

## In the City of Exiles

*for he hath neither ships fitted with oars, nor crew to carry him so far across the sea...*

The Odyssey

In the afternoon he had sat down by a cooking fire with merchants and the soldiers who guarded their passage into Sidon and been given a crust of stale bread for one of his greatest sequences: verses that told of a homesick soldier who must sail past the fatal sirens.

A stubble-bearded soldier had humphed down his nose.

'Memory plays you false old man. I have sailed the waters you sing of. The only harlots on the sea were the ones aboard our ship, bought from the slave market in Tyre. And their only danger lay in the filthiness of their parts.'

The other men laughed.

The soldier tore him the crust.

'Bring us wine or women, else go sing your song to fools.'

The old man's boy took the lyre and the old man's arm. The boy led him to the top of the quay where he sat down as he was wont to, squinting into the distance as though his sightless eyes could still take in the horizons of the earth. The boy said a flotilla of battleships were in the passage.

'What ships?'

'Ten of them. Double-banked, with rams, and square sails midship.'

'The figureheads?'

'Broken off,' said the boy.

The old man sighed.

'Phoenician triremes, but they belong to Sennacherib now.'

The boy asked the old man if they would go down to talk to the sailors - follow them to a tavern and listen to their talk for tales of new heroes. And perhaps a captain would give them a berth if there was not already a poet aboard.

But the old man shook his head.

'I have no use for the heroes of their ugly new wars.'

The old man had wandered from city to town in the Greek Isles and Phoenicia, selling a night's song for as much as ten gold coins and as little as applause. He had been in Sidon more than a year. All the world passed through Sidon at one time or another, and he came to realise there was no need to wander further after scraps of tales, nor people who were ignorant of

his own. In Sidon a transitory audience of princes, soldiers and sailors heard the fragments of epics he recited by campfires and in public houses.

In his youth he had been a soldier. He had sailed on North African cities with the Phoenicians, resting them from Assyria; in Egypt Sennacherib himself fled from his sword. And he had travelled by caravan deep into the heart of the desert, scaled tremendous yellow walls and delivered a citadel from the grip of a roving Babylonian militia.

Sea-glare took his sight. He had possessed an impeccable memory, a strong voice and a pretty turn of phrase and when his eyes failed, battleships that had hired him as a warrior kept him aboard to sing. He sang of all he loved and had lost, cast in the glinting bronze of another age. He sang of all that the young sailors stood to gain and that the older men had begun to disbelieve yet some strange melancholy bade them hear. If allowed, he would begin his song at evening and not finish till the second dawn. In his vast poetic country a war was waged for love of a woman, and a hero was abroad, ever trying to find his way home...

A hooded, black-bearded man drew along the esplanade. He was headed for the fires on the beach where fresh catch was roasted and sold for a few coppers or the promise of a day's work. He saw the old man sitting with the boy at the quay. Sidon had no shortage of old men – antique soldiers and merchants who had no better home – and he wondered why he was drawn to this one. But when he drew close the attraction became repulsion, as though he was meeting the insurmountable walls of a city greater than Babylon.

The old man listened to the footsteps of the one who came along the path. Hundreds of men walked the esplanade each day, and he wondered why these steps should command his attention. When the steps were close the old man felt overwhelmed, as though a great wind had risen against his ship and was pushing him back from a strange new land.

He greeted the man in Greek. He was answered in the tongue of King David.

'I thought, by your step, you were Egyptian,' said the old man, 'The Egyptian moves so slowly he will never arrive at the future.'

'Then you have me wrong indeed,' said the black-bearded man. 'I walked slowly because I was trying to recognise you.'

'Do you know me?'

'It is given me to see many things, but you – no. You I have not seen in the world or in dream. What are you called?'

'My name, in this city at least, is Homer. And you, friend?'

'I am Isaiah.'

The old Greek pronounced the breathy Hebrew syllables.

‘Every wandering soul must pass through this port,’ he said, ‘the waning city; the rose that bloomed for a moment and wilts for eternity; the city that no king may hold for longer than a season; the camp of exiles. But each man has his own reason for arriving at the crossroads of the world. What brings you to Sidon?’

Isaiah smiled at the poet’s epithets. He sat down and looked to the sea.

‘I served a good king, but he is dead. His son keeps Sidonian priestesses in his house to hear their soothsaying. He erects altars to stone idols and reddens them with the blood of our children. And we are soon to be scattered, laid to waste by God, whose hand will take the shape of Assyria or Babylon. That is all one. Yet I am hated fiercely for saying so, by king and people alike. How strange that I should be safe here, at the heart of Baal’s cult.’

‘Not strange. Here every man is a slave of a king, terrible but far distant, and by virtue of the fact as free as a bird. That and the mountains protect us: like the little yellow flower at your feet, that is found nowhere but here.’

Isaiah looked at his sandals and then at the old man’s sightless eyes and laughed.

Homer smiled. ‘Not strange. But you mean the cult of Eshoun?’

‘Baal, Eshoun, Astarte. They are all one. They all mean Lord of the World and, yet, nothing. But to answer you, I am waiting.’

‘For what?’

‘For the future.’

The old man sighed.

‘The future is threadbare. The past alone is true.’

‘The future exists,’ said Isaiah. ‘I have seen it. Though, somehow, it is infirm, and must be carefully sought. I must wait for it here, till the time is right.’

‘And yet,’ said Homer, feeling the ground and picking one of those rare yellow flowers whose colour he could not be sure memory lit aright for him. ‘I long ago decided it is the past that exists but is infirm; the past that must be carefully sought. Since I lost my eyes I have believed this. In the evenings I sit beside anyone who can pay; my audience believes I am only another bard, singing to remain alive. But what use have I to live longer? No. Each night I take up the thread of the past in the hope that it will lead me back.’

‘To where? Some battlefield of youth? I have heard the bloody Greek epics. Fear not, the past has not exhausted the future of wars. You will not be there to slay and be slain, but what is that? Perhaps you follow the cult of honour and wish you had been slain at your height.’

‘Yes.’ The old man closed his eyes to make his darkness complete. ‘Yes, man, you are right. I would be happy to have never lived beyond one day. It

was the night after battle. I was in a strange city, in a room in a house of arched doorways. The walls were inscribed with letters that I could not read but were like the shapes that candle-flame carves out of darkness. In my bed was an Aramean dancing girl who was not sorry her masters were defeated. She had been waiting for me, but now it was late and her almond eyes were closed. Gold bangles rattled on her ankles and wrists while she dreamt, and one long dark thigh like a gazelle's lay without the silk sheets. I almost woke her, but my own mother was a dancer for a tyrant, and I let the girl sleep. I was standing on a stone portico. Nothing was on the street but firelight. Even the watchman was drunk and asleep in his tower, for the city was safe, and I stood looking up at the stars that seemed no more wondrous and infinite than my days on earth... That is the place I try to find along the thread of my song. That place that was mine and is now barred to me by the iron doors of time.'

'This is the tale you sing?'

Homer shook his head.

'I will never sing it, because I am jealous. If I sing it I fear I will lose it. Yet I allow myself to shape a world around that room that was so foreign and familiar it felt like a long lost home. The world of my poem upholds that one true and glorious point in time and space that threatens to vanish at my death. You see, I am cursed. First with blindness – that does not even allow me the present to set against my past – and cursed doubly with an infallible memory. Other men may replace today's losses with tomorrow's hopes, but I know how the world's glories vanish like smoke into the dark.'

'And yet,' said Isaiah, 'For me the past is a bitter well. My people have never truly known peace. Home has been but a brief sojourn between exiles; and slavery and war have been our companions. Now a terrible past has crept into our cities, with the faces of Egyptian gods and Baal, even into Jericho and Jerusalem, and turned Men of the Lord into worshippers of chance and stone. For me the past is a scattered, hopeless country. It is the future that fills my thoughts. God pushes me into its barren regions, after images of a kingdom that fills my dreams, so I am never satisfied. And so I have lost everything: my country, my people, my wife and son. The poem I carry is too great for mortals. Those whom the God of Israel asks to bear it may know no happiness.' The Jew prized a stone from the ground and threw it into the sea. 'No happiness at all.' He sighed. 'The universe speaks incessantly to me. I see angels in the shape of winged lions that tread behind every man to the poorest of beggars, even to the latrines and the places men toss coins.' He laughed charily. 'One night in Jerusalem, the city under siege and its army outnumbered, my king asked me where was my God. I closed my eyes in fear, for I did not know, and a voice spoke to me saying God

would repel the Assyrians. I told the king. The Assyrians were two hundred-thousand strong. I knew I was mad. I sat sleepless on the wall that night knowing I would be executed when the city was stormed in the morning, and I watched an Angel of dark flame slay all but a tent-full of the soldiers camped at our gates.' Isaiah shut his eyes on the daylight that was drawing away. 'And I see a blood debt. This universe is falling apart for the evil of men; innocent blood must be the mortar. The debt is too great for men to pay; yet in my poem there is one who will pay it. How this one's blood may be so precious as to equal all men's blood ever, I cannot know. What terrible, sad thing will he be? And I prepare the way for this one! I am the shadow cast before him, for now we have passed midday and it is the afternoon of the world. But I will never reach the hopeful shore of his making, not before I have slept with Abraham. I will never know your night after battle, only the battle, and a ship comes soon to take me to its heart, and this time to my death. Already the wind snaps the sails of that ship. Only here, in Sidon, for the last time in my life, is the future held at bay. I may glance without intention at pretty foreign girls – for we are all foreign here; I may sit down to meat with soldiers who on other shores would slay me. Here I may have respite.'

'Yes,' Homer agreed. 'Only here, in the city of travellers, despite our contrary natures, are you and I near home. For when a young sailor cuts the wind by my ear with a brass sword, though he found it buried and forgotten and does not know its name... when a woman walks by with tinkling foreign bangles, though she be the plain wife of a tax collector... then I hear my place whispering to me. Then I feel it belongs to the memory of the universe, not merely to my own memory, and may be shaped again with the remnants that are left.'

'I may dream of the day when a grand ship with the power to sail against the current of time will arrive here, and we all go down to the harbour and throw flowers into the sea, crying out that beauty has returned. And you may sit and dream you will stand on the distant shore of your poem. So you stay here in Sidon with unbroken hope.'

Isaiah nodded.

'But my fatal ship will come.'

'Yes.'

'And your ship will not.'

'No.'

'We are neither of us fit for this world,' said Isaiah with a melancholy smile.

'But we are fit for Sidon.'

The Jew nodded and stood up: 'And now I go to take my meal at ease among strangers.'

'You say you see the future. Are we to meet again?'

Isaiah shook his head.

'We should not have met this once. But God has been merciful and closed his eyes.'

'You mean the fates have been careless.'

'That is all one. Perhaps, though, we will meet once more. In a country where there is no past and future. Then we will trade stories again.'

'In that country,' said Homer, 'there will be no need.'

The Jew smiled and pulled his hood over his head and walked off toward the bay and the coming centuries, leaving the old Greek alone with his boy, squinting his sightless eyes at a lost sea.