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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON



I

'Go *away*!' shouted Hylas.

The boar threw him an irritable look and went on wallowing in the mud. She and her piglets were having a lovely time at the spring, and she wasn't going to make room for some scrawny boy who needed a drink.

A chill east wind tore across the hillside, rattling the thistles and probing the holes in Hylas' tunic. He was tired, footsore, and his waterskin had been empty since last night. He had to reach that spring.

Loading a pebble in his slingshot, he landed the boar a smack on the rump – which she ignored. He blew out a long breath. Now what?

Suddenly the boar scrambled to her feet, jerked up her tail and fled, with her piglets racing after her.

Hylas dropped to a crouch behind a thorn bush. What had she sensed?

At that moment, the wind dropped to nothing. The hairs

on the back of his neck rose. The silence felt thick and strange.

The lion came out of nowhere.

Bounding down the slope above him, it halted two paces from where he hid.

He didn't dare breathe. The lion was so close that he could smell the musky heat of its fur, and hear the dust settling around its enormous paws. He saw how its tawny mane stirred in the windless air. Silently, he begged it to spare his life.

The lion turned its great head and looked at him. Its golden eyes were stronger than the Sun – and it *knew* him. It saw his spirit, like a pebble at the bottom of a deep, clear pool. There was something it wanted him to do. He didn't know what, but he felt its command.

Again the lion lifted its head and tasted the air. Then it bounded down the hill. Hylas watched it leap a clump of boulders and land without a sound – then vanish into a thicket. Now all that was left was its musky scent and the prints of huge paws.

The wind returned, hissing dust in Hylas' eyes. Shakily, he rose to his feet.

Near the spring, the lion's tracks were filling with water. Hylas knelt by a pawprint as big as his head. Water from the pawprint of a lion gives you strength. He stooped and drank.

Something heavy smacked into him and knocked him off his feet.

'That might've made you stronger,' said a voice, 'but it didn't make you lucky.'



'Where are they taking us?' moaned the boy next to Hylas.

No one answered. No one knew.

The ship was packed: ten slaves tied to the oars on either side, twenty huddled on deck, and eight fat overseers with copper-tipped whips.

Hylas sat crammed against the side of the creaking, pitching vessel. His wrists throbbed, the rawhide collar was chafing his neck, and his scalp hurt. Two days before, one of the slavers had hacked his fair hair short.

'Where you from?' the slaver had barked, stripping him of his gear and tying him up with brutal efficiency.

'He's on the run,' his companion had muttered, peeling back Hylas' lips to check his teeth. 'You can always tell.'

'That true, boy? Why're you missing a bit of your ear? They do that to thieves where you're from, eh?'

Hylas had stayed grimly silent. He'd paid a herdsman the last of Pirra's gold to cut off the bottom of his earlobe, because the notch in it would have marked him as an Outsider.

'He understood that,' said the smaller one, 'so he must be Akean. Which part, boy? Arkadia? Messenia? Lykonia?'

'Doesn't matter,' the other growled. 'He looks strong enough, he'll do for a spider.'

What's that? Hylas thought numbly

And who *were* they? They wore rough wool tunics and

greasy sheepskin cloaks, more like peasants than Crow warriors; but they might be working for the Crows. They mustn't find out who he was.

A wave splashed him in the face, wrenching him back to the present. The boy beside him groaned and threw up in Hylas' lap.

'Thanks,' muttered Hylas.

The boy gave a feeble snarl.

Trying to ignore the smell of vomit, Hylas turned back to the Sea. The ship sat low in the water, and he'd been watching for dolphins. So far, nothing. He thought of Spirit, whom he'd befriended last summer. At least the dolphin was happy and free with his pod. Hylas clung to that.

And maybe far away on Keftiu, Pirra had managed to escape. She was the daughter of the High Priestess, and unimaginably rich, but she'd told him once that she would do anything to be free. At the time, he'd thought she was mad. Now he knew better.

A fin sliced the water, alarmingly close to where he sat. The shark fixed him with its lightless black eye and sank out of sight.

That's why no dolphins, thought Hylas. Too many sharks.

'That's the seventh since we set out,' said the man on the other side of the seasick boy. He had a broken nose that had set crooked, and there was a weariness in his brown eyes, as if he'd seen too many bad things.

'Why are they following us?' mumbled the seasick boy.

The man shrugged. 'Dead slaves get chucked overboard. Easy meat.'

A whip cracked out and struck his cheek. 'No talk!' yelled a fat-bellied overseer.

Blood trickled into the man's beard. His expression didn't change, but something in his stare told Hylas that he was picturing burying a knife in the overseer's hairy paunch.

Judging by the Sun, Hylas guessed that they'd been heading south-east since dawn – which meant a long way from Akea. He was furious with himself. All his efforts wiped out by a moment's carelessness.

Sorry, Issi, he told her in his head.

The familiar guilt gnawed at his guts. His one memory of his mother was of her telling him to look after his little sister – and he'd failed. The night the Crows had attacked their camp, he'd decoyed them away, but afterwards he hadn't been able to find Issi. Did she know that he'd done it for her? Or did she think he'd abandoned her to save his own skin?

That had been a year ago. Since then, all he'd found out was that Issi *might* be in Messenia, the westernmost chieftaincy of Akea. Last summer he'd bought passage on a ship, but it had wandered from island to island before putting in at Makedonia – hopelessly far north.

For eight moons he'd struggled through an unknown land of hostile peasants and savage dogs: always in hiding, always on his own. The image of his fiery, talkative little sister had gradually faded, till he could scarcely remember her face. That frightened him more than anything.

He must have slipped into a doze, because he was woken by a ripple of apprehension among the slaves. They were approaching land.

In the red glare of sunset, Hylas saw a vast, black, cloud-wreathed mountain rising from the Sea. Its peak was weirdly flat, as if some god had lopped it off in a fit of rage.

Below it, he made out a bay of charcoal sand between twin headlands that curved inwards, like jaws agape. As the ship slid between them, he heard the screams of seabirds and a din of hammers. He caught a strange smell, like rotting eggs.

Craning his neck at the western headland, he glimpsed smoky fires high on a ridge. On the opposite headland, a steep rocky hill was crowned by a massive stone wall spiked with torches, like all-seeing eyes. That had to be the stronghold of a chieftain. From there you'd have an eagle's view of the whole island. You'd see everything.

'What *is* this place?' whimpered the seasick boy.

The man with the broken nose had gone pale beneath his windburn. 'It's Thalakrea. They're sending us down the mines.'

'What's a mine?' said Hylas.

The man threw him a sharp look, but just then an overseer grabbed Hylas' collar and hauled him to his feet. 'It's where you're going to spend the rest of your life.'



2

'What *is* a mine?' muttered Hylas to the man with the broken nose.

After an evil trudge, they'd reached a crossroads. Tracks led off to both headlands, another inland – and the fourth ended here, at the mines: a great red hill heaving with half-naked slaves. Men pounded livid green rock, women and girls washed it in troughs, small boys picked it over; all under the watchful stares of overseers. Higher up, more slaves swarmed in and out of holes in the hillside, like flies at a wound.

'A mine,' said the man with the broken nose, 'is what men do to get bronze. You dig till you hit the greenstone. Hack it loose, crush it, burn it till the copper bleeds out. Then mate it with tin.' He nodded at the smoky ridge. 'Furnaces. That's the smith's domain.'

Hylas swallowed. In Lykonia where he'd grown up, peasants said sorry to the earth before they ploughed their barley patches – even though ploughing didn't really hurt Her and

the scars soon faded. This tortured hill had been cut too deep to heal.

At last their bonds were untied, and an overseer passed down the line, appraising each slave. 'Hammerman,' he grunted, and the man with the broken nose was led away. 'Hauler. Crusher.' He glanced at Hylas. 'Pit spider.'

A bigger boy jerked his head at Hylas to follow, and they scrambled over piles of red rubble dotted with shards of glossy black rock. Hylas recognized it as obsidian. Crow warriors used it to make their arrowheads: last summer, he'd dug one out of his arm. Pretending to stumble, he grabbed a shard and hid it in his fist.

They reached a hollow cut into the lower slope, and the boy told Hylas to wait for the other pit spiders, then left.

The hollow seemed to be some kind of den: Hylas saw four small piles of rags in four patches of trodden earth. He slumped down, too exhausted to care where he sat. He couldn't remember when he'd last eaten or drunk, and the din of hammers was making his head pound. His new tattoo stung. After they'd splashed ashore, a man had grabbed his forearm and pricked it over and over with a bone needle, rubbing in a paste that smelt like soot. The result was a grimy zigzag, like a mountain with twin peaks: his owner's mark.

The Sun set and the hollow filled with shadow. The hammers fell silent – except for one, which rang out from the furnace ridge.

Four boys appeared at the mouth of the den and glared at Hylas as if he was something they'd forgotten to chuck

on the dungheap. They were covered in red dust and their scrawny limbs were pocked with odd greenish scars. They wore nothing except sweat-soaked rags tied round their heads, hips and knees.

The tallest looked a couple of years older than Hylas, with a hook nose and heavy black brows that met in the middle. On a thong on his chest he wore a shrivelled strip of dried meat the size of a finger. He was clearly the leader; he shot Hylas a challenging stare.

The youngest was about seven, with bandy legs and weak eyes. He squinted up at the older boy for reassurance.

The third had black hair and haughty features. He reminded Hylas of an Egyptian he'd seen last summer.

The fourth was a wild-eyed skeleton with collarbones that jutted like sticks. He kept flinching and darting fearful glances over his shoulder.

The Egyptian boy took a step towards Hylas. 'Get out,' he snarled. 'That's my spot.'

Hylas knew better than to back down. 'Now it's mine,' he said, letting the boy see the obsidian shard in his hand.

The boy chewed his lips. The others waited. With a hiss, the boy snatched his rags and found another spot.

The small boy and the scared one glanced at the leader. He hawked a gobbet of red snot, then squatted and began unwinding his head-bindings.

Hylas shut his eyes. It was over for now – although he guessed that sooner or later, they'd have another go at him.

'How old are you?' the leader said brusquely.

Hylas opened one eye. 'Thirteen.'

'Where you from?'

'Around.'

'Name.'

Hylas hesitated. 'Flea.' A shipwrecked sailor had called him that last summer; it would do. 'You?'

'Zan.' He nodded at the youngest boy. 'Bat.' Then the Egyptian boy. 'Beetle.' Then the bony one. 'Spit.'

Spit gave a jittery snigger that bared a slobbery mouthful of broken teeth.

'What's he so scared of?' Hylas asked Zan.

Zan shrugged. 'Snatcher nearly got him coupla days ago.'

'What's a snatcher?'

The others gaped and Zan sneered. 'You don't know nothing, do you?'

'What's a snatcher?' Hylas repeated levelly.

'Bad spirits,' said Bat, clutching a furry amulet that appeared to be a squashed mouse. 'They live down the pit and they follow you in the dark. They look like us, see? There can be a snatcher right next you and you won't know it.'

'If it looks like you,' said Hylas, 'how d'you know it's a snatcher?'

'Um . . .' Bat's small face crumpled with confusion.

Beetle the Egyptian tapped the groove between his nose and his upper lip. 'Snatchers got a ridge here. That's how. But you never see them for long enough to know.'

'They live in the rocks,' whispered Spit fearfully. 'They come and go like shadows.'

Hylas considered that. Then he said, 'Why are you called pit spiders?'

Zan snorted. 'You'll find out.'

After that they ignored Hylas, and busied themselves with unwinding the rags from their heads and knees and laying them out to dry.

A wave of homesickness swept over him. He missed Issi, and Scram, his dog that the Crows had killed. He missed Spirit the dolphin, and Pirra. He even missed Telamon, the chieftain's son who'd been his friend till he'd turned out to be a Crow.

If he cared about someone, he lost them. He always ended up on his own. He hated that.

Well so *what*, he told himself angrily. First things first, you got to get out of here.

'Don't even think about escaping,' muttered Zan, as if he'd spoken aloud.

'What's it to you?' retorted Hylas.

'You'll fail, we'll get punished, then we'll punish you.'

Hylas studied him. 'I bet you never even tried.'

'Nowhere to go,' said Zan with another shrug. 'Islanders too scared to help, Sea full of sharks. Nothing inland but boiling springs and man-eating lions. If they don't get you, Kreon's men will.'

'Who's Kreon?'

Zan jerked his head at the stronghold frowning down at them. 'Kreon owns the island. The pit. Us.'

'No one owns me,' said Hylas.

All four burst out laughing and beat the ground with their fists.

At that moment, a whistle shrilled and they scrambled out of the den. Hylas followed, hoping this meant food.

Hordes of slaves were fighting over provisions. The pit spiders grabbed a basket and a rawhide pail, and Hylas elbowed his way to a few gulps of vinegary water and a handful of bitter grey mush that tasted like mashed acorns and grit.

He was licking the last of it off his fingers when he heard the thud of feet and the rattle of wheels.

'Get in line!' shouted Zan.

Red dust was rising on the westward track, and fear was rippling over the hillside like wind through barley. Hylas saw slaves bowing their heads and clamping their arms to their sides; overseers tapping their whips against their thighs and wiping their sweaty jowls.

First round the bend swept a pack of hunting dogs. They had shaggy red hides and wore collars spiked with bronze. They had the hot dull eyes of beasts who'd been beaten and starved to make them killers.

Next came a band of warriors: nightmare figures in breastplates and kilts of black rawhide, with heavy spears and vicious bronze knives. Despite the heat, black cloaks flew behind them like wings, and their faces were grey with ash.

Hylas swayed. He'd seen warriors like them before.

In their midst rode a chieftain in a chariot drawn by two black horses. As it thundered up the track towards the

stronghold, Hylas caught a glimpse of hooded eyes and a bristly black beard. Something about that face was terrifyingly familiar.

'Head *down*!' breathed Zan, elbowing him in the ribs.

In horror, Hylas stared from the chieftain to the tattoo on his forearm. 'It's not a mountain,' he whispered. 'It's a crow.'

'Course it's a crow!' hissed Zan. 'That's Kreon son of Koronos – he *is* a Crow!'

Hylas felt as if he was falling from a great height.

He was a slave in the mines of the Crows.

If they found out he was here, they would kill him in a heartbeat.