

A dramatic night scene of a burning stone castle. A large, full moon hangs in the dark sky on the left. The castle, constructed of stone, is engulfed in flames, with bright orange and yellow fire consuming its towers and walls. Smoke rises from the burning structure. In the foreground, a dark, rocky beach is visible, with some fire burning on the ground. The overall atmosphere is one of destruction and tragedy.

HEIKE WOLFF

ASHES OF CRETE

istolé

A Bronze Age epic. One woman facing the fall of Crete.

"Crete," I murmured,
"Crete," and my heart beat fast.

Nikos Kazantzakis in Alexis Sorbas, 1946

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Storm at the Libyan Coast

The winter seemed without end. For weeks, the days dissolved into one another, each steeped in a different, joyless grey. Storms chased low-hanging clouds across the sea. At times they relented for a few hours, only to return with renewed fury, churning the sea and driving leaden waves hard against the coastal rocks. Rain pounded relentlessly on the twisted juniper trees in the dunes and the ramshackle mud huts scattered among them. It bore fine desert sand, depositing a brown film that settled into every crack and cloth.

Undaunted by the crashing breakers, a woman stood on the shore. Her rounded shoulders and broad stance betrayed that she had seen many years, yet there was something regal in the way she held her chin high. Her bare feet remained just beyond the foamy fringe of the waves rolling onto the beach. Every morning, she came here, gazing at the ship pitching in the stormy sea beyond the jagged reef. She wrapped herself in a patterned blanket of red, orange, and violet against the damp chill. A colourful scarf tamed her grey yet still thick hair. *Against the endless grey, she stood like a promise – that this winter, too, would pass; that sea and sky would recover their blue and turquoise; that the rosy shell sand would once again drink in the sun's warmth.*

Not far away, raindrops seeped through the thatched roof under which Captain Makar sat, watching the woman. Strands of silver threaded his shoulder-length hair. His lean body bore the marks of years of hard labour, though boredom had long since drained him of vitality. Absentmindedly, he swirled the strong wine in his cup. It

was far too early for a drink, yet the warm burn in his belly helped him endure the endless weeks stranded in this peasant village of muddy paths and soot-blackened huts. In the beginning, when the storm had battered his ship, claiming a third of his men and leaving his hull in shambles, there had been enough work to keep him occupied. He traded the remnants of his cargo for timber to repair the damage. Eager hands had been easy to hire – men lured by the promise of adventure and foreign lands. But since then, the days had blurred one into the next: endless storm, rain, and damp cold seeping into his bones. And the infernal sand. He ran his tongue over his teeth, but the gritty sensation lingered. Age was beginning to make itself felt: his joints stiffened in the mornings, and the damp cold crept deep into his bones. He longed for thick stone walls and a hearth that burned through the night. All that held him here was the weather. One clear day, and he would leave this wretched place behind.

He took another sip, hoping to rinse away the roughness.

“May I join you?”

Makar set his cup down. The woman in the colourful blanket was standing in front of his table.

“Be my guest.” He gestured to the seat across from him and studied her more closely.

The wrinkles that age had carved into her face revealed a hard yet joyful life. She was older than he had first thought – perhaps as old as his Mother would have been, had she still been alive. She eased onto the cushion stiffly, tucking her legs beneath her with effort. As she did so, the blanket slipped from her shoulders, revealing an eye-catching necklace from which three agate beads dangled.

“The usual?” asked the bearded man who ran the house, offering travellers a thin brew of sage leaves, wine, and, if one was lucky, something to eat.

A glint sparked in her eyes. “I’ll have the same as him.” Her voice was raspy, and not just because of the guttural

dialect spoken here.

She remained silent until the drink arrived. Makar wondered why she had joined him. In all the weeks he had spent under this roof, this was the first time she had approached him. He had seen her standing at the shore, staring out at his ship. At some point, she had started greeting him with a nod.

When the wine was placed before her, she raised her cup to him. A thin, pale scar on her forearm caught his eye – an old wound.

“The rain will end tomorrow,” she said, to his surprise, in his own language. The words emerged haltingly, as if unused for years. “Then you will sail for Crete.”

“You’re well-informed.”

“Take me with you.” She said it plainly, leaving no doubt she meant it.

Makar laughed. “Why would I do that? You’re an old woman. I doubt you’d survive the journey.”

“You won’t regret it. Here.” She removed the necklace and pushed it to the centre of the table.

Makar let it lie.

“It means a great deal to me. But getting to Crete one last time means more.”

“So you’ve been to the island before?” he replied inquisitively.

“I want to die there.”

“Are you serious?” he asked, incredulous.

“Let me tell you my story.”

Rain drummed on the thatched roof, and the sea hurled itself against the cliffs. The day stretched before him, empty and grey. Whatever she had to tell him, it could do no harm to listen.

She took another sip, as if gathering her courage. Eyes fixed on the horizon, she began:

“Whenever I think of Crete, my heart beats faster. Longing drives me to the shore. Sand presses between my toes as

the waves reach my feet, and I look north. There it lies, my island, my home. I no longer know how many years have passed since I last walked its red earth or breathed the scent of cedar and laurel. I've lost count. The days here pass like waves. Behind me stretches a barren land, dry as far as the eye can see. All year, wind blasts dust into our faces, stinging eyes and ears. How I miss the olive groves with their silvery shimmering leaves, the rugged peaks crowned with snow lingering well into the year, and the burbling streams in the oak forests. I remember our city on the hill - paved paths, plastered walls painted with vibrant scenes of joy and beauty. The sea, like a gleaming mirror to the left, the mountains rising to the right, and whose name I bear. Between them, fertile land, a lush garden offering its bounty to the people. Sea and mountains endure eternally, but my Crete is no more. Phaistos has fallen. Here, on this foreign shore, I tell its story - so that someone will remember when I no longer can."

The Eve of the Equinox

My story begins in spring on Mount Kofinas, the holy mountain. Like an upturned basket, its stony summit rests upon the ridge that borders the plain to the south. Its peak inclines toward the sea in salutation. From far off it appears smooth and welcoming. From its base, the jagged rocks rise like a vast palisade meant to bar the way.

I remember the sky vaulting above us, a searing blue, and the sea meeting the horizon in a razor-straight line. Deep below, the plain unfolded east and west, its margins hinted at by pale village shapes. Northward, the great mountains towered, their heads still wrapped in snow.

On the summit plateau, I was helping Pareia prepare the ceremony for the return of the light. Tomorrow, light and darkness would be in perfect balance. The sun would rise over the eastern edge of the plateau and set directly opposite. On this day, we'd beseech Ilithyia for bountiful crops, thriving livestock, and healthy children. The heat had intensified with each passing year, and last summer had brought the most terrible drought in living memory. The grain withered in the fields, and the fruit trees shed their leaves under the autumn sky. Their fruit remained small and hard. For the first time in my life, the shallow lake in the plain dried up. The Lithaios, which fed it and supplied Phaistos with water, dwindled to a scattering of rivulets before vanishing altogether. The pithoi stood empty, and mice scampered across the bare floors of the storehouses. The people of Phaistos needed a fruitful year. This time, failure was not an option. If the gods did not heed our prayers, children would starve next winter. The elderly would waste away.

Pareia was winding olive branches around the twin axes beside the altar. "You're exuding joy, Ide," she said.

"With good cause," I replied, knotting cloth panels to the supports to form a canopy that would shade Father's and Grandfather's seats tomorrow.

"The captain?"

I nodded. Since the harvest festival last autumn, I had been seeing Geros, the supreme captain of my Father's fleet. Geros always had an answer for everything. He stood by his convictions. And when he laughed, dimples appeared in his cheeks.

"The season of winter storms is nearly over."

I swallowed. The thought had been lodged in my throat for days, like a piece of poorly chewed bread. Geros was preparing the ships. In just a few weeks, he would set sail for Egypt. "Tomorrow, we will tell Father that we belong together and ask permission for the wedding ceremony to be held before Geros goes to sea. Then you will bring us the blessing of the gods." I lifted my head and smiled at her. As High Priestess, Pareia led every ritual. When I ascended the throne of Phaistos after Father's death, with Geros at my side, it would be her duty to call upon the gods.

She placed the twin axe into its holder. "It's about time he took a bride. At his age and in his position, it's fitting for a man to start a family." She jabbed a finger towards me. "And you're a good catch, little sister."

"He loves me," I said, smiling. "And I love him. With him, I feel whole, as if a part of me has returned that I never knew was missing. Do you understand?" "Besides," I remembered fondly, "he dances like Welchanos himself."

"Our people do not marry for love. Marriage is an alliance – one that secures the future of the kingdom. That is how Geros understands it, and it is how you must learn to see it. You should choose a more suitable match. The younger son of Kydon, perhaps."

Clever. Calculating. Cold-hearted. That was Pareia. Of all people, Kydon, whose realm Kydonia lay in the northwest of Crete. Years ago, when our grain stores had been infested with beetles, Father had travelled there, hoping to exchange wool for pithoi of barley. Kydon had refused to share his surplus, even though he continued trading with the islands. That summer, many people in Phaistos starved.

I decided to ignore her remark. I wouldn't let her provoke me. Not this time. "Geros is the right choice. When Father is gone, we will rule Phaistos together. His knowledge of Egypt and the eastern kingdoms will help us forge strong alliances."

Pareia's expression made it clear she still saw me as the little girl who once played with wooden dolls wrapped in goatskin.

"Father is old. He makes poor decisions," I said defiantly.

"How can you speak of Father like that? Watch your tongue, sister."

"He's neglected our ties with Knossos. An alliance with them would protect us, especially in these times. I hear the grumbling every day. You should hear what Gnosilas says in the scribes' workshop."

"You think you understand governance? You were playing with dolls just yesterday."

I swallowed her biting sarcasm. That was just how Pareia was – always believing she alone knew best. If I wanted to rule Phaistos with Geros, I had to convince her. So I continued.

"They claim it is for trade," I said. "But fleets are not built for peace alone. And what about ours? Every time the earth shakes and a tidal wave follows, we lose ships. Every winter takes more from us, and we're not building new ones. The people are hungry, and hunger breeds rebellion."

"Welchanos's wrath."

"Think about it! Geros, an experienced captain, is the perfect choice."

Geros had told me about the Egyptians – what they had built while our ancestors still lived in scattered hamlets. Pyramids taller than the hill on which Phaistos stood.

“I want to have irrigation channels dug to water the fields when the Lithaios runs low. They’ll be fed by the river and the springs. The hunger will end. We need to build new ships. Then we can trade with Alasiya and Ugarit.” Both lands lay so far to the east that a full moon would wax and wane while Geros sailed there. Alasiya was even larger than Crete. From there, we obtained copper sheets shaped like ox hides. Ugarit bordered the sea to the east. It was said that from there, one could walk endlessly over land without ever reaching another shore. I thought that was just another of those wild tales told around the winter fires. “We can offer them cedar wood and olive oil, and in return, buy metals and spices. And you, dear sister,” I touched her arm, “will speak to the gods and ask for their blessing.”

Pareia curled her lips in disdain. “You will be nothing more than a puppet on the throne, with your handsome Geros pulling the strings.”

“How can you say that? Geros is loyal to our Father, and he will be loyal to me too. Because what I plan is right. Because he loves me.”

“Keep your illusions to yourself.” Pareia surveyed our work. “We’re finished. I’ll set up the offering bowls. You can go off to your hero.”

Some days, I barely had the patience to endure Pareia’s scorn, her relentless taunts. But today, on the eve of my favourite festival, her spiteful words stung painfully. Maybe that’s why I replied more sharply than I intended: “You understand nothing of love. Maybe you should find a man yourself – then you’d know how wonderful it is when someone shares your dreams.”

I turned and climbed down from the plateau. Here and there, our ancestors had carved steps into the rock. The path was barely visible, and I had to use my hands to steady

myself. As I climbed, I checked that the torches were firmly wedged in the rock crevices, for tomorrow we would ascend in darkness.

In the fading light of the setting sun, our encampment sprawled across the saddle at the foot of the Kofinas. I stopped atop the rocks, taking in the scene below.

Our tents lined the perimeter. Pareia and I shared one, as did Father and Grandfather. People clustered around fires, huddled under blankets or talking in hushed groups. Children darted between them, their laughter a rare contrast to the sombre murmurs. By their clothing, I recognized inhabitants of Phaistos as well as farmers from the villages at the edge of the plain. A few sailors from Geros's ship kicked a ball back and forth, but I didn't see Geros himself. There were a few smaller tents, but most slept in the open. Somewhere, a baby whimpered.

The Return of the Light was our most sacred festival. Everyone wanted to be there and catch a glimpse of the ritual, even though the plateau couldn't accommodate so many people.

A tension hung over the camp, clinging like cold fog. Voices were low and edged with sharpness, and when laughter broke out, it faded almost at once. I missed the lively energy of past years. Something was stirring among the people of Phaistos.

"Ide! Ide!" A high-pitched voice snapped me out of my thoughts. Between the rocks,

Lydi, my friend Ayra's daughter, clambered up towards me, reaching for my hand. "Come quickly! Kairomenes is telling the story of the fire-mountain." The little girl tugged at my arm.

"Then let's go and hear what he has to say," I said, ruffling her hair.

Lydi was like a little sister to me. She adored animals, and I often took her with me to tend to my horse or feed my pet monkey. As I did, I imagined what it would be like if Geros

and I had children of our own. Would he awaken in them the same curiosity for the world that Grandfather Kairomenes had nurtured in me?

With Lydi clinging to my hand, I made my way down the slope.

At the base of the rocks, Ayra leant against the stone, waiting. As soon as she saw us, she pulled Lydi into an embrace, pressing the girl against her hip. "You mustn't run off like that," she chided gently. "Especially not here, where one misstep could send you tumbling down the cliffs."

"But tomorrow I want to climb up, too!"

"We talked about this, remember? We're going to stay in the camp." Ayra bent down to meet Lydi's gaze. It pained me because I knew she couldn't squat due to her stiff leg, for which I was to blame.

"But I want to see the ceremony," Lydi pouted.

"I can take her up with me," I offered.

"Yes! Please, Mother, please!" Lydi bounced excitedly.

Ayra sighed. "Very well. But you must obey Ide."

"I always do!"

I smiled. "I need to check on Grandfather. He's telling his stories again and probably forgotten his cloak."

Together, Lydi and I hurried down the slope. Over my shoulder, I glanced back at Ayra. She followed slowly, feeling her way, one leg at a time. She gestured for me to go on ahead.

As we wove between the tents, we nearly stumbled upon a group of men with a defiant stance. Gnosilas, the scribe, gestured towards my Father's tent. The moment he saw me, he fell silent. The others crossed their arms and glared.

Whatever they had been discussing, it had not been meant for my ears.

Four days a week, I worked in Gnosilas' scriptorium at the harbour, tallying the records on clay tablets against the actual goods in our storerooms. My Father used to oversee this work himself, but for the past four years, he had

entrusted the task to me, rarely appearing in the scriptorium anymore.

“Keep a careful watch,” he had instructed me. “One week, count the pithoi of grain; the next, the amphorae of wine. Let the knucklebones decide what you inspect, so no one can predict your choice. Scribes and merchants are a wily lot.”

In all that time, I had only noticed one minor irregularity at the beginning, and to this day, I wasn’t sure if Gnosilas had deliberately marked it on the tablet to test my vigilance. At first, he and his assistants had eyed me warily, but over time, they forgot my presence. That was how I caught snippets of conversation not meant for the ears of the Archon’s daughter.

And that was why I longed to know what they had just been saying.

A chill of foreboding ran down my spine. I tightened my grip on Lydi’s hand and hurried on.

Sure enough, Grandfather’s hare-fur cloak lay on the bed inside the tent.

“Come!” Lydi urged from outside. “I want to hear the story!”

I grabbed the cloak and followed her.

Grandfather sat by the fire, dressed only in his tunic, with barearmed sweeping gestures, his voice rising above the crackling flames, telling his favourite tale – the story of Thera.

“I saw the cloud from the slopes of Mount Psiloritis,” he declared. “I was just a boy, but the sight of it filled me with terror, and I hid behind my Mother’s legs.”

Kairomenes had told this story countless times. I could recite every word by heart. Yet he had once again drawn a circle of enraptured listeners.

“Like a colossal pillar, grey clouds were rising, as if the underworld itself had burst open and Potnia herself was

hurling darkness upon the world. High above they spread, darkening the very heavens.”

The listeners gasped, and Lydi squeezed my hand tighter.

“Again and again, the earth trembled – so violently that Mother stumbled and I fell to my knees. Bolts of lightning flashed from the cloud, weaving a net of fire across the distant sky – and I was glad to be far from the gods’ wrath. The sea rose up in fury and swallowed half our fleet. The next day, torrents of rain fell. We wondered what had provoked Welchanos’s ire.” Kairomenes slumped in silence.

For a while, the listeners waited, wondering if he would speak further. A log split in the fire, sending sparks dancing upward.

“This must be the curse of Welchanos,” whispered a woman.

A flicker crossed Grandfather’s gaze – though I could not tell whether it was the fire – and he lifted his head to look at the speaker.

“You are right. We are indeed cursed... at least for now.”

The people shifted uneasily in their seats. I resolved to end this grim tale and draped Grandfather’s cloak about his shoulders.

“All shall be well,” I said. “Tomorrow we shall celebrate the return of the Light.”

“Nothing shall be well!” he cried, flinging the cloak aside. The woman stepped back and made the sign against evil. “We shall perish! Death and damnation will befall us!” He spat and coughed – a cough that had plagued him since last summer, no matter what herbs Menon had given him.

I motioned for the others to depart and retrieved the cloak. “Come, Grandfather, I will take you to your tent.” Reluctantly, he allowed himself to be wrapped in it and led away. Lydi followed us like a shadow.

Inside the tent, I helped him onto his bed, raising his legs. “Rest now. Tomorrow will be a good day.” I stroked his cheek, the wrinkled skin felt like parchment.

"Ide," he murmured, gripping my arm. His strong hold startled me. "Don't forget: you can achieve all you desire."

He had said this so many times before. I brushed a grey lock from his brow – his hair had become thin and wispy, yet it still curled as in days of old. "Now sleep," I urged.

Obediently, he closed his eyes and turned onto his side.

One of the palace servants stepped in tentatively. "Do you require any help?"

"Stay with him, Naran, and watch over his sleep."

At the tent's entrance, Lydi was still lingering, biting the knuckles of her clenched fist, her eyes wide, "Is he right? Are we all going to die?"

"Someday, surely. But not today."

She shifted from foot to foot. "I'm hungry."

I nodded. "It is time for the first harvest to be gathered. Come."

We went into my tent, and I offered Lydi a piece of my bread. It was not the first time – I still recall how often I sneaked into the bakehouse or filched a morsel of meat in the kitchen so that Lydi and Ayra would not go hungry. Always secretly, so that no one else noticed it. Lydi pressed the crust against her breast. "Why is it that you always have food, Ide, and we have none?"

What answer could I give? Was it because I was the daughter of Oreichares, the Archon of Phaistos? How should a little girl understand such things? I drew her close before gazing upon her heartshaped little face. "Share it with your Mother."

Lydi nodded and scurried away. I sank back into the soft covers of my bed.

In one respect, Grandfather was right – something had changed, though I doubted it was due to Welchanos's wrath. I remembered years of abundance: grapevines bending low under heavy clusters, grain ripening thick, sheep and goats thriving. In the storehouses, pithoi brimmed to the very

edge. No one had to suffer hunger in winter. Those days, alas, were many years past.

Dry summers had withered the fields; the animals found no water and perished. Grandfather insisted it all began on the day the underworld opened upon Thera. I drew a deep breath. This was not the evening for sorrowful thoughts. Tomorrow, the light would return – with it the buoyancy of spring and the fullness of summer. I loved this festival for its joy, and I longed to feel that joy once more. I yearned for colour in life – even if just for one night and one day – before the drudgery of every day cares returned. There was but one who made my life more vibrant. So, I smoothed my dress and left the tent to seek out Geros and enjoy the festival with him.

I found him amid his men at the edge of the encampment, engaged in a game of Twenty Fields. Geros had brought from Egypt a wooden box filled with figures and counting bones. He called the game Tau, and he played it gladly – for it reminded him of his Father. On long winter evenings, the two of us would often sit together and play.

His opponent was his uncle Vafis, who was at that moment leaping his piece – a little hound – beyond the target field. The others cheered with delight. Already two hounds sat by the box, while seven falcons perched upon the board. As a child, I had feared Vafis; his mottled skin gave him the appearance of a serpent.

Geros scratched his neck – the habit he always had when pressed for a move. He gathered the counting bones and cast them. Three marks lay face up. Unable to make a move, he was forced to return a falcon to its starting square.

I watched the game, spellbound. Vafis could only advance one space.

Before he could roll again, Geros winked at me – a four. He reached for a piece, but it was not the right one. Leaning in, I whispered the next move into his ear, and he guided a falcon safely to its goal. The men erupted in cheers.

From that moment on, fortune seemed to favour Geros. Falcon after falcon he got safely home, while only one further hound managed to make it home. Vafis congratulated him and slid a ring his way. When I lost, Geros would receive a kiss.

"Enough for today," said Geros, gathering the pieces and bones back into the box. The men dispersed. "You brought me luck." Drawing me close, he buried his nose in my hair.

We descended the hill that bordered the camp to the west until we came upon an olive tree. Its gnarled roots formed a sheltered hollow where we sat. The night wind carried to us the plaintive strains of a lyre. A shiver passed over me, and I leant into him.

"If fortune smiles upon us, then perhaps tomorrow will be the right time – after the ceremony, at the feast."

Silence.

I listened to his steady breaths. "I would like to speak with Father before you set out again," I said.

Geros loved the vastness of the sea; on land, he felt like a bird with a broken wing. Each summer I stood upon the shore, gazing into the endless blue, and prayed that Asasara – the protector of seafarers – would bring him home safely. That cost seemed trivial if it meant he would return to me.

Geros withdrew his hand and looked at me. In the reddish glow of the fire, his eyes were sorrowful. "You mean everything to me, Ide – you know that," he murmured, tucking a stray lock behind my ear.

"Precisely because I know," I replied, taking his hand in mine. "I fear for you when you are out there. None can fathom what may come to pass in these troubled times. Once I am your wife, I will have peace of mind."

"I am of common blood – there is nothing royal in me. I doubt your Father will be pleased with your choice."

"Yet he shall be content. He cannot reign forever. Even now, I see how the weight of his office burdens him, how much longer it takes him to make decisions he once made

without a second thought. He values your counsel, and he will be glad if you stand by my side. Together, we may lead Phaistos to new strength."

"Never before has a woman held the throne of Phaistos."

"And yet in the land of your Father, a queen does reign."

Geros nodded, taking his time to respond. His thumb kept tracing the contours of my knuckles. "I doubt this will be your decision," he finally said.

"Of course, I will decide as I must – like my Mother, or like Pareia who became High Priestess. I will not wed just any ruler's son from Kydonia or Knossos. The Achaeans offer their daughters as mere cattle for exchange – but not us!" I raged inwardly.

"I know well," he murmured, stroking my face as a thoughtful look crossed his features.

"What ails you?"

Geros withdrew his hand, reached into his pocket, and produced a necklace. On a silver cord were strung three smooth agate beads.

"Here," he said, "I have kept this for you these many days." He fastened the necklace about my neck, securing it at the nape. "The time never seemed right until now."

My fingers caressed the smooth beads. For so long I had longed for a token from him – a keepsake to remember him by during his absences at sea. "But why now?" I asked aloud.

He was silent for a long while, and when he finally spoke, his reply seemed detached from my question. "It is said that the Achaeans intend to set forth against Crete."

"I think not."

"They are assembling a fleet at Mycenae and Tiryns."

"Yes, for trade."

Geros shook his head. "No – it is not for trade."

I was raised in an era of peace, with tales of war reaching us only from distant Egypt and Byblos. Though our fleet was

large, our warriors lacked battle experience. We sailed across the seas, trading goods with far-off nations.

“Then we must surely speak with Father. Should war come and harm befall him, we can protect the people of Phaistos. The fleet will be under your command – and I have been known from my youth; none doubt the legitimacy of my reign.” I grasped his arm. “Geros, if what you say is true, then our union will not only seal our love but secure our people’s future.”

Geros traced my cheek with his fingertips, and without another word, he kissed me. What I did not know then was that this would be our last happy moment for a long, long time.

The Return of the Light

Pareia woke me long before sunrise. I felt as if I had barely slept. A biting chill hung over the camp, and I shivered as I sat up. Pareia poured herself a brew of ten sacred herbs, the same concoction she drank before every ritual. Its musty scent filled the tent. As a child, I had once secretly tasted it. It was as vile as it smelt, and aside from making me nauseous for an entire day, it had done nothing. But Pareia swore by its power. The herbs, she claimed, either opened the path to the gods – or closed it forever.

I helped her into the ceremonial gown, its skirt cascading in five tiers down to the ground, each tier woven with alternating black and yellow squares. A sand-coloured apron wrapped around her waist. The most striking feature was the bodice, a rich blend of deep red and black, enveloping her arms and shoulders but leaving her breasts exposed, as tradition demanded. Once, they had been full and firm. Now, they had begun to droop with age.

I dressed in my own festival robe, its cloth striped in blue and white, ending in a red border that symbolized the sacred earth.

When we were both ready, I brushed her hair, twisting the strands into tight curls using a heated bronze rod. The dark locks cascaded in shimmering spirals down her back. I had always envied Pareia's hair. It was black as obsidian, while mine had a brownish hue and never stayed in place no matter how I tried to tame it.

We spoke little on these mornings. Pareia had to gather her thoughts for the ritual, and I was grateful for the silence – I had never been fond of waking before the sun.

Outside our tent, Ayra was already waiting, Lydi at her side. The girl hopped eagerly from foot to foot, her excitement barely restrained.

"What is she doing here?" Pareia asked, deliberately ignoring Ayra.

"I'm taking Lydi up to the summit with me," I said.

"You?" she responded sharply.

"Ayra can't manage the climb with her leg, and - "

"I forbid it!" Pareia snapped.

"You cannot stop me," I shot back. It was too early in the morning to bicker with Pareia.

Pareia spun on her heel, snatched up an oil lamp, and strode towards the plateau, lighting the torches one by one as she ascended. Their flames marked the path we would soon follow. The ritual required that she stand alone at the altar, chewing on laurel leaves to amplify the power of her herbal brew.

I, on the other hand, went to Father and Grandfather's tent. Around us, the camp was stirring. Voices murmured sleepily. Metal clinked as pots were moved. The air was scented with a blend of sea salt and the fading embers from last night's fires.

Two women passed me. They fell silent and averted their eyes.

It wasn't the first time I had noticed this. Their faces were drawn tight, their expressions wary. Something had changed over the past few days. The unease of last night still lingered. I longed for the usual festival spirit - the cheerful chatter, the barely contained anticipation. Instead, tension stretched over us like a taut rope.

"Wait here," I said to Lydi, then pushed aside the tent flap.

Inside, Naran was helping my Grandfather into a tunic embroidered with red spirals. Father sat nearby, staring into a steaming cup, deep lines carved into his face. His eyes were bloodshot.

“Ide, my child!” Grandfather beamed when he saw me. He shoved Naran aside and struggled to his feet. “Where’s my staff? I need my staff!”

Naran hurriedly pressed the staff into his hand. It was made from the abelitsia tree, its top carved into a spiral. Abelitsia wood was the hardest we had – it could serve as a weapon in a fight. We called them *katsouna*.

My stomach tightened at the sight of him. He swayed slightly. The climb would be too much for him. But I had already lost that battle yesterday – there was no convincing him to stay behind.

I hugged him. “Let Naran finish dressing you.” Then I turned to Father. His face looked even more worn in the dim torchlight. “Are you all right?”

He hesitated before answering. “It’s getting worse with him. We should have left him at home.”

“But Grandfather loves the Return of the Light,” I said, thinking to myself that he might not live to see another.

Father set his cup down so hard I thought it might crack.

A deep, resonant note rang through the air. Pareia had blown the triton-shell horn.

It was time.

“Let’s go,” Father said, stepping out of the tent. When he saw Lydi, he actually smiled.

Naran hastily finished tying the last of Grandfather’s fastenings, and we followed him.

The sky was still dark, but the eastern horizon had begun to pale. Six temple maidens awaited us, bowing deeply to the Archon.

Geros appeared, brushing my hand lightly as he passed. A smile played at the corners of his lips. I reached out and brushed his arm in return. I wished I could take his hand.

The high-ranking officials fell in behind us – Menon the physician, his assistant, and Gnosilas, the chief scribe. Gnosilas scowled at Geros, as he always did. He had never approved of my Father appointing him, the son of an

Egyptian immigrant, into the council. Since then, he had nursed his hatred wherever he encountered Geros.

Lydi clung to my side, her impressions of her first festival making her uncharacteristically silent.

I must have been about her age when my Father first took me up the Kofinas for the ceremony. That day had begun as clear as this one. I remembered how the view had stretched west to the White Mountains and east to the Dikti Range, where Welchanos was said to have been born, the child of Earth and Sky. Below us, the golden hills rolled towards Phaistos, with Davos in the distance rising out of the emerald fields. And beyond, the sea shimmered, mirroring the clouds.

Here, I had felt small for the first time. The daughter of the Archon, yes – but merely a tiny being, at the mercy of the gods.

Lydi's face mirrored that same awe. I squeezed her hand. The feeling lingered within me, but now, I no longer believed my fate was solely in divine hands. I was meant to shape my own path.

A gust of wind slipped under my robe. I shivered.

Against the gradually brightening sky, Pareia's silhouette stood waiting at the summit. She blew the horn again. The temple maidens bowed once more and began leading our procession up the torch-lit path.

Father carried a torch himself. I stayed close behind him, helping Grandfather with the high steps. Naran walked ahead, lighting the way. Lydi climbed with ease, as nimble as a monkey.

The line of people stretched down the mountain. When I glanced back, they reminded me of a flock of sheep being herded over a pass.

The eastern horizon glowed yellow. In the west, the remaining stars twinkled. The sea below rippled and shimmered like liquid silver.

The cold bit at my skin as we reached the summit.

A Hint of Turquoise

The long storytelling had worn Ide out, just as the rain had finally exhausted itself. She leant back, her gaze lost in the distance, fingers brushing the white line on her arm. Mist rose from the beach. In the ever-present grey of the sea shimmered a hopeful glint of turquoise.

On the table sat a jug of water, dates, cheese, and millet balls. Makar had nibbled from time to time. She – Ide, as he now knew – had not touched a single bite. The necklace still lay untouched between them.

“You came all the way here,” he said, eager to hear the rest.

“We sailed southwest for days until we reached this coast. We came ashore. The men, under Selas’s command, sailed on eastward.” Her accent now sounded as though she’d never stopped speaking her native tongue. “Have you ever heard of Agathon? I often wonder what became of him. What became of all of them.”

“He realised his dream of a trading city. He was held in high esteem.”

Ide accepted this with a quiet nod and watched a gull hop across the beach, pecking through seaweed for something edible.

“What happened next?”

“We came upon nomads who didn’t ask where we came from and welcomed every helping hand. We lived with them for many years. My children were born – a girl and a boy. But my longing for the sea grew, and Geros’s old wound troubled him more with each passing summer. He could no longer keep up with the other men. So we left the tribe and settled here, where a sedentary group was already living.

Geros missed the sea even more than I did. At least here, he could still feel the waves at his feet, though the sailor's heart in him never settled." She wiped the corner of her eye.

"What became of them? Of Geros, your children?"

"Our son left for Marsa Matruh. This," she gestured around, "doesn't offer much to young people. My daughter lives in Dakha. I haven't seen her in a long time."

Makar waited, unsure if she would continue. "And Geros?" he asked at last.

A veil passed over her face. "The gods called him many years ago. The wound reopened. The fever could not be banished. He died in my arms."

Makar listened to the wind and the sea. No longer did it roar like a raging beast – it lapped rhythmically now.

"I miss him every day." Her stare was distant.

There was nothing more to say.

Makar leant against the house wall and looked north – towards Crete.

A silver shimmer showed beneath the clouds. His ship rocked on the sea, like a restless horse pawing the earth. By nightfall, the sea would calm. She was probably right – he would finally be able to set off at sunrise.

"Here." He slid the necklace across to her. "We leave at sunrise." Ide closed her eyes. A peaceful expression settled over her face.