

## *Prologue*

If you all keep coming, night after night, my daughter will *have* the greatest wedding feast in the history of the Hellenes. Perhaps, should my sword-arm fail me, I can have an evening-star life as a rhapsode.

Heh. But the truth is, it's the story, not the teller. Who would not want to hear the greatest story of the greatest war ever fought by men? And you expect me to say 'since Troy' and I answer – any soldier knows Troy was just one city. We fought the *world*, and we triumphed.

The first night, I told you of my youth, and how I went to Calchas the priest to be educated as a gentleman, and instead learned to be a spear fighter. Because Calchas was no empty windbag, but a Killer of Men, who had stood his ground many times in the storm of bronze. And veterans came from all over Greece to hang their shields for a time at our shrine and talk to Calchas, and he sent them away whole, or better men, at least. Except that the worst of them the Hero called for, and the priest would kill them on the precinct walls and send their shades shrieking to feed the old Hero, or serve him in Hades.

Mind you, friends, Leithos wasn't some angry old god demanding blood sacrifice, but Plataea's hero from the Trojan War. And he was a particularly Boeotian hero, because he was no great man-slayer, no tent-sulker. His claim to fame is that he went to Troy and fought all ten years. That on the day that mighty Hector raged by the ships of the Greeks and Achilles skulked in his tent, Leithos rallied the lesser men and formed a tight shield wall and held Hector long enough for Ajax and the other Greek heroes to rally.

You might hear a different story in Thebes, or Athens, or Sparta. But that's the story of the Hero I grew to serve, and I spent years at his shrine, learning the war dances that we call the Pyricche. Oh, I

learned to read old Theogonis and Hesiod and Homer, too. But it was the spear, the sword and the aspis that sang to me.

When my father found that I was learning to be a warrior and not a man of letters, he came and fetched me home, and old Calchas . . . died. Killed himself, more like. But I've told all this – and how little Plataea, our farm town at the edge of Boeotia, sought to be free of cursed Thebes and made an alliance with distant Athens. I told you all how godlike Miltiades came to our town and treated my father, the bronzesmith – and Draco the wheelwright and old Epiktetus the farmer – like Athenian gentlemen, how he wooed them with fine words and paid hard silver for their products, so that he bound them to his own political ends and to the needs of Athens.

When I was still a gangly boy – tall and well muscled, as I remember, but too young to fight in the phalanx – Athens called for little Plataea's aid, and we marched over Kitharon, the ancient mountain that is also our glowering god, and we rallied to the Athenians at Oinoe. We stood beside them against Sparta and Corinth and all the Peloponnesian cities – and we beat them.

Well – Athens beat them. Plataea barely survived, and my older brother, who should have been my father's heir, died there with a Spartiate's spear in his belly.

Four days later, when we fought again – this time against Thebes – I was in the phalanx. Again, we triumphed. And I was a hoplite.

And two days later, when we faced the Euboeans, I saw my cousin Simon kill my father, stabbing him in the back under his bright bronze cuirass. When I fell over my father's corpse, I took a mighty blow, and when I awoke, I had no memory of Simon's treachery.

When I awoke, of course, I was a slave. Simon had sold me to Phoenician traders, and I went east with a cargo of Greek slaves.

I was a slave for some years – and in truth, it was not a bad life. I went to a fine house, ruled by rich, elegant, excellent people – Hipponax the poet and his wife and two children. Archilogos – the elder boy – was my real master, and yet my friend and ally, and we had many escapades together. And his sister, Briseis—

Ah, Briseis. Helen, returned to life.

We lived in far-off Ephesus, one of the most beautiful and powerful cities in the Greek world – yet located on the coast of Asia. Greeks have lived there since the Trojan War, and the temple of Artemis there is one of the wonders of the world. My master went to school each day at the temple for Artemis, and there the great philosopher,

Heraklitus, had his school, and he would shower us with questions every bit as painful as the blows of the old fighter who taught us pankration at the gymnasium.

Heraklitus. I have met men – and women – who saw him as a charlatan, a dreamer, a mouther of impieties. In fact, he was deeply religious – his family held the hereditary priesthood of Artemis – but he believed that fire was the only true element, and change the only constant. I can witness both.

It was a fine life. I got a rich lord's education for nothing. I learned to drive a chariot, and to ride a horse and to fight and to use my mind like a sword. I loved it all, but best of all—

Best of all, I loved Briseis.

And while I loved her – and half a dozen other young women – I grew to manhood listening to Greeks and Persians plotting various plots in my master's house, and one night all the plots burst forth into ugly blossoms and bore the fruit of red-handed war, and the Greek cities of Ionia revolted against the Persian overlords.

Now, as tonight's story will be about war with the Persians, let me take a moment to remind you of the roots of the conflict. Because they are ignoble, and the Greeks were no better than the Persians, and perhaps a great deal worse. The Ionians had money, power and freedom – freedom to worship, freedom to rule themselves – under the Great King, and all it cost them was taxes and the 'slavery' of having to obey the Great King in matters of foreign policy. The 'yoke' of the Persians was light and easy to wear, and no man alive knows that better than me, because I served – as a slave – as a herald between my master and the mighty Artapherenes, the satrap of all Phrygia. I knew him well – I ran his errands, dressed him at times, and one dark night, when my master Hipponax caught the Persian in his wife's bed, I saved his life when my master would have killed him. I saved my master's life, as well, holding the corridor against four Persian soldiers of high repute – Aryanam, Pharnakes, Cyrus and Darius. I know their names because they were my friends, in other times.

And you'll hear of them again. Except Pharnakes, who died in the Bosphorus, fighting Carians.

At any rate, after that night of swords and fire and hate, my master went from being a loyal servant of Persia to a hate-filled Greek 'patriot'. And our city – Ephesus – roused itself to war. And amidst it all, my beloved Briseis lost her fiancé to rumour and innuendo,

and Archilogos and I beat him for his impudence. I had learned to kill, and to use violence to get what I wanted. And as a reward, I got Briseis – or to be more accurate, she had me. My master freed me, not knowing that I had just deflowered his daughter, and I sailed away with Archilogos to avoid the wrath of the suitor's relatives.

We joined the Greek revolt at Lesbos, and there, on the beach, I met Aristides – sometimes called the Just, one of the greatest heroes of Athens, and Miltiades' political foe.

That was the beginning of my true life. My life as a man of war. I won my first games on a beach in Chios and I earned my first suit of armour, and I went to war against the Persians.

But the God of War, Ares, was not so much in charge of my life as Aphrodite, and when we returned to Ephesus to plan the great war, I spent every hour that I could with Briseis, and the result – I think now – was never in doubt. But Heraklitus, the great sage, asked me to swear an oath to all the gods that I would protect Archilogos and his family – and I swore. Like the heroes in the old stories, I never thought about the consequence of swearing such a great oath and sleeping all the while with Briseis.

Ah, Briseis! She taunted me with cowardice when I stayed away from her and devoured me when I visited her, sneaking, night after night, past the slaves into the women's quarters, until in the end – we were caught. Of course we were caught.

And I was thrown from the house and ordered never to return, by the family I'd sworn to protect.

Three days later I was marching up-country with Aristides and the Athenians. We burned Sardis, but the Persians caught us in the midst of looting the market, and we lost the fight in the town and then again at the bridge, and the Persians beat us like a drum – but I stood my ground, fight after fight, and my reputation as a spear fighter grew. In a mountain pass, Eualcides the Euboean and I charged Artapherenes' bodyguard, and lived to tell the tale. Three days later, on the plains north of Ephesus, we tried to face a provincial Persian army with the whole might of the Ionian Revolt, and the Greeks folded and ran rather than face the Persian archery and the outraged Phrygians. Alone, on the far left, we the Athenians and the Euboeans held our ground and stopped the Carians. Our army was destroyed. Eualcides the hero died there, and I went back to save his corpse, and in the process found that Hipponax, my former master, lay mortally wounded. I gave him the mercy blow, again failing to think of the

oath I'd sworn, and my once near-brother Archilogos thought I'd done it from hate, not love. And that blow stood between us and any hope of reconciliation. To Archilogos, I'd raped his sister and killed his father after swearing an oath to the gods to protect them. And that will have bearing on tonight's tale.

From the rout of Ephesus, I escaped with the Athenians, but the curse of my shattered oath lay on me and Poseidon harried our ship, and in every port I killed men who annoyed me until Hagios, my Athenian friend, put me ashore on Crete, with the King of Goryton, Achilles, and his son Neoptolymos, to whom I was war tutor. I tutored him so well that in the next great battle of the Ionian War, Neoptolymos and I were the heroes of the Greek fleet, and we helped my once-friend Archilogos to break the Persian centre. It was the first victory for the Greeks, but it was fleeting, and a few days later, I was a pirate on the great sea with my own ship for the first time. Fortune favoured me – perhaps, I think, because I had in part redeemed my oath to the gods by saving Archilogos at the sea battle. And when we weathered the worst storm I had ever seen, Poseidon had gifted me the African-Greek navigator Paramanos and a good crew in a heavy ship. I returned to Lesbos and joined Miltiades – he who had wooed the Plataeans at the dawn of this tale. And from him, I learned the facts of my father's murder and I determined to go home and avenge him.

I found Briseis had married one of the architects of the Ionian Revolt, and he was eager to kill me – the rumour was that she called my name when he was with her at night. And I determined to kill him.

After two seasons of piracy with Miltiades and further failures of the rebels to resist the Persians, I found him skulking around the edge of a great melee in Thrace and I killed him. I presented myself to Briseis to take her as my own – and she spurned me.

That's how it is, sometimes. I went back to Plataea, an empty vessel, and the Furies filled me with revenge. I found Simon and his sons sitting on my farm, Simon married to my mother, planning to marry his youngest son Simonalkes, to my sister Penelope.

I'll interrupt my own tale to say that I did not fall on Simon with fire and sword, because four years of living by the spear had taught me that things I had learned as a boy from Calchus and heard again from Heraklitus were coming to seem important and true – that justice was more important than might. I let the law of Plataea have

its way. Simon hanged himself from the rafters of my father's workshop, and the Furies left me alone with my mother and my sister.

That would make a fine tale, I think, by itself – but the gods were far from done with Plataea, and by the next spring, there were storm clouds brewing in all directions. An Athenian aristocrat died under my hypaspist's sword – Idomeneus, who comes all too often into these stories, a mad Cretan – he had taken up the priesthood of the old shrine. I went off to see to the crisis, and that road took me over the mountains to Athens, and into the middle of Athenian politics – aye, you'll hear more of that tonight, too. There I fell afoul of the Alcmaeonidae and their scion Cleitus, because it was his brother who had died in our sanctuary and because my cowardly cousin Simon's sons were laying a trap for me. He stole my horse and my slave girl – that's another story. Because of him, I was tried for murder – and Aristides the Just got me off with a trick. But in the process, I committed hubris – the crime of treating a man like a slave – and Aristides ordered me to go to Delos, to the great temple of Apollo, to be cleansed.

Apollo, that scheming god, never meant me to be cleansed, but instead thrust me back into the service of Miltiades, whose fortunes were at an all-time low. With two ships, I reprovisioned Miletus – not once but twice – and made a small fortune on it, and on piracy. I took men's goods, and their women, and I killed for money, took ships, and thought too little of the gods. Apollo had warned me – in his own voice – to learn to use mercy, but I failed more often than I succeeded, and I left a red track behind me across the Ionian Sea. And in time, I was a captain at the greatest sea battle of the Ionian Revolt – at Lade. At Lade, the Great King put together an incredible fleet, of nearly six *hundred* ships, to face the Greeks and their allies with almost three hundred and fifty ships. It sounds one-sided, but we were well trained, we should have been ready. I sailed with the Athenians and the Cretans, and we beat the Phoenicians at one end of the line and emerged from the morning fog expecting the praise of our Navarch, the Phokaian Dionysus – alongside Miltiades, the greatest pirate and ship-handler in the Greek world. But when we punched through the Phoenicians, we found that the Samians – our fellow Greeks – had sold out to the Persians. The Great King triumphed, and the Ionian Revolt collapsed. Most of my friends – most of the men of my youth – died at Lades.

Briseis married Artapherenes, who had slept with her mother – and became the most powerful woman in Ionia, as she had always planned.

Datis, the architect of the Persian victory, raped and plundered his way across Lesbos and Chios, slaughtering men, taking women for the slave markets, and making true every slander that Greeks had falsely whispered about Persian atrocities.

Miletus, which I had helped to hold, fell. I saved what I could. And went home, with fifty families of Miletians to add to the citizen levy of Plataea. I spent my fortune on them, buying them land and oxen, and then – then I went back to smithing bronze. I gave up the spear.

How the gods must have laughed.

A season later, while my sister went to a finishing school to get her away from my mother's drunkenness, I went back to Athens because my friend Phrynicus, who had stood in the arrow storm at Lade with me, was producing his play, *The Fall of Miletus*. And Miltiades had been arrested for threatening the state – of which, let me say, friends, he was absolutely guilty, because Miltiades would have sold his own mother into slavery to achieve power in Athens.

At any rate, I used money and some of the talents I'd learned as a slave – and a lot of my friends – to see that Phrynicus's play was produced. And incidentally, to prise my stolen slave-girl free of her brothel and wreak some revenge on the Alcmaeonidae. In the process, I undermined their power with the demos – the people – and helped the new voice in Athenian politics – Themistocles the Orator. He had little love for me, but he managed to tolerate my success long enough to help me – and Aristides – to undermine the pro-Persian party and liberate Miltiades.

I went home to Plataea feeling that I'd done a lifetime of good service to Athens. My bronze smithing was getting better and better. I spent the winter training the Plataean phalanx in my spare time. War was going to be my hobby, the way some men learn the diaulos or the kithara to while away old age. I trained the young men and forged bronze. Life grew sweeter.

And when my sister Penelope – now married to a local Thespian aristocrat – decided that I was going to marry her friend Euphonia, I eventually agreed. I rode to Attica with a hunting party of aristocrats – Boeotian and Athenian – and won my bride in games that would not have disgraced the heroes of the past. And in the spring I wed her, at a wedding that included Themistocles and Aristides

and Miltiades – and Harpagos and Agios and Moir and a dozen of my other friends from every class in Athens. I went back over the mountains with my bride, and settled down to make babies.

But the storm clouds on the horizon were coming on a great wind of change. And the first gusts of that wind brought us a raid out of Thebes, paid for by the Alcmaenoidae and led by my cousin Simon's son Simonides. The vain bastard named all his sons after himself – how weak can a man be?

I digress. We caught them – my new Plataean phalanx – and we crushed them. My friend Teucer, the archer, killed Simonides. And because of them, we were all together when the Athenians called for our help, because the Persians, having destroyed Euboea, were marching for Athens.

Well, I won't retell Marathon. Myron, our archon and always my friend, sent us without reservation, and all the Plataeans marched under my command, and we stood by the Athenians on the greatest day Greek men have ever known, and we were heroes. Hah! I'll tell it again if you don't watch yourselves. We defeated Datis and his Persians with the black ships. Agios died there on the stern of a Persian trireme, but we won the day. Here's to his shade. And to all the shades of all the men who died at Lade.

But when I led the victorious Plataeans back across the mountains, it was to find that my beautiful young wife had died in childbirth. The gods stole my wits clean away – I took her body to my house and burned it and all my trappings, and I went south over Kitharon, intending to destroy myself.

May you never know how black the world can be. Women know that darkness sometimes after the birth of a child, and men after battle. Any peak of spirit has its price, and when a man or woman stands with the gods, however briefly, they pay the price ten times. The exertion of Marathon and the loss of my wife unmanned me. I leapt from a cliff.

I fell, and struck, not rocks, but water. And when I surfaced, my body fought for life, and I swam until my feet dragged on the beach. Then I swooned, and when I awoke, I was once again a slave. Again taken by Phoenicians, but this time as an adult. My life was cruel and like to be short, and the irony of the whole thing was that now I soon craved life.

I lived a brutal life under a monster called Dagon, and you'll hear



plenty of him tonight. But he tried to break me, body and soul, and nigh on succeeded. In the end, he crucified me on a mast, and left me to die. But Poseidon saved me – washed me over the side with the mast, and let me live. Set me on the deck of a little Sikel trading ship, where I pulled an oar as a near-slave for a few months. And then I was taken again, by the Phoenicians.

The degradations and the humiliations went on, until one day, in a sea fight, I took a sword and cut my way to freedom. The sword fell at my feet – literally. The gods have a hand in every man's life. Only impious fools believe otherwise.

As a slave, I had developed new friendships. Or rather, new alliances, which, when I was free, ripened into friendship. My new friends were a polyglot rabble – an Etruscan of Roma named Gaius, a couple of Kelts, Daud and Sittonax, a pair of Africans from south of Libya, Doola and Seckla, a Sikel named Demetrius and an Illyrian kinglest-turned-slave called Neoptolymos. We swore an oath to Poseidon to take a ship to Alba and buy tin, and we carried out our oath. As I told you last night, we went to Sicily, and while my friends became small traders on the coast, I worked as a bronzesmith, learning and teaching. I fell in love with Lydia, the bronzesmith's daughter, and betrayed her, and for that betrayal – let's call things by their proper names – I lost confidence in myself, and I lost the favour of the gods, and for years I wandered up and down the seas, until at last we redeemed our oaths, went to Alba for the tin, and came back rich men. I did my best to see Lydia well suited, and I met Pythagoras's daughter and was able to learn something of that great man's mathematics and his philosophy. I met Gelon the tyrant of Syracuse and declined to serve him, and sailed away, and there, on a beach near Taranto in the south of Italia, I found my friend Harpagos and Cimon, son of Miltiades, and others among the friends and allies of my youth. I confess, I had sent a message, hoping that they would come. We cruised north into the Adriatic, because I had promised Neoptolymos that we'd restore him to his throne, and we did, though we got a little blood on it. And then the Athenians and I parted company from my friends of Sicily days – they went back to Massalia to till their fields, and I left them to go back to being Arimnestos of Plataea. Because Cimon said that the Persians were coming. And whatever my failings as a man – and I had and still have many – I am the gods' own tool in the war of the Greeks against the Persians.

For all that I have always counted many Persians among my friends, and the best of men – the most excellent, the most brave, the most loyal. Persians are a race of truth-telling heroes. But they are not Greeks, and when it came to war . . .

We parted company off Illyria, and coasted the western Peloponnesus. But Poseidon was not yet done with me, and a mighty storm blew up off Africa and it fell on us, scattering our little squadron and sending my ship far, far to the south and west, and when the storm blew itself out, we were a dismasted hulk riding the rollers, and there was another damaged ship under our lee. We could see she was a Carthaginian. We fell on that ship and took it, although in a strange, three-sided fight – the rowers were rising against the deck crew of Persians.

It was Artapharnes' own ship, and he was travelling from Tyre to Carthage to arrange for Carthaginian ships to help the Great King to make war on Athens. And I rescued him – I thought him a corpse.

So did his wife, my Briseis, who threw herself into my arms.

Blood dripped from my sword, and I stood with Helen in my arms on a ship I'd just taken by force of arms, and I thought myself the king of the world.

How the gods must have laughed.

## Olympia – 484 BCE

‘Water is best, and gold, like a blazing fire in the night, stands out supreme of all lordly wealth. But if, my heart, you wish to sing of contests, look no further for any star warmer than the sun, shining by day through the lonely sky, and let us not proclaim any contest greater than Olympia.’

Pindar. 476 BCE



## I

Artapharenes stubbornly refused to die.

After an hour, it was plain to any man who'd known as much strife as I that, despite the six deep sword-cuts in his side, he was not mortally wounded. He had a contusion on his head where a pike haft had laid open his scalp, and he'd been hacked at by desperate men, but he was merely unconscious.

Don't imagine I hovered at his side like Hermes attending on Zeus. Despite the sea fight, my ship still needed repair, and we were uncomfortably close to Africa – a strong north wind and we'd have been wrecked. And the coast of Africa was the coast of Libya – Carthage's coast, and all hostile to me and mine. Megakles was between the steering oars. I had Sekla watch the coast – he knew Libya better than any man in my crew. Ka, my new African master bowman, had two men wounded, and he was doctoring them, and Leukas, my Alban oar-master, was with me in the water, patching the two man-lengths of riven wood where the storm had opened *Lydia's* seams along the starboard side.

It was Brasidas – my former Spartan marine – who was left with the complex job of watching the vessel we'd taken. Complicated because, in truth, we hadn't taken her – we'd rescued her. The presence of Briseis, the love of my life, made everything complicated. But the Persians aboard – my three friends, Darius, Cyrus and Arayanam, and Artapherenes himself – complicated things still more. We were not at war with Persia, that summer. And the Persians were clearly an embassy, and embassies were sacred to all the gods. I'm a pious man, even when I'm a fool – I could see the boughs of ivy and laurel in the bow, and I wasn't going to betray my guest oaths and friendship oaths with these Persians, but I was hard put to decide just what to do with them. Or my love.

Had Artapharenes just died . . .

He wasn't going to die. And that being plain, I dived into the cold seawater to help repair my ship and to clear my head, despite a wounded hand and the stares of Briseis' women at my naked body, or perhaps because of them.

Leukas, bless him, had no worries beyond the ship, and he went down under the hull and back up, again and again, shaking his head until, with ten men hauling the sodden remains of the other ship's boat sail, we managed to get at our sprung timbers and bind the sail over it. It didn't stop the leak, but it reduced it.

We still had six oarsmen at the wooden pumps all day and all night.

The Carthaginian ship we'd taken was in even worse shape. The mast had been down when the storm hit, but my guess – all the officers were dead – was that the tackle hadn't been stowed properly and had blown loose in the night, rolling and pitching, driving the oarsmen mad and finally blowing over the side in the darkness, after swamping the ship and tearing a grisly hole in the side. The boat sail spar had smashed half the oars and stove a hole right through the side, and when dawn showed them calmer water and the coast of Africa under their lee, the oarsmen revolted.

That ship was finished. I thought perhaps I could get it on to the beach of Libya, but that was the last place I wanted to go myself. Good sense told me to take my own and row away. But Artapherenes held my guest oath and had given me my life, and I had worn his ring for years.

When we had the hole in our side patched, I rolled aboard and dried myself, and stood in the sun. Thirty feet away, Briseis smiled at me across the water.

Damn her.

I puffed out my chest, no doubt.

Why are men such simple creatures? Eh?

Sekla had the deck. The steering oars were inboard, waiting until there was way on the ship, but Sekla stood between them, the traditional command space, at least on my ships. He leaned forward.

'That's the famous Briseis,' he said. He had the temerity to laugh.

'Yes,' I said.

He shook his head. 'Beautiful,' he said. 'She never took her eyes off you, while you were in the water.' He shrugged.

I was watching Briseis.

He elbowed me. 'Are you the mighty pirate Arimnestos, or some spotty boy?' he asked.

I glared at him. I'd saved him from lovesickness – I thought, *How dare you.*

He laughed in my face.

I had to laugh with him. 'A spotty boy,' I agreed. 'That's what she always does to me.'

Leukas was drying himself on his chiton. The Alban shook his head but remained silent.

Megakles didn't. His broad Italiote accent added emphasis to his comic delivery. 'While we all drool at her, my lord, any Liby-Phoenician in these waters will snap us all up. And we'll all be slaves.'

Sittonax – my lazy Gallish friend – stretched like a cat. 'That is one well-formed woman,' he agreed. 'Not worth dying for, though.' He nodded at Megakles. 'You know he's right.'

'They're an embassy,' I said. 'Even the Carthaginians respect an embassy.'

I gathered that my friends didn't agree. Their intransigence made me angry, and I remember biting my lip and trying to keep my temper. I was thrice tired – awake all night at the helm, fighting a boarding action, and now I'd helped fother the hull – and it was all I could do to stay on my feet, and their teasing got under my skin far too easily.

I stood there, watching my oarsmen pump water out of my damaged hull. I couldn't see us making any of the southern Peloponnesian ports – too far, and too much chance of another spring storm.

Brasidas motioned with his usual economy of effort – a single flick of the hand.

I leaned over the port-side rail. 'What do you need?' I called.

'Nothing,' he said. 'But the woman wants you.'

In any other man's mouth, that might have sounded like ribaldry, but the Spartan was carefully spoken. We don't call them Laconic for nothing.

On any other day, I'd have ordered the oarsmen to use boarding pikes to pull the ships closer. But Briseis was watching, and so, despite fatigue, I seized a chiton and pulled it on, belted it with a corded zone, pulled my sword belt over my head, and leapt – leapt, I say – from one oar bank to the next. I noted as I landed that the other ship was lower in the water.

I managed to jump inboard over the terrified survivors among the

slave oarsmen – what was left after the fight, watched like hawks by my own marines – and I tried not to swagger too much as I went aft to Briseis.

I bowed. She had a scarf over her head like a good matron and the only flesh on display was one ankle and one hand, but I knew her body.

I suppose that Sekla was right. I was a pimply boy, when it came to Briseis.

‘Come,’ she said, and led me aft, to where Cyrus – the best of my friends among the Persians – sat with Artapherenes’ head in his lap.

The satrap’s eyes were open. I knelt by him, and just for a moment, some dreadful fate tempted me to put a dagger in his eye and take the woman for my own. I am a man like other men – I think of awful things, even if I try to do the right ones.

He beckoned me closer.

I leaned over to hear him.

‘Arimnestos,’ he said softly.

‘My lord,’ I said.

‘A mighty name,’ he murmured. ‘Carthage,’ he said, and his eyes closed.

Briseis put a hand on my shoulder, and that contact was like the flash of lightning across the sky that heralds the storm. ‘He is asking you to carry us into Carthage,’ she said.

For once, I looked past her, and my eyes locked with the heavy black eyes of Cyrus, captain of Artapherenes’ guard and his right hand.

I sat back on my heels. ‘Cyrus,’ I said. ‘If – I say if – I take you into Carthage – can you guarantee my safety? I have no love for Carthage. Nor she for me.’

Cyrus scratched his beard – so much the old Cyrus, full of humour and Persian dignity, that he made me feel fifteen years old again. ‘Who can guarantee anything that Phoenicians do?’ he said. ‘They lie like Greeks.’ He grinned. ‘I can’t promise that the Carthaginians will treat you as part of our embassy.’ He shrugged. ‘I can only promise that if you take us there and they turn on you, I’ll die beside you.’

That’s a Persian. And he meant it.

If you have any honour in you, you know when another man is honourable. And when he makes a request – a certain kind of request . . .

Artapherenes had spared my life, and other lives, the night I found



Hipponax dying on the lost battlefield north of Ephesus. I had saved his life, too. Cyrus and I had traded sword-cuts and guest pledges a few times, as well.

And it is not on a sunny day that your faith is pledged. The value of your oaths to the gods is tested when the storm comes. I sat on my heels, and within three heartbeats of Cyrus's affirmation that he'd die by my side if the Carthaginians betrayed the truce, I knew I had to do it.

I rose and sighed. 'Very well. I will tow you to the beach, and see if this ship can be saved. If it cannot, I'll row you around to Carthage. May Poseidon stand by me. May Athena give me good council.'

Cyrus smiled. 'You are a man,' he said.

What's that worth?

All of my friends glowered at me. I stood their displeasure easily enough, and crossed to the stricken Phoenician ship with half of my deck crew and two dozen of my best rowers and Leukas, who was – and is – a better sailor than I'll ever be. I left Megakles with the command. I also took young Hector, my new *pais*. He had been seasick since Croton, and not much use, but he was finally getting his sea legs.

Evening found us wallowing in the light surf, twenty horse-lengths off the coast of Africa. The beach was a ribbon of silver in the light of the new moon, and to say that my rowers were exhausted wouldn't do justice to their state. Remember that most of them were slaves who'd risen against their masters and been beaten.

But no one wants to drown.

Cyrus stood by me. I was between the steering oars, while Leukas led the bailing party and tried to keep the water out of the hull by willpower. Our rowers – tired and desperate – were also pulling a waterlogged hull that weighed three times what it should have.

*Lydia* went in first. I saw Brasidas lead his marines over her stern and jump into the shallow water – in case there was a welcoming party.

Cyrus grunted. 'Your men are very well trained,' he said.

I nodded. 'Piracy is a hard school,' I said.

He frowned.

The oarsmen poured over *Lydia's* sides and up the beach, and the slick black hull was hauled ashore almost as if by the hands of the gods. It was splendid to watch, despite my worries about the ship I

was in. Despite the presence of Briseis just a few feet away – so close that I swear that I could feel the warmth of her body.

Aye.

I tapped the steering oar and took us a few more yards down the beach. I wanted the damaged hulk to land well clear of my beautiful *Lydia*, just in case.

Leukas laid out pulling lines along the decks of the capture, and as soon as *Lydia* was lying on her side, well propped, the oarsmen ran down the beach to us, and it was time. I looked at Briseis, and as my eye met hers, she smiled.

It took long enough to turn the ship end for end that the moon began to peep over the rim of the world. We didn't 'spin', we wallowed, but eventually we were stern first to the beach and the surviving rowers had their cushions reversed.

Cyrus looked at me, eyes very white in the new darkness. 'I think the rowers are considering another rising,' he said.

Cyrus was no fool. Neither was Arayanam, who took his bow from its case and strung it.

There was a curious quality to the rowers' silence.

'Leukas!' I called, and he came back to me.

'Take the helm,' I ordered, and he did.

I ran forward to the space amidships where a good trierarch stands in battle – where his voice carries over the whole sweep of the benches.

'Listen up, oarsmen!' I called. 'When we have this ship on the beach, I will see to it you are fed. This ship won't last three more hours – stay with me and I'll see you ashore and alive. If you try me now – all I can promise is that every one of you will die.'

I looked down into the gloom.

'A lot of these men don't give a shit whether they live or die,' called a man bolder than the rest. His Greek was Ionian.

'I can only speak to the Greeks aboard,' I said. 'But I'll do better for them than the Phoenicians ever did. Or I'll kill them and land the ship anyway.' I stood above them, and I knew from my time toiling under the lash of Dagon how powerful the voice on the command deck could seem.

I walked back along the catwalk. I didn't hurry – I wanted to seem as confident as possible. The truth was that we were a hundred yards from shore and I was in no danger, but I had no idea whether Briseis

could swim and I couldn't imagine that Artapherenes would survive the journey.

I heard some muttering.

Muttering is a good sign, usually.

I took the steering oars from Leukas and he began to give orders in his Keltoi-Greek. 'Pull!' he commanded.

He began to beat time.

Some oars stayed in. But my rowers dug in with a will, and enough of the others pulled that we made way sternwards, and the sternpost kissed the sand with a gentle thump. Immediately, the current and the waves began to push the head in towards the beach – the worst thing that could happen, and something that a helmsman feared on a stormy day on a windswept beach, but not on a nearly dead calm night on a broad belt of sand.

Luckily for me, Sekla and his oarsmen already had the lines that my borrowed deck crew flung them, and they dragged us with more will than the oarsmen pulled.

Leukas yelled, 'Over the side, you whoresons!'

Some went, and some didn't. I couldn't tell whether I was facing mutiny, desertion or utter, desperate exhaustion. So I walked down the catwalk, abandoning the steering oars – I think I pulled them inboard. I started to prick men lightly with a borrowed Persian spear. One man, with a long scar over his forehead, cursed me and crouched like an angry dog on his little bench, but he couldn't even reach me with spit, and when his spirit broke, all the men around him went, too. Men are odd animals – too intelligent, sometimes, for their own good.

Leukas and I started them, and the Persians helped – came and threatened – and we got them over the side and on to the beach. A dozen tried to run and were swatted down like errant children by Brasidas and his marines. The last thing we needed was a pack of runaway slaves giving away our positions.

My three Persians got their lord over the side and carried him between two spears to the fire that Sekla had already lit on the beach, and in an hour we had mutton cooking. Any plan to keep our presence secret was wrecked when a pair of cautious shepherds approached and offered to sell us sheep.

By the time the moon was high in the sky, we had the local headman at our fire, and he knew we were Greeks.

★

I would love to say that I lay with Briseis that night. I desired her – I watched her at the fire the women had, and I sent her a joint of meat after I made the sacrifices to Poseidon and poured libations to all the gods for our safe arrival at land, and she sent me back a cup of sweet wine. But my feelings of the sacred – of what was owed to Artapherenes – kept me from her side. Instead, I introduced my Persian friends – the friends of my earliest youth – to the friends of my recent slavery.

Brasidas, as a Spartiate, took to the Persians immediately. They value most of the same things – indeed, Spartans and Persians have a great deal in common.

But Sekla had no love of the Persians, and they in turn treated him much like a slave – at least in part because the only black men they knew were slaves, I suspect. And the Persians, for their part, were amazed to hear that Megakles was from Gaul – still more amazed that Leukas was from Hyperborea.

‘He looks just like any other man!’ Darius laughed. ‘Well – except for the odd eyes and the dead white skin.’

‘And the size of his nose,’ Aryanam said, but Leukas couldn’t be offended, as it was all said in Persian. Still, they handed wine around to the others, and after an hour, even Sekla was less prickly.

I remember that I looked at the moon – Artemis’s sign – and wondered again at the risk I was running. ‘Cyrus – you are bound to Carthage to get allies there against the Greeks. Am I right?’

Cyrus narrowed his eyes. ‘In effect – yes.’ He shrugged. ‘Really, it is far more complicated than that,’ he continued.

‘Why?’ Brasidas asked. He rarely asked questions. It was fascinating to see how animated the Persians made him.

Cyrus made the Persian hand sign for ‘a little of this, a little of that’, rocking his hand back and forth. ‘It is not that the Great King needs their ships, or their men,’ he said. ‘But there is a rumour at Sardis that Gelon of Syracuse might lead his fleet against the Great King.’ He frowned. ‘You might know more of that than I, eh? Arimnestos?’

I smiled grimly. ‘I might,’ I allowed.

Brasidas laughed when the silence lengthened. ‘Perhaps you could become a Spartan,’ he said.

Cyrus nodded. ‘You don’t wish to tell us what you know?’

I looked around the circle of firelight. The Persians had all taken one side of the fire, at least in part so that they could tend to their lord, who lay close to the fire, wrapped in three cloaks. On my side

of the fire were Sekla and Brasidas – Ka stood alone by the wine, almost asleep, and Leukas was already gone, wrapped in his chiton. Megakles sat quietly, wrapping rope-ends in linen, and showing Hector – patiently – how to do it.

‘Are we to have a war, then?’ I asked. ‘I have been gone from the world of Medes and Greeks for five years.’

Cyrus looked away, and Arayanam frowned, and Darius met my eye and smiled. ‘Aye, little brother, it’s war,’ he said. ‘And I’ll guess you’ve been at this Syracuse about which we hear so much these days.’

I nodded. Persians are great ones for telling the truth, and truth-telling can be habit-forming. Yet even then, I was calculating some lies. I’m a Greek.

‘I was a slave, not a trierarch,’ I said. ‘And pardon me, brothers, but I think that I have captured you, and not the other way around. It is my hospitality you enjoy here, and in this situation I may choose not to answer every question.’

Cyrus nodded. ‘I, too, may decline to answer.’

I bowed slightly, in the Persian way. ‘Elder brother, I respect your right to be silent. But I beg you to see this from my point of view – I am a Greek. I fought Datis at Marathon.’

All three of the Persians laughed. ‘Ah, Datis,’ they said.

We all knew Datis as an ambitious and somewhat power-mad man.

‘I thought Marathon was the end of the Great King’s ambitions in Greece,’ I said.

‘Ambitions!’ Cyrus said, truly stung, I think. ‘My lord is the rightful ruler of all that is under heaven, and the resistance of a few petty states of pirates and terrorists on the fringes of the world will scarcely constitute the *end of ambition*. Athens encourages the Ionian rebels. Athenian ships prey on our shipping and disrupt our trade. Athenian soldiers burned the temple of Cybele in Sardis. Even last year, Athenians aided rebels against the Great King’s authority in Aegypt. Greek mercenaries are serving against the Great King at Babylon! It is not my lord’s ambition, but the foolish and militant posturing of the Greeks! A culture of hate and war, where no man respects his neighbour! Much less a lawful ruler!’

Brasidas chuckled. ‘In Sparta, we say many of the same things about Athens,’ he said.

Cyrus wasn’t done. ‘Sparta! A nest of godless vipers who executed

one of the king's sacred messengers!' He leaned in to the fire. 'When I was a boy, no one in Persia had ever heard of these two cities – Athens and Sparta. But now the Great King knows both of these names, and he will erase them as if they had never been.'

I shook my head. 'Cyrus – Cyrus. You are letting unaccustomed anger cloud your thoughts. The Great King lacks the reach to take Athens – or Sparta. You have no idea how big the world is.'

I had been outside the pillars of Herakles. I had been to Alba in the Western Ocean, and my idea of the size of the world was profoundly affected. The world was *immense*.

Cyrus shrugged. 'In truth, the intransigence of Athens makes me angry, which is foolish.' He frowned, looked away, and smiled. 'And a poor return on your hospitality. But yes – the world is wide, and we should be conquering it together – Greeks and Persians side by side – not squandering our strength on each other.'

I poured a libation to the King of the Gods, Zeus. 'Cyrus – it pains me to say this, but if we stand at the edge of a great war of Greeks and Medes, perhaps it is not the wisest course for me to take you to Carthage.'

Darius sighed. 'And yet we are an embassy, and embassies are sacred to all the gods,' he said.

Brasidas nodded. 'So they are. I come from a family of heralds – I recognise the sign of the god upon you. And surely – leaving aside the differences in our opinions – surely this war is not so imminent?'

Darius looked at Cyrus. Arayanam simply drank another cup of wine, as was his wont. He seldom spoke, unless he had something vital to say, and might have been welcomed in any Lacedaemonian mess group.

Cyrus shrugged. 'The Great King has ordered a canal dug across the isthmus of Mount Athos,' he said. 'He gathers a fleet. Now that the revolt in Aegypt is broken, Athens will not take so long.'

'How long?' I asked.

'Two years?' he said. 'A year to defeat Babylon, anyway. See, I am honest.'

I laughed, my mood restored. 'Two years?' I said. 'By Poseidon, Cyrus, I imagined you were speaking of weeks or months. Two years? Pardon me, but in two years storms may wreck a fleet, the Great King may die – a year of famine might cripple your army, or the will of the gods might make itself manifest in a hundred ways.'

Cyrus spread his hands. 'Perhaps. But Athens can count its days.'

He looked at me. 'What do you care? You are not an Athenian or a Spartan. You could be one of us. Your former master, Archilogos, is one of the Great King's most trusted officers. You could be the same, or even greater.'

I frowned. 'Cyrus, my elder brother,' I said. 'I no longer know what I want from life.' I looked across the fire to the women's fire, but Briseis' slim, deep-breasted figure was gone. 'But I know that service to the Great King is *not* what I want. And my city is Athens' closest friend.'

Cyrus shrugged. 'Athens is doomed,' he said.

In the morning, we bought every scrap of wood that the Berbers could bring us – herdsmen and villagers from a fishing port a few stades farther west. In the end, after two days attempting to effect repairs with too little wood, I gave up on the Phoenician ship and broke it up. It seemed like a defeat, and a waste, but there simply wasn't enough good wood to repair the two great gashes in its side. And then there were the rowers. They were mutinous, and the more I fed them, and the more they recovered their strength, the more mutinous I found them. So after two days, I ordered the Phoenician broken up, and her good timbers were immediately pressed into the repairs of my lovely *Lydia*. With the worked pine and cedar of the other ship, we had our own repaired in a day, and we had enough pitch in our own ballast to caulk her tight.

My rowers were all free men, and professionals – a mixture of the very best of all the fishermen, herdsmen and freed slave rowers I'd had for the last few years. Every man of them had arms, and I lined them up on the soft sand and formed them four deep, like a small phalanx, with my marines on the right and my archers on the left, and I took them to the other rowers before they could consider flight or resistance. We had weapons and training and numbers. They had nothing but sullen ferocity.

Men who are ill used become evil men themselves. Ill use is like a disease that robs men of their worth and leaves them broken, empty vessels capable of filling with ire and hate and inflicting only harm. They stood like a sullen pack, and I eyed them with something like loathing.

The fact is, I couldn't take them, and I couldn't leave them behind. If I left them on the beach, they'd rape and murder among the local Berbers until one of the lords raised an army and massacred them.

And even though these were not Sekla's people, they were close enough that I couldn't inflict so much suffering on them.

I'm a soft-hearted pirate.

If I took them, I'd be selling them as slaves in Carthage, and I had *been* a slave rower in Carthage. Carthage, unlike Persia, is truly evil. She lives on the backs of her slaves. And orders parents to kill their children.

Bah. You can smell their children roasting on their foul altars when you land a ship in the harbour. Think of that, and tell me that Carthage is a state like the others.

The answer was obvious – to massacre them myself. At thirty, I might not have hesitated, but I was older, and I had finally begun to appreciate the wisdom of Apollo and practise mercy.

So I looked at the sullen men as they cringed at the edge of the hard sand.

I made a sign to Brasidas. 'I am going to let the gods decide which of them lives and which dies,' I said. 'Watch me – but not too closely.'

The Spartan nodded. He wore a small smile.

Ka put an arrow to his Persian bow.

'All the Greeks, form on the right,' I called out to them.

'Phoenicians!' I called, but there were none.

'Aegyptians!' I called, and there were a few, and a pair of Jews, and a single Babylonian and a dozen Keltoi and two Illyrians. I divided them by nation, and I moved among them, talking to those who could, or would, talk.

And as I expected, as I walked among the Greeks, further dividing them into Ionians and Dorians, the angry dog – that's how I thought of him, the man with the scar on his forehead – came at me. I saw him early, moving among his friends, if such a man has friends, and I didn't let him know I had seen him. But I never quite gave him my back.

He had a knife. And some idea how to use it. And his friends – or his followers or his flunkies or what have you – seized stones and clubs they'd made themselves and came at me. Most of them were Greeks, I'm saddened to say.

There were four of them close enough to me to do me immediate harm. But the youngest Greek, who was closest to me, gave them away with an odd noise – the angry dog gave a great shout, and the boy struck me with an ineffectual blow and cringed, rather than, say, grappling my arms, or legs.



I drew my long xiphos from its scabbard and killed the boy on the draw, the rising blade opening his naked belly and the edge of the upper leaf cutting through the bone of his chin and spraying teeth as it exited his face. Then I pivoted slightly on my right foot and cut down with the other edge, and the next man died, too.

Ka shot one who was at my back.

The fourth man stumbled back, but the gods had played their role, and I killed him with a cut across his eyes and a merciful thrust.

Brasidas didn't fence with the angry dog, either, but put a spear in his throat with brutal economy.

'Kill only those who are armed, or resist!' I shouted.

The two Jews and the Babylonian, who all seemed to know each other, lay flat. The Keltoi gathered in a huddle.

I confess that some innocent men probably died on our spears, and perhaps some who were merely foolish, but in a minute I was rid of the most vicious.

While their blood was still soaking into the sand, I rounded up the rest, had them searched, and called them forth by nation.

'Are any of you worth a ransom?' I asked. Several of the Greeks claimed that they were. I sent them to Brasidas. Trust a Spartan to be able to spot an aristocrat.

The two Jews and the Babylonian all claimed to be worth ransom. And many other men had stories – some scarcely believable, some patent lies, and a few truly horrible.

I spent an hour listening, and then I had them distributed among my own rowers. They'd been bled of their most dangerous men, twice – there were fewer than forty of them left, and I was almost twenty rowers short. They brought me to full complement. In fact, with Briseis and her women, with Artapherenes and his soldiers and his four servants, we were as crowded as a trireme can possibly be, but on the positive side, with twenty extra rowers, I had reliefs, and because my *Lydia* was a hemiola and not a true trireme, I had the deck space to ship them all – aye, and sleep at sea if required. So we coasted to a small inlet and took on water, and then we started west, into the afternoon sun, for Carthage.

Carthage, on whom I had made war for years.

Dagon's home.

The masters of the tin trade.

Laugh if you like. Sometimes, when you make a decision, you know it is right before you feel the consequence.