
Opening Extract from...

Poseidon's Spear

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Poseidon's Spear

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Prologue

So – here we are again.

Last night, I told you of Marathon – truly the greatest of days for a warrior, the day that every man who was present, great or small, remembers as his finest. But even Marathon – the great victory of Athens and Plataea against the might of Persia – did not end the Long War.

In fact, *thugater*, an honest man might say that the Battle of Marathon *started* the Long War. Until Marathon, there was the failed revolt of the Ionians, and any sane man would have said they had lost. That the Greeks had lost. In far-off Sardis – in Persepolis, capital of the Persian Empire – they barely knew that Athens existed, or Sparta, and I will wager not a one of the gold-wearing bastards had heard of Plataea.

I was born in Plataea, of course, and my father raised me to be a smith – but my tutor Calchus saw the man of blood inside me, and made me a warrior, as well. And even that isn't really fair – my pater was a fine warrior, the polemarch of our city, and he led us out to war with Sparta and Corinth in the week of three battles, and fought like a lion, and died – murdered, stabbed in the back while he fought, by his own cousin Simon, and may the vultures tear his liver in eternal torment!

Simon sold me as a slave. I had fallen wounded across my pater's corpse, and Simon took me from the battlefield and sold me. Why didn't he kill me? It might have helped him, but often, evil men beget their own destruction with their own acts – that is how the gods behave in the world of men.

I grew to full manhood as a slave in Ionia, the slave of Hipponax and his son Archilogos, and to be honest, I loved them, and seldom

resented being a slave. But Archilogos had a sister, Briseis, and she is Helen reborn, so that even at thirteen and fourteen, men competed for her favours – grown men.

I loved her, and still do.

Not that that love brought me much joy.

And I received the education of an aristocrat, by attending lessons with my young master – so that I was taught the wisdom of Heraclitus, whom many worship as a god to this very day.

When I was seventeen or so, events shattered our household – betrayal, adultery and civil war. I've already told that story. But in the end, the Ionians – all the Greeks of Asia and the Islands – left the allegiance of Persia and went to war. In my own house, I was freed, and became Archilogos's friend and war-companion. But in my hubris I lay with Briseis, and was banned from the house and sent to wander the world.

A world suddenly at war.

I marched and fought through the first campaign, from the victory at Sardis to black defeat on the plains by Ephesus, the city of my slavery, and then I fled with the Athenians. I served as a mercenary on Crete, and found myself with my own black ship at Amathus, the first naval battle in the Ionian Revolt. We won at sea. But we lost on land, and again, I was on the run in a captured ship with a bad crew.

Eventually, I found a new home with the Athenian lord, Miltiades. As a pirate. Let's not mince words, friends! We killed men and took their ships, and that made us pirates, whatever we may now claim.

But Miltiades was instrumental in keeping the Ionian Revolt alive, as I've told on other nights. We fought and fought, and eventually we drove the Medes from the parts of the Xhersonese they'd seized, and used it as a base to wreck them – until they sent armies to clear us from the peninsula.

I did as Miltiades bade me: killed, stole, and my name gained renown.

After a year of fighting, we were losing. But we caught a Persian squadron far from its base, in Thrace, and we destroyed them – and in the fighting, I murdered Briseis' useless husband. Again, I've told this story already – ask someone who was here.

I thought that, now Briseis was free to marry me, she would.

I was wrong. She went back east to marry someone older, wiser and more powerful.

So I went back to Plataea.

★

I worked my father's farm, and tried to be a bronze-smith.

But a man died at the shrine on the hill – and his death sent me to Athens, and before long I was back at sea, killing men and taking their goods. Hard to explain in a sentence or two, my daughter. But that's what I did. And so, I was back to fighting the Persians. I served Miltiades – I ran cargoes into Miletus, the greatest city of Ionia, besieged by the Persians, and we saved them. And then the East Greeks formed a mighty fleet, and we went to save Miletus.

And we *failed*.

We fought the battle of Lade, and the Samians betrayed us, and most of my friends died. Miletus fell, and in the wake of that defeat, Ionia was conquered and the East Greeks ceased to be free men. The men of some islands were all killed, and the women sold into slavery.

It's odd, thugater, because I loved the Persians, their truth-telling and their brilliant society. They were good men, and honourable, and yet war brought the worst of them to the fore and they behaved like animals – like men inevitably do, in war.

They raped Ionia and Aetolia, and we – the survivors – scuttled into exile. I ran home, after Briseis spurned me again.

So I went back to the smithy in Plataea. I began, in fact, to learn to be a fine smith.

But I had famous friends and a famous name. I had occasion to save Miltiades of Athens from a treason charge – heh, I'll tell that story again for an obol – and as a consequence, my sister got me a beautiful wife. Listen, do you doubt me? She was beautiful, and had I not saved Miltiades …

At any rate, I married Euphoria.

And a summer later, when she was full of my seed, I led the Plataean phalanx over the mountains to Attica, to help save Athens. This time, when the Persians forced us to battle, we had no traitors in our ranks and we were not found wanting. This time, the gods stood by us. This time Apollo and Zeus and Ares and Athena lent us aid, and we beat the Persians at Marathon.

But I told that story last night.

And when I came home, my beautiful Euphoria was dead in childbirth. Her newborn child – I never saw it – lay in swaddling with a slave. I assumed it dead. My sister still blames herself for that error, but I have never blamed her. Yet, to understand my tale, you must understand – I thought my child had died …

So I picked my beloved wife up, took her to my farm and burned it, and her, with every piece of jewellery and every scrap of cloth she'd ever worn or woven.

And then I took a horse and rode away.

That ought to have been the end. But it was, of course, another beginning, because that's how the gods make men.

You need to understand this. After Marathon, nothing was the same. No one was the same. Life did not taste sweet. Indeed, most of us felt that our greatest deed, and days, were behind us, and there was not much left for us to do. And I had lost wife and child. I had nothing to live for, and no life to which to return.

Part I
Sicily

Σιληνός

ὁρῶ πρὸς ἀκταῖς ναὸς Ἑλλάδος σκάφος
κώπης τ᾽ ἄνακτας σὺν στρατηλάτῃ τινὶ
στείχοντας ἐς τόδ᾽ ἄντρον: ἀμφὶ δ᾽ αὐχέσιν
τεύχη φέρονται κενά, βορᾶς κεχρημένοι,
κρωσσούς θ᾽ ὑδρηλούς. ὦ ταλαίπωροι ξένοι:
ποτίνες ποτ᾽ εἰσίν; οὐκ ἴσασι δεσπότην
Πολύφημον οἷός ἐστιν ἄξενόν τε γῆν
τήνδ᾽ ἐμβεβῶτες καὶ Κυκλωπίαν γνάθον
τὴν ἀνδροβρῶτα δυστυχῶς ἀφιγμένοι.
ἀλλ᾽ ἥσυχοι γίγνεσθ᾽, ἵν᾽ ἐκπυθώμεθα
πόθεν πάρεισι Σικελὸν Αἰτναῖον πάγον.

I see a Greek ship on the beach, and sailors who ply the oar coming to this cave with one who must be their commander. About their necks they carry empty vessels, since it is food they need, and pails for water. O unlucky strangers! [90] Who can they be? They know not what our master Polyphemus is like, nor that this ground they stand on is no friend to guests, and that they have arrived with wretched bad luck at the man-eating jaws of the Cyclops. But hold your peace so that we may learn [95] where they have come from to Sicilian Aetna's crag.

Euripides Cyclops 85

I

I was off my head.

I rode south past the shrine in a thunder of hooves, so that Idomeneus came out with a spear in his hand. But I did not want his blood-mad comfort. I rode past him, up the mountain.

Up the Cithaeron, to the altar of my family. The old altar of ash and ancient stone where the Corvaxae have worshipped the mountain since Leitos left for Troy, and before.

I had nothing to sacrifice, and it had begun to rain. The rain fell and fell, and I stood at the ash altar watching the rains wash it, watching the water rush down the hillside. And my life was like those ashes – so useless it was fit only to be washed away. Lightning flashed in the sky, the thunderbolts of Zeus struck the earth and I stood by the altar and prayed that Zeus would take me – what a grand way to go! I stood straight, and with every crash I expected—

But the lightning passed me by. It is odd – I decided to slay myself, and only then realized that I had neither sword nor spear. Looking back, it is almost comic. I was exhausted – I had fought at Marathon only a week before, and I hadn't recovered, and the cold rain soaked me. My sword and spear were back on the plains below me – at my sister's house, where even now they would be looking for me, and looking for Euphoria to bury her.

I wasn't going back.

Cithaeron is not a mountain with a crag from which a man can easily hurl himself. The whole thing has an aura of dark comedy – Arimnestos, the great hero, seeks to slay himself like Ajax, but he's too damned tired.

Before darkness fell, I started down the mountain, headed west over the seaward shoulder, intending – nothing. Intending, I think, to jump from the very first promontory that I came to.

Or perhaps intending nothing at all. May you never be so tired and so utterly god-cursed that you seek only oblivion, my daughter. May your days be filled with light, and never see that darkness, where all you want is an end to pain. But that was me.

I walked and walked, and it grew dark.

And I fell, and then I slept, or rather, I passed out of this world.

I woke in the morning to the cold, the rain, deep mist – and to the knowledge that there was nothing awaiting me. It came to me immediately – my first thought on waking was of her death. And I rose and wandered the woods, and I remember calling her name aloud, more a groan than a greeting.

On and on I walked, always down and east and south.

I slept again, and rose the third day, with no food, no water, endless rain and cold. I wept, and the rain carried my tears to the earth. I prayed, and the skies answered me. I thought of how, on the eve of Marathon, I had dreamed of Briseis and not of Euphoria, and I *knew* in my heart that I had killed her with my betrayal.

I was an animal, fit only to kill other animals, and I was not a worthy man: death was what I deserved.

It may seem impossible, my friends, that one of the victors of Marathon should feel this way a week after the greatest victory in all the annals of men, but if you know any warriors, you know the revulsion and the fatigue that comes with killing. Truly we were greater than human at Marathon. But the cost was high.

I could see the faces of the men I'd killed, back and back and back to the first helot I'd put down with a spear cast at Oinoe.

I thought of the slave girl I'd sworn to protect, and then abandoned.

I thought of the beautiful boy I'd killed on the battlefield by Ephesus, while he lay screaming in pain.

And of the woman I had left, pregnant, on Crete.

And of Euphoria, with whom I had often fought, and seldom enough praised.

I went down the mountain, looking for a cliff face.

Eventually I found one.

The rain stopped when I reached the top of the cliff. I couldn't see the base – it was hidden in fog. But the sun was about to burst through the clouds. And even as I stood there, it did – a single arm of Helios's

might reached through a tiny gap to shine on the ground before my feet and dispel the cloud of fog below the cliff.

Well.

Apollo pointed the way. He has never been my friend, that god, and I might have ignored his summons, but I wanted only extinction.

I said a prayer. I said her name out loud.

I jumped.

I hit water.

How the gods must laugh at men!

I had jumped into the ocean. It was a long fall, and I struck badly. It knocked the wind out of me, and then I became the butt of the laughter of the gods because instead of letting the cold water close over my head and drowning – I had, after all, intended to die – I began to fight to live. My arms moved, my legs kicked and my lungs starved for precious air until my head burst from under the waves and my mouth drank air like precious wine.

Against my own desire, I began to swim.

I was just a few horse-lengths off a rocky coast – it was deep water, or I'd have been dead – but with nowhere to land.

Oh, how the gods laughed.

Because now, suddenly, I was filled with a desire to live, and my arms swam powerfully, and yet there was nowhere to go but onto rocks. The sea struck the rocks sharply – three days of rain had raised a swell.

I turned my head out to sea in the fog and began to swim.

The change from suicide to struggle for life was so swift that I never questioned it. I merely moved my arms – as strong as any man's arms, and yet weak from four days of no food, and from the incredible effort that was Marathon. I was not going to last long. But I swam, drank mouthfuls of air and swam more, and eventually – long after I think I should have been dead – I turned the headland and saw a beach at the base of the next cove, a beach with a small fire on it. The smell of the burning spruce came to me like a message from the gods, and I swam like a porpoise – twenty strokes, fifty strokes.

My toes brushed sand.

I was swimming in an arm's-span of water.

I dragged myself up the beach.

I lay with my legs in the water and my elbows in the sea wrack and kelp, and strong arms came and lifted me clear. They dragged

me up the beach. I didn't know their language, but they rolled me over and they had serious, hairy faces – skin the colour of old wood, and black beards.

I stammered my thanks. And went down into the darkness.

That was probably for the best.

Because when I awoke, we were at sea, and I was chained to an oar bench.

Remember, I had been a slave before.

This was worse. Far, far worse, but having been a slave before saved me. I knew all the petty degradations, I knew the perils and I knew the penalties.

I was chained in the very depths of a trireme – as a thranite, the very lowest tier of oarsmen. Air came to me through my oar-port, which was mostly covered in leather and leaked air and water in equal profusion.

When the men above me relieved themselves, the piss and shit fell on me. Oh, yes. That's the way in the lower decks of a slave-driven trireme.

I lay quietly for as long as I possibly could, because I knew that as soon as they noticed me, I would be made to row. But a man can only stand so much piss in his hair and beard. I moved my arm, and the oar-master was on me. He struck me several times with a stick, grinning with delight, and put an oar in my hands. It took time for him to bring it from amidships.

He seemed to speak a little Greek, and I barely understood him, but the man above me in the second deck leaned down.

'He's a killer, mate,' he said. 'Obey, or he'll gut you.'

For a moment I thought he was talking *about* me, rather than to me. I thought perhaps he was telling the oar-master that I was a killer.

Hah!

Pride goes first, when you are a slave.

The oar-master grinned at me, took a knife from under his arm and poked it into my groin. Smiled more broadly.

'Tell him I know how to pull an oar!' I shouted. Instant surrender.

The oar-master laughed. And hit me.

I'm sure you are waiting to hear, my friends, how I recovered my wits, rose from my bench and slaughtered my enemies.

Well, you haven't been a slave, have you? Any of you.

In a week, I was used to it. I was strong enough, and there was food – badly cooked fish, barley bread, sour beer.

I ate. I no longer wanted to die. Or rather, I only wanted to live to kill the oar-master, whom I hated. And I hated him with a pure, searing hate. But I was a slave, and he laughed at my hate. He was big, and very strong – fully muscled like a Pankrationist. He enjoyed inflicting pain – on us, the slaves, but he even enjoyed inflicting petty, verbal hurst on his subordinates and the helmsmen and the deck crew.

I was ridden like a horse. For the first week I rowed in the depths of the ship, with water and shit over my ankles, the smell enough to stop a man from work. But even exhausted and injured, I was strong compared to other men, and that crew had seen better days. After a long pull – I have no idea when, or where we landed – I was 'promoted' to the top deck of rowers, the 'elite'. I, who had commanded my own ship, who could steer and make sail. And fight.

The top deck was not an improvement, except for the clean ocean air. Here I was constantly under the eye of the oar-master and his minions, the six men he used to impose his authority. The ship carried no marines – or, just possibly, these men were the marines – a surly, churlish lot. They proved their manhood by tormenting the rowers.

It is a thing I have often noted, how the stamp of a leader imprints itself on his followers. Hasdrubal – the captain – was a beak-nosed Phoenician from far-off Carthage. He was tall, he was strong and he was a vicious bully. He never gave a direct order – rather, he wheedled and manipulated when strength would have done better, and then turned into a right tyrant when some persuasion might have served the trick.

He was handsome, in a burly way, and had the pointiest, heaviest, most perfumed beard I'd ever seen on a man. Well, a man at sea, anyway. I'd seen such things on Thebans.

But his bad command skills transmitted themselves to this captain's officers as effectively as Miltiades' were transmitted to his. The oar-master was a torturing tyrant, the sailing-master was a weak man with a drink problem who knuckled under to the oar-master in every situation and hated him for it and the helmsmen – a pair of them, both Carthaginians learning the trade – were young, silent, morose and bitter. My guess, from the yawning chasm that separated

us – you can't imagine I ever talked to these bastards – was that the two helmsmen were better men, just trying to survive under the regime of a bully and a madman.

For Dagon, the oar-master, was mad. Mad with power, mad with rage, mad with the cunning, plotting madness of a long-time drunkard, or a man who enjoys the pain of others.

It was days before I truly felt his displeasure. I know now that we were somewhere on the coast of Dalmatia, rowing north. I had gathered from talk on deck – slaves were forbidden to speak unless spoken to – that we had a cargo of Athenian hides and pottery and some Cyprian copper, and that we were going to bump our way up the coast until we found someone to sell us iron and tin.

I was rowing. When you are in peak physical condition, it is possible to row for a long time while your mind is elsewhere. Despite despair and wounds and struggle, I was sound enough to row – all day – without pain. But my head was in a dark place, considering my life. My life with Briseis. My life with Euphoria. My life as a hero, and my life as a smith. I wasn't despairing – it takes longer than three days to drive me to despair. But I had started pretty far down, and being enslaved certainly hadn't helped.

The stick hit me a glancing blow on the left shoulder. 'Off the beat,' the oar-master roared, his spittle raining on my left ear.

'Like fuck!' I said, before I'd thought about it. In fact, I was dead on the beat – my stroke was perfect.

The next blow hit my head, and I gave a half-scream and sort of fell across my oar, and then he hit me again, five or six blows to the head and neck. My nose broke, and blood showered across me.

'Silence, scum,' he roared at me. 'Do not even scream!'

I grunted.

He hit me again. It was an oak stick.

I must have made some noise. Or maybe not.

'Silence!' he said in the kind of voice a man uses to a lover, and hit me again.

My oar caught in the backwash of another man's oar, jumped and slammed into my chest, cracking ribs. I grunted.

He hit me again. 'Silence, slave!'

I tried to gain control of the oar. Tears were pouring down my face, and blood.

He laughed. 'You need to learn what you are. You are a sack full of pain, and I will let it out when I want to. For anything. Until you

die, cursing me.' He moved around until he was in my sight line. 'I am Dagon, Lord of Pain.' He laughed.

Just then, the trierarch came up. I knew his voice already. That needs to be said, because I could barely see. And you have to imagine, I was trying to manage an eighteen-foot oar while he hit me in the back.

'You are off the stroke,' he said teasingly, and hit me on my left shoulder. He was expert. He hit me so hard I could barely manage the pain – but he didn't break a bone.

I guess I whimpered.

Dagon laughed again. 'Silence!' he said, and hit me again.

The trierarch laughed. 'New slaves are useless, aren't they?' he said.

The oar-master tapped his stick on the deck. 'He can't get the rhythm,' the oar-master said. A lie.

'You lie,' I spat.

The blow that struck me put me out.

When I awoke, I was the stern oar of the thranites – the lowest of the low, and since most triremes row a little down by the stern, all of the piss and shit of the whole slave ship was around my ankles and calves. The moment I groaned and shook, one of the oar-master's minions threw seawater over me and put an oar in my hands, feeding it through the oar-port – it was, of course, a short and difficult oar because of the curve of the ship. Rowing here was always a punishment, even on my ships.

I threw up.

On myself, of course.

And started rowing.

Time lost meaning. I rowed, and hurt, and rowed, and hurt. Men came and hit me with sticks and I rowed, and hurt. We landed for a night, somewhere north of Corcyra, and I was left chained to my bench while other men went ashore. Kritias, a Greek, one of the oar-master's bully-boys, came to me with stale bread, dipped it in the stinking brown water by my ankles and put it in my lap. 'I have five obols on this,' he said. 'That you'll eat it.'

He got his five obols.

Then I was sick – sick with one of Apollo's arrows in me, and shit poured from me into the water at my feet and I vomited, over and over.

And I rowed.

The sun beat down, and men above me died. I was hardly the only victim – indeed, so ill was that ship that men died every second or third day. So that after some more time – I have no idea how much time, but we were somewhere on the coast of Illyria – we landed, and even I was allowed ashore. We ate pig – the slaves got crap, but it was delicious, and we ate *everything*.

That was the night I realized we were in Illyria. A party of nobles came down to the ship, and I had the energy to pay attention. There were two men and two women on horseback, and they rode straight down the beach.

They gave Hasdrubal the signs of peace, and dismounted warily. He offered them bread and salt and wine.

The two women were young and pretty, tough the way all Illyrians are, as blond as the sun, tanned like old leather, in fine wool with gold bracelets. The men were taller and older, with beards and more gold jewellery. Their servants had tin. We could see it in ingots, brought by donkey from somewhere even farther north.

Illyrians are a strange lot – they have nothing but lords and slaves, and the lords are at war with each other all the time. They look Greek, they sometimes speak Greek – worship our gods, too. Many of them know the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But they are not Greek. Or rather, sometimes I think that they are Hellenes who never found the rule of law.

But I was not thinking such rational and philosophical thoughts that night.

I was too far away to hear any of the conversation, but the style of their pins and their clothes, their horse-furniture and a thousand other little details, all made it plain where we were.

Well, while there's life, there's hope, or so it is said. Illyrians are the worst pirates in the Middle Sea, and suddenly, it occurred to me that if Hasdrubal would just keep sailing up the coast, an Illyrian coaster was bound to attack us. And the gods knew that we wouldn't have lasted a moment in a sea fight – a two-thirds crew of sick slaves and bully-boys as marines.

It has to say something for my state that being taken by Illyrians, who enslaved all captives regardless of social status, was my *hope*.

We were tied together with rope while ashore and put in a stockade, more like a pen, with two armed men as guards. When we were ashore – this was my first time ashore since my first day on board – it

was impossible to keep us from talking. Yet, to my utter puzzlement, none of the other oar-slaves would speak.

Not even a word.

It was the lowest part of the whole experience. I had never seen slaves who would not mutter – who would not rebel in a thousand little ways, even if they were too cowed to rebel in the ways that mattered.

The slaves sat silent, every one of them with their eyes closed.

I moved from man to man, whispering, until a guard came into the pen. I froze, but he'd seen me, and he struck me with his spear shaft – heavy ash. He almost broke my arm. He hit me so hard – I'll just say this as an aside – that he raised a black bruise on the side of the arm *opposite* to the blow, and it covered the arm. It made a nice counterpoint to the ache in my ribs.

I didn't even whimper. I'd learned better.

He laughed. 'Beg me not to hit you again, *pais*. Beg me. Offer to suck my dick.'

Sometimes, having been a slave before saved my life. This was one of those times. A man who'd always been free might have had to knuckle under and been broken – or might have had to resist, and been killed.

I held my head and looked dumb.

He hit me lightly. 'You know what I said!' he grunted.

I held my head, met his eye and then cocked my head to one side.

He sneered. 'Not even your wits left, eh?'

Outside, there were shouts – rage – a scream.

He ran out of the pen and slammed the rickety gate closed.

The palisade was hastily built – badly cut palings rammed into the sand and held together with a heavy rope woven in and out of the palings. I could see. My arm hurt, but I got myself to an edge.

Two other slaves came to look.

The rest just lay still with their eyes closed.

Our guards were running full tilt for the central fire of the camp. One of the Illyrian servants was making for the wood line; another was face down, and experience told me he wasn't ever getting up.

'You're an idiot,' said the Thracian at my elbow. 'Make trouble.'

'Uh,' said the other, a Greek. 'Never fucking talk when they can hear.'

'Sorry,' I muttered.

'Skethes,' said the Thracian.

'Arimnestos,' I said.

'Nestor,' said the Greek. He looked to be fifty years old, and as hard as an old oak tree.

Something was happening at the fire. A woman was screaming.

We couldn't see anything because it was too dark. But we didn't have to.

There was the unmistakable sound of a man being beaten with spear shafts – blows falling like hail on a tent, the hollow sound of a man's head and chest taking them.

And the women, screaming. They were being raped.

One by one, many of the slaves went to sleep.

I couldn't. I lay there and hated.

Towards morning, two more guards opened the pen and threw in the body. It was a man, and he was alive. I didn't have to be a philosopher to figure out that he was one of the Illyrian men, although his face was a swollen pulp and he was covered in weals and blood and shit – his own.

All the slaves woke when he was tossed into the pen. He lay there, bleeding, for a long time. Too damned long.

Finally, I couldn't stand it. I guess I wasn't broken. Again, my experience as a slave helped me because I wasn't shocked and I was learning the 'rules', sick as they were. So I stripped my loincloth off my groin, dipped it in our drinking water – well might you flinch, young woman – and started to wash the man.

I gave him some water when his eyes opened – they were just slits.

He punched me as hard as he could in the nose – my recently broken nose.

He roared some sort of war cry, and Skethes pinned his shoulders and Nestor rammed my loincloth into his mouth.

The guards, watching through the palisade, laughed.

Fuck them, I thought. I had found a way to rebel. I went back to washing the brutalized man.

The three of us got him cleaner, and we dripped some water into him, and when the sun rose above the rim of the world, we fed bread to him, too. By then, he knew where he was. He didn't speak. He was, in fact, in shock.

As soon as the light was strong, we could see the bodies. Six of them. The two girls, the other Illyrian nobleman, two Illyrian

servants or slaves and one of the oar-master's bully-boys, all dead in the sand, with a lot of blood around them.

The oar-master woke the slaves with cold water, and ordered us to bury the bodies.

'You useless fucks,' he went on to his guards, 'can watch them, and you can think about how I'm going to take the price of two blond slave girls out of your pay.' He hit a guard.

The guard flinched.

'Useless coward,' the oar-master said. 'And one of them escaped. So we won't get all their tin, and their war party will come. Your fault!' he screamed. He looked at Kritias. 'If my contact here is killed, I'll sell the lot of you as slaves.'

Really, you have to wonder that someone didn't kill him. But I caught that. I'm still proud I did – neither hate nor shock nor the will of the Gods plugged my ears. Dagon had a contact among the Illyrians.

I must have seemed to be listening too closely.

He struck out with his stick and hit me.

I didn't make a sound.

The guards stood over us and prodded us with their spear points while we dug in the sand. Planting corpses in sand is useless – an offence to gods and men, an invitation to scavengers. But he didn't care, and the trierarch was silent and withdrawn.

We were down into the gravel layer under the sand, and making heavy work of it – we were digging with bare hands and no shovels – when the trierarch came up, stroking his beard.

'A little hasty, attacking guests,' he said. His voice trembled. He was speaking to the oar-master, but since no one on the beach was making a noise, his voice carried. He spoke in Greek, accented, but clear enough.

'You think so?' said the oar-master. He sneered. 'Don't be weak. We need slaves. That's what we are here for. And now we don't have to pay for the tin.' He looked at the wood line. 'Besides, you know as well as I, *my lord*, that his uncle offered us—'

The trierarch spat. 'We are here for iron,' he said primly. 'Not tribal feuds.'

'Bullshit, I'm here for slaves and tin.' The oar-master smiled. 'And we'll get more. The same way. Epidavros has promised.'

'We let them approach as guests,' the trierarch said.

'Don't be weak,' the oar-master said. 'We need Epidavros.'

There was a long pause. I had to assume that Epidavros was the oar-master's contact.

'Why were the women killed?' Hasdrubal asked.

The oar-master shrugged. 'My people got carried away,' he said. 'It won't happen again.'

'See that it doesn't. Now I want out of here.' Hasdrubal gestured at the ship. 'They're too weak to dig gravel with their hands. Leave the bodies. Let's be gone.' He paused, his fear showing even in the way his right foot moved on the sand. 'One escaped. They will attack us.'

The oar-master shrugged his infuriating shrug. I could tell that he, not the trierarch, was actually in command. And the name *Epidavros* stuck in my head. There's a town of that name on Lesbos. I met Briseis there, once. At any rate, he smiled insolently. 'Epidavros won't attack us,' he said. 'Even if he wanted to – it'll be days before he's finished off their relatives.'

The Carthaginian trierarch turned and looked at those of us digging. 'I want the men who killed those women to pay,' he said. 'Those women were worth the value of the rest of our cargo.'

The guard next to me kicked me. 'Work faster, motherfucker,' he spat. He knew his turn was coming, so like a good flunky, he passed his anxiety straight on to a slave.

Hasdrubal pushed us back onto the ship. He switched any slave who was slow getting aboard, and he ordered the oar-master, in a voice suddenly as strong as bronze, to flog the last man on his bench, and when that order was given, we went like a tide up the side and almost swamped the ship.

The Illyrian man could barely walk.

The oar-master ordered me to carry him, thus guaranteeing I would be the last man up the side. And I was. I was naked, my loincloth lost in the night, and he shoved me over a bench and caned me, his stick making that dry, meaty sound as he struck me.

Then he put his head close to mine. 'I can read your thoughts, pais. You take good care of the Illyrian slave. Show me what you are made of. The more you care for him, the longer he'll live for me.' He smiled and let me up. 'He called me a coward, do you know that, pais? So I'll keep him alive a long time, and show him what a man is.'

Somehow, I got the Illyrian onto a bench – the starboard-stern thranite's bench, that had been mine. Lekythos, the biggest guard, pointed at it, and then put me in the bench above.

Now I noticed that a third of the benches were empty. The mad fucks were killing oarsmen and not replacing them.

All we needed was an Illyrian pirate. At worst, he'd kill the lot of us. I really didn't care.

Time passed.

I cared for the Illyrian a little – not really that much. I had to survive myself. I'd like to say the Thracians and the Greek helped, but I never heard a word from them. They were somewhere else – funny that, in a hull only as long as a dozen horses end to end, I had no idea where they were. They weren't among the twenty men I could see when I rowed, and the others around me were silent and utterly broken. In fact, one died. He just expired, and his oar came up and slammed his head and he didn't cry out because he was dead.

I managed to get to the Illyrian in the evening, when the oarsmen were rested, and in the morning, before we began to row. We were off the coast of Illyria now, and we stayed at sea, and every islet on that coast – seen out of the oar-port of the man in front of me – seemed like a potential ship. But our pace never varied, and we rowed on and on. We never raised our boatsail, the small sail in the bow, and we seemed perpetually in motion.

And we never landed.

After a week, the food failed. Suddenly, there was no more barley, much less pig or thin wine. The guards complained and hit us more often.

My Illyrian awoke from whatever torpor had seized him and was given an oar.

We continued north. I assumed it was north – I could seldom see the waves.

The Illyrian didn't know a word of Greek. I tried to teach him, in grunts and whispered bits, but he wasn't listening: he didn't care, and, after a while, I gave up.

The oar-master came to him every day. Stood over him and laughed, and called him a boy and a coward, and told him that he would be sold in Athens to a brothel. But the Illyrian was too far gone, and spoke no Greek, so he endured the abuse.

Another day, he was told he was rowing out of time and beaten, and then beaten for crying out.

You know that feeling you get in the gut, when another man gets what should be yours? That feeling you have when you hear a good

man abused? The feeling between your shoulders when a woman screams for help?

When you are a slave, all that happens. For a while. But by taking away from you your ability to respond to these, they take your honour. After a while, a man can be beaten to death an arm's-length away and you don't even clench your stomach muscles.

On and on.

We rowed.

We rowed all the way up the coast of Illyria and Dalmatia, and men continued to die, and we rowed without food for a while, as I say. It's hard to tell this, not just because it's all so low and disgusting, but because there's nothing on which to seize. Abuse was routine. Pain was routine. Men hit us, and we rowed. Our muscles ached, and we rowed. Sometimes we slept, and that was as good as our lives ever were.

We came to an archipelago of islets, and they had small villages on them. Finally, we landed. None of us was allowed ashore, and all I can say is that after a time, a dozen slaves and some food came onto the ship and some copper was unloaded.

And then it all happened again.

My Illyrian was moved out of the stern-post rowing station, and I was moved back to the upper deck, and we rowed. There was food. That seemed good.

We rowed.

We made another landfall, and were beached again. This place had a ready-built palisade for slaves, and we could see it was full from our benches, with forty or fifty male slaves waiting to be sold.

Our Illyrian looked at the beach and wept.

We were pushed ashore, roped together and put in the palisade. By luck, I was roped to the Greek, Nestor.

After darkness fell, and the guards went off to fuck the female slaves in another pen – I call these things by their proper names, children, and may you never know what slavery is! – we lay side by side, and whispered very quietly.

'Still alive, brother?' he said.

'Yes,' I said.

He nodded in the dark, so close I could feel it more than see it. 'Good,' he said. 'I was thinking,' he went on. 'Arimnestos is an odd name. Where you from?'

Where was I from? May I tell you the truth, friends? I hadn't thought of home, of *anything*, for weeks.

'Plataea,' I said, and it was as if a dam opened in my head and thoughts poured in. My forge, my wife, the night she died, the fire.

The *Pyrrhiche* and how we danced it. The feel of a spear in my hand.

'You are Arimnestos of Plataea?' he asked. 'By the gods!' he muttered. 'I'm a man who's been a slave his whole life, but you! A gent!'

'I've been a slave before,' I said.

'Ahh,' he said, and nodded again. 'Ahh . . . that's why you are alive.'

We ate better after that port. We were also a lighter ship by the weight of our Cyprian copper, and we had forty more rowers, fresher men who hadn't been abused. Indeed, there were too many for the oar-master to ruin them all at once, and we had easier lives for a week.

We rowed.

Not one man died that week. That's all I can say.

We made one more port call. None of us was allowed on the beach, and we picked up women – twenty women, all Keltoi with tattoos. They were filthy, hollow-eyed, and the first night at sea the oar-master discovered one was pregnant, and he killed her on the deck and threw her corpse over the side. I don't know why, even now.

The bully-boys forced the slave women every night. Sometimes these acts happened a few feet over my head. The despair, the sheer horror that those women experienced was somehow worse than any of the blows I had received because it was all so casual. They were used like . . . like old cloaks to keep off rain.

And none of us could do a thing.

Or perhaps what is worse is that we *could have* done something, if we had been willing to die. Die without revenge – die nameless, achieving nothing, our bodies dumped in the sea. That would have taken a special courage I didn't have. But it took yet more of my honour. I was a *slave*.

Then we turned south. I was moved to a stern oar on the top deck, and I, who feared no man in war, was terrified to be so close to the oar-master. Indeed, I was just a few steps from him at all times.

Luckily, he was mad. So mad, he'd forgotten me and the Illyrian both. He hated women – all women – far more than he hated us. So

while I had to witness his brutal degradation of the slave women, I was merely beaten occasionally, as an afterthought. Tapped with his heavy stick when he was bored.

After some time – by Zeus the Saviour, I have no idea how far south we'd come – the oar-master cut the throats of a pair of the women in a sacrifice. He did it in the bow, and I never knew exactly what happened. But after that, the other women stopped being alive. That is to say, they were still warm and breathing, but they were dead inside. A few days later they started to die.

The trierarch simply let it happen.

Sometimes he reacted in anger and hit a slave, but mostly he just fingered his beard and watched the heavens. His two helmsmen said little.

From their stilted conversations, I gathered that we were on our way home, and that home was Carthage.

And I began to learn other things.

I was a good navigator – my best helmsman and friends had taught me well enough – but the Phoenicians have secrets about navigation, and they hold them close. They use stars and the sun. All of us do, but they do it with far more accuracy than we Greeks. Now, since Marathon, we've taken enough of their ships to enslave a generation of their navigators, and we have all their secrets, but back then there were still tricks we didn't know: the aiming stick for taking the height of a star, or the secrets of the Pleiades and the Little Bear. Ah – I see that the lad from Halicarnassus knows whereof I speak!

But the helmsmen and the trierarch were careless. They took their sun sights and their star sights a few feet from my silent back, and they discussed their sightings. Hamilcar, the younger helmsman, was obviously under instruction and very slow. I think – I will never know – that he was so deeply unhappy with the life he was living that his brain had shut down.

And Hasdrubal, the trierarch, used him as his scapegoat. Every wrong answer was punished with a blow. His every thought and opinion was ridiculed.

Another week at sea, and the new slaves began to be broken. Our rations were cut – I can't even remember why, just the satisfied voice of the oar-master telling us that we deserved it.

We rowed.

Another week.

But the navigational lessons at my back had begun to keep

me alive. They gave my brain something on which to seize. And Hamilcar's obstinate ignorance became my closest friend, because my understanding of the Phoenician tongue – bad to start with – became more proficient, and because Hamilcar needed everything repeated two or three times, three days in a row. Bless him.

One night, the sea grew rougher and the wind came from all directions, and after a while, rowing grew dangerous. A new slave below me lost the stroke, got his oar-handle in the teeth and died. His oar went mad, and other men were injured. None of us was very strong, and the sea was against us – and suddenly the bully-boys were afraid, and they showed their fear by beating us with sticks and spear butts.

The wind steadied down from the north, but it grew stronger and stronger.

We got our stern into the wind by more luck than skill, and suddenly, we had to row or die.

'Do you want to die, you scum!' roared the oar-master. He laughed and laughed. 'If you die, I die too!' he shouted. 'Here's your chance! Rebel, and we all go down to Hades together – you as slaves, and me as your master!'

The trierarch and the two helmsmen had three shouted conferences on the spray-blown deck that convinced me we were close to the coast of Africa – too damned close to be running before a north wind. But the oarsmen were badly trained and brutalized, and the officers were shit – pardon me, ladies – and the trierarch didn't have the balls to try anything. So on we rushed, the oars just touching the water to keep our stern into the wind.

After some time – it was dark, cold and wet and all I knew was the fire in my arms – one of the Keltoi women stepped over me and jumped over the side. I saw her face in a flash of lightning – she was Medea come to life. To me, that face is printed for ever on my thoughts the way a man writes on papyrus, or carves in stone. It was set with purpose – hate, determination, agony and even a tiny element of joy. She was gone before my heart beat again, sucked under by Poseidon. To a kinder place, I hope.

But something passed from her to me. Her courage, I think.

Right there, in the storm, I swore an oath to the gods.

And we rowed.

We took a lot of water, but we weren't lucky enough to sink. About a third of our oarsmen drowned or died under their oars, and yet

somehow we made it. The bully-boys threw the corpses over the side, and cut the oars free, too. And on we went.

The morning dawned blue and gold, and we were alive.

After that, there was no food and only about eighty whole men to row, and we were on the deep blue. We rowed, and we rowed, and we rowed.

I should have been dead, or nearly dead. But the Keltoi slave woman had told me something with her eyes – I can hardly put this into words. That resistance was worthy. Perhaps, that I could always restore my dignity with death. Either way, I was coming to my senses.

And of course, my brain was engaged, too. I had taken to listening to the men at the steering oars, and now I was interested. Hasdrubal talked about the trade – about how the tin was no longer coming in from northern Illyria in the old amounts, and how the Greeks were trying to cut into the trade from Alba, and that interested me. He talked about new sources of copper down the coast of Africa and up the coast of Iberia, outside the Gates of Herakles, and I discovered, from listening to him, that Africa was much bigger than I had imagined.

I had no cross-staff with which to try calculations, but I used my fingers. Star lessons happened at night, just a horse-length at my back. I was careful, but I tried their sightings as I got the hang of their method.

It worked.

Mind you, it wasn't that I'd ever needed to do such esoteric navigation, and if Hasdrubal hadn't been such a poor sailor, neither would he! He was a fine navigator, but a dreadful sailor. We always knew where we were, but we never seemed to be able to move from where we were to where we needed to be. And a big trireme – even a twenty-oared boat – can't hold enough food to feed its oarsmen for even a few days and nights. This is why all ships coast – they go from beach to beach, buying food from locals, whether they are a tubby merchantman with four oarsmen and a dozen sailors to a fleet of warships with two hundred oarsmen apiece – the ironclad rules of *logistika* are the same either way.

But I digress.

After some more time – I have no idea how long – we came to Carthage. I'll tell you about Carthage in good time, but when I first rowed that ship in between the fortress and the mole, I saw nothing.

I was not really alive. I was a human machine that pulled an oar, silent, unthinking, at least by day.

The hull bumped the wharf.

The trierarch had the gangplank rigged, and then he, his two helmsmen and the oar-master walked off the ship. An hour later, after we'd grilled in the African sun, twenty soldiers – *Poieni*, which is their word for citizen infantry, like our hoplites – came to the ship and ordered us off. Many of us could not walk.

The phylarch shook his head. 'Useless fuck. These men are ruined.' He spat. Came and looked at me. He pointed at my legs.

My once-mighty legs were like sticks.

'Look at this one,' he said. 'Good-size man. Filthy, lice, and hasn't been allowed exercise.' He shook his head. 'Hasdrubal is a useless fool. Sell this lot to anyone who will take them.'

And with that, he took the surviving women and marched them away. That left another man in charge, and he averted his eyes and his nose and ordered those of us who could walk to carry the rest. I ended up carrying the Illyrian. I have been back to that spot – we only walked about fifty horse-lengths. Less than a stade.

I remember it as being more like fifty stades. It went on for ever. Oddly, they never struck us, and one of the Poieni asked us why we were so silent.

No one spoke.

We were put in stone slave pens with a roof and shade. There was water in which to bathe, drinking water and a shit-hole. I saw men break there – men who had been free and were now slaves.

But for us, fresh from Hasdrubal's grim trireme, it was like the Elysian Fields. We had barley porridge for dinner and again at breakfast, and red wine so thin it was like water. It made me drunk, so I laughed and sang the Paean of Apollo. I was the first to give way to sound. After a second helping of that awful wine, a dozen men were grunting at my song. Or my attempt at song.

We passed out. But in the morning, I found that the Illyrian was curled tight against me, and the Greek, Nestor, was lying against the wall with the Thracian.

Nestor looked me in the eye. 'We lived,' he said quietly.

The Thracian grunted.

'Now,' I said, 'we need to get free.'

Both men nodded.

And the Illyrian stiffened. '*Eleuthera*,' he said. Freedom. Free. That's what we thought.