

PEOPLE OF THE SEA, by Jack Dempsey
EXCERPT 1---New Resolve to Fight for New Life

1

--Are you gone mad? Burn Knossos Labyrinth?
Your own family's house!

--Criminal, said another. --Talking slaughter, like
some king. Then what?

--Oh, Sweet Wine didn't mean those things, said
the gray goat-bearded priest who was kneeling over me,
flat on my back like an X in a pile of bed-skins, my head a
mountain coming out of mist. It was Makris, gazing down
with a new-moon smile

--Please, you two, he said. --The man was struck by
lightning, and good as dead three days. Let a brother get
his breath!

Makris pulled the old hides off my bones and
worked his hands like a midwife's up and down. Revived
out of nowhere, mountain air ran along my flesh a breath
of wings. And that first full drink of it, cold as black water
from a spring, swirled through me. It was an ecstasy of
waking up, and underneath all being, an undulating
sorrow that time would not change

--Go on now, men, cry the town that Deucalion
lives. We dance, and festival, while the new year sun
stands still. Find the women, and his sons!

The two incensed cousin-townsmen grunted, and turned for the dolmen door. One thumped his boot on the threshold, and spoke without looking back

--Hey, priest. Ask this unconquered son why as soon as he swore blood, a Griffin's tongue of lightning blew him off the sanctuary. Not with our sons!

--Out!

Where? Karfi: a colossal gray crag-faced spike of granite rising straight up from the shoulders of a mountain, hammered like a nail in the heart of our island Mother Kriti. Whoever sailed the sea miles below, or stole up into this country, Karfi saw them first. Old times of our mothers and fathers, Karfi was a high place of dance, of feast and healing, between the stars and the horned mountain caves of our families' sleep. Now in a world torn off its wheel, The Nail was a refuge that only self-exiles would choose. A hostile crag, as far as possible from homes we could not let go

The air was medicine, sage, thyme, artemisia, and my body felt the mountain hold me up to the circles of the sky. But the snug cypress-beams over our two heads roofed a house that was one room and one window more than a boulder goat-pen. Every wall a common wall in this honeycomb of lanes and shelters, huddled down out of wind and sight behind The Nail's northern cliffs

There was sting-fire up and down my arms out of deep red slashes I had cut, for blood alone awakened family sleeping in the mountain, that they speak. But the wounds were clean and crusted, with a smell of Makris'

diktamos poultice. Now he raised me up to ladle water, icy and mineral-sweet

--Come to your house, Sweet Wine, Dionysos, true of speech, he chanted gently out of funerary song. --What do you remember, Deucalion?

I remembered that remembering made me want to die. Near thirty years ago, out of the ruins of my own and my family's mistakes, turning my back on the figurehead throne of conquered Knossos and dragging my first son up this break-neck mountain, to keep him from the mainland's Achaian squanderers at arms. An island, you see, a whole exquisite island one day's sail from our north shore, had blown itself into the sky, and they were making the most of our wrecked land. Too late we had found ourselves only prey in mainland eyes. Our every answer played into their hands, and the woman who walked the world as the soul of us lost her life by our confoundment

The wind and cold we found up here, the work for every morsel of comfort---and the harvest, for a sand-blasted wine god, a king of things other than war? An outlaw inheritance for two sons and a girl. Futility, while a violent handful of red-beards and blue-eyes kept on bleeding the ancient household

Outside a rebel yell broke the morning twilight: *Hai-ee! Hai-ee!* And women's voices trilled up out of the town, *O-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo*

In my left hand, the hem of Makris' deerskin wrap, with a tiny stitched-in row of running spirals. The back of my skull still felt a clout of thunder, and limbs and looks

moved slow, as if enormous. Things buzzed, like a mountain alive with summer bees. And here we were again, through annihilating fire

--Better say what *you* remember, brother

--Ho! Makris laughed with a wag of his chin-
bristles. --Why, it was everything to look for in a Moon
Bull, a Minotavros---and so say all three camps of cousins
up here, who love you. May I? Son of Pasiphae Who
Shines For All, and of the Minos, Keepers of Days in The
House of the Double Axe, Labrys. Blood and rightful
husband of Ariadne, Lady of Knossos Labyrinth, heiress of
the ancient queens, and no man and woman ever will be
closer. But now---argh. The last son of Labrys Clan. The
last to hold the Great Year throne in family honor. And he
left it so

--Makris, what happened?

--It was you, grown so black and quiet everywhere,
down with the men guarding trail, or pruning trees, or
ripping out wood for somebody's broken loom. I saw you,
listening, looking, that restless rolling shoulder. And then,
talking straight out with people, here at a table, there at the
spring, or a grave. Saying plain what I see, too, in their
faces---that it's no life to hand on to children. We are dying
on the vine up here, the goodness of our seed. We, a pack
of highland outlaws---there's a backwards bone to choke
on. Well, *I* knew, Makris laughed, --that you were the
fellow to turn things, Knossos Labyrinth spectacle man.
You, to pull the nail out of people's smiles

--Yes, yes. Five days ago. It was the dying of the moon just ahead of winter solstice. You climbed up onto the sanctuary roof. From there on the edge of this world you called out the mountain. People came in from hunting, climbed their ways over rocks from the other houses---we crammed the lanes and roofs to see you up there on The Nail's last point. I remember, you began to move, and I was thinking you were like old Keret, from the songs sailors fetched out of Ugarit. A well-born man, a loving man, homesick for his house, for his family, his mate. Not a straggler up here who couldn't feel that, with elders' graves and a burned-out farm behind them

--Remember what you said? I felt the breath go through my body, Makris sighed, --and every other body in the press. You said you climbed up there to die with the sun and moon. You were going into the dark with them, and coming out alive, or you were going to jump---but for you, The Nail was finished. You slashed your arms till I winced, and the altar-stone took your blood and word. Keeper of Days, that was a Minos speaking

--Then, wonders, that's all! I know you saw your sons, and daughter, and how many people kept vigil for you up there. Prayers, torches, pipes came out, a systrum, a daouli-drum, the githa-bag wailing to make your nape stand up. On you went, and no moon in the morning sky. Rippling off old skin like winter Snake, ramping along that edge a spring-crazy Bull. You belly-roared like summer's Lioness, with young to feed

--But oh Sweet Wine, you made us wait for the shiver of death that Griffin brings. Second night with no moon, and still the arms up and out at stretch, all runs of blood. Then, you'd done it. Down over Dikte mountain came a thunderhead, so big and louring-black that it made people hide bunched together in their houses, and the dogs in too. When the rain cracked open out of that with thunder, you were still up there, turning and howling like the world. Well, you climbed down inside the sanctuary, and came back out with Labrys---the last big bronze double axe we had, with the doubled blades and spirals

--Ho! said Makris. --Lightning snapping and booming around us in the rain. Back you climbed up onto the sanctuary roof. The last altar of the world, it looked, because it is. And you turned in place and doubled back to face us. You lifted the monster both hands high, and your face, Deucalion, the eyes---I don't want to see that again, till Griffin take me home to Snake. The waters pouring off you. You bellowed out, *Knossos Labyrinth will burn!* And, *Crack!* That bolt was so close and blinding-blue I see it now. *Crack!* Down you went a dead man, right through your knees, and Labrys in blasted pieces. Mercy! I never will know why you didn't pitch back off the mountain

Makris breathed out, and rested, brooding still over answers to the offering. I saw the last sign of our family's understandings, Labrys, broken by the hand of light and shadow that had forged it. How had I not understood the grief and clamor of our elders' graves? It was criminal to leave a thing once holy unbroken, unburned, unburied. So

then---the end, and our way out, lay where we were born. House of the Double Axe in funeral flames. A night of the Griffin, lit by the last Minotavros

Suns and moons had endings. We had been clinging to a corpse. Now, the baffled man inside was finished. Watch new metal flowing from a forge, you see the slag drop off, and feel the hot pure incandescent blood of Earth. It cools, and hardens: that was what I found inside. Morning. Ferocious, loving---real again

--Well, your good sons helped us carry you in, Makris smiled. --And here we are. Back from the other world, and come to your house. Home, Deucalion

--Home. Be careful, man who just called the dead back, *true of speech*

--Oh, you don't want to kill anybody! Makris cajoled, grooming back my father's thick black hair as I managed to stand up. With no answer, he loosed his highland whistle toward the door, and ducking in under the lintel came a troop of smiling cousins, kinsmen who had kept his vigil for an end or a beginning

A good eight or nine mountain-people of the town arrayed themselves to stand gazing in a group, some with a flute, a drum or censer in their hands. All together they lifted their palms up and out to me in a sunny welcome's blessing, little ones in black and white wool wraps, hard prime men and women in caps of goat, and the haggard buckskin elders. I doubled this, grateful, but their faces were fear behind Karfi smiles. Now, three of the women with bright eyes piously lifted their wraps to show their

breasts, singing out sweetly: *Seam, undo yourself!*
Mollifying voices, luring men back into the world of hope
and shipwreck

--See? Makris said. --Home, and this is your family.
Some of them. Come now Deucalion, you know every face.
Here's Pereko, and Cissia the potter, and Donos and Arge.
Look, young Oinops brought us a rabbit

--Otus, I told them. --Otus climbed out of those
skins. *He Pushes Back.* Family, are we finished weeping on
this stone? See this cup I make with my hand. The Sweet
Wine is turned. I pour it out. Earth Mother, turn it again

They knew me not a man to call for war. To live on
The Nail was to know our enemies' hope, that we should
live according to it, for a weakling's benefit

--Say no more, Makris cautioned. --We know, thirty
years and your family's house still bleeds in the mainland
paw. I mean, why make cousins nervous. You like it here.
We see you happy at the chores. Festival is medicine

Deft fellow, Makris: stall, deflect, show the crazy
man normal things

--You saw me taken, soul and body. Family, what
we grieve is gone the same. And we cannot leave the great
house of our families, the core of our memory as she is.
Come spring, I am going to burn Knossos Labyrinth. Or,
die where I was born. I will kill every cheese-counting
Achaian squatter with a knife in the way of that pyre, and
take the sunrise after

--Now, this is true: good ships are sleeping winter
in the sheds along Amnisos shore. Five moons from now,

we can make them ours and sail The Great Green. The wind can tell us where to go, but no more this. I will push back, against squanderers who imagine that what they have done here *works*

--Stop! said Makris with a stamp. --There are families up here mainland blood. They won't kill their kind! Why, Melas is your brother-in-law

--Yes he is. Melas is Achaian family. But say it, this once: our end was their beginning. They had no word for ocean, coming here. The best of our houses rent themselves making them at home, and we lost ours

--Say it! What made Melas family? He turned his back on kinsmen still at pillage. But we cannot just walk away. You do not hear *war* from me. But where stealing begins, family ends. Griffin tells me, Karfi is not enough

In the silence a thump of mountain wind touched the house, and people started to ease themselves back outside, some with the half-smiling wink of any morning, and some with nervous formal hails of old time, fist-to-brow. Bluntly cordial, scared: Cissia, with the black-haired almond-eyes touch of Egypt, Oinops my rugged nephew with the north islands' twinkling smile. In each and all, the gardens of Crete had mixed proud Aegean shoulders, the locks and olive-bronze skins of Canaan, Libya and Asia. Off they went to put it off, in little joys of morning

--I ask not a man of you along. But where to, cousins?hovels, not home. Are we not sick of how an island blew into the sky, and it rained white bulls?

--That's alright! See you at celebrations! Makris called after them. --Same old fellow, don't worry. He loves us all three houses! The women are coming!

But Makris stopped short, with an uncertain clutch of his amber-bead necklace. Makris, our dear gray he-goat out of Malia, grieving his home since it burned: pretending we did not see him bent and wasting, too, before our eyes

Anybody, I tried after them. *A way to start again, with any honor*. The one answer was a young girl's voice

--Keeper of Days, keep us in the circles of the sun!

I might have said, *No more, no less*--but running in past them through the door came my girl-child, Little Zoe. She vaulted up into my arms

--Papou! --Sweet girl! --There, that's the medicine!

Zoe, eight, happy, gangly and lithe, with strong hair and eyes dark brown as ripe carob. The monkey clung to me laughing and the sound and feel of her drove deep a sword of gratitude. We spun, kissed, and bumped the table: the ache of life came back

The greased-skin window, the portal-stone were glowing new-moon orange. New sun and moon, bearing days and crimes unpurged back into the world. A man can understand that joy alone kills the killers, and yet go on

For you see, Knossos fell, and Ariadne died, and then the first order of Achaian business was to murder Crete's elders in their houses of the mountain horns. Me they spared as a useful effeminate idol of old blood, and things in reach I twisted back Crete's way, while they took down the land. In five years or so, my son Prax was born.

Four years more and I, twenty-nine, walked out with him, his mother of her own will keeping to the house; and Prax was ten on the mountain when Podargos came into the world, Bright Foot my second son. Then, last spring, Little Zoe straggled up these trails like the rest of us. People called her my daughter because one day, I chanced to see her first. She was singing out alone to Earth and sky, moving one foot at a time toward a sure-death fall. When I showed myself, she turned to me a seven-year-old face with the nose cut off. In its place was a grisly blue-black failure of healing, an open crime

Achaians had ruled the house fifteen years when Zoe was born. Since the end of easy plunder, they had little to show except land that needed toil. But the spider who replaced me on the throne---an old baron of Mykenai's, styled *Koreter*, the man---had bribes of loyalty to pay. He sent his clanking bronze Companions out into villages, where orchards and fields and kine still showed the shocks of our catastrophe. As part of their new-style ceremonies to engender fruitfulness, they snatched up the two-year-old Zoe and cut her nose off. So that her life, each day, would rub her town-fellows' long Cretan noses in the dirt. *You can make this place produce for us, or watch it burn*

Zoe was going to jump, the day I chanced on her. She had come alive as pain in the faces of most home-people. Her blink of years convinced her it was best she be forgotten. I tried what I had, some foolish drinking-rail clowning along my end of the precipice, holding her eyes. With a startling honk, she said *That was stupid*, backed up,

and asked what I had to eat

In Little Zoe's shadow we learned to want the sun again. It was she pulling out the nail: if we could make her love her life again, we could love ours. We were mistaken to oblige our guests and disappear. So, there in the house and more times, I should have heeded her. Zoe snatched up my tiny silver Labrys hung with rawhide

--Look, Papou! she cried with a sprig of ivy up to see: between its jagged leaves, one twice-born shoot sharp green. Tongue in her teeth, her fingers fixed it on. --I have a *dance* today. The *sun* is back. Come see, Papou?
