

PEOPLE OF THE SEA, by Jack Dempsey
EXCERPT 2---Destruction of Knossos Labyrinth

...That instant we turned to gather, we saw a kind of human whirlwind rising out of the east stairwell, and out onto the court: a shoving chopping tangle of death-faced Karfi men, Alashiya and white-robed Companions rage against rage, the Achaians thrusting and boxing with spears and Cretans hacking back across the shafts, grappling to get inside their swings of long sharp sword. Out here, the stairway walls no longer helped us

Surely Abas caught most Achaians in bed, and here they came up turning stairs right into us. I saw no Squiddy or Abas, it looked that they had cut their prey in half, and yet these big-built charioteers, some of them were even laughing to each other as they swung with wild despairing joy for little Earthlings. One of them screamed for Merire, and Pereko's bows bore down. I screamed our battle-name again, and forty of us slammed into them

We hit them just short of the great stair's broken portico. Melee tore me off against a big blond beard with no shield who had managed to get a bronze helmet on, no corselet nor greaves round his legs, but his arms were bigger than my thighs. He was bloody, not wounded: we circled in hot blasts of wind, his spear jabbed my sword and shield-arm and he put an arrogant this-is-play bobbing to his head, so the white plume on his helmet danced to spoil my eye. I wanted to end him, that cursed Achaian grinning down. I thrust hard-in below my shield.

He was good point and butt alike because his blunt end slammed my shield down on my sword. If training had not snapped me back he had put his spear through my face, but the head deflected up to rake my temple. I cried out and he pulled back to stab. When it came I stole his trick, whacked it down and drew back through his front knee. When it folded, I stabbed through his left lung. He went down disbelieving, like his priest

About me swarms were wrestling down Companions one by one, hacking, cursing. I needed all the pure luck of battle to drop one more alone with a duck and swing back upward through his groin. That one's head I had time to lift by the plume and cut his throat. For every person who had danced these stones and harmed him not, I poured his blood. The gout of it steamed like his disappearing soul

The night's mad din was dying, though our men were running back down into the east wing now, and up came screams of women and children. Norax caught up to my side taking ferocious breaths and cursing me to let his shoulder be. He pointed Melas over there helping to guard the Libu, rather than fight his own at last: he did not know if Abas lived, but had seen Prax and Aktor head down that stair in the northeast corner for the artisans' shops. The decent quarters where Key-Bearer had a room

We had to get out of here before any serious muster. I told Norax to start for the ships, but he refused till we were together. --Otus, watch your back. Now, go and finish. Quick, and no talk. That hall must have ten

ships' store of oil. I'll put men to the fires

I walked through blood and weapons, corpses, writhing forms: Donos dead on his back, with Butes lowering a young son's locks down over him, Kinuwa dead, his old folks orphans. They helped me to eat my heart at the four doors of the throne's sunken anteroom. Down four steps inside, the alabaster benches sat empty around a floor of black ironstone, set in pink schist: naked wall where, once, a turquoise tapestry of isles

My arm let go the shield. Four doors behind me became two in front: in old days, this play the more to see nothing but The One beyond enthroned. Now this magic doubled iron in my blood. For Koreter sat there, still as an idol in the chamber's crimson flicker. Here, where seated elders of our clans had faced down every would-be Cretan king, nobody faced him

Waiting his turn; but the great palm-painted jar at his feet, the bowls on the inner-chamber benches at his sides said he had prayed. He gave me nothing as I came in, his gray hands fixed to the knees of his white gold-belted gown, the silver-pointed chin and brow high, eyes straight across the chamber. Gold his wristbands, a yoke of eight gold necklaces; goldfoil holding white locks from his brow with two winged horses, lapis-blue

He was trying to master me, and flinched not an eye when I kicked over the great jar and it smashed, pooling chrism and horsemint. Same instant, I read the wall at his back: gone the great green palm that had shaded our throne's white alabaster, gone our green hills,

waters, lively quietude. Either side of Koreter's blank face, a sharp-beaked Griffin, hunters and devourers once the reach of our law. Tonight, they were monsters come for him, their hooked beaks high with necks craned up to swallow. And wingless, too! A joke laced in by our old-blood painters: no wings to carry this fellow up the sky. Too fat, Mother Griffin, with a belly full of Great Year monsters waiting to be born

I put the tip of my iron to his plexus: Koreter's breath came big, but his eyes stayed fixed looking past me. What he saw was the chamber's sunken pit, the grave of summer's sun-crown, grave of the miserable self

--Minotavros is come. The son of your own lying hand, I said. And then, louder: --You sit like a Pharaoh. Too bad you're Achaian, and in Crete. I thought you people held it blasphemy, impersonating gods. You know me for your own, don't you, Koreter

He blinked once, and then deigned to look at me

--You cursed clown-faced animal, jabbering Libu. Those guards are Meshwesh, he snarled. --Smarter dogs come in out of the rain. Oh, to see their knife in your back!

Outside, Norax was shouting. Here, I reached to rip Koreter off the throne, and *Dog's Day*, he cursed: *You will never be free of us*

My hand threw him across the chamber: he hit the facing stone bench hard and his body cried out, but not his will. He clambered half-up, and clutched the arm worst-hurt. In the throne's shapely seat I saw our moon, our sun and star above the mountain: I the first and last to do a

thing like this in front of them

--Does it hurt, when somebody hurts you?

Welcome to the world. Too bad you can't stay, spider

Koreter was still bent, half-up where he fell: a nice clean little old man-sire. I thought of his Lion and their sons' deeds sanctified. Hard-built towns in ash. Burly browbeaten yokels whose hope in life was slaves and jewelry, who shipped our mouthy women to their flax-farms. Zoe's nose. Flame, I no longer knew who spoke

--A thousand names built this house. For them, Koreter, I give you something. A living chance. I swear it, by our family. *Look at me!* Answer one question. An easy one you should know. Answer, and solemnly, you live

--Get it over with! What is it then! he sneered, holding hard to the bench

--Just tell us about one good thing you have done, for Crete, in coming here. There must be one good thing. Tell us about it

He tried. --Ohh, gods, *gods!* I fetched him, jerked his head back and drove iron down the root of his neck till the hilt struck collarbone. His eyes were boiling and the throat in his open mouth. I twisted hard-around, then ripped out and his lungs' blood fountained purple from the hole. When the spray of it failed, I threw him on his face at the dais, and shrieked his death delivered soaked with blood before the throne. Everything fused and married: sun-disc, star-center, navel, new moon cradling new sun: crowns of the horned mountain, and fresh blood red across their niche. *Let go. See*

Between the polished sea and mountain curves of the throne's back alabaster stone, my shade moved in the other world, iridescent, bloody. Where the ninth curve had crowned the face of the woman of my soul, a splash of blood let two drops fall. The throne was broken, dead and killed---not Great Year way. Dead, alive and in-between, I raised the palms I had to the people who had raised it, and defended it

At the door a man of Alashiya offered to drag out Koreter. I woke to stink of iron in the pooling blood, mad noise outside beyond the doubled doors. Rocks and arrows coming down: there might be a dozen Achaians outside, men caught bunking in the town and now hoping to hold us without coming in, until they scared up who knew what, and horses

Smoke of our burning-begun flowed in gray plumes out of doors and stairways, and blasts of south wind dragged it over the court. There was Melas, his back to a huddle of women and children, all fair, sobbing in their night-clothes. Why not kill them, right there where Achaians killed ours. I found Koreter's corpse dragging from my hand, out between Merire's Meshwesh and the captives. In front of all, I chopped the head off, and held it up on high a draining diadem. The women and children hid their eyes, poor innocent locusts. Here came Melas through smoke and bouncing stones. --Where in blazes Aktor, and Abas! It's time to settle and get out!
