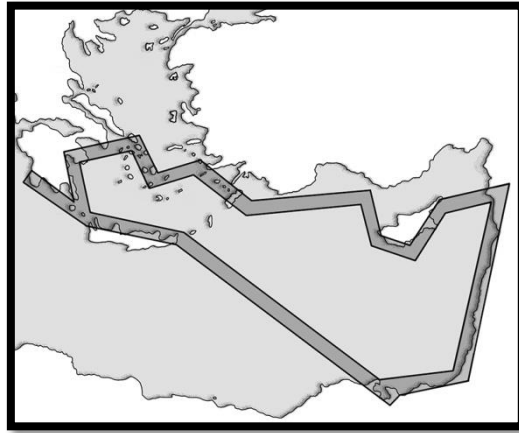


(Scene: Halfway through the book. Narrator Iakos is setting out from his hometown on his second year as a mariner on his Uncle Aithon's fleet of two ships.)

29



At nineteen years of age, I've seen most of the world. The fertile shores of the Egyptos and the barren deserts beyond. The lowland plain of Kizzuwadna, watered by the smooth-flowing Sarus. The stark, forested mountains south of Hatti. The unfathomable immensity of Anatolia's grasslands that stretch north, south, east, and west without end. The high plateau of the Seha River Land, where you march up and down, up and down, hardly ever straight ahead.

But no land compares with the unsurpassed beauty of the Mediterranean Sea and all she touches. Father Poseidon took the blue from the eyes of his mother Rhea and the green from those of Tethys his aunt and cast them into the sea, letting them spread as they would, so that some days the Mediterranean shines majestic blue and other days piercing green—and on some days, near the shore, a blend of the two.

Sun, sea, and shore layer color upon color and grace upon grace, and if for a moment you lay aside your plow or oar or hammer, if for a moment you wipe the sweat from your brow and just dwell on the land- and seascape that surround you, letting the waters and the skies and the beaches merge one into another in a seamless fabric of creation, a thinking man could swoon with the prospect. Perhaps the gods created this paradise to make up for their inexplicable cruelties.

When we set out from Pylos on the twenty-eighth day of March, it seemed more like the month of May. The breeze was pleasantly moderate. Knee-high waves laughingly rolled their way straight toward Crete, and over their shoulders beckoned us to keep pace with them. Even the old hands said they couldn't remember such an inviting start to sailing season.

High above our heads, the sun shone a dazzling silver-yellow, as if it were reflecting itself off polished electrum. Emerald capes and islands pointed the way straight to Kydonia and its riches: Cape Mattapan, Kythira, Anitkythira, and finally Cape Spatha on northwest Crete herself. The verdant island greens gave way to the mixed grays and browns of the rocky Cretan coastline; but Father Zeus compensated, blessing mankind with a cloud-speckled half-sphere in which azure sky met azure sea, an all-encompassing sapphire worn on the neck of Hera his consort. Under our keel, the sea glowed a deep indigo, but as the depth lessened shoreward, it lightened to cornflower, then sky blue, then turquoise, till finally where it lapped the shore, a pale blue-green too exquisite to bear a name.

Setting off this riot of color was a shoreline of beaches unimaginably white, as if snow were too lovely to melt, surpassed in brightness only by the waves crashing to the land and bursting skyward in foam and spray. Beyond the beaches, dark green scrub and dwarf evergreens dappled the seaside here and there, pressing on with the business of living in spite of a surfeit of heat and a deficiency of rain.

In the far distance beyond the range of any but the best and youngest eyes, the mountains of Crete were just visible in the cloudless south, a faint purple ripple between land and sky so indistinct that even if glimpsed, was doubted.

But of all the colors of the Cretan landscape, none was so riveting, so awe-inspiring, as the roiling reds and oranges of Kydonia burning to the ground.



There would be no trading on the north coast. Any town worth disembarking in was either crowned with smoke or clashing with men at arms. After each grim spectacle, we'd point our bows east, only to sheer off at the next ruined port and head east again.

As we rounded the Kyriamadi Peninsula on the easternmost tip of Crete and steered southwest along the coast, all eyes peered into the distance toward Palaikastro, the last stop before the sea crossing to Egypt. Last season, we put to sea just ahead of an Achaean invasion. Would it too lie in ruins?

"Palaikastro!" shouted the lookout.

Curiosity conquered discipline. One after another we shipped oars and gathered in the starboard bow, shading our eyes from the sun and squinting toward the town.

All was quiet. All was well. No smoke. No fire.

"All right, odd benches, back to your oars," Aithon ordered. The rest of us sat back down or grabbed a line for support and watched the harbor get larger and larger as we approached at a leisurely pace.

What a contrast to the north coast. No clanging of bronze on bronze—no battle sounds of any kind. No acrid scent of wood and flesh wafting on the breeze. No blazing streets or charred remains. Tranquility reigned. Even the breeze had calmed, easing our headway west.

"Ship your oars," Aithon ordered as we entered the harbor. "Elpenor: Signal the cargo ship to halt where she is." In silence we coasted to a stop fifty paces from shore.

Jerking their heads forward and back, sea gulls clambered over the long, guano-covered rock pile that served as Palaikastro's jetty, staring out at us with tiny black eyes and not a care in the world. The peaceful surroundings seemed to have lulled even the birds into complacency.

I think Eurylochos spoke for all of us when he said: "Where the fuck *is* everyone?"

The beach was devoid of people. The waterfront was devoid of people. The streets and homes and shops were devoid of people. The entire city was overflowing with people who were somewhere else.

Dread instantly spread to every corner of the *Planetae*. "Plague!" someone said aloud, and the very timbers gasped in fear.

Aithon jumped up on the forecastle. "Don't be idiotic! If it was plague, there'd be bodies. The weak and dying would crowd the streets. There's no plague!"

Frowning, his face taut, he swept his gaze over the streets and alleys of Palaikastro, trying to discern the hand of Father Zeus.

"I want three volunteers for a shore party to accompany me and Eurylochos ashore," he ordered.

My cousin stared at Aithon. "That's funny: I don't remember volunteering."

"Full armor," he told the crew. "Who's coming?"

"I'll go," I chimed in.

"I feel safer already," muttered Eurylochos.

No one else spoke up. "An obol-rod a man," said Aithon.

"I'll go," said Elpenor unenthusiastically.

"No," Aithon replied, "I need you to command the ship." My uncle looked the crew over. "Last chance—then I decide myself, and no obol-rod."

"Oh, all right," grumbled Leander.

"I'll come," said one of the Midean bowmen. I couldn't remember his name.

The five of us donned Hittite snake armor, and Elpenor took the ship in till there wasn't enough water under the keel to dampen a cloth. We awkwardly clambered down a line into the shallows and waded ashore. The *Planetae* immediately reversed oars and joined the cargo ship in the safety of open water.

Swords drawn, five abreast, we explored the empty city, turning constantly on our heels to keep our shields between us and danger. The certainty of impending battle never put fear into my heart as did those unnaturally silent streets. It was as if Hades had reached up from the bowels of the earth and dragged every soul down to his realm. An eerie feeling came over me that it was the end of the world, and we were the only ones left alive. Under my breath I prayed to Our Lady Doppota that my parents had been spared.

As we rounded a corner, something tripped me, and I sprawled face-first into the dust. Prone in the dirt, I looked back and saw that we were not alone. Filthy from head to toe, with long, knotted white hair, a bedraggled beard, and rheumy bloodshot eyes, an old man of perhaps seventy sat on his haunches stark naked. Throwing his head back, he burst out laughing, ignoring the four swords pointing down at him.

I reclaimed the sword I had dropped and rose to my feet.

Aithon glared down at the old man. “Where is everyone?” From his tone, he seemed to hold the old man accountable for the empty streets. The tip of his sword was a finger’s width from the old man’s windpipe. Any sane man would have instantly begun placating the swordsman.

“Aye, and where *should* they be?” cackled the old man.

“You tell me,” said Aithon, just touching the man’s throat with the tip of his sword. My uncle was taut as a drawn bowstring. The old man was about to die.

“Well, my ’pinion is, Mother Gaia tired of all the vice and folly in the world and swallered all the sinners down her cunny, leavin’ only the wise and virtuous. And here I sit.”

“I’m going to ask you one more time,” Aithon warned. “If you don’t tell me what I want to know, I’m going to kill you. Do you understand?”

“Aye, and while yer at it, dig up the dead men and kill them too,” the man mocked. “And plant ships to grow trees. If rain fell upward, ’t’would put out the sun, so p’raps ’tis best to leave things as they are.”

“He’s mad,” said Eurylochos.

The whole scene left my skin cold and tingling.

Aithon lowered his sword and gestured for the rest of us to do the same. “Do you need food?” he asked the madman gently. “Are you hungry?”

“I thank’ee, friend, no. Worms eat us all in the end. Till then, we may’s well return the favor. Birds relish ’em, and *they* seem none the worse for the ’sperience. Double duty, friend, double duty: Delve for dinner in spring and summer, and come winter you’ve a fine sepulcher to rest in.”

“He’s giving me the creeps,” said Eurylochos. “Can we get out of here?”

Uncle lowered himself into a crouch to look the man in the eye. “Perhaps for a jar of wine, you’d tell me where the townspeople went?”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “I see you bearin’ no wineskin, unless you’ve hidden it up brother brown eye. And if you *have*, my thirst don’t carry me so far as that, I’m proud to say.”

“I’ve a trading ship in the harbor,” Aithon told him. “Tell me what I want to know, and I’ll give you a jar.”

The man shifted his legs underneath him and stroked his beard. “Be it a good vintage?”

“The best.”

“Nay, sounds too good for the likes of me.”

“On the contrary,” said Aithon, waving his hand at the surrounding streets. “You’re lord of all you survey.”

The madman grinned. “Aye, I am at that.”

“I swear before Diktaean Zeus that I’ll keep my word,” Aithon promised.

“Nay,” said the madman, “ ’t’won’t do no good to swear by him. Zeus’s left the Dikte cave fer good, and all Crete too. He loved the mountains, but they’ve become too crowded, ’specially Karphi.”

“Crowded?” said Aithon. “Mount Karphi? Did ... did the townspeople flee there?”

“Ssshhh, not so loud, friend, lest the worms hear you and go join ’em there, and then what would I have to soak up my wine?”

“Did they all go there? Everyone?”

The man shook his head. “Nay, friend. Only them’s whose heads was still wed to their shoulders.”

Aithon rose to his feet. “We’re going to look around a little more. But if you meet us on the beach, you’ll have your wine.”

“Thank’ee, friend. Fer yer kindness, I’ll tell you a secret.” He glanced around to ensure no one was eavesdropping, then lowered his voice. “When you up-anchor, cast a last look on Crete. The next time you pass this way, I doubt her head will show above water.”