

PEOPLE OF THE SEA, by Jack Dempsey
EXCERPT 4---Facing New Complexities in Canaan

7

Unbelievable. Utterly. A man as old and young as his tribe's ninth generation, faced again with starting from the stones. An ignorant stranger, in a land as thick as ancient blood. And nothing for it, except to go on

--You will find your way, Radharani smiled. --Sure as El found the ocean

For as she told it, in the very beginning El, Beneficent Bull who reigned from his mighty horned mountain, looked down on the sublimity and dewy freshness of the world. Turning his gaze in every direction, El basked in what he alone had created and accomplished. Yet, among all the green and gray distances surrounding him, half of what El saw was blue, in a place and a way that was not the sky. So did El descend his mountain, to see what this different blue was

When El for the first time stood beside the ocean, he wondered at so vast a living thing, as it tossed and sighed and glimmered. Now, El saw two immaculate creatures at play in the waters and the waves, sporting and flashing and enjoying themselves. They seemed to be waiting for him. Their flashing eyes and solemn looks

reached down into El's great root, and stretched his being from one horizon to the other

El cried out to them, and said they might call him father, or husband, as they pleased. They gave El one laughing answer---*Husband!*---and El knew that his being and doing had never been alone. These wonders in the waters were the handiwork of Asherah, El's one wife older than stars, the walker in the sea, who had made all things beside him. Horny old fool, how had he forgotten? El's laughter at himself shook the universe awake. And together they named these immortal younglings, Shachar the dawn, and Shalim, dusk: children of the sea, Elohim, the first divine offspring

There were more than seventy powers like these consecrated from the harbors to the inland mountains of this land, with names and temples and confused crossings-over to make your head swim---each the patron of a family or a guild or some profession. Dagon and Belatu, mother and father of nourishing dew, were raisers of the grain. Their son was Baal Hadad of thunder and storm, like his father with a wish to rule alone: his mate was Baalat. Anat, ever-virgin of a million copulations, slaughterer on battlefields, was a match for Reshef her crazy kinsman of the desert, who brought plague or skillful healing at his whim. Yam ruled the oceans and rivers, Kotharat was comfort to a woman with child. Nikal filled men's orchards with succulence, Yarikh was her husband of the moon: Kothar a craftsman, and Shapshu the living sun. Hawwah and Adham, wife and husband tending

vineyards on the mountain, lived like all of the Elohim forever. And the crown of their realm was the world's great Tree of Life

Mot was the name of death in these Canaani lands and towns. He alone, Radharani said, received no worship and no offerings. After all, every day, the hand of Mot took for itself. And why was that?

El had forgotten himself in vanity. Baal Hadad had done likewise. So had another of the Elohim, Horon---a guardian of men against the desert's wild beasts, as cunning as snakes at magic and in places underground. Horon took his chance to challenge El. With a single toss of one horn, El sent Horon head-over-backwards down the mountain. But Horon, raging, resolved on a hopeless revenge. In a flash he was a snake, and he sank his fangs into The Tree of Life. It changed into a hideous Tree of Death, and Horon cast around it a sickly fog, a mist that choked and dimmed the world

From the Elohim, El sent Adham of the vineyards to fight Horon. So, they grappled up and down the thundering mountain. But Horon coiled up his vicious spite, and struck his fangs into Adham. As Adham felt this bite, and took this poison, he knew that he lived no more among his undying sisters and brothers

This was the beginning of Mot. No greater grief could Adham suffer. Yet, to his comfort came Shapshu, the living sun, to be mistress of the dead and light the way. Adham the new creature, she called man, Adam. And because for him, there was no life without Hawwah,

Shapshu gently folded her hand into Adam's

But this was not the deathless hand of his companion from their vineyards on the mountain. This mortal, woman, she called Eve, Life, The Mother of All Living to be born. Henceforth, said Shapshu, their immortality would be their children

The Elohim together, moved by these wrongs and kindnesses, turned in wrath against Horon. The Elohim forced Horon to rip his Tree of Death up by the roots, and to restore The Tree of Life, that man and woman never want for its fruit; nor shall they want who are *mujomena*, *mystis*, or understanding

Yet, for this undoing, Mot was not to be undone. Shapshu the sun, for her part, never shone so bright. She burned away the last of Horon's sickly fog, and the land and living things were fresh as dew again

As an islander, I sought these first Canaani things in hope of their wisdom about death, and why it had not touched me down these years. It seemed their answer was the one I had from home: no answer, only the comforts and consolations of this life. This was at least fair ground for hope that I might fit in

--Urana is what age? I asked

--All of eighteen, Radharani smiled, as we watched the first of her welcome-girls stride out, covered in flowers, toward a hundred guests across the stone-slab court. Our vantage was a slot in the door of her house where it faced the courtyard: two other young favorites of the house came out behind Urana, companions of the greeting with

crown-daisies golden in their thick dark hair, and they loosed one shivering call from the white conchs lifted in their hands

These girls wore no more than their festival names, their flowers and white loincloths, like Qadesh, Canaan's Holy One. In the crowning blaze of summer solstice sunshine their garlands of flowers flowed brightly down off their shoulders, the blooms hung carefully to cross X just below the girls' dimpled navels. Big-budded vetchlings orange as a new moon, clusters of red everlasting, rock roses white against blue Syrian cornflowers, and coastal iris, with petals so purple they looked black

Their solemn good cheer quelled the courtyard's murmuring babble, and the conches cried six more calls for the summer gathering-days. People let their eyelids fall and smudged themselves with smoking cedar-twigs, fingers spiraling up and down. Behold, my new teachers: farmers of the broad sea-plain Sharon, Canaani merchants of the trade-towns, island sailors, feather-crowned Serens of the Pulesati cities, and herdsmen off the hills and pasture-heights that faced The Green. Radharani was giving them a place to make offerings to powers, that powers embrace their lives in arms of care and comfort

--Good girls, thunder! she whispered with pleasure. --Yes! Confront them, stand, arms high now, like suns between horns of mountains. Sway, lift up their hearts---and lo! she laughed. --The manly mystics crane their necks for more. They'd give their souls, to see those

flowers fall! Music now, music!

Her guild of players commenced as the young girls moved in serpent sways of hips and shoulders in a line. A deep and heavy drone rose into the air with the nebel's twelve lusty-fingered strings, and a shimmering ring of little cymbals danced in and out of time between pulses of a ram's hide drum. As people answered, shaking tiny bells sewn in along their garments' fringes, two double-reed flutes began to flutter like twining birds. Softly between them climbed the ugab's long sweet hollow-sounding pipe. It seemed to cry above the droning and the drums' dark beats. If their sound had a name, it was longing, and longing swayed the young girls' hips

This was all by old custom of *marzeah*, a gathering-of-riches festival for the summer countryside around the hill Qadeshah. A generation gone since our catastrophe, I had watched this place grow from low squat hovels to a travelers' house, and then a town over the sea, with a few rolling acres of two-story homes, garden patches, and date-palms shading well-laid paths of stone. The knee-high wall encircling everything marked a sanctuary rather than a stronghold, and below the hill's steep flanks of red sandstone, a good little harbor spread out along the riverbank, with houses for stores and a fair road inland

Of all the hands that had raised Qadeshah, people called Radharani its crown: she wore her rich black locks in two big spiral curls and between them her pixilated almond eyes were bright, her thirty years' red-brown skin even darker under her long white diaphanous gown, of

island-weave. She wore red everlastings everywhere and I could scarce believe another circle in my fortune, to stand beside her here

--Look at my dear fool out there! Radharani laughed now, giving me her view. --He wants to be our baal, my king? *His head is wonderful*, the songs say---kindly, since between his ears are smoke and clouds! Make me laugh, like Asherah at El!

This was Halak, the big portly fellow now dancing by himself across the front of the crowd, the full spread of his tasseled garments swaying bright colors and shapes of Nile cotton and Canaani purple. Halak these people sometimes called head man of Qadeshah, but that was as far as it went: he had not fled north into The Lebanon with so many other Canaani, but held fast to family orchards and proffered himself for the job of kissing up to overseers from The Nile. Halak's mouth as he danced alone was open in a kind of feigned possession by the music, his beard dark and thick as fur but curled up into ringlets Hatti-style, and a tall hat rode his bobbing head. His eyes had not rolled back, but peeked through his painted lids to see which people took up his pretense, and who might laugh or sneer. Behind his back, Halak was the walking reason why Qadeshah brooked no king: he amounted to the nickname whispered in the country where his family held good orchards, Lord Of Pistachios

--Forgive me, Radharani said. --In truth, Halak does for us the things that must be done, stroking Egypt, where our hope is only to be left alone

Her hope and mine: Qadeshah was the seed of a way cracking open in the good soil that followed our nightmare. The man who left his brand in our flesh had been murdered by his captive wives. And still, the peoples in reach of his house paid their prices. To Nile we owed our place here, and the price was Pharaoh's charge: keep these lands and roads of trade in order, or lose everything. Halak was the butter we spread on his officials

Another life ago, where I thought my rage had made me a helper, I had brought forth dead bodies. Here, in the ordinary well-laid streets of Qadeshah, in the fine stone buildings raised by these people in the midst of humble houses, the seed of the way was life trying to be life again. What stood now was Pulesati and Canaani, with island touches, and Achaian hearths, and things from Tyre and Byblos: a sanctuary garden of Qadesh, white evening star, whose presence tamed the wild

--And, tonight, Radharani relished, as her hips rocked gently with the music, --a shadow takes full moon. The moon, Sweet Wine. Are you sure?

--By all my years a Keeper, this is the night, I answered her. --The worry, I told you: we can wait eighteen years and no shadow comes, and then wait eighteen more to the hour of the night, and it will show. But you know what this does to people. They think the dead walk, that daemons climb up out of holes. Every blessing and power of the moon fails, and dark things rise that can devour the last hope. Be kind, Radharani! It will come this night, because it is your desire

She wanted help to prove her house a sister of the sun and moon. She wanted Qadeshah to stand a peer in secrets of the real moon's lights and shadows, and so like other women of good houses, be a conscience of Pulesati strength. And she hoped as much that it might do something for the troubling night-time voices coming off the land: long ululating anguished calls, that she said had begun a few years ago. Their sounds, to her, were northern highland: floating voices circling strings of words, at once a deep of longing, accusation, and a warning

Our bride is in many hands

At sunrise hours ago, a hundred close-by families stood gathered at the ocean: their procession circled around the entire hill, and then wound up through Qadeshah with music to the high place trees and stones. Farmers with their barley and wheat in ranked the front of the company, Dagon's sons: behind them two feather-crowned ponies pulled a chariot with one of the house-guard's Annakim giants riding grand marshal, and behind him, Labrys walked high on a flower-spiraled shaft. And now, gates closed, more solemn things: the sun was nearing noon, the fierce peak of his powers and the beginning of his fall. Radharani and I took turns at the slot of vantage in her door, and the courtyard was packed to the pillared entranceway, the faces of her guests as many colors as their garments

The droning din of music ceased, and Urana and

her sisters burst out into shares of the wild harangue schooled into them

--To Qadeshah be welcome, all, where sun stands still and shines straight down!

--Welcome, you wholly ungovernables!

--Today we choose today!

--Now, get out of here, clodhoppers, scribes in crooked clay, plotting rotting good-for-nothing greed-bags! Fuck your feuds, and women, go, who kiss their horny feet! Go, you broken ones who bow to weaklings and their fists---and go you rat-faced keepers of the hoard!

--Great Year wheel and blackened moons and suns, break your greasy grip!

--Snake, Bull, Lioness take you down! And Griffin grab you by the balls!

Sudden wilder music then, with claps of the crowd's hands catching on quick, and outraged raucous roars of laughter. No one departed

--Let them serve out the honeycakes, Radharani said, --and sharing-cups of your wine. Are you ready, Flood Rider, New Wine Sailor, for the day you have wanted so long? Breathe, from this lotus I hold for you

I bowed my head, and breathed her proffered queen of flowers. The house was all Lebanon cedar of its beams and burnt barley out of the bread-ovens. She seemed to know my need to keep my head, and she drew me to another look outside. A crowd to overwhelm the eyes, every pair of them so different, from head-gear and hair and beard to the blends of colors down their striped

and patch-pattern robes. Rings and bracelets, clan-tattoos, earrings and necklaces, each one a work of worlds I never saw. The only common things were the lack of visible weapons and the ranks of bare washed feet. But still alive the lot of us, three hundred years of salt since Knossos. Radharani breathed herself a long deep savor of her flower

--Your little ones in Egypt, she said, one palm to my heart. --Murdered by the grief of people there, in battle's wake: they are here with you. Today, in the children you husband for this house, meet them again. Sweet Wine, before this double door, let go. Men drown beyond their depth. Qadesh spreads her wings, and breathes them life

I looked up from the flower to the graces of her eyes. --I will do as you ask, to be a house-bond, I answered. --I will speak a Keeper's secrets where you ask. But, I want to know---what *you* most desire, Radharani

--I will tell a man who lost and brings so much. Let people refresh themselves, they see me soon enough. This be the touchstone of our day, Radharani began

--When I was three, your fathers the islanders scourged many kings out of Canaan. When Nile broke the last waves of you, you came back to this land where the temples and great houses already knew your arts. But you, Deucalion, were dead to everything. Pharaoh wanted lucre for his priests. His ministers gave you choice of the peoples' captured ships. So you were wealthy again by the time I first saw you, and a prisoner to ghosts. Living in one wretched room in Gaza, on a mattress like a stone

--And how did I find you, born worlds away? You know what Yumm said, the man I called father; that I was born of the rising sun. So they say of mystery-children east of Babylon. Young, I thought me born in the saddlebag of one of his asses. Yumm called me bright as hammered tin, sweeter than the myrrh he traded west. I loved the travelers' houses and the roads and hills with him, the Sutu tents and Bedouin camps in lands of stone beneath the sky. We had night-sings, and music by the wells

--One spring, there was sickness in Yumm's tents, and it left him old: he knew his body had strength for one more journey. Yumm was like his fathers, no man to forget a debt. To pay it took him all of the western road to Gaza. I made him bring me along, as little girls get their way. So I thought, until I found he had left his wealth at home, but not his treasure. Yumm owed a Cretan of Gaza for stock of oil and aromatics. And what to do when he found he had outlived those partners---another whole company of people swallowed by The Green? He asked help from the little old priestess there in Gaza, Diwia

--She found us another Cretan. You. I remember, Yumm was too much man to cry for losing me, scrawny as a monkey then. But he cried when you, in turn, put me in the care of Diwia's house. That was what he wanted for me all along. *Why?* I cried then, because I loved him; and he said, *The lives of these great ladies will be yours: in you, the eastern lands return the gifts of the western sea. Do this for me, Shiny One, and for yourself: goodbye.* It helped me through that time to tell myself his stories. Yumm said that gods

might be the sun, but Radharani is what shines; that nothing moves a god, and still her ceremonies move him. In the core of my name, I found the thing to which I meant my life to rise

--Those years, I swept Derceto's halls in Gaza, learning arts of ceremony; and when my flower came, I gave it to the god come through my door. The first I heard your name was when I drank with ladies there the drink that closes wombs. And each man gave back something to the house: the wealth that made ten fingers' worth of good things happen in the towns around those places. I laugh because I like so much a man who understands: good things happen where a woman feels safe!

--I know the men of tribes outside who twist the names of sanctuary women, houri of the hours, and call us whores for that. Men who either drop their robes or pick up a stone if a woman says hello, and give back as little as they can. But I was as Urana is becoming. I paid honor to that house, as women give to see a good thing prosper; so that loving ways go on in this our life. So I came to know and learn from the daughters of the isles who fought old Ramses. I should be---like them, finding fields with promise, if I could fetch men to it. They knew what it was to need and help each other

--The land was broken kingdoms, except where your people of the boats were sharing seed and staking farms, and building to the south. Not many Canaani, sons of the old disorder, stood in the way of people who put roads and fields and markets back to work. Women said it

was like old Alashiya, every town its kinds of worship, and Great Year festivals between. I had skills to rise in that. The time came when it grew safe to travel old roads inland. In the Shephelah country that looks up the hills toward Hebron, there is an old Canaani town, Lachish, where your tribes were digging in grapes and olives. I went there with priestesses, to ask the daemons of the land a planters' blessing

--And who was camped as well along their brook but a band of Annakim, the giants who keep our walls here, brothers now: the first men swayed to the thing born in my mind. They fight for any side, but in-between they live for drink and girls. That day, they were down from their guild-house in Hebron for both, all blades and muscle. I thought there might be some with better hopes. What are their lives, Deucalion, that music and a woman's subtle foot should mean so much? Was I not to build where they saw Asherah, Baalat Qadeshah, Hawwah?

--I gave my learning, and they gave back gifts, and service. I asked if they had ever dreamed a garden, in the midst of pains of war and work. Well, if I knew a place like this, our red mountain of the dead, with good harbor and a road, could they move men and stones? If I brought such men of skill, would Qadeshah not stand? It was these people, all so different, wanting one place set apart. I did what Gaza mothers did, and every other house not waiting for a king

--Oh! Shall we not have fine music today, Radharani said breathing out a sudden brightness, --and

carry our prayers up to the high place, and take good meals and talk along the benches? How I have wanted to thank you, she smiled, looking us both up and down as if we had appeared full-born before the doors

--Yumm is always near me: sometimes I smell his leather travel-bags. I felt like a child when I saw you come beaching back into my days. You were the door for me to a new life, Radharani smiled. --Now, I will be yours

I still held Pyrrha in my soul, sitting pretty on a mountain. This was all such woman, with worlds more ambition for this place in the Pulesati web

--What do I want, Radharani said, searching it out: her almond eyes narrowed round the sun's dance of lights in her irises. --The trade of predictable old boats: to learn The Great Year moons and suns, and make them double crowns of Qadeshah. To that, you will speak for me this day, and put before our Serens what this evening offers. Ahh, tonight! May the shadow come to light!

Radharani laughed at herself, a trill like a spring among stones. --Sweet Wine, my life is ceremony. But it is not the regard. Not The Green's easy wealth. Nor even your Libu mystery, that keeps time for children in our hands. What I crave is beyond myself; to let go, offer, and extinguish into life, such as I knew in my first flower. To marry this my flesh to the world's flesh, and stand beyond my name and the last thought. Pouring forth, like a wound and all my joy together. A wind of the sea

Her eyes animal-alive, all shapes at once: I felt her dark-skinned body breathe, sheathed in the gown no more

than a white translucence. With a sweep of her lifted hand
Radharani reached for the double cedar doors, which
opened into sunshine and her multitude of lives

--Selah, Sweet Wine!

Urana and the girls sang out from prayers already
old to these families, and the courtyard took them up.
Radharani lifted a new husband's right hand

*--Across a thousand courts, a thousand houses,
men find their joy reborn in Qadesh, Holy One.
Speak, Goddess young in our eyes, in-law of the peoples,
speak the word of our father, Bull, El, Beneficent One.
Take war from the face of The Earth, he says:
Weave love into the very dust.
Let peace possess the world, tranquility the fields*

Soft waves of their voices pleased her, their bride
in many hands; and Radharani answered

*--For I have a word that I shall tell you,
a matter that I shall declare to you:
the word of the tree, the whisper of the stone,
the murmur of the heavens to the earth,
of the deep to the stars,
a word that men do not know
nor the multitudes of the earth understand.
Come, and I shall show it
in the midst of the mountain*

--Now, let the young ones step forward! she declared. To my surprise, it was the sight of the children coming out that tore me down, letting go a father's hand or mother's robe: two boys and two girls ten years old holding onto each other as they neared the strange man off The Green. My share of Qadeshah younglings to foster

Ahh. Here we went again, this lot with dark moppy heads and pudgy faces, smooth brown skins: fine new children I could only live to lose and bury like the rest. At first, enormous words *I am so sorry* ran through my body, as if the latest of my lost ones might have heard. But these open faces, their utter helplessness told me I would die or live to protect them. Behind them was a crowd of factions each with sucking-fangs behind their smiles, eager to entrap these young to themselves

--This man, this day, is born to us as he becomes your xenos: this day, this man, Deucalion Flood Rider, is sworn to be your life-long friend and helper. From this day, you are family: from this day, you have a friend in the world, a friend who holds you first, and close, even if hard adventures hold you apart

The girls were Anab and Yamani: the boys, Woko and Bohan. *I make you my xenos*, said each one taking my hand; and I spoke likewise, giving each a small silver Labrys on a chain around their necks. Each of those I touched to the one I wore, and it was done between us, with a smile of hope and trepidation

It was done, except that now big burly Halak interposed himself into our midst, and laying his hands on

two young shoulders without looking down at them, he brought his black eyes and beard of curls into to my face

--You people off the sea do not really belong here, Halak told me under his breath, like rotting meat. --Any more than these sneak-thieving Sutu savages off the hills. Well, come tonight, I will bring you a fine surprise, and we shall see who and what amounts to something

I could only give him half a smile and wait to see what else was coming. Now Halak turned to the crowd and raised his right palm out their way: a moment later, the palm was close up to my face, with some kind of black greasy smear of ash

--Do you know what this is? Halak asked so that everyone could hear. --This is what is left of the last man who betrayed our precious children! Do you see, my people, that Halak is for you!
