

**PEOPLE OF THE SEA, by Jack Dempsey**  
**EXCERPT 3---No Choice But Another New Life**

...My son Podargos had all a man could want in Sicily. He and Kopi raised four children, Nyasha bore Shekelesh sons to reckon with, and they kept Bright Foot clear of Sicily's worsening feud. My son Deucalion was a man to name every bird in our orchards. Zoe grew to a woman with a gift like Kia's, and all but lived at Paphos' seashell-oracle. She played with people till their own sense served them, and it grew the oracle's name. *Should I sail this year?* a trader would ask her. *Will you feel more lucky next?* Zoe also bore a girl, Kaliopi, with her dancing-feet. I watched their lives ripen through fine evenings under the great trees of our yard. Grandfather now, I did begin to dote in the sun. Old Crete, even The Nail, grew sweeter: this should have been an old man's nap. Instead, I was still fit for voyages

Travel kept me some from Pyrrha, but none of the trouble touched her. In Pyrrha we lived past measure: Zakkala was home, music, dawns and evenings jasmine-scented, strong harvests, children, swimming with them in waters like liquid sky. She and I never got enough of holding each other, naked, kissing: our feet still rubbed together, making their own love every time the first

And then I was kneeling beside her last bed. Pyrrha told everybody else to leave the room: they went out

smirking-sure that, now, for her, daemon-man would work his gift, and it would out. I had nothing: words

*You made my heart big as the mountains  
not even mountains could love you more*

I watched Pyrrha traveling, returning from visions that soothed her pain. This the woman who forged two trades with Sicily and Libu, now crosslegged upright in her bed, like some tiny ancient seed a child of herself. She lifted her hands toward the room's light, and her fingers were a clumsy girl's: she was in her mother's Cretan kitchen, tongue at her mouth's corner, one eye shut, learning thread and needle. Her hands rose up together again and again, threading the eyelet like a gesture of solemn praise: it tore down my bitterness till I was left only shattered, and in awe. The other world had opened in the room. The thread in her hands was real and infinitely long, and the line of grandmothers teaching: I saw worlds vanish in her passing, and their gestures and praise untouched by it. Pyrrha slept, and then the eyes in which I lived came back, lucid, radiant

--I dreamed, she smiled, --our first day together, on the mountain. And I wake to my beloved, and the world we made together of what we said

--Pyrrha! Pyrrha!

--No, no. Listen, she said. --These years of talk, I arranged to help you. Sweet Wine, Zakkala is our family's. But--you had better leave. Make yourself their agent on

the sea. Don't wait till someone wants to see if you can die. Strange man, crazy man! Sweet Wine, take your name back. That is all we can hope, is it not, to bear with everything, and keep our honey?

--Go back to Kemet. Take my name to Lady Tiye, who rules with Pharaoh. So much land, they ran the country till he grew; and Tiye wants island things. My winter snake, be brave, whatever keeps your summer rising! Husband, brush my hair, before the women come

I gnashed my teeth not asking to die with her. If I did eat poison, or drown, would I be a walking corpse? She looked down generations: the choice was live for that, or ashes now. I swore my Pyrrha all. She closed her peaceful eyes. I kissed her mottling hands, and when her breathing ended, sat her up, and brushed her hair. When I pushed the room's shutters open, the midday trees were still as if the last bird had died. Below, Paphos faces stared up from her yard. The wine of my blood turned fiery: in that window I took my old name again. People turned their backs

--Not even for her! --Curse your man-selfish secrets! --Why don't you leave, like your kinsman that other murderer?

I went into our orchards and hills along the sea, and crushed the tears from my heart. When it tore me inside-out, I was back in the paradisaical night with Mother Zoe under Dikte, and we laughed that I had found her right three ways. I refused to see Pyrrha's grave: it was a lie. And then, I never worked so cold and sure at things

whose end or reason, I knew not

Zakkala had standing to fetch good crews. Ramose had taught us to turn ships over when rot crept under the rowers' benches; so by trade and silver, three new boats were mine-outright, fat-belly galleys with more ways to work the sea's whims. The captains liked what Ramose taught me about who commanded them, and the rest looked like ordinary business. So once again I was leaving a valley we had built, with horns and spirals in the sun. *I was out?* What trial was this? What stupid dreams repeating in my life! I never forgot presents-home on top of any cargo, just for spite

Pyrrha's palm tree now stood with the tallest in Ugarit. In Tyre a new head-family was squeezing the land-locked sisters of her trades. Byblos went on as if there were no yesterday: Gaza too, with her Sutu desert-music and island flash. My eye began to like that little Ascalon, unwallied against the sea, the white cluster of its royal young buildings and the spread of the town like only the best of Ugarit. Podargos' sons took Shekelesh business there, and Shardana amber. Even shops' quarters they planted with green, as if to please the passerby

We coasted to Pelusium, and Pyrrha's name produced a pilot up the channels of The Nile. The green shores narrowed, turned, offered several turns, narrowed again, pretty village girls waving from the old shaduf: blue and earth-brown the waters, the wind at our backs combing vast fields of wheat and barley. Put aside snakes and crocodiles, I never took to these steamy flatland

warrens of the river. Dead-end marsh and quicksand warning you not to lose your way

Our pilot concealed his landmarks: I began some. And as the river's inland branches joined and we started to row through city after city, I found my spirit lowering its shield. I was alone with business crew. There was nothing for it but to learn: a casual might was staggering my eyes. Walls and roofs of temples high as country hills stood above the walkways of the guard, with pennants ranked along the roofs on poles twice as tall as ships' masts: where the gates stood open we glimpsed white limestone streets straight and broad, plazas lined with obelisks and gargantuan seated kings. A double-row of seated scowling lions flanked a boulevard of stone that looked as if it walked to the horizon

Sandstone, granite block within block of painted walls, giant forests of pillars, temple-facings glowing in shadow or colors ablaze with the sun; and along their foundations, no end to multitudes streaming every way on errands of the realm, priests, farmers, herdsmen, officers, work-gangs, clutches of families, carrying-chairs. We passed five cities bigger than Ugarit before the river's channels joined to one; and for miles between such places, the fields that fed them stretched out of sight

Kemeti called everybody children, and we never had liked our island-share of it. At Giza, though, at Memphis, and every mile up that river, we saw how they could say it. Their merest travelers' rest-house would have graced an island chief. In a few days we beached at

Akhmim, on the eastern bank before the great turn into Thebes: Akhmim was Tiye's family's hometown, and here the house of her mother. Tuya, by name, came out her doors between two peacock-painted columns, and stood there a kindly-smiling, spider-thin matron in a black wig and red-sashed gown, flowing like water down her bones

--Ahh, the Alashiya! Tuya said. I bowed and proffered a massive gaudy fruit bowl cranked out in Crete: her toothy frank smile made me sorry to present such mock. What gave Tuya pause was Pyrrha. --She was a flower, Tuya said. --We were brilliant together. And you must be her son? What does your name mean? Won't you come in, captains and all of you?

Deucalion, New Wine Sailor kept his mouth shut except for sweet tilapia-fish, eaten as they did with right thumb and two fingers. Tuya's grandsons in short red-sashed gowns joined the table, the elder maybe twelve with fine black eyes and a glossy mane, Tutmose: the little one Amenophis, with sunburn peeling his shaved head, was pudgy and interruptive. Tutmose spoke enough island to try a joke that shook the table: Amenophis alone didn't catch it, Tuya scolded him, and he mocked his steady brother in reply. Both of them I gifted with obsidian razors, and met the next Pharaohs in their eyes

Tuya regretted that trade had to wait: this was second month of flood season, the family was due up-river in Thebes, and she asked us to sail behind her barge. A festival founded by Hatshepsut was on, so popular that it ran longer every year: eleven days in honor of Opet,

another face of Isis, mother of Green One. The rites kept  
Pharaoh young

--She's a big fat hippo with a lion-lady's head, and  
a crocodile down her back! Amenophis laughed. --Blap!  
She farts up bubbles in mud, like a priest

--Her powers helped your mother to bring you  
backwards into this world, said Tuya gravely. --Mind,  
because Opet likes big bites out of vulgar boys. Now,  
Deucalion. Comfortable in Thebes, I shall introduce you to  
Anen, my brother-in-law, chancellor of our lands to the  
north at the river's mouth. He will take you to Khaemhet,  
who manages grain for the throne. Then I am sure, with  
your mother's charm, Tuya smiled, --you will return here,  
things in hand, and we can proceed. Your cups,  
gentlemen, more of this wonderful wine. I taste your  
limestone earth and herbs. To the house of Lady Tiye. And  
your house? she invited

In Egypt you felt like young dust

--Zakkala. Thank you. Thank you, I said

And then, Thebes, like the mother of cities seen  
before; and within it on the western bank, Malkata, palace  
of Tiye and her Pharaoh. He had raised already a  
stupendous temple in the place where The Green One's  
mother had rested after labor: I learned he was a king to  
build on wisdom of his women, in the faces of his priests.  
Their pride lay with princes of old who had captured  
Thebes and made Amon-Re god of gods, forgetting the  
mud: this Pharaoh had himself blazoned as a vessel of Isis,  
shaped by Her hands on Her wheel. I stopped trying to

count the people walking and singing in the main procession, behind golden well-dressed statues of Amun-Re, Goddess Mut, their strapping son Khonsu. Pharaoh himself led chariots twelve-abreast down a vast open avenue, westward toward the river; then he and his family boarded barges, and from the halls of Karnak the people's march trailed his voyage south, to Luxor sanctuary. Thousands of people that day, and each with an offering to follow their king's: baskets of lotus for the priests' hands, fat cones of joss and jasmine, wine-jugs lashed to flowery oxen, braces of duck and striped gazelle. I gave our crew little gifts to be seen, but none of us saw inside these places. No one did except for the wealthiest, and clergy. If the painted elders glowed from the strength of Pharaoh's prayer, people took rub of youth and good moods from them; that Opet had given him suck, that no one thirst nor hunger forever

Amenophis strode back out of Luxor's towering gate, and gave his golden mace a randy shaking for his multitudes. I was with Khaemhet by way of the chancellor. The man beamed bright as his hard-won breastplate enjoying the cheer, his head like a raisin with gold-drop earrings and gappy teeth

--Green One shines, Khaemhet said. --Your ships are timely to buy grain

--Dew of your land, I smiled, and at the words, somebody jostled into me: a servant-girl not twenty with a chaplet of greens in her black curls, melting cat's eyes like green stones, and her gown a diaphanous festival-dress of



island weave, likely borrowed, exquisitely too small

Nofret, her name: we were wanted back for Malkata's midday feast, and she clung to little Amenophis' wrist. --You can play with Nefertiti anytime! Forgive me, sirs, he has no respect like his brother

--Piss of the land! said Amenophis skyward

Malkata's tables were spread below Tiye's and Pharaoh's in a hall of gilded stone three times the yard at Zakkala. Pillars the girth of its trees sang back music, echoed our clatter: with each course a painted man or woman brought a fresh fingerbowl of lemon-water. This palace housed three hundred lesser wives. Gangs of fellahin were digging an entire lake off the river for the house. If Kemet ever turned all its strength to war, the world had better stay home

We ranked no audience, but Lady Tiye met us in her gardens. In its great pool, hatchling-crocodiles lunged among the lotus, rippling its mirror of the sky. The country loved Tiye's round brown eyes, her skill with festival and her scowl that froze little Pharaohs. She chose me a Nubian orchid, then sat and took my hands with ready terms. Where I looked for dismissal, this great lady reached out for Labrys round my neck, regretting old-time amity with the islands. Equally vague, I mourned the loss of bonds by which bad things happened

--I always liked island diplomats, Lady Tiye smiled, pleasant memories sparkling in her eyes. --Enjoy your stay, New Wine Sailor. Your name will be welcome in my ports. Be assured, my husband makes more than grain

grow. Bring us the islands, and reap ten-fold

The smile she left me with foretold the night, because Nofret climbed into my bed, a girl full of pillow-talk charmingly sure of her own great house someday. Next I knew back at Tuya's, I was hearing the virtues of a marriage. This was more than I had hoped; a small inconspicuous niche that worked with what was. Now I just had to stay ahead of my problem in people's eyes....

\*\*\*