

The Way to Greece

Sean McMullen

The Sixth Scroll

The shores of the Underworld were of clean, yellow sand under a bright blue sky, nothing like the gloomy imaginings of our childhood dreams. The River Styx had been different too: not murky vapours and turgid waters, but mountainous waves, slashing rain and howling winds.

By the time the storms abated, we had been swept far from the coast. The navigator had been trained to follow coastlines, as Phoenicians prefer to do, and had never been out of sight of land for more than a few days at a time in the whole of his life. It was all that the crew could do to keep our pentaconter afloat as it was driven east. Oxhide sea-anchors kept the ship aligned with the mountainous waves yet water still poured over the decks and down the hatchways. We bailed in the murky grey daylight, we bailed in the pitch blackness of the night. Driving rain soaked anything that had escaped the waves. Phoenician sailors and Egyptian warriors alike began to suffer from exhaustion and exposure. Some died.

The skies remained overcast after the storms and we drifted with the currents and winds, hopelessly lost in mid-ocean. The waves were still huge and the wind was unrelenting, keeping us too busy to brood about where we really were. Phoenicians are lost without a coast to navigate by, and now we were in a nothingness of water that stretched to infinity. There was little more that we could do except run with the winds and currents. The ship's leaks worsened by the day as the pegs and tenons that held the planks of the hull together worked loose. Earlier damage by marine worms in the hot regions beneath the path of the sun worsened the leaks, and after five weeks the crew was spending more time bailing and caulking than sailing the ship.

The sea itself gave us no comfort. The dark green waves were free of flotsam and we saw no birds. There were no changes in sea-swell to indicate land nearby, and the bottom was deeper than our sounding line could reach. Some of the crew muttered that we were in the River Styx, and the Egyptians said that we had sailed into the waters of the firmament. Two suicides were added to the earlier deaths from exposure. The Captain steered for what seemed to be north, hoping at least for better weather. Slowly the weather did grow warmer, and the sun was visible more often.

This gave us new optimism. We began to catch fish again, and this seemed to prove that we were no longer in the waters of death. Then the navigator noticed a subtle change in the sea-swells, and the more experienced crewmen nodded at his words. Land was near. Another day passed, then a low, scrubby shore appeared. Everyone who could be spared from bailing went to the oar benches, from the Egyptian envoy to myself and the cook.

We approached a gently sloping, sandy beach on an incoming tide, but the weakened hull cracked under its own weight as the water receded. Exhausted, we staggered around on the wet sand hammering in stakes and tying the ship fast before the next tide came in.

The young Greek scholar read slowly, struggling to cope with the idea of what he was holding as much as the text itself. It was an epic, but actually written down as if his teacher Thales had been speaking words onto the Egyptian papyrus: yet another revolutionary innovation of the brilliant philosopher.

The scrolls were piled beside an outdoor baking oven, and charred scraps and edges showed that

some had already been used to start fires. Pythagoras was at once puzzled and offended. Why burn such a wonderful work? It was both a fantastic idea and an incredible story; it was written as if Thales had actually been on that strange and frightening voyage himself. He picked through all the remaining scrolls. Most were old accounts from Thales' olive oil merchanting, but a few more were part of the same epic. A scroll headed by the numeral 7 continued the narration.

The Seventh Scroll

Having a ship to rebuild distracted the crew from our plight. The planks of the hull were removed one by one, checked for damage, then replaced or reused. Fortunately our pentaconter had been carrying spare timbers to repair other ships in the fleet. We steamed these in wet sand then chiselled and bored the slots for the pegs and tenons. The native timbers were hard, heavy and difficult to work, yet were well suited for use in the frame. Two months after we had made landfall the ship was stronger and more seaworthy than when it had first been launched. That was just as well, as nobody knew what to expect when we tried to sail home.

The Captain called a meeting between himself, Mos the Egyptian and our navigator Solinon. Mos insisted that I, Thales of Milatos, attend also, to keep a record of what was discussed. The meeting was held at the crest of a high sand dune so that no others could creep close to listen. Authority would not last long if the desperation and indecision of those in charge was known. The Captain always chose to speak standing, as it displayed his size to best effect. He was not a charismatic leader, and tried to impress people with his sheer bulk.

"In ten days the ship will be ready to sail," the Captain announced, smiling broadly with the little good news that he had. "It will sit steadier in the water, and we have removed the ram so that it will handle better in heavy seas."

"What of the worms that ravaged its timbers?" asked Mos.

"The worms were dead or dying in the wood. I think that they can only live in the hot regions beneath the path of the sun."

He said this brightly, with scarcely a quaver in his voice. The Egyptian smiled too, but not Solinon. Our skilled and exceptional navigator sat fiddling with his beard, baffled by the totally unfamiliar land, sky and ocean. Although he was fit, well muscled and in the prime of life, he now seemed flaccid, like a half-empty wineskin.

"So where do we tell the crew to steer?" he asked.

"We have a coast to follow," suggested the Captain. "The sun is in the, ah, north, so we should follow the coast north until we reach India."

"But this land may be an island," said Mos.

"You have no proof of that," the Captain replied hesitantly, then glanced to Solinon for aid. Solinon was silent, almost in a trance.

"No proof?" said Mos eagerly. "Of course there is proof. Look out over the waters of the bay: black swans. Go into the forest and you will find monkeys that carry their young in pouches. The deer have pouches too, and they hop instead of running. This place has to be an island, and a very isolated island, otherwise we would at least have heard legends of such wonders."

"This is the Underworld," muttered Solinon.

The other two were hoping for a more constructive opinion, and silence followed his words. Distant hammering echoed across to us as the crew repaired the pentaconter with nowhere to go. Guards with spears and bows patrolled at strategic approaches, but the thin, black natives had learned to avoid us.

"We have two choices," said the Egyptian. "The first is to go back the way we came. We could row for the sunset until we reach Africa."

"And how many sunsets did we see in all those storms?" Solinon snapped. "Besides, we could barely keep the ship afloat while running *with* the winds and currents. How long would we last while fighting

them?"

"You Phoenicians are always afraid to go out of sight of a coast."

"And you Egyptians -"

"Solinson!" exclaimed the Captain. "We're here to find a way home, not fight. Still, you are right. Five weeks of being blown along by those winds ruined the ship and exhausted the crew. How could we row against such winds, all the way to Africa? Mos, what is your second choice?"

The Egyptian stood up, serene and composed, and backed off a few paces. Not a hair was out of place and his face was painted as if for court. He worked hard to keep up appearances with his clothing and grooming, and it did lend him a strong air of control.

"Consider our problem as a scholar might," he said slowly, as if lecturing to slow pupils. "Where is the sun at noon?"

"Due north," Solinson mumbled.

"No, it is directly over Africa! If we steer for the direction of the noonday sun and take that bearing each day we shall reach the coast of Africa somewhere beneath the sun's path." The Egyptian glanced fleetingly at me, and I nodded. Solinson was suddenly alert, as if he had been stung.

Mos dropped to his knees and drew a circle in the sand. Within it he outlined a wedge that symbolised Africa. Off to the right, over near the rim of his world, he drew a little circle.

"Suppose that this is the world, floating on the waters of the firmament, and that my fist is Ra, the sun. He rises far over here in the east each day, stands above the centre of the world in mid-Africa at noon, then sinks to the waters of the west in the evening. If we are on this little island in the oceans of the firmament, here, then we could steer straight for the central coast of Africa, avoiding the rough waters out here. The skies are mostly clear in those hot regions, beneath the path of Ra, so a noon heading will not be hard to maintain."

Solinson's eyes widened, then he frowned at the diagram. I had seen that sort of reaction among the scholars of a dozen nations during my years of travel: that of an expert confounded by an outsider. Until now it had always been directed at me.

"You would still have us row across open ocean," the Captain said, leaning over to examine the circle.

"No coasts to follow; that's not good. The crew would not like that."

"But we would be *sure* of a direction," insisted Mos. "Only courage is needed."

"We know what those regions are like," said Solinson, shaking his head. "Hot, clear skies and no winds. We would have to row the whole distance, and in great heat. There would be little rain, yet we would drink more water than is usual. We would have to carry enough drinking water to last months."

"Those who do not row need not drink," suggested Mos, his mask of diplomacy slipping for a moment.

"And those who do not *think* will perish! Do you think we can row that ocean in five weeks? Even in calm seas it would take four lunar months to row across."

"Four months!" exclaimed the Egyptian. "How do you know that?"

"I'm the ship's navigator, it's my job to know."

Mos glanced to me again, but I only shrugged. I knew about theories of the world's shape, but not practical navigation.

The Captain held up both hands. "This is not a temple academy for arguing the finer points of astronomy. The problem is one of navigation. We Phoenicians excel in coastal navigation, and we have a coast to navigate. I favour following the coast to the land of India."

Mos laughed. "But this is an island."

"Not so. Four of my sailors took a captured native canoe north for five days and found only straight, unbroken coast. I say that this is the extreme south of India, and that if we follow the coast for long enough we'll find cities."

"Cities whose ships may attack us," said Mos.

"If we did the attacking we might plunder rich trading ships."

"But you have cut the ram off the ship, remember? Captain, you only oppose my plan for fear of the open ocean. You Phoenicians are lost without a coast to follow. It doesn't matter where it leads -"

The scroll ended with a ragged tear. Pythagoras cursed softly and looked up. In this fable there were men whose very lives depended on a point of philosophy. Thales had often expounded upon the value of philosophical theory in everyday life, and the elaborate tale on the shape of the world was consistent with his ideas. Why had he written it, and what was its lesson?

Pythagoras sorted out all the surviving scrolls of the epic, and was about to begin reading the fourth when he suddenly wondered at why they had been discarded to start fires. Was it a terrible mistake by some servant, or had his master had ordered them destroyed deliberately?

He glanced around the yard furtively. At any moment Thales' cook could come to start the fire to make bread. He stuffed the scrolls of the narration into his robes and rearranged the others beside the oven, then stood up and walked briskly across the yard and into the dusty streets of Milatos. It was only in the privacy of an olive grove on the outskirts of the town that he took the scrolls out again. Of the earlier scrolls only the fourth had survived, but it was intact.

The Fourth Scroll

The Phoenician fleet stretched in a line from horizon to horizon, and was the biggest ever assembled in peacetime. So many ships had been removed from the trade routes of the Mediterranean that the economies of towns and cities from Spain to the Red Sea were suffering. The shortage of vessels was such that many pirates found it profitable to haul honest cargoes while Pharaoh Nechos II conducted the greatest single feat of exploration in all of history: the circumnavigation of Africa.

The vast size of the fleet had a purpose. It would discourage attacks from any of the unknown nations on the coasts to be explored. They would see the fleet approach, they would tremble with fear and hope that it would pass them by . . . then they would sigh with relief when it did indeed pass. From the mast of our pentaconter at the middle of the fleet I could see neither the ships of the vanguard nor the rearguard. All along the horizon on the starboard side was the verdant line of the African coast.

As ship's scribe I recorded details of the voyage for both the Phoenician captain and Mos, the Egyptian. There was a scribe on every ship, so that even if only one vessel survived the voyage there would still be a complete record for the Pharaoh. I wrote the count of knots when the leadline and floatline were heaved, and the number of gradations on the arm-staff when the sun's elevation was taken at noon. At night I recorded the observations of stars and constellations that the watch called to me. I shivered at the new constellations appearing in the south, but still faithfully recorded the new patterns of stars just as I noted down the reefs, peninsulas, bays and islands that were being discovered and named every day. I recorded that the pole star disappeared beneath the horizon, that we passed beneath the path of the sun, and that the noonday sun then moved through the northern sky. I wondered if anyone would believe my words when we returned.

Our Phoenician sailors feared the unknown too, but were comforted by the sheer size of the fleet and the security that it gave. Tall, ebony warriors watched our passage from their canoes, affronted by the intrusion, yet not daring to retaliate. Sometimes there were mountains visible inland, and the smoke from fires that might have been burning forests . . . or the hearths of vast cities. As I gazed over the rail I wondered at the size and variety of Africa.

The months passed and the climate grew cooler. This was as I expected: we had passed beneath the course of the sun, and were now sailing away from it. Just as travelling north to Greece from Egypt meant going to a more temperate climate, so too did travelling south mean the same thing here. North had become south. What next? Might up become down? There was a well known theory which had the continents surrounded by water. If this was true, then Africa would not extend to the edge of the world, it would taper off. Pharaoh Nechos had staked the huge cost of the fleet on this. More weeks passed, and the fleet began to veer more sharply to the west as we followed the coast. Navigators smiled, wine jars were unsealed, and sacrifices of thanks were offered to the gods of half a dozen religions. The base of Africa was near.

Finally the fleet turned to the northwest: we were past the base! I was both delighted and relieved, yet a little surprised. Being a student of astronomy, I knew a lot about the world's shape and the mechanisms of the firmament. Where were the terrible storms and currents that I had predicted? This was the Worldstream, the great pulley of the heavens driven by the sun itself. This was *my* Worldstream, for I alone, Thales of Milatos, had conceived it. I should have been glad to have escaped the storms of my theory, but I was not. We sailed past a great bay with a mountain beside it shaped like a giant's table, black and stark as the sun set amid gathering clouds. I noted its shape as a guide for future mariners. The storm that slammed into the fleet just before dawn was worthy of my wildest dreams of the Worldstream current. The fleet began to break up, and we could see the running-torches of other ships turning back for the sheltered bay beside the table-shaped mountain. My prediction had come true: the calm that we had experienced was no more than a rare break in the great storms of the Worldstream. Our pentaconter was swept out into the raging blackness.

The Nechos fleet! The implication sent a shiver through Pythagoras in spite of the warmth of late afternoon. Pharaoh Nechos II had hired a huge fleet of Phoenician ships to circumnavigate Africa some forty years earlier. The voyage had been a success, although no official account had been released by the Egyptians. Pythagoras had spoken with old sailors who had sailed on it and their stories matched well. At noon the sun had been on the starboard side as they sailed west, the Pole Star had been below the horizon for two years, and there was a searingly hot region where the sun passed directly overhead. The voyage was a fact, and beyond dispute.

Before the expedition had left, Thales had openly supported the theory that Africa was bounded by the sea. Beyond that, he had predicted that there was a great system of winds, currents and storms sweeping from west to east past its base. Both predictions had been verified, his Worldstream did exist. Phoenician veterans of the voyage were emphatic that there had been a great storm at the base of Africa. Pythagoras' hands were shaking as he picked up the ninth scroll. Was this new story merely a fable? Thales had been studying in Egypt when the fleet sailed, and his account of how he had spent the following three years was quite vague.

Had Thales been on the voyage? With meticulous research he might have been able to uncover the fine detail of this fable, yet that same detail might be evidence that he had actually been with the fleet. If the latter was the case, had one particular pentaconter been separated from the others by the storms of the Worldstream?

"Without his help there can be no answers," Pythagoras muttered aloud as he drew a circle within a circle. He held a yellow pebble above it. "But are those questions important?" he asked, then flung the pebble away. If this was not a fable, then it was an account of the most distant regions of the world by the most eminent philosopher alive. His heart was pounding with excitement as he unrolled the ninth scroll, suddenly aware that he might be holding the true nature of the world itself in his hands. Was it a terrible secret? Had Thales, like some human Atlas, been bowed down by the weight of what he knew?

The Ninth Scroll

I was sitting alone on the shore carving pegs and tenons from the hard, red native wood when Solinon came strolling along with his navigation sticks and strings. It was a little after noon. He stopped beside me, gazing in the direction of the sun.

"So it's above Africa now," he said.

"That is what most scholars think," I replied, nervous at his tone of voice.

He glanced about, but nobody was within a hundred paces of us. "Can we talk?" he asked. I nodded and he sat down beside me, taking a blank and beginning to carve a peg.

"What do you think of the Egyptian's theory?" he asked.

"It's sensible, considering how far we are from any familiar coast."

"We're far from familiar coasts, but that doesn't make it sensible."

"The world's shape makes it sensible."

"Convince me."

I gestured to a large, greenish starfish on the wet sand. Some of its arms had been bitten off. "The dry land of the world is like this starfish. This arm here might be Africa, this next one is where we are. These others are unknown lands, all touching the great circular current that I call the Worldstream." I drew a wavy circle around the starfish. "At the centre is Africa, this arm, and the Mediterranean Sea is a hole in the flesh over here. The sun rises from the waters of the firmament beyond the worldstream each day, and is over the centre of the world, in Africa, at noon. It plunges into the waters west of the Pillars of Heraclese each night and is quenched until it rises again in the morning. Steer for the sun at noon and you steer for Africa."

"Simple, elegant," he replied, but clearly expected more.

"Ah . . . the world is probably not exactly like a starfish, of course, but if you steer for the noonday sun, you find Africa."

"Thales, look at me for a moment. Mos practices playing senet with his servants, sharpening his game in case we have somehow sailed into the Underworld. He believes that he will have to play senet against evil spirits to win his right to everlasting life, yet when he was talking about the shape of the world and the firmament he mentioned only a single Egyptian god."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Mos thinks like an Egyptian yet he spoke like a Greek scholar when talking about the shape of the world. Did he learn all that from you?"

"Yes," I mumbled, reluctant and embarrassed. He spat on the sand and tossed a completed peg into the basket. "I'm only one of his servants. An idea needs authority behind it if it's to be taken seriously. Coming from Thales of Milatos it's nothing. Coming from Mos the Egyptian envoy, it has strength."

"Ideas don't need patrons to make them true. You never saw your Worldstream until it swept us away, yet you knew it was there. How?"

"It's needed to turn the invisible wheels that move the sun, moon and stars in the sky. It is how force is transferred from the Earth to the sky. It always flows in one direction, it has to."

Solinon stared at me, then stared back at the starfish. He ran his finger in a circle, skirting the tips of the arms.

"Until this voyage I would have placed more value on a beggar's nosepickings than your theory, yet you have been proved right. Well then, could we row to Africa?"

The difference between a scholarly opinion and professional advice made me hesitate, but there was only one reply possible.

"Yes."

Solinon ran his finger around the starfish again. "It would involve great hardship, but who knows? We Phoenicians would prefer to follow the coast of this starfish world. It would be a longer trip, but we would be close to land all the way. If this was an island, however -"

"This might be the southern tip of India."

Solinon looked across at me, and this time held my gaze. "If Mos was to claim that the Worldstream was his idea, what then?"

"He cannot!" I exclaimed. "It's well known among the scholars at home that I proposed it." I tried to stare him down, but he had me by the quaver in my own words. I tried to change the subject.

"Before long the ship will be ready, and we'll have enough meat and fish cured to spend several months at sea. Could we reach Africa in -"

"Piss on your smoked fish, I want to learn about the shape of the world. If the sun rises just outside the Worldstream, would it have burned us if we had not steered up out of it to here?"

"No, the sun emerges even further out than the Worldstream, and is still cool from the firmament's waters in the morning. When it crosses the Worldstream on the way down it will be hotter, but not intolerable because it is exhausted from a full day of burning. Besides, there were clouds over the Worldstream most

of the time that we sailed it. They would keep us cool."

He lay flat on the sand. "I close my eyes and I fancy that we are anchored off Carthage. The sun is hot, the sea is calm and the shipwrights are getting us ready for a short, quiet cruise to Samos. I open my eyes and the illusion remains: blue skies, calm water, the hammering of shipwrights. This is not the Underworld, I know that now. This bay could be on the Aegean Sea, that bright blue sky could be over Greece. The place even has its own sort of beauty, yet it's so strange. Some trees have hair instead of leaves, others grow twisted into forms like big grey snakes. The deer hop, some birds run on huge legs, other birds laugh like demented men. Does strangeness mean that this is the realm of the gods?"

"Africa was strange too," I replied, full of sympathy for his rational talk. "Remember those beasts that were all neck?"

He picked up an unfamiliar shell, glanced at it with distaste for a moment, then flung it into the water.

"This is so remote, more remote than mortal men could ever dream. Why would a scholar like you risk his life on a voyage like this, Thales?"

"I'd just finished my studies in Egypt when the Pharaoh began to hire his fleet. I was offered a place as a scribe and I took it at once. It was a chance to sail to the very edge of the world! Phoenician ships and sailors, Egyptian soldiers to protect the ships, and Thales of Milatos to record the wonders of the voyage."

"And there really are wonders to record in this nameless place."

"It's India, if you believe in my starfish world."

"Not India. There are said to be cities in India, but there are none here. Where then? Nowhere? Somewhere near the edge of the world?" He gasped in mock alarm. "Could we fall off?"

I laughed, and Solinon joined in after a moment.

"According to the best astronomical teachings known to priests and philosophers -"

"Yours."

"Well, yes. Ah, the sun rises out of the sea here, crosses the centre of the world in Africa here, and plunges back into the sea somewhere to the west, here. The heat of the sun plunging into the water generates clouds, winds, and the great Worldstream current flowing around the world's edge in a perpetual circle. It was the storms and waves from that current that caught the fleet as we reached the bottom of Africa. They carried our ship away, took us right along the edge of the world until we reached this land."

"Which is where?"

"I keep saying it: southern India. India is to the east."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because navigators like you tell me!" I snapped. "Look, the shape of the world has been of great interest to scholars and philosophers until now, but of no practical use. Everyone has a different theory. The Babylonians say that their god Marduk wove a rush mat and placed it on the infinite waters. Then he made dirt and piled it on the mat, and that became the world."

"What do you think of that?"

"Well, I just leave Marduk out. Water is all around us, there is water to infinity. Dry land is a jagged disk, floating like a reed mat on the water, and great storms blow around its edge - always from west to east. Beyond the Worldstream is the edge of the firmament, but this is water too. The sun is incandescent water that blazes out when it rises above the sea and is quenched again when it sets, yet it draws the fuel for the next day's burning even as it travels through the water."

"So we ventured too far from the edge of the land disk and those storms blew us here, to one of the jagged capes that stick out like Africa - and may be India."

"That's my theory. It may be wrong."

Suddenly Solinon slammed his knife and peg down on the wet sand, raised his hands to the sky and cursed in some dialect that I did not know. Those who were closest turned to stare at him, but he soon flopped back on the beach with his face in his hands.

"I'm a Phoenician master navigator, one of the best in the world," he whispered, his voice cracking. "Now

the rules that make me a master no longer apply. Even the sky has betrayed me."

He began to weep quietly. I said nothing, and carved another peg with exaggerated care and concentration.

"Such pain, giving up the beliefs of a lifetime," he said, suddenly cheery again. "Like losing one's wife . . . but at least the wife had a beautiful sister in this case. Thales of Milatos, I accept your world, your Worldstream and your firmament, even though the ideas make my head spin. We must talk again, but about practical navigation."

Later that day the ship was test-floated on the high tide and was found to be free of leaks. More work was needed on the deck and rigging, however, so it was beached again. The oars were to go on last, as were the stores, waterskins and jars. That night there was a feast, with appropriate sacrifices. A little wine was even released from stores.

So many scrolls were gone, yet a complete picture was forming. Whatever Thales' motives for having the scrolls destroyed, he had been careless not to do it himself. Not many people in Milatos could have read the words on the rolls of papyrus stacked beside the cook's oven, yet those very people were all regular visitors to Thales' house. The tenth scroll had been burned, and only a scrap remained of the eleventh. Pythagoras was annoyed, but he no longer cursed the cook. Without her there would have been nothing.

The Eleventh Scroll

The idea that we had reached India appealed to the Captain. We would follow the coast and map India's coastal cities, then return to the Red Sea and Egypt. Part of this strategy involved an accurate fix on true north, a difficult task with such a strange sky overhead. There were arguments between Solinon, the Captain and Mos on the very meaning of north, but one thing was certain: the pole star had disappeared for good when we passed beneath the path of the sun. Solinon spent many nights awake, studying the few familiar constellations and making -

The scrap ended in a line of char. Papyrus was very good for starting fires so the cook had been using it sparingly. At least the twelfth and thirteenth were undamaged.

The Twelfth Scroll

Being the Egyptian envoy's scribe I shared a tent with his servants. As the date for the ship's completion came closer, the division between the Phoenician sailors and those in the camp became more noticeable. The sailors slept on or near the ship, and kept to themselves. Six of the Egyptians raided a native camp and carried away two girls who they ravished for the best part of the night. Mos learned about it the next day, and he was furious. He freed the girls and had the culprits flogged, but he was in a difficult position. War with the natives would result in deaths, reducing the number of rowers, yet he was risking a mutiny if he treated his men too severely. He issued an edict against molesting the natives. That evening a guard was speared.

The next morning we awoke to find the ship anchored some distance out in the bay. No sailors remained ashore, and they had taken their tools and spare timber. Mos had the guards punished, but that was hardly just: they had been watching for attack from without.

I went down to the beach and stared across the water at the pentaconter. It was a long, flat thing, without rigging, riding high in the water now that its cargo was gone. The tide was on the way in, and the ship held its anchor rope taut against the fast flowing water. A bow wave gave the impression that it was moving rapidly. The sound of hammering continued as the sailors completed their work on the decking.

Mos came up beside me, folded his arms and stared at the ship. All the Egyptians were on the beach, curiously quiet and uncertain.

"They have seized the ship as a gesture, nothing more," Mos said at last. "Had they wanted to desert us they could have been well out to sea by now, with a makeshift sail."

"You think they will not sail without us?" I asked.

"Cannot, not will not. They need oars and rowers to get past shoals and to row across open, windless water. They need warriors to hunt for game in the forests and to fight off attackers."

"But they can sail the ship and do some hunting by themselves."

"Perhaps, but sailors are worriers. They worry about sea serpents, too much wind, too little wind, privateers, angry gods and revenue collectors. They seized the ship because they were worried about sailing across the open sea, yet they dare not follow the coast without Egyptians to fight for them as they pass Indian cities."

The Egyptian commander came over, already wearing his sword, armour and helmet. "Master, I can see someone getting into the canoe beside the ship," he said. "What do you advise?"

"Take off your weapons and armour. You don't lure a rabbit out of its hole by shouting at it."

The canoe carried three sailors and the Captain, and they stopped at a safe distance while Mos waded out to talk to them. Predictably, the Captain was worried about the mid-ocean voyage, and wanted to follow the coast to India. The Egyptians were to surrender their weapons before they would be let aboard. If they did not, they would be marooned.

Mos laughed. "The ram has been cut away, so you cannot fight your enemies without grappling and boarding. For that you need us. And when the wind is driving you onto a reef, what will you do then? Row with a few sailors using oars made of the heavy local wood from these forests? You need the muscles and cedar oars that we have ashore."

"We'll not go back by mid-ocean," the Captain replied. "For that you need the ship but not us. You would navigate yourself and use the soldiers to row. You would kill us to save water."

"Please, please, a ship always needs good sailors," Mos said soothingly. "We would not be so foolish. Go back to your ship, work hard, make it seaworthy. We are in no hurry to leave, we like it here. Talk among yourselves and calm down, then we can negotiate some other day."

Later that morning we carried the oars and supplies inland, to a more easily defended site. Perhaps in retaliation, the sailors raised the main mast and lashed a bowsprit to the forepost. Unease spread among those ashore, but Mos ordered nightly roasts of the hopping deer on the beach, and sent joints of hot meat out to the ship on the small canoe to keep the mood friendly. I noticed that the Egyptian commander and most of his men were spending a lot of time away from the camp.

After nine days of standoffs and meetings a compromise was agreed to. The Egyptians would surrender their weapons, and we would follow the coast until we reached the place where the sun passes directly overhead on the way to its noontime high point over Africa. If we had not found the first Indian cities by then, we would set out across the open ocean, according to the Egyptian's original plan.

On that same night the Captain was murdered, stabbed as he lay sleeping. Smears of deerfat and charcoal were on the side of the ship, and a trail of water led to the Captain's cell. Someone had swum out, covered in blacking, someone trained to spy and assassinate. An Egyptian warrior, Solinon cried from the canoe in the first light of morning. He was now in charge, he was the new captain. We agreed to have another meeting later on in the morning, aboard the ship.

"What could we possibly gain by killing him?" I asked Mos, baffled by the news.

"Nothing," he muttered. "One of the sailors probably did it."

"Why?"

"Fear, perhaps. He had agreed in part to a mid-ocean voyage, and after the terrors of the . . . what did you call it, Thales?"

"The Worldstream."

"The Worldstream, I would say that none of those Phoenician mice would ever want to be out of sight of a coast again. One of them was frightened enough to kill."

"So we'll keep negotiating?"

"Only until the afternoon tide."

"Why do you say that?"

"I am no mere envoy, young Thales: I have spent a lot of time in the army of the Pharaoh. I learned tactics, lines of defence to fall behind. I had no intention of surrendering our weapons, I was only playing for time. When the tide comes in this afternoon you will see."

The tide was still going out when Mos and I boarded the canoe that Solinon had sent. *Another hour before the tide turns; I'll try to keep them talking until then*, Mos had told his commander. Apart from the strong current the water was calm, but there was a light wind from the north. The pentaconter's bow was facing inland, into the current, as we approached. A knotted rope was thrown over the side and our rowers climbed it. Solinon appeared at the rail.

"Thales is to go next," called Mos. Then he whispered "Make sure that there is a clear area near the rail. When my men attack we shall need to escape quickly."

I climbed the knotted rope and was helped over the rail by Solinon, but then I was seized by three Phoenicians while Solinon took an adze and chopped into the rope as it strained under the Egyptian's weight. There was a cry of surprise cut off by a splash. I was bound and Solinon began hacking at the anchor rope. Three chops severed it, and the ship immediately began backing to the open sea as crewmen swarmed into the rigging to unfurl the sails. I was tied to a shieldrail as they fought to turn the ship. Not far away Mos was clambering into the canoe, while figures on the shore ran and gestured frantically.

As we passed the promontory with the high sand dunes I caught sight of the Egyptians launching an array of poles lashed to inflated deerskins. It was surmounted by a crude but effective looking siege tower.

Some carried the oars that we needed no matter which way we chose to return home. The Phoenicians shouted in dismay and trimmed the sails for all possible speed as we entered the open sea.

In the calm waters of the bay the Egyptians' siege raft would have caught the ship easily, and the fighting would have been over in moments. Indeed they did gain on us for at least two stadia by the lightness of their craft and strength of their rowers, but it had been built to last only a short time on the calm waters of the bay. It slowed as the frame began to disintegrate in the heavy seas, and they were chopping down the siege tower and rowing for shore when I lost sight of them.

The scroll ended with a flourish, and the text went straight on in the thirteenth.

The Thirteenth Scroll

Solinon himself untied my hands.

"I owe you an apology, Thales of Milatos," he said. I heard but did not understand.

"What are you going to do with me?" I asked.

He laughed. "Treat you as the most prized treasure aboard the ship, what else?"

The crew seemed happy as Solinon took me to the stern, just behind the single steering oar on the port side. I noted that we were sailing due south! Nailed to the navigator's table was a sheet of papyrus, and drawn on it in charcoal was my model of the world.

"If you had been aboard nine days ago we would have sailed at once," Solinon said earnestly.

The man at the makeshift steering oar turned and called "Who needs oars and Egyptians when we have Thales of Milatos?"

"I'm sorry to have had you seized and bound like that. There was no time to explain, and you might have jumped overboard."

The old shipwright Kalinas came out of a hatchway carrying sailor's gear. He was a little unsteady on the rolling deck after so many months ashore.

"You'll have to learn sailorcraft real quick, as us bein' short of hands," he said with a broad and toothless grin. "We'll teach each other, eh?"

I leaned back against the rail, confused. More of the crew came aft and stood around, obviously pleased to have me aboard. Solinon gestured to my map of the world.

"We Phoenicians are not cowards, Thales, but we like to do our sailing as safely as the gods allow. We follow coasts out of preference, it's true, but we also follow currents and seasonal winds over the open sea. Right?"

The crew roared "Aye!" with enthusiasm and pride.

"Here's where we are." He pointed to an arm of my starfish world, the one to the right of that marked Africa. "Here is a steady current with prevailing winds to take us to Africa." He traced the Worldstream around the edge of the map, all the way around the world until he was back at Africa.

I stared, then looked up at him.

"What do you say, Thales? I based the idea on your theory. All that you have said has been right so far." Time slowed down for a moment. Solinon had gambled everything on my words, and the loyalty of the crew hung in the balance. They were waiting for my reply. It would work, true, but the size of the world was not known. Reaching Africa might take a year, a decade, or even a lifetime. Eager faces encircled me.

"Marvellous," I said loudly, then nodded. "With a strong ship, a good crew, and kind gods . . . it might work."

There was a sharp gasp of indrawn breaths, then a mighty cheer. Solinon could lead them to the ends of the earth now, and in fact he would do just that - yet he had needed the authority of a scholar first.

The coast tapered off and turned east, as I had predicted. There was no table-shaped mountain, so we had not already sailed around the world and returned to Africa. The land grew more arid, then became desert, then rose into towering cliffs. We steered south, out to sea, then let ourselves be taken east with the edge of the Worldstream. After many days we reached a cool, lush land where the wolves were striped like tigers and the natives were very short. Exotic pine trees grew here, and their wood was light enough to make oars, spars and masts. We stopped for two months, making oars and spare rigging, and hunting the pouched, hopping deer for meat and waterskins.

This land also tapered off without our landmark mountain, so once again we set off into the cold, rough waters of the Worldstream. Weeks passed, then there was yet another land, one with no natives at all, or even animals, yet some of the birds were as tall as elephants. Yet again there was no table-shaped mountain when this land came to an end, and again we challenged the Worldstream. On four arms of my starfish map there were crosses now, and Solinon had drawn only one other arm. Live birds were penned on the deck, smoked and salted meat was stored below, and netting bags of live oysters hung over the side. Thus the sailors ate well and were happy - and were willing to ignore the curious fact that there had been no natives at all in that land. Its significance was not lost on me: we might well have sailed beyond the realm of mortals.

All the while the sun rose in the east and set in the west, and we showed no signs at all of passing beneath its path of rising. Of all those on the ship only I was concerned. Common sailors could not follow the most advanced philosophical theory in all of scholarship. If Solinon had any doubts, he did not show them. This leg of the voyage dragged on to become far longer than any of the others. There was no sign of land. Had we wandered out into the waters of the firmament itself? Did the Worldstream suddenly turn south to infinity? When Solinon commented that we had been at sea a disturbingly long time, I replied that the voyage from Africa to our first landfall had been almost as long.

"How wide is the Worldstream?" he asked, but I could not say.

"Why do you ask?" I asked in turn.

"I have doubts about our course. We may be too far from the centre of Africa." He stared out to sea to where the noonday sun should have been. "If we are too far from the centre of Africa, we may have already sailed past the base of Africa."

The thought chilled me. We were due to pass under the path of the sun twice before seeing Africa again, but had not done so even once.

"According to my theory it's too early," I said. It was the truth.

"What do you advise?"

"Sail further north, or closer to the world's centre, whatever direction means here." My head was throbbing. What we were seeing did not match my theories, yet our lives depended on how I interpreted what we saw. I fought to stay calm, to seem confident. If they lost confidence in me, who else was there to advise them? "Keep at the edge of the Worldstream, with the noonday sun at the height that it was when we were at the base of Africa."

"But the height of the noonday sun varies with the season. In the Mediterranean I could make an estimate, but not here."

"We must . . . stay at the edge of the Worldstream; we know that it skirts the edge of Africa. As for the sun, you must use your own judgment as navigator."

He stood at the rail for some time, watching the clouds obscure the sun. "There is something consistent about the way its height at noon varies through the season."

"I've observed it too . . . and I can't understand it. As we approach the path of the sun it should stay at the same height at noon - I think. Or perhaps it will move up and down a little."

"Don't you know?"

"Why should I? Why should anyone?" I snapped, aching to debate my doubts like a true scholar. "Lives never depended on the sun's motion until now."

Solinon considered this as I stood regretting my words. "The Worldstream behaves as you have predicted, but not the sky. The sky behaves just as it would at the base of Africa. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll treat the sun as if we were still at the base of Africa. We shall sail further north, at the very edge of the Worldstream. When might we have another landfall?"

"Perhaps soon, perhaps never."

"Do you know something that I don't, Thales?"

"It wouldn't help to tell you."

I did have a theory as to why the sun was behaving as it did. The world could be fifty times, even a hundred times bigger than I had guessed. The starfish might have more arms than Medusa's head had snakes, I could not know. It could take us a lifetime to get around, and the next landfall might be years away. If true, that might as well be never.

But we did make another landfall, in about a lunar month. There were golden skinned natives, tiny camels, deserts and forests, but it did not seem like Africa. We turned south, looking for the table-shaped mountain, but this land probed very deep into the Worldstream. The sun rode lower and lower at noon, and when the peninsular did at last taper off it was a nightmare of dark, mountainous seas and driving rain. On the eastern side it was calm again, and Solinon steered north with the current until the sun was the right number of knuckles at arms-length above the horizon at noon. Again we stopped to repair the ship and forage for food and fresh water, then we sailed east.

This time we did not sail to catch the full might of the Worldstream because the repairs to the ship were incomplete, and most of the crew was sick. Fortunately there were still fair winds and currents to carry the ship east. I recorded the daily entries of observations in spite of attacks of fever and diarrhoea. It was just two years since we had been separated from the main fleet of Pharaoh Nechos.

Solinon began to spend a lot of time on deck, staring at the horizon ahead. He said that it comforted the crew to see him working hard at guiding them, yet that was not so. I knew what he was looking for, and that he wanted to be first to see it. A month passed, five weeks, six weeks, then . . . perhaps it was a gesture on the part of the gods that Solinon was indeed first to see the flat, table-shaped mountain.

They had circled the world! Pythagoras was giddy with excitement as he looked for the fourteenth scroll, forgetting for a moment that it had taken its secrets to the cooking fire. He smiled ruefully to think that he now knew more about nameless lands at the edge of the world than about the southwest coast of Africa. He read the fifteenth scroll, the last to survive. Its dark and evil secret shocked him, yet it also left his mind jabbering with questions, the foremost of which was simply

whether or not the fable was true.

He kept the scrolls, re-reading them until he had memorised every surviving word. Through the long, sun-drenched days of the months that followed he drew starfish within circles whenever he found a smooth patch of sand, and traced charcoal circles on water-rounded stones on the beach. His lessons with Thales continued as before, but he interspersed the discussions with oblique, subtle questions. Some of Pythagoras' questions earned praise from Thales, others had him propelled from the elderly philosopher's house with a kick. His reputation as a brilliant scholar soon brought opportunities to travel and study, and he left Milatos with high praise from the greatest of living philosophers.

He took the scrolls, and in the years that followed read them as a ritual whenever he travelled by ship. The thirteenth scroll fascinated him in particular. The motion of the sun had remained the same as the pentaconter had sailed the Worldstream - in defiance of the cosmic machineries that Thales had used to explain it. The pentaconter had simply not crossed beneath the path of the sun while in the Worldstream.

Were the world a cylinder or sphere, and the Worldstream no more than a particularly strong system of winds and currents encircling the base, the sun would behave as Thales had observed it to do. If eclipses of the moon were due to the shadow of their world, then the circular shadow that everyone saw on the face of the moon could only come from a spherical world. If Thales had indeed circumnavigated the world, it was not in the way that he thought.

The world was a sphere and it had been circumnavigated by the Phoenician pentaconter. That was so obvious, yet Thales clung to his idea of a flat world encircled by a great current. Here was a contradiction that Pythagoras could not understand. If the story in the scrolls was a fable to support Thales' ideas, he could have easily included passages about the Worldstream passing beneath the path of the sun, once at the east end of the earth and again at the west.

Everything depended upon whether or not Thales' story was true. For two years Pythagoras questioned every old sailor that he met, but although he learned a lot more about the voyage of the Nechos fleet, he met no crewmen from Thales' ship. None of the old sailors even mentioned hearsay about laughing birds or hopping deer with pouches. When he finally found the proof that he wanted, it was in an unexpected form. True to his ritual when he boarded a ship, he read through the scrolls.

The Fifteenth Scroll

Mogador was a remote Phoenician frontier port on the west coast of Africa, but Solinon had been there before and recognised its headland long before we saw the town. Our ship was fouled with barnacles and seaweed, and worms had once more riddled some of its timbers with their borings. Not all however. Some of the wood from the other side of the world was resistant to attack.

The Nechos fleet had called there, of course, and there had been the greatest feast and celebration ever known in the little port. It had sailed on for Carthage only three weeks before we arrived. The fleet had merely rounded Africa in three years, while we had taken the same time to encircle the world. To be fair, they had stopped twice to sow and harvest crops, and this had added a full year to two years of cautious sailing. We had nearly caught them up, thanks to the speed of the Worldstream which had carried us along.

Our ship was beached, scraped and repaired. I spent the time sorting and collating my records, and I discovered that we had somehow lost one day. Solinon shrugged it off, saying that it was easy to lose one day in a thousand, but I knew my records to be absolutely accurate. Most of the crew were anxious to sail on to Egypt to collect their pay but Kalinas, the old shipwright, declared that he had done enough sailing, and would settle in Mogador. The last leg of the voyage was an anticlimax after what we had been through. Once careened and trimmed, the pentaconter handled well. We passed the Pillars of

Heraclese and followed the North African coast past Rachgoun, Mersa-Medakh, Utica, Tipasa and finally to Carthage. I had been writing a lot during the final days, preparing the records of the voyage into a proper chronicle for my Egyptian masters.

We approached the Carthage harbour as the sun was setting, and could see that the fleet had not yet departed for Egypt. After dropping anchor Solinon and I rowed to the flagship where we were greeted with great surprise by those left on watch. We had been lost for over two years. I gave a sealed account of our wanderings to the fleet's chief scribe, who happened to still be aboard, and he undertook to present it to Pharaoh Nechos. When we returned to our pentaconter we gave the crew leave to go ashore and join whatever rowdy celebrations the sailors of the fleet had begun.

Solinon and I stood alone on the foredeck, keeping watch over the empty ship. He was drunk. I noticed that he had lost much of his former discipline as we neared home again.

"What will you do when we get back?" he asked me.

"Go back to Milatos, teach."

"Milatos? You might as well've stayed in that frontier fleapit Mogador with Kalinas. Why not settle in Egypt? You'll be known as the best philosopher in the world."

"My family is in Milatos; it's a good place. I have learned much from the Egyptians, but Milatos is home."

"Piss on home," he snarled.

"How can you say that? You who have guided us through the waters of the firmament itself to find the way home?"

Solinon spat into the water, then began to laugh. He laughed for a long time, and needed a drink to clear his throat before he spoke again.

"I guided us around the world . . . to guide us around the world. A voyage around the world is so much more than a voyage around Africa. It's fame, riches; it will turn us from mortals into legends."

Perhaps I should have been more careful, perhaps I should have had a better grasp of what fuels the ambitions of others: instead I blurted out my thunderbolt, and I chose my words very badly.

"We may not have sailed around the world."

"What?"

"I've been trying to explain to myself why the sun behaved as it did when we were in the Worldstream. I have a theory, but it may take a few months to think through all the celestial motions. It's hard to explain to someone who is not a philosopher, Solinon. I need to work it out for myself first."

He took a long swig of wine, then gazed out over the moonlit waters. At last he scratched his head and nodded to himself.

"None of those sheep had any vision, especially the Captain. He said 'Tell us the way to Carthage' or 'Tell us the way to Egypt'. We had a chance to circle the world itself yet he only bleated about the shortest way home. He deserved his fate."

"I don't follow."

"I stabbed the Captain."

My stomach seemed to plunge into a bottomless pit and a sour taste flooded into my mouth. I gripped the rail with both hands, speechless. Solinon regarded me coldly, then continued.

"Why, you want to ask why," he said. "I tried to avoid it. I'd convinced the crew. All I needed was to get the Captain ashore while you were aboard, but . . . Pah, he was suspicious, perhaps he smelled a mutiny. I wanted his ship and crew, so I killed him. Most of all I needed you, the philosopher. I nearly stayed too long to get you."

"Me! You stayed for me?"

"Aye. I knew about the Egyptians' floating tower: I'd sent scouts ashore at night. As a navigator I was worse than useless when so far from familiar waters, but were I to be aided by a Greek philosopher with proven theories of the world's shape, ah, that was different. I needed you for authority, I needed you to interpret the sky, I needed someone who understood the Worldstream."

"But I *don't* understand the Worldstream. I can't explain what I saw and I'm not sure where we went."

"We circled the world! That makes everything worth it. That's all that matters."

"But *where* did we sail? I don't know, and I'm not ashamed to tell anyone. You - you condemned fifty people to die just to sail home on the Worldstream."

"Die? They might've made peace with the natives. Just think, the royal blood of Mos taking root in those tribes. How many lives were really lost because of me? One: the Captain's. If we'd returned by India, it could've been dozens. The voyage of the fleet around Africa cost four hundred lives. The shopkeepers, shipwrights and whores of Mogador told me that."

"I wish you'd told me nothing."

"But I needed to tell you . . . to show the gods that I'm not ashamed. It's a secret, but . . . only because I'm just a navigator. Pharaoh Nechos knew that he'd be sending hundreds of men to their deaths when he sent the fleet around Africa. Is he less guilty than me?"

"He did no deliberate killing -"

"Oh, so four hundred deaths are all right, but not one?"

"Those deaths were due to chance; they came from the dangers of a voyage into the unknown. A knife in your Captain's heart is not chance."

"That was a blow against my enemy. There was greatness at stake, something that all the gold of Pharaoh Nechos II couldn't buy. We were first to sail around the world. You showed me the way, I followed it."

I shook my head. "I was happy in ignorance. I feel as if I've been enjoying a fresh, juicy apple only to find half a worm. You don't need my sanction. Why did you really tell me about the marooning, the killing, the lies?"

He did not answer, but took long, deep draughts of wine until the jar was empty. He held the jar out over the waves for some time, as if it was the symbol of an idea that he wanted to let go, then released it.

"Until we struggled back here, to familiar waters and coasts, I controlled myself tightly. *My* arms kept the ship together, *my* breath was in its sails, *my* belief in your universe guided us home. Now that we're safe, I've relaxed. Now that I've relaxed, the phantoms come after me, they plead not to be left on death's side of the Styx. Thales, I need company when they cry out; it's hard to face them alone."

"So you want me to be haunted as well?"

"In all the world there's nobody else I could confide in."

Pythagoras sat on the charred, weathered frame the old pentaconter, rolling up the scrolls amid the very timbers that had carried his great teacher around the world. The wreckage was proof beyond his wildest dreams, and he was dizzy with elation at finding it. The last scroll had mentioned Carthage, but it had taken him some time to save the cost of the voyage. After questioning dozens of old seamen he finally found one who remembered a straggler from the great fleet of Pharaoh Nechos II.

It had come in just before the main fleet was due to leave, and while anchored in the outer harbour one of the crewmen had killed the Captain and set the ship afire. The anchor rope burned through and blazing wreck drifted ashore and grounded. The remains had been on the beach ever since.

Some of the timbers were damaged by odd worms, while others were scarcely affected. These were hard, red and heavy. With a knife Pythagoras cut samples from the frame and turned them over in his fingers, wondering at the solid proof of Thales' story. Some of the lighter timbers had been roughly hacked off for firewood, but the ram had been carefully cut away and the stump rounded off. It was all in the scrolls, there was no question that this was the very pentaconter that had once sailed east until it had returned to Africa . . . and travelled backwards in time by one day.

The scrolls were no fable, and it was time for a meeting with Thales of Milatos. The confrontation did not take place for months. Travel was not cheap, and Pythagoras had become an important young philosopher with many commitments.

Three years to the day after he had found the scrolls he stood in the house of his old master, looking on nervously as Thales examined a sliver of hard, red wood. In his other hand was the charred fragment of the eleventh scroll.

"How many scrolls did you manage to save?" he asked tentatively.

"Less than half of them, and only to where you were approaching Carthage. I know of Solinon's

confession to you."

Thales considered for some time, frowning with concentration. His hands shook, he paced the floor. The slap, slap, slap of his sandals were like wavelets lapping against a boat.

"I killed Solinon," he finally announced. Pythagoras was silent. "So, you're not surprised?"

"It's - it's a shock to hear you say it, but no."

Thales smiled. "Good, excellent, I've taught you well. All right then, believe what you like, but here is the truth. Solinon tried to stab me on the night that we entered the outer harbour of Carthage. I was ready for him, though. I knew that he would do something like that."

"You knew? How?"

"If you share a ship with someone for over three years, you get to know him. I was a threat to Solinon's most precious possession, the feat of sailing around the world, but he could never bring himself to kill in cold blood. He had to force himself to do it, so he confessed to killing the Captain to make it too dangerous for me to live. Some of the crew had told me they heard him arguing with the Captain on the evening that the assassin supposedly crept aboard. Yes, he had probably done it all before. I was suspicious.

"I rigged up a cloth dummy in my bunk, and slept beneath it with a knife in my hand. When Solinon came I was ready, but even so it was a close fight. Just as I stood over his body with a bloodied knife in my hand three of the crew came back aboard. They cried murder and tried to seize me, but they were very drunk and I was sober. During the struggle a torch was knocked into some sailcloth and it blazed up fiercely.

"I jumped overboard, leaving them to fight the fire, but they were too drunk to do more than get themselves and Solinon's body into a boat. As the ship burned I swam ashore and hid, but I did not have to hide for very long. Knifings were common enough among Carthage seamen and the authorities did not pursue me with any great zeal. I was an experienced sailor by then, so I had no trouble working my way back to Milatos. Once home I pretended never to have been on the Nechos fleet. My theory of the Worldstream was widely known before the fleet had sailed, so I was acclaimed now that it had been proved."

"This was good enough for you? Predicting that the Worldstream existed was more important to you than sailing it?"

"Yes."

"Where do you think the ship went? Why didn't it pass beneath the path of the sun twice while sailing the Worldstream?"

"Because we sailed out beyond the places where the sun emerges from the waters and plunges back into them. It makes sense, it explains what we saw. We sailed out into the machineries of the sky itself. I should have explained that to Solinon properly. He thought that I was telling him that we didn't circle the world. We did do that, and much more."

The proposition had such a powerful charm that Pythagoras teetered on the edge of accepting it for a moment, but the pure, logical machinery of his own theory quickly reasserted itself. His master was wrong, but to argue the point would achieve nothing. He had been through all those arguments with him before.

"Why did you write the scrolls, Master?" he asked, moving on through his mental list of questions.

"I wrote the scrolls when I found out . . . that truth was being smothered. My records were safely aboard the flagship when the pentaconter burned, and they were taken to Egypt. Certain well-placed friends informed me that my account of sailing the waters of the firmament scandalised the priests and nobles there. They decided to release nothing official about the voyage rather than risk destroying the very foundations of their religion by letting my findings be known. I was angry, so I wrote out the entire truth as best I could remember it."

"Then you tried to destroy the scrolls."

"They accused me of murder."

"So why write them at all?"

"Pythagoras, please! Just listen and try to understand. I was young and angry when I wrote the scrolls, but as the years passed I grew older, wiser and very successful. I became famous for many other discoveries and theories, so why should I reveal a murky killing in my past for the sake of a little more fame? Besides, I owe a lot to Solinon. For all his faults he was a great man and a brilliant navigator. He valued my theories so highly that he risked everything to get me aboard his ship. He proved that philosophy can be of great practical value to people. That changed my life; I've based all my teachings on it. Oh, I could tell the story of our voyage without revealing that Solinon murdered the Captain, but soon people would realise that it was I who killed Solinon. I could only clear myself by branding him as a murderer, but why blacken his memory and punish his shade? Better to pretend that I'd stayed in Egypt, and that some other Thales went with the fleet."

Pythagoras considered this, then reluctantly nodded. Thales went on.

"My theory of the world's shape and the Worldstream had been verified by the main fleet. Thousands of Phoenician sailors were soon telling everyone about the voyage of the Nechos fleet. That did not worry the Egyptian priests greatly, but in *my* notes they read that we sailed out into the waters of the firmament and found no gods. Even though that devastated them, it was not of great philosophical value to me. It took me years to admit that, but once I did I decided to burn the scrolls."

Pythagoras slowly took the scrolls from his sleeve.

"Your cook may have a use for these," he said, handing them to Thales. "They are good for starting fires."

"This time I'll start the fire myself. Tell me, though, what do you think of me after hearing all this?"

"You are far wiser than I could have guessed, master."

They talked for some hours after that, and Pythagoras left when the evening was well advanced. The sun was already beneath the horizon as he returned to his lodgings by the harbour. He fingered a sliver of red wood, proof that the sun was now shining on other lands, not quenched in the waters of the firmament. He had his theory, he had his proof. Henceforth he would teach that the world was a sphere, and one day some philosopher or mariner would provide new proof, proof that would not incriminate Thales or Solinon. If Pythagoras himself did not live to see it, then he had lost nothing but a little fame - and grasping for fame had killed Solinon. He paused to nod thanks back in the direction of Thales' house as he consciously walked the surface of an immense sphere to the harbour.

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