Melqart Island off of Tyre ... like you said.”

“They had a plague there?”

“So I’ve heard.”

“I hadn’t heard about Melqart, I did hear about Arwad.”

“Not my fault. Thanks for the box. Nice meeting you.”

Batnoam turned and walked to the door.

“Barekbaal!”

Batnoam froze.

“I KNEW it! I knew it! All the stories about you! I should’ve put it all together!”

“Shhhhhh ... shhhhhh ... SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP!”

The man was holding a fist to his chest and bowing.

“STOP THAT! It’s all over. I’m just an average sailor, nothing else. You’ll make me useless with my crew; they’ll treat me as ... something. The captain will throw me off the ship. Just stop! The world isn’t Phoenician anymore.”

“Aaaah, but WE are ... right HERE. Very much so. Those young girls will be quite keen on Barekbaal babies.”

“Baal’s balls! Please don’t ruin my life.”

“Think how many you’ll be starting.”

“Can we work out a deal?”

“Are you kidding? This is going to be so entertaining to watch!”

“Ummm ... I’ll just say you’re crazy ... just completely invented something.”

“Who do you think they’re going to believe when it comes to the authenticity of babies? You or me? With the heroic stories about you, they’re already standing in line ... this will cause a frenzy.”

“Baal’s balls!”

“I think you’ve forgotten about Phoenician girls.”

Φ Φ Φ

Batnoam skirted around the backs of houses, outrunning some of the dogs, until he got to a place on the very edge of town. He clambered up on the roof and took a deep breath. He relaxed a bit and looked at the stars to get his bearings.

Nikkal: “What are YOU doing up here? ... May you live.”

Nikkal appeared out of nowhere with her bow and arrows.

“May you live. Finding some peace and quiet.”

“All you have to do is give me a little fun, and I’ll give you a little peace.”

“I thought I made it clear when I was cornered in your little forum!”

“Who listens to a man avoiding bed?”

“You have a culture, nothing wrong with that, but I ... who are THOSE guys?”

A band of armed men were advancing along the pathway to town.

“Nurritani. We’ve been at war with them for years, hence our shortage of men. Are you going to do anything about it?”

“They’re out of my range.”

Nikkal started firing arrows into their archers. Arrows started flying back at her, and Batnoam plucked them out of the air, while yelling to the lookouts. With their archers wounded or killed, the pack turned around. The lookouts signaled the alarm, and the village armed itself.

“I figure you saved my life 4 or 5 ... “

Batnoam turned and saw two burly men climbing over their roof. They never quite got their balance over the edge, since Batnoam took care of them and they fell off before Nikkal could draw her bowstring..

Nikkal’s eyes were wide and sparkling. She had a very mischievous/evil grin.

Batnoam: “What’s wrong? You all right? Did you take an arrow?”

Nikkal grabbed Batnoam and planted a hot, wild, passionate kiss on his lips that took his breath. She tripped him and straddled his body. She needed two hands to wrestle with her undergarment, which gave Batnoam the opportunity to tip her over. He ran across the roof and just dived off. There was a close

building that was undergoing some maintenance and had a partially constructed bamboo scaffold. It was a little wobbly, so Batnoam didn't stay long on any one piece, but quickly swung through it like a monkey until he hit the ground running.

Nikkal: "You are SO gonna give me babies."

Φ Φ Φ

Nikkal: "Sikarbaal! Where's Batnoam? He saved my life ... he's *MINE!*"

Sikarbaal: "You just missed him. He went running back down the trail, in the dark. ... You really got cheated there. He's the last Barekbaal."

Nikkal: "**WHAAAAT?!!!!!!!!!!!!**"

Nikkal secured her bow and newly filled quiver, and ran right after him. Some of the other women grabbed weapons and followed as well.

Urumilki: "What happened to Batnoam?"

Sikarbaal: "He couldn't take the stress of the women hounding him. He took the intelligence and went back to the ship."

Urumilki: "Hunh ... I knew him before this trip. Bedding wasn't something he was shy about. I wonder what scared him off? ... Why do you suppose so many women went after him? ... The stories?"

Sikarbaal: "Who knows what women do?"

Φ Φ Φ

Lookout: "AT ARMS!"

Captain: "Chief, what's up?"

Chief: "Now there's somethin' ya' don't see every day ... a sailor being chased by a horde of armed women."

Captain: "... and who might that be?"

Chief: "Third Mate Batnoam."

Captain: "Keep the ship bristling with weapons, send out a skiff ... let's see what happens."

When Batnoam hit the sea, he started swimming with one arm holding the intelligence box out of water. He was a Phoenician man, and he could swim fast, but he was no match for stripped down Phoenician girls. They were all gaining on him.

At the last second, Batnoam grabbed the edge of the skiff, but there was no time to crawl in. He just hung on as six men out-rowed the women. Batnoam passed the intelligence to the captain, before he sat down and just panted. All the girls swam up to the side of the ship and caught the attention of every sailor.

Captain: "What's the meaning of all this!"

The captain was poorly hiding a smirk. The Chief behind Batnoam was outwardly grinning.

Batnoam: “Captain, they’re from a lonely outpost and want babies from me. They think I’m related to someone important, Captain.”

The captain knew EXACTLY who Batnoam was related to.

Captain: “Now that the intelligence is taken care of, why don’t you just go satisfy a few ... for good diplomacy?”

The girls close by shouted their support.

Batnoam: <fingering his Nyx medallion> “I would prefer not to, Captain.”

Chief: “I always wondered what the expression ‘too much of a good thing’ meant.”

There was boisterous, laughter from the crew.

Nikkal: “Request permission to come aboard, sir!”

Batnoam: “NO! No, no, no, no”

Captain: “Permission granted.”

Batnoam dragged himself onto all fours and started crawling away.

Captain: “Third Mate, hold!”

Nikkal jumped onboard like a gazelle, in almost her full glory. She was wearing a very thin, wet shift that clung to every curve. Not a sailor could speak.

Nikkal: “Your Third Mate saved my life. I demand the Phoenician Rite of Thanks between a man and a woman, Captain.”

Batnoam: “There’s no such thing.” <He was now on his feet>

Nikkal: “It is OUR custom, Captain.” <There was some cheering from the water>

Captain: “... and does the word ‘consensual’ enter into it anywhere?”

Nikkal: “Actually, ‘no’ ... it’s a formal rite ... Captain.”

Batnoam had his back to a mast, obviously terrified.

Captain: “You put me in an uncomfortable spot, Miss.”

Nikkal: “Nikkal, Captain.”

Captain: “Yes ... Nikkal ... this ship is under Phoenician high seas law, but I’m afraid it doesn’t apply to your local customs.”

Nikkal: “It would please our state and reinforce our relationships with your ... goals, Captain.”

Captain: “I do see your point, Nikkal ... but just look at him. He’s like a drenched mouse staring at a cat.”

Nikkal: “Oh, I’ll take care of that ... no problem ... he’ll be better than new, Captain, when *I’m* through with him.” <Loud cheering from the water as well as the crew>

Captain: "I have thought about this, Nikkal. You're asking me to stretch OUR naval law. The whole bugaboo is the 'consensual' part. How about this? On the ship he's under our law: if he decides to take a dip or step out on land, he's yours for the duration of your rite. How's that?"

Nikkal: "What about relieving himself, Captain? When he's stretched away from the deck?"

Captain: "Only if he touches the water."

Nikkal: "We will accept your approach, Captain. Thank you. By your leave?"

The Captain nodded.

Then, Nikkal took one or two steps towards Batnoam, one foot in front of the other, accentuating the movement of her hips. She shrugged her shoulders and suddenly everything became more detailed, more erotic. She gave a look right into Batnoam's soul, and his legs crumpled. Then she dived off the side of the ship. There were cheers from both the sailors and the girls in the water.

Captain: "So far, I've had nothing but solid decisions from you, Batnoam. However, I can't help but wonder about your choices here."

Batnoam: "It's complicated, Captain."

Captain: "Excellent, excellent shipboard protocol, there. I look forward to meeting them again."

Batnoam: "Maybe when I'm not aboard, Captain?"

Captain: "Good point. I think they've got an eye out for you now."

Chief: "I just have to say it: 'no good deed goes unpunished.'"

Batnoam: "It wasn't anything like that, Chief. We were a team. The attackers were outside my range. She fired arrows, I knocked away the incoming. That's it. Battle teamwork ... what was I SUPPOSED to do? ... and two more guys, but that was just daggers."

Chief: "I stand by my words ... I'm guessing she attempted this 'Rite of Thanks?'"

Batnoam: "Uuuuhhh ... yeah, Chief."

Chief: "You're just full of one surprise after another."

This was the most entertainment the crew had had in weeks. It was thoroughly enjoyed at Batnoam's expense.

The rest of the day, all night, and until the rest of the crew returned, Phoenician girls swam by the ship singing an ephemeral melody filled with very descriptive words of what they'd like to do to Batnoam. The captain had trouble keeping a crewed watch on the other side of the ship.

"Hey! Gotcher Macedonian right HERE!"

"THIS Syrian will treat you right!"

"You know what they say about Kushites!"

Nikkal watched the deck like a hawk from the beach. Batnoam swore he could feel her eyes burning holes into him, and he tried to hide behind the masts and deck gear. It didn't help that some of the other sailors teased him by threatening to throw him overboard.

Batnoam: “Kel? What **do** they say about Kushites?”

Shukeli: “... and here I thought you were worldly.”

Φ Φ Φ

“I’ve been at sea since before I could stand, Kel, but this is the weirdest trip I’ve ever been on.”

“You’re never gonna live down ‘Batnoam’s Island’.”

“Cut it out.”

“This isn’t normal for you? Saving the entire crew from slavery and death, sinking a ship by yourself, being chased by a village of women begging to bed you?”

“ANYONE else would have done exactly the same thing.”

“Anyone else who just happened to sleep on the high rigging, was deadly with daggers, and knew a ship’s weak points? Had a pair the size of coconuts?”

“It was desperation. If I didn’t do SOMETHING, I’d be a slave too ... desperation and a lot of luck.”

“I think you make your own luck. I thought so back in Alexandria. Why do you think I hang around such a scrawny little sailor? I’ve been doing pretty well with your also-rans ... Nyx? She wasn’t some kind of luck? ... I gotta say there was a nice contrast between heroic-Batnoam and Batnoam-cowering-behind-rope-coils ... No one understands about you and the island women ... Just sayin’.”

“They just didn’t want to have fun. They wanted babies ... as many as they could get. I loved my dad. I want to raise my kids, and I already have Nyxie lined up for that ... ‘A responsible man seeds his own garden’ ... I might be a dad already.”

“Don’t Alexandrian girls use that weed stuff?”

“There wasn’t lag time to discuss it. Besides, there was plenty of opportunity, and I don’t think the root always works.”

“WHAT?!!”

“How often would I get back there? What would YOU have done?”

“Kushite women aren’t anything like that. Our Pharaohs brought a little too much Egypt back with them. Our women make us work for it. I think my response would have gone the other way.”

“Phoenician women aren’t supposed to be like this either.”

“You know, Bat, Sardinia is a regular stop. Intelligence from Spain goes through there and Ibiza. Lots of your people on Ibiza, too. Maybe more hungry women?”

“Excrement. A nice career complicated by women.”

“You’re singing the song of mankind.”

Φ Φ Φ

Tall Hatshepsut: “There’s nothing in the dispatches, Nyx. He’s *probably* still alive.”

Nyx: “SHUT UP!!”

“Nothing about the ship, nothing about him, nothing ... there’s a rumor from the temple in Puteoli, *maybe* about him. Wanna hear it?”

“You’re just being mean.”

“One of the intelligence crew was allowed to go to a bordello. Maybe as a reward.”

“Batnoam wouldn’t do that.”

“How many young, handsome Phoenicians are on that ship?”

“Probably quite a few.”

“With a medallion of a woman on their neck?”

“I DON’T BELIEVE IT!!! ... You’re just ... just ... MAKING STUFF UP!”

“The High Priestess is pretty livid about it. Someone’s really going to get it when they come back.”

“He just wouldn’t ... “

Nyx went stomping out. Astarte had just caught the last of it and followed her.

Nyx: “I know he wouldn’t ... he just wouldn’t ... “

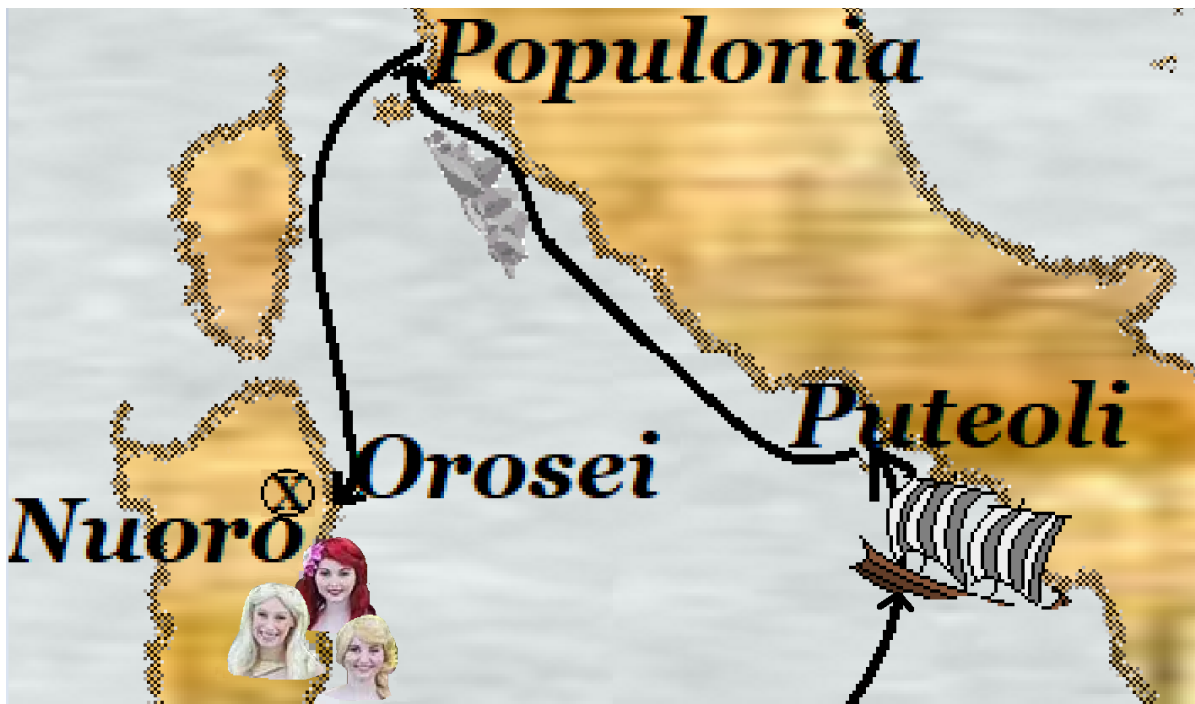
Astarte: <When signing to the vast majority of people that didn’t understand *Beautiful*, Astarte used common sign> I . KNOW . HIM ... I . KNOW . HIS . FATHER ... I . KNOW . MY . FATHER ... HE . PART . MY . FAMILY ... IF . HE . DID ... SOMETHING . ELSE . HAPPEN ... FAMILY . LIKE . THAT... DO . THINGS . LOOK . ODD ... BUT . VERY . SURPRISE.

“What was that word? Like this ... “ <gestures and sniffs>

S . U . R . P . R . I . S . E

“Really?” <sniff>

I . LITTLE . GIRL ... REMEMBER . STORY . ABOUT . COUSIN . FATHER ...



Chapter VI – What The Hell *Is* That Thing?

The ship had returned to Puteoli to transfer intelligence from Sardinia. Batnoam asked the Captain if the Chief would take a note to the High Priestess along with the intelligence box.

“You do it, Third Mate. Just talk to her.”

“Uhhhh ... Captain, wouldn’t it be easier if ...”

“The Chief will be relieved, she doesn’t much like him ... or any of us.”

“I’ve never actually spoken to one, Captain.”

“It’s part of the job. It’s like a girl toddler that screams a lot: you just have to get used to it ... This is the master box. Sort through it and pull out Puteoli stuff. Put that in the small box. Exchange the small box with the High Priestess, then dump her stuff into the master box. Easy.”

Φ Φ Φ

“WAS THERE SOMETHING ELSE?” <Voice of doom>

“Errr ... ummm ... I ...”

“STAND UP STRAIGHT. LOOK US IN THE EYE. SPIT IT OUT.”

<Deep breath> “High Priestess, our intelligence ship was saved by information I got from a working girl, High Priestess.”

“SAPHRON WAS IT? AND ... ?”

“High Priestess, she’s from Populonia. She’d like to stop what she’s doing and go back, High Priestess.”

“WHY WOULD WE CARE?”

“High Priestess, in my humble opinion, she’s very smart and says there’s a small Isis temple in Populonia. Her coastline descriptions were very accurate. High Priestess, I wonder, if there’s not someone there already, if you would consider vetting her to expand your network. High Priestess.”

“PICKING INTELLIGENCE STAFF ARE YOU?”

“High Priestess, it’s merely a suggestion. I don’t know the kind of people you need. High Priestess.”

“GOOD RESPONSE, BOY. WHY DON’T YOU JUST BUY HER FREEDOM?”

“High Priestess, what would she do? The same job without being owned? It seems like a waste of her intelligence, High Priestess.”

“YOU COULD HAVE DONE THIS WITH A NOTE.”

“High Priestess, that’s what *I* thought, but my captain made me come ... for the experience, High Priestess.”

“HOW ARE YOU MANAGING?”

“High Priestess, I’m terrified ... I’m *this* close to wetting myself, High Priestess.”

“FROM REPORTS, YOU PERFORM WELL UNDER PRESSURE.”

“High Priestess, so far, the gods seem to grant me luck when I’m desperate ... High Priestess.”

“OUR ASSESSMENT IS THAT THERE’S MORE TO YOU THAN LUCK.”

“Thank you, High Priestess.”

“HAVE YOU PONDERED THE IDEA THAT A SAILOR ADVANCING A WORKING GIRL MIGHT MAKE A RUMOR THAT WOULD SPREAD? MAKE YOUR MAP INFORMATION EASIER TO COLLECT?”

“High Priestess, I was hoping for something like that, High Priestess.”

“MORE TO YOU THAN LUCK.”

“Thank you, High Priestess.”