

Chapter 2

Treachery at Thermopylae

The brave and noble Leonidas scanned the horizon and witnessed the sun's warm rays, partially blocked at the highest point of the day. The smoke from the scores of enemy campfires hid the noonday sun from those who were to meet in battle and decide the fate of an entire country. He was dismayed; nevertheless, he had an obligation to his men and his country to reach deep into his soul and find the words that would motivate his soldiers to fight bravely to defend their country in the face of such overwhelming odds. He took one last deep breath and left behind the sanctity of his tent to meet with those who were prepared to fight for their lives and for the honor of Greece.

“Oh, brave and courageous warriors of Sparta, the chosen ones who are entrusted with the sovereignty of our mighty homeland; tomorrow, we shall either live victoriously or we will die nobly. When the sun sets upon our shoulders and when it rises again, we shall find that we will rest comfortably with our shields or we shall die gallantly upon our shields. We made that solemn oath to our wives or our mothers, and we will stand by that commitment in order to save the next ten generations of our fair lands. The choice rests with us, and we must uphold that honorable choice for our beloved country, families, and friends.”

“Great King Leonidas of the righteous Lacedaemonians, we shall conquer the Persians and push them back into the sea, where such creatures belong right, men?”

“Thank you, Zoticus; that is nothing less than what I have come to expect from the bravest soldiers that the wise gods have ever created from their sacred loins. We must prepare ourselves mentally and physically for the battle that will decide the fate of our country, our wives, our children, and our children's children. Do you want our wives and children enslaved by this foreign

pestilence? Do you want us to die in vain as the invaders rip our families apart and keep them in servitude for the next untold number of generations? Do you want our aging mothers and fathers fed to their beasts?

“That is the unpleasant scene that shall happen to our loved ones if we do not fight with every ounce of strength and cunning that the compassionate gods have given to us on this fine day. We must use every technique that we have learned over our lifetime to defeat this enemy, as our forefathers did a decade ago. Do this for the glory of Greece. Fight valiantly for the safety of our families. We will die bravely, if we must. If we perish, we have the full knowledge that we did not supplicate ourselves like dogs in the eyes of a force that vastly outnumbered us. We would rather die and be brought back on our shields to rest through eternity itself along the banks of the peaceful Eurotas than to ever bow our heads in shame to our enemies. What say ye, virtuous men of the Peloponnese?”

“Noble Leonidas, every soldier standing before you this day shall fight with his last breath for king, country, and family. You should have full belief that the Spartans who hear your voice this day are the bravest and noblest of all warriors that our lands have ever produced over the long history of our mighty culture. We’re prepared to live in victory or die in defeat. No man shall abandon his brother when the battle begins. Count on our valor and our cunning to annihilate the scourges that have landed on the back of our noble land. A thousand, two thousand, no, three thousand years from this very day, our ancestors will still be honoring the bravery of the men who are assembled here today at Thermopylae. Our courageous deeds will never be forgotten in time, as so many others have been.

“Mark my words, men we are the symbols of courage in the face of insurmountable odds. We shall live through eternity as the ones who stood tall and fought magnificently, even though we were outnumbered by hundreds to one. Our future

generations shall be in awe as they read about one of our soldiers being as gallant as one hundred, five hundred, or even one thousand of theirs. We can't escape our fate; we can just live it this day and know the merciful gods wouldn't abandon us or let our deeds die upon the tongues of our brave countrymen today or every day until eternity itself shall end."

"Brave and courageous Elpis, I willingly place my life in your hands, and I know it is safe, since your words are an inspiration to every soldier here today. When my warring days are over, you shall wear the crown that our honorable citizens have entrusted me with. You shall lead the brave Lacedaemonians to victory when my time has come to return to the benevolent gods who have created me. When I am standing in our sacred meadow of serenity and wisdom throughout eternity, I shall gaze down upon you and your brave soul and smile, knowing that you are a wise and compassionate leader of our people."

"Thank you, sire. My life is also yours, brave Leonidas, as is every life that breathes the vital vapors that are here amongst us today. It's with the caring gods' help that we shall breathe the sweet smells of success in the upcoming battle with those who wish to supplicate us and our way of life."

"May the benevolent gods be with us and cast a long shadow over each of us to protect and guide us in battle. As your leader I must say; men, go to your tents and sleep the night away, knowing that we shall engage an enemy who was severely beaten last time they made war with the noble Greeks. Darius was defeated at Marathon on that infamous day over a decade ago, and tomorrow his son shall also feel the sharp point of our spears. It appears that the son is like the father and does not learn from history that the Greeks are a force to be reckoned with. Once again, our lands will send the unwelcomed invaders cowering and racing back across the seas to forever remember how we, a small band of courageous warriors, defeated a force

that was a thousand times larger in number, yet a thousand times smaller in heart.”

“Alalalalalalal!” A unanimous cry of approval arose immediately from the soldiers who heard the inspiring message of their glorious leader and king. If the battle had started at that moment, the Persians would be, indeed, in trouble.

“Men of the Spartan hegemony, go in valor and prepare your sacred armor for the upcoming battle. As you speak your allegiance to our compassionate gods, shine your breastplates so that they blind the eyes of our enemy; sharpen your *dories* so that they easily cut through the bone and sinew of our enemy; and polish your greaves so that they deflect the arrows and spears of our enemy. If they escape our first round of destruction, our malevolent *xiphos* shall inflict great casualties upon enemies who are soft and used to luxuries unknown to our culture. Having prepared for battle, sleep soundly, and be ready for the dawn, which will soon be calling us to an infamous day in history.”

The morning sun rose over the Greek homeland like any other day however, this was a day that was unlike any other the people of the land had ever experienced before. There were a million nasty bees ready to deliver their deadly sting to a small band of noble soldiers, whose valor would be unquestioned to the end of time itself.

Leonidas, refreshed after a peaceful night, addressed his men one last time before the battle. “Men of Sparta, protectors of Greece, fathers of our unborn children; I see that you are fully prepared to assume the responsibility that has been thrust upon us by the benevolent gods. Because of their compassion, we are willing and able to deliver a deathblow to the plague that has crossed the seas to our fathers’ and their fathers’ land. Our cause for freedom is greater than their cause for extermination of the noblest and bravest people that the all-knowing gods have placed on this hallowed land. Men, pick up your *dories*, grasp your

aspises, and wear your greaves as proudly as the fathers of your fathers' fathers boldly wore them for countless generations.”

A loud cheer erupted from the men of valor, the men who were the best of the best.

“Leonidas, the valiant three hundred are ready and waiting your command. Your words have inspired us to fight the fight of our lives, and we accept the final verdict of the kindhearted gods on this gallant day. We follow you to victory, or we follow you to death we have only two choices, and both are noble endings to this day.”

“Men, listen to my plan and follow every word, since our very lives and the lives of our children depend upon how we execute the strategy for today’s encounter with the enemy. You, brave Nicanor, and you, the wise Cleitus, assemble the men at the narrowest point where the sea and the land embrace each other. Lock your mighty shields together as a man and wife who have been reunited after a long winter campaign. Our *promachoe* will stand bravely, as our shoulders rest upon our brothers’ shoulders to create an impenetrable wall of human flesh and metal that no foreign spear or arrow may penetrate. Sing our *paeanes* as loudly as your lungs can, in order to drown out the orders from their commanders, make our *alalagmoe* the last sound they will ever hear upon the soil that is foreign to them.”

“Sire, your battle plan shall be carried out as you have said; each and every soldier shall tightly embrace his brother and make a wall of bravery that shall repel any attack by the foreigners who have dared to encroach upon our sovereignty and our lands and put our families’ lives in danger.”

“Brave and noble Lacedaemonians, go, make war, and let the kind gods favor us today.”

A loud cheer signaled that three hundred brave warriors were ready to do battle with a far superior number of soldiers. The Spartans quickly made their stand at the narrows and, to a

soldier, were brave and unrelenting in their desire to engage the single beast with a million heads that day.

Hundreds of meters away stood an ominous enemy in full battle regalia, seemingly just bidding its time before making its charge. The air was full of tension, full of anticipation of what was to follow. The wave of humanity never flinched; it stood still. The minutes turned to hours, and still no attack.

Suddenly, a solitary soldier burst through the Persian ranks and made his way to the Spartan line. He stopped just twenty meters short of his adversaries and dropped his weapons. “My Greek brothers, I am Phraotes, son of Shahab, from the bustling city of Arachosia, which sits alongside the peaceful Tarnak River. Although we now stand facing each other with our sharpened spears and swords in our hands, in our hearts, you, my friends, are like me and thousands of others gathered here today. Each of us wishes to return to our mighty Tarnak, as you desire to return to your beautiful Eurotas. Every heart wants to rejoin its loved ones, to hear its children laughing and playing while its wife comforts its parents.”

“Persian, get to the point, since the sun is racing across the sky and wants to join his wife when the night falls upon us. Waste not a single moment, for this sacred reunion is getting nearer with every word you speak. What do you want of the Spartan army? It is clear that we are greatly outnumbered this day; do you wish us to grovel as domesticated beasts at your feet because the odds are in your favor? Do you ask the benevolent gods for the noble Lacedaemonians to lick your silk boots?”

“Brother, there’s no need to be angry as a nest of wasps, since my intent is an honest one and one that can save the lives of many here today. My words shall not humiliate the noble faces of the men that form your battle lines. No, it’s just the opposite, I’m here to save men not destroy them. Hear me out; countless lives shall be saved from your army and saved from ours as well. As you say, and rightfully so, your men are few,

while ours are many. However, there's no need for the slaughter of such brave and courageous warriors on either side. You see, I've come as a messenger of peace with a request from our king. The brave and noble Xerxes, wisest of the wise, great leader of the Persians, requests an audience with the fearless Spartan Leonidas. Can you convey my message to your courageous leader while I await his decision?"

Unbeknown to the Persian, the noble Leonidas mingled among his men about five meters from their front line and clearly heard every word of the unusual appeal that Phraotes had spoken. Without a word, the men parted, as the seas, to allow their king to advance beyond the line and speak directly to the intrepid messenger.

"Prescient messenger, I have heard each word that you have spoken, and I believe it is worthwhile to meet your king and hear his words. However, I have certain terms that must be met: first, there will be no one but your leader and myself, to meet fifty meters from my warriors and fifty meters from your soldiers. And second, we leave our weapons on the ground five meters away from where we shall face each other. Do you understand my demands, and as such, will the noble Xerxes fully agree to them?"

"Dear King Leonidas of the mighty Spartans, thank you for hearing my most kind offering and making such a wise decision. I know in my heart that our brave and noble Xerxes agrees to your request. He foresaw your acceptance of his wishes, and it's already arranged that he shall step forward from our lines ten minutes after I have returned to our men. As you shall see, he shall carry no weapons, since he rules our people with kindness and wisdom and not by force and cruelty. He has no heart for such things. He lives by the creed that his words are stronger than forged metal. Now, I take your leave, most noble Lacedaemonian, and wish you continued good health and long life."

As the Persian made his way back to his men, the newly appointed *ouragos*, Theodoros, questioned his leader's judgment to meet the Persian king. "Leonidas, do you make a wise decision, meeting with the man whose only desire is to destroy our country, take away our freedom, and make our families slaves? We beat his father, and his taste for vengeance must not have evaporated like water from a rose - we made his father grovel as a beast, and he shall get revenge upon those who have brought shame and disgrace upon his father and culture."

"My dear Theodoros, you have spoken rationally, and I must agree that shame cannot and does not wane over time, especially since it has been but a decade since we had them turn tail like wild dogs back to their women's arms. But, as there are two sides to a coin, so there are two sides to my decision this morning. By the grace of the benevolent gods, I have walked our lands for six decades and fought against many armies for more than half of those years. What I have learned is that it is best to know the enemy before you engage the enemy. What better way to know your opponent than to meet him and look him straight in the eye? It is impossible to enter the mind of your enemy unless you can talk freely with the man."

"My king, you're right."

"This man has held a personal grudge against our nation since we defeated his father; can you imagine holding hatred in your heart for over a decade? At least he should have an opportunity to meet with me, the leader of the army that shall inflict great losses upon his soldiers, the commander of the warriors who shall send him scurrying back across the Hellespont with his tail tucked between his legs, as we did to his father. Do not worry, since my heart and mind shall be closely guarded so that he cannot get to know me and take advantage of us in battle. Look, it must be time, because I see a lone figure approaching the meeting point. I must go and meet our destiny. Be brave, my soldiers of freedom."

The two leaders slowly walked up toward each other, and when they were a meter away from the mightiest foe that they would ever meet in their lifetime, they bowed and extended a hand in a show of respect. What a sight to behold: Leonidas wore his shiny bronze armor and a short red tunic for the ensuing battle. His long black hair billowed behind him in the cool breeze of the morning, and his straggly beard hid the battle-worn features of a legend that had lived for over six decades. By contrast, Xerxes was around twenty years younger and wore the finest silk garments, with untold meters of gold chains around his neck and his arms. His beard was immaculately trimmed, and his curly hair neatly cascaded down to his shoulders.

It was evident these two great leaders represented different cultures with different views upon what attire was befitting of a king in battle. The Lacedaemonians were no-nonsense and avoided the usual signs of the accoutrements of the wealthy, while the Persians were about pomp and displayed their sumptuous wealth. If it was a fashion show, Xerxes would have won first prize, but this was war, and fashion played no part in the battle between two armies that took center stage this morning.

They stared at each other for several minutes; Leonidas spoke first. “Great leader of the noble Persians, we finally meet. It is only fitting that we are face-to-face before a battle that shall determine the very existence of our country and the legend of your kingship and country. Noble Xerxes, why do you wish to have an audience with me?”

“Brave Leonidas, it is my pleasure to meet the Lacedaemon known throughout our lands for his expertise in war. I come to you this morning with a proposal that will ensure you and your band of three hundred mighty warriors will, indeed, experience another fine morning as we have now. However, before I share my plan with you, let us talk, since there are many things that I wish to know about the leader of the brave people

who stole a great victory from the very hand of my dear father, Darius I. First, tell me about your culture and why you thrive on simplicity and frugality while you shun wealth and luxuries.”

“That is an easy question for any Spartan, young or old, male or female, to address. Our founder, Lacedaemon, was the love child of the mighty Zeus and the nymph Taygete. As a young man he married Sparta, who was the daughter of Eurotas, and together they established the city of Sparta. Lacedaemon had a dream, and in his dream he visited the future and saw that our once-thriving culture had succumbed to riches, easy living, and many luxuries that, in the end, doomed our way of life. Thus, seeing that was our fate, he decided that our culture would focus upon the important things in life and reject material things, in order to develop and maintain a healthy mind and body. Hence, at the age of seven, our male children are enrolled in the *agoge* system of education. Our commerce is conducted by the *perioikoi*, and we are taught the art of war, being conscripted in our noble army for forty years of our lives. And now, brave leader, I must ask you the question; why do you wear such extravagant clothes and jewelry when you are prepared to do battle with us?”

“Mighty Leonidas, that is also an easy question to answer for any Persian. My clan is a direct descendant of Achaemenes and Cyrus my progenitor was none other than the grandson of Zeus from the union of Perseus and Andromeda. For hundreds of years, my family has wisely ruled Persia and created the legendary culture that we are to this very day. Yes, I dress in the finest clothes, live in the finest palaces, and wear the finest jewelry, since that is what I am entitled to do, since I am directly descended from the greatest leaders, politicians, and warriors of my people. However, I am not that shallow to only adorn myself with luxurious clothes and material goods; our grandiose building programs in Persepolis, Egypt, and Susa will ensure that

our greatness and the nobleness of my predecessors shall live forever.”

“While you make a good argument for your display of wealth, it still appears such a waste of time, resources, and effort, because when you leave this life, you shall not take any of these valuable items to the other world. It still remains in my mind that working on a healthy body, a developed mind, and a psyche for war is the far better investment of one’s time.”

“It has been written that you are a direct descendent of the noblest of the noble Heracles and, as such, are a god walking among men. Because you are of this bloodline, you deserve, no, you are expected to differentiate yourself from the rest of your population, and after all, you are a creation from the loins of the mighty Heracles himself! However, you do not build temples and buildings to praise the society that has elevated your ancestors due to their ability in war, politics, and law. Instead, your citizens have decided to live in huts like the ancients did. Where are your large and bustling cities that have mighty edifices to honor your gods and your ancestors? With the passage of time, the Spartans will be forgotten, like so many other cultures that have lived and died.

“Is that the fate of the Spartans? Do you wish your greatness to be lost, like a grain of sand on a beach? If your culture continues as it is, the mighty Lacedaemonians will be only a legend in the future. Is that what you want, Leonidas? While your culture shall disappear completely from the minds of men and the pages of history, my mighty culture will never be forgotten. Our striking buildings and vast cities are a testament to our place in the minds of men. Ten thousand years from now, no, tens upon tens of thousands of years from now, the Persians shall be spoken of as the eternal culture, an example of excellence, ruled by the mightiest of families.

“Leonidas, I have yet another question to ask of you. As we look at each other, it is evident that my clothes and your

clothes reflect the heart and the soul of our cultures. We are different in how we dress and what we think about wealth and material goods. So, we are a living contradiction, and so it appears your culture and freedom are an apparent contradiction. Today, your men are about to fight in a life-and-death battle in order to protect the freedom of your civilization. But you, oh Spartan, have the largest number of indentured slaves of all the Greek city states combined. You conquer your enemies in Messenia and Laconia and then turn them into unskilled laborers to till your soil, cook your food, and wet-nurse your children. And periodically, your Spartan populace wages war on the Helots and slaughters them without any retribution or culpability. Yet, you stand for freedom, you stand for democracy and yet live a life that is a contradiction to say the least. So, before you condemn my culture for its values and apparent contradictions, it is best to look at your own first before you make judgment upon me and my people.”

“Your observation is correct, Xerxes still, you fail to see we are acting humanly toward our vanquished enemies; hence, we do not kill them when we conquer them. I know that your culture kills its conquered no mercy, no remorse. Instead, we keep them alive to do our manual labor, in order that our minds and bodies are free to pursue higher goals in life. If not for the Helots, we would have to share our time between educating our minds and harvesting grain, exercising our bodies and tilling the soil, and fighting our enemies and building our homes. That is an apparent waste of our valuable time, bodies, and minds. So, we have a perfect solution; we save our enemies to work for us, and we have more time to devote to the necessities of life. So, a contradiction, no - a reality, yes.”

“I do understand your logic in the handling of prisoners of war, yet, you still talk about freedom and servitude in the same breath. With my culture, it is black and white when we conquer you; we kill you. There is no greater threat to our

society than an enemy that has been defeated and then kept to live in one of our cities. It is firewood just waiting to be ignited. If we keep them alive, it is us who must keep looking over our shoulders, not knowing when a match will be used to get the fire started. We know not what the defeated are planning, and so, in the end, it is more efficient to send them to their caring gods and the sooner the better.”

“There is yet another cultural norm to consider, brave one. Xerxes, one day you will better understand how a Spartan thinks and what motivates us to save our city-states from a greater enemy than ourselves. We have a saying, ‘We are all of the same family, so I can kick my brother, but you are not family and cannot kick my brother.’ Our city-states have lived and prospered by this unwritten creed for hundreds of years. You, or any other threat from abroad, cannot destroy our allegiance to our brothers’ cities and lands.”

“You are right; that just makes little sense to me, since there must be a victor of each conquest, and if it means to vanquish a neighboring city then it must be done. Now, wise Leonidas, even though the odds are greatly in our favor, you go ahead and attempt to conquer the mightiest army that has crossed the Hellespont? It appears to be sheer madness to me and a death wish to each and every bronze clad warrior on the battlefield today.”

“Honored Xerxes, you must understand as a tactician of war and a leader of people that we, the brave Lacedaemonians, are in a win-win situation. If we win the battle against you today, we win, and if we lose the battle against you today, we still win.”

“Erudite Leonidas, you are talking in rhymes, as my country’s famous poet Virdarna. We both know that poets are romantics with a blurred idea of reality, yet, their reality is not mine, the leader of the greatest nation in the history of our lands. Surely, you cannot believe that you and your soldiers shall win in defeat and win in victory. I understand that your defeat shall

result in the total annihilation of three hundred well-trained soldiers under your command. You and your men will lose and surrender your souls to the benevolent gods unquestionably. I understand that in victory, your band of three hundred warriors will defeat the millions of Persian soldiers amassed on your sacred soil on this day in history. What you say is sheer folly... nothing more and nothing less.”

“Oh, great leader of the mighty Persian army, I shall gladly share my supposed foolishness with you. There can be no turning back now, since each of us must fulfill our destiny on this day. Be forewarned, noble Xerxes, your nation shall be the losers in either case our warriors shall be the victors regardless of the outcome on the battlefield. If we win, we win, and your troops leave our country, and we have saved our fathers, mothers, and our children’s children from a life of slavery and hardship. If we lose, we become the symbol of bravery and shall, no doubt, set the wheels of patriotism in motion, and many new recruits shall be inspired by what my brave warriors attempted to accomplish when outnumbered by thousands, if not tens of thousands of your troops to one of mine. The battle that is about to take place today shall also provide valuable time for our city-states to organize or reorganize their troops and amass a larger army for you and your men to face. As you can see from my madness, the Greeks shall win if we win, and we shall win if we lose.”

“My brave Leonidas, you would sacrifice yourself, but what about the mourning widow you will leave behind, the lovely Queen Gorgo, and your fatherless children. Would you let her fend off her many suitors, since her husband was brought back to Sparta on his shield? Would you have another man raise the children from your royal loins? Is this what you want to have happen to your bride and children? It appears to me that your eyes have grown foggy as the lakes of our lands after a cool summer morning. Being myopic is not a royal quality. Even

though you face a terrible dilemma that will affect your royal lineage until the end of time, there is a simple solution. Think very carefully about what I shall now speak of; it is the proper time to disclose why I wanted to speak with you before we meet on the battlefield.”

“Xerxes, I await your proposal; after all, that is the main reason why we share an audience today. It is not about your being inquisitive about me or my culture, is it?”

“I shall speak plainly and directly, great leader. Listen to my solution; I personally guarantee that you and your men shall be allowed to go free if you surrender to us and do not engage in battle with us. If you and your men abide by my simple request, your entire army shall have free passage back to the banks of the Eurotas. As the king of my mighty empire and a proud descendent of the great Cyrus, I promise that your culture can keep its own laws, religion, and education there is no need to follow our ways.

“However, you shall be required to muster an army and fight hand-in-hand with us against any foe who wishes to battle the mighty Persian Empire. In return, of course, your city-state shall have the full backing of the courageous Persian army if another city is so foolish as to declare war upon the noble Spartans. In return for your life, your freedom, and the preservation of your culture, you shall pay a yearly tribute to my treasury. The amount shall be fair and shall not cause undue hardship to your people.

“There is yet one more item that we must agree upon. In order to seal our new treaty and to remain strong allies, you are also offered the hand of my eldest daughter in marriage. There is my proposal; however, I warn you - before you make a decision of accepting or declining my generous offer, think carefully of what it means to you, your men, your children, your parents, and your way of life.”

“Generous Xerxes, I’d already made up my mind even as you spoke those words, and I know that I have the full support of my men, my family, and my nation. I graciously decline such an offer by the noblest of the noble Persians. As I mentioned, we shall win regardless of the outcome of the battle we are about to face. On the other hand, if I accept your offer, we lose our most cherished of all things we possess - our oath never to quit and never to surrender, no matter what we face and no matter what we know the outcome to be. In essence, accepting your kind offer places each and every one of us upon our shields, alive...and not dead. This is not the Spartan way. Although we face insurmountable odds, it is our way to be proud and not run away from the destiny that is ours to receive from the all-knowing and benevolent pantheon of gods.”

As Xerxes looked off into space, he thoughtfully stroked his manicured beard for a few moments. “I see. Well, you have sealed the fate of yourself and your men with this imprudent answer. Brave one, the next time we meet, we shall be in Hades. Fearless Spartan, fight bravely and die nobly.”

“We shall dine together in Hades and share the moment that marked the beginning of the end for one of us. Noble Persian, be strong and fight tough.”

The two leaders amicably shook hands, nodded, and then walked back to their men in anticipation that the onslaught would begin immediately.

Back at the front line, Leonidas divulged the real reason why the Persian king wanted to meet him. “Lacedaemonians, today the brave Xerxes has requested of me that we should surrender without a fight in order to see another day. Deep in my heart, I question how a Spartan can possibly be a coward and a freeman at the same time and with the same breath. Men, have no fear; I said we shall fight and either be victorious or dwell with the compassionate gods in Hades this fine day.”

“Alalalalalalalala...we shall never live as cowards, but we shall die as brave men!” The three hundred were one voice in their support of their brave leader’s refusal to bargain for their lives and kneel at the invaders’ feet just to breathe the air as the vanquished.

Back at the Persians’ camp, Xerxes expressed his malicious thoughts. “Pixodarus, the Spartans shall have their wish today since they have no desire for peace; rather, they want to die a useless death, and we can accommodate their desires. This day will mark our greatest triumph and the end of the Spartan culture. They shall make their journey to Hades as sure as the sun rises every morning and the moon rises every evening. Attack; be merciless, and take no captives, kill every last man, and let the blood of the three hundred kiss the earth to mark the spot where my troops avenged my late father’s defeat.”

Upon seeing the Persian line fast approaching, Leonidas spake once more. “Men, stand brave here comes the first wave of tyranny from our foreign enemies. Kallistos, keep the men in a tight phalanx and thrust your trusty *dories* into their soft flesh with every ounce of strength that the merciful gods have given you. Have their blood pour out upon our soil as a gesture of gratitude and good fortune to our loving gods. Now, let’s make short work of this gang of invaders.”

The Persians sent wave after wave of their finest soldiers unto the Spartans’ welcoming bronze spears. As the brown earth turned to crimson red, the bodies piled higher and higher, until the Greek defenders felt a tinge of sorrow for the needless deaths of so many Persian men. Of this frightful dais, both sides thought that such bloodshed was an act of futility.

“Sire, the Greeks repel each attack, and we have lost thousands of our best warriors should we reconsider our tactics before even more widows shall grieve for their husbands and more mothers shall mourn for their sons?”

“Megabazus, why do you even consider asking such an ignoble question that, in the end, casts doubt upon your king’s judgment? Would you like to lead our next charge into the lion’s den? If not, perhaps you should rephrase your concerns to the noble Xerxes, before he takes action for you even thinking about such a puerile question?”

“Oh, great one, may the kind gods punish me for my poor choice of words. I’d never be so audacious as to question your expertise on the battlefield. What I meant was that the bodies are piling up so high that they are forming a natural barricade around the Greeks, which is to their advantage. It makes it next to impossible to get at the enemy with our spears and swords.”

“My dear Megabazus, now this is a fine example of why the king keeps you close to his heart and to his ears. Your suggestion to collect our dead, due to a strategic reason, is sound and worth following through upon have the assaults cease immediately for the day, and let us bring the brave warriors back to our camp so that they may lie upon their funeral pyres before the grieving sun closes its eyes upon this inhospitable land.”

“Sire, thank you for your approval, and I shall inform the troops to cease at once. Tomorrow shall bring forth another chance to vanquish the unwelcome flea from upon the leviathan’s back. In a mere twenty-four hours, the Greeks shall beg for mercy when we start to run them through with our cold blades of iron and bronze.”

The battle for the pass that protected the soft underbelly of Greece had gone on for the better part of the afternoon. As the orange sun kissed the green horizon on that infamous day, thousands of Persians were sent to Hades by the bronze *sauroters* of the Spartans. While many of the enemies died a swift death, there were few casualties from the original three hundred Spartan soldiers.

With the first day behind them, Leonidas spake to his stalwart warriors. “Men, you have earned a rest after our much

deserved victory. Extra rations for everyone! The sun rises early, and we must fight again for our very lives. My friend Zoticus, do not let me be disturbed this evening; it has been an excruciatingly long day, and I need to sleep, since we shall enter into yet another brutal day of fighting our enemy tomorrow.”

After washing the stench of death from his burly hands, Leonidas lay on his mat of sheepskins and was in the land of dreams within a few minutes. At that blissful moment, he was sitting on the inviting banks of the Eurotas and holding the warm hand of his queen. He felt a sense of harmony, which had eluded him since his soldiers had hastily left the city to march north to meet their destiny with the future.

“Oh mighty Leonidas,” said a voice. “Arise and accept your fate from the pantheon of gods while all has been going well for your mighty Spartan warriors to this point, your *peripatetic* is about to change.”

“What? Who spake of a change of fate? Was that you, Pamphilos, playing games again? Reveal yourself to me before you feel the sharp point of my dagger.”

Leonidas quickly arose and cautiously looked into every nook and cranny of his tent to find the bearer of such bad news. After roughly ten minutes of searching and not finding another soul present, the brave leader of the outnumbered Spartans gave up and returned to his simple bed.

“I knew that my fate, and the fate of every last one of my men, is sealed by the Oracle of Delphi. I accept what the compassionate gods are about to give to me, and I welcome my death to save my beloved city and country. While our nation shall grieve for us, our families shall know that our lives were not given in vain, since only good can result from the sacrifice of the many here today. We may lose this battle, but we shall win the war and send Perseus’s flock back to their lands knowing that once again we, the noblest of the noble, have beaten down an invader who tried not once but twice to crush our proud nation.”

As the sad words of brave Leonidas became silent, once more he entered into the land of dreams and walked through a beautiful meadow of golden flowers with his wife and children at his side.

The sun had just peeked over the horizon when a greatly invigorated Leonidas leapt out of his tent and sharply barked his day's orders to his men. "Spartans, this is day two, and as we look around us, we see that we have only lost a few of our colleagues and friends. Look to your left and to your right, and as you do, you will behold that the bravest of the brave have sacrificed themselves for their friends, families, and gods. Do not shed a tear for Agape, Hyginos, Linos, Kleon, Eusebius, Xenon, Straton, or the others who have fallen in the line of duty for their country. These brave warriors would expect us to fight gallantly as they have and meet our death or victory with pride. While we have given few to the enemy, our enemy has lost thousands to us. This is reason for a celebration. Let us make an offering before we unleash our wrath upon the followers of Xerxes for yet a second time."

While his gallant men gathered around him, the brave Leonidas spake confidently to the benevolent gods of his city. "Again we shall do battle with the Persians, and today we shall once more display our courage to the caring gods and show them that a handful of freemen can be victorious over legions of conscripted men. Our ideals are noble as we aspire to keep a free land a free land and not to conquer another land for booty or glory. Since our cause is just, mighty gods smile down upon us and deliver us from the hordes who have unnecessarily invaded our sacred lands. Now, men, it's time. Take up your positions, be brave, and hold the line to ensure that the children of Heracles shall destroy the sons of Perseus."

Within a few minutes of Leonidas's noble speech, the Persians came running full force and attempted to smash through the tightly formed phalanx of the Greeks. Wave after wave of

brave men smashed into the Spartans' line, and time and time again they were cut to pieces as the slaughter of the second day mirrored the carnage that resulted on the first day. The noble Xerxes had learned nothing from his first encounter with Leonidas's men, and his troops paid dearly for his ego and stubbornness. The battle waged on for hours as the bodies of the Persian warriors fell in countless numbers around the Spartans.

“Wise Xerxes, our dead pile high before the enemy, and once again it is difficult to get within arm's length of the enemy to have them feel the sharpened blades of our noble spears. Do you believe it is prudent to call a temporary truce and retrieve our dead and wounded?”

“Yes, call it a day, and clear the men's bodies away from our enemy before the afternoon sun meets the green hills that surround us. Collect the dead, and prepare them for their journey to idyllic havens for all eternity.”

As the Persians withdrew and sent their men to gather up their dead and wounded, there was a loud cheer that emanated from the proud Lacedaemonians. “Men, we weathered a storm of such great magnitude that, by all accounts, we should be the ones that are piled high in death. However, the benevolent gods have protected us, and we live to fight yet another day. Sleep sound, and dream of the time when we can return to our homes and families as conquerors and not as cowards. I shall see each man in the morning since the kind gods helped us through another day. Perhaps after tomorrow, Xerxes shall understand that he shall lose even more of his men if they continue to do battle with us. Maybe he shall finally see the folly of this battle and head back to the Hellespont and cross the waters on his impressive pontoon bridge.”

While there was jubilation in the Spartan camp, there was intrigue about to unfold at the camp of the Persians, which would seal the fate of the brave and noble warriors from the Peloponnese.

“Oh mighty Xerxes, a Greek is here, and he states that he has valuable information that can be used by our forces to defeat the Lacedaemonians. Do you wish to have an audience with him?”

“Yes, of course I would entertain his ideas and gladly accept his information to wipe out those few pesky insects who believe they may overcome our might and power on this wonderful day. Send him in immediately!”

“We will abide by your wishes at once, sire.”

“Oh brave and generous King Xerxes of the mighty Persian Empire, I supplicate myself before you today to help your cause against the Greeks. Magnanimously, I have sought out the mightiest of the mighty so that we may strike a deal that shall forever change history. You see, the scribes shall write about a great victory on this very day by the noble Xerxes that shall endure as long as man walks the gracious earth, as long as there are genteel gods in the heavens, and as long as there is joyous water in the seas.”

“Well, my newfound savior of the Persian Empire, what are you called?”

“My name, sire, is Ephialtes, and none other than the noble gods themselves have sent me forth to bring about the defeat of the wicked Spartans and a victory for the righteous Persians.”

“Brave Ephialtes, tell me how you, a simple Greek citizen, can influence the all-knowing gods on this day that has just been delivered to us?”

“My dear lord of the Persian Empire, you have been fighting for the last two days and have only killed a few Spartans while incurring thousands upon thousands of deaths of your elite soldiers. I have news that can snatch victory away from the Spartans and bring you complete victory and total annihilation of the enemy. You see, sire; there is a secret pathway shared only by the wild goats and myself - this pathway shall bring you

behind the Spartan lines, and they shall then be fighting on two fronts, which they cannot possibly sustain with such few numbers. In the end, they shall be massacred by your army, victory shall be yours, and you shall not suffer great losses of your soldiers as you have in the past two days.”

“Oh, well-intentioned shepherd of the Greeks and messenger of the benevolent gods, what does it cost the bold Xerxes for you to disclose this secret path only shared between your animal friends and yourself?”

“Lord of the greatest army ever assembled in the history of the world, all I ask is for a few pieces of gold the weight to match my earthly body. This is a small price for such a large reward, is it not?”

The Persian leader’s eyebrows did not hide his surprise. “Why, yes, Ephialtes, when it comes to gold or my army, the gold is dispensable, while my army is not. You shall have the reward you seek when you have personally shown that enigmatic path to my men. Captain of the Guard, assemble one hundred of my Immortals and go with our newfound emancipator of the Persian Empire to this secret pathway. Then bring him back to your king immediately after he has divulged this secret to you. Xerxes shall ensure he gets exactly what rewards are just for such an act of bravery on his part.”

The leader of the Immortals, the brave Miltiades, assembled one hundred of his finest men on the covert mission that was about to end the two-day standoff between the sons of Heracles and the sons of Perseus.

After an hour or so had passed, Miltiades appeared at the tent of the great Xerxes with a wide smile on his face. The wise leader of the Persians knew that the traitor of men had made good on what he had promised to give to the enemies of Greece.

A tide of arrogance surrounded the words Ephialtes spoke. “Oh, great and powerful Xerxes, did I not speak the truth when I told you that I am the deliverer of the mighty Persian

forces gathered here today? Did I not speak the truth when I mentioned that your casualties will be reduced by this goats' path? Did I not speak the truth when I mentioned that a small amount of gold is little to pay in return for such a generous gift from the kind and humble Ephialtes?"

"Yes, every word that has so eloquently rolled off of your tongue is, indeed, true. Ephialtes, do not worry about the fate of the Spartan warriors, which you have just sealed here today; you see...your name shall live forever."

Suddenly, Xerxes's temperament became as black as the sky would before the unkind winds bore down upon his noble pontoon bridge. "However, your name shall be known as the traitor of his own countrymen, the name that is synonymous with treachery and greed. You, sir, shall receive what is fitting for such an act of treachery toward your own people. You see, you shall dine in Hades with the rest of the three hundred brave souls that you had a direct hand in killing on this infamous day in history. Take him away, and be sure he feels every thrust of our Persian swords cutting his entrails into pieces as we send him to his death - the death that neither a single person today nor a thousand generations of tomorrow will mourn for. Even your own mother shall feel tears of remorse for the day she bore such a coward into this life."

"No, please save me as I have saved the lives of thousands of your best warriors! Please, you gave me your word. Stop..."

The coward's last pleas fell upon deaf ears, as the mighty Xerxes simply waved his hand to signal the decision had been made and no amount of sad pleas or tears would change his mind. The king resumed his dinner as the guards took the screaming traitor to meet his death.

When the morning sun had risen, the Spartan camp was once again optimistic that they could sustain the deadly advances of their foes. Little did they know the treachery that had occurred

the night before, and the treacherous act that would seal their place through history immortal.

“Men, as the third day dawns, the benevolent gods still favor us, and we shall meet the evening sun with yet another day of slaughtering the ones who wish to crush Greek democracy. All right, be brave, and maintain your tight grip on your *dories*. When you have broken the wooden shaft off and it is embedded in a foreigner’s body, then use the *sauroter* to steal away yet another life of the ones who are uninvited guests to our lands.”

No sooner had Leonidas spoke his brave words to his soldiers then the enemy attacked on two villainous fronts. As the Spartans prepared for the onslaught of troops that stood before them, suddenly the humming sounds of deadly arrows could be heard above the noise of ten thousand leather-bound feet approaching the Spartan line.

As the arrows repeatedly found their marks, many Spartans fell dead to the ground. Above the noise of the wooden assassins, mighty Leonidas quickly changed the battle plans of his men.

“Brave Spartans, hold you bronze shields high above your heads, crawl under your protectors, and wait until the deadly volley has stopped. Then raise your spears, and cut the enemy to pieces.”

Alas, the brave leader’s words were for not, as the barrage of countless arrows continued to slice the men apart from their flank, while ten thousand soldiers hammered away at the phalanx of the Spartans. It was a pitiful scene for a Greek to see, as the bravest, one by one, met their death by the treacherous words of one of their own.

As the enemies’ arrows continued to blacken the morning sun, there was one last order from the brave Leonidas before he also met his death. “Men, be brave and die nobly to the very last of us. Know that we shall meet again when we dine with the compassionate gods in Hades this very day.”

He spoke his last words when a barrage of ten arrows ripped into his body. Even though he had been hit so many times, he refused to go down; he still swung his razor-sharp sword until the last spark of life had been extinguished from his mortal body. The last few souls still standing gathered around their fallen leader and prepared to lie in death with him throughout eternity. As the last millimeter of life-giving blood slowly seeped out of their bodies, there was a mighty cheer from the Persians, as they knew that the end was nigh. And so the mighty three hundred ended their lives, which, in turn, guaranteed that their brave deeds would never be forgotten in the long tunnel of time.

“Men, bring the mighty king’s lifeless body to me, and be sure no soldier of mine desecrates it,” commanded Xerxes. “Show respect for the warrior, who, with but a small band of noble men, almost defeated the mightiest army of our day. If it were not for a traitor of their own kind, perhaps we would be sailing back to our homeland without trophies of victory and leaving behind the ashes of many dead comrades consumed by the fires of this barbarous land they call Greece.”

The Spartan’s body was dumped at his feet, and as the mighty Xerxes inspected the fallen leader, he quietly thought to himself that this, indeed, was a brave man, who, against all odds and sure death, chose the noble way to end his life rather than to live a longer life subservient to a foreign invader. After his inspection, Xerxes ordered the three hundred to be buried in a common grave close to where they fell. He knew little of the Spartan’s burial practices and this would haunt the brave warriors throughout eternity.

“Brave and noble soldiers of Persia, followers of Xerxes the Powerful, today we have won a great victory for our forefathers, our country, and our families. We shall now head south into the very heart of this inhospitable land to complete our mission. We shall easily pick the low lying fruit from the trees of the Greeks. First, we shall decimate Thessaly; next we will

vanquish Boeotia; and finally, we shall enter Attica and bring the goddess Athena to her knees. She shall supplicate herself to Xerxes as her sacred temple burns to light up the sky for the mightiest army that has ever set foot upon her land. Her tears shall flood the lands and bring such carnage that no man, woman, or child for a thousand generations shall ever forget the name of Xerxes the Great. This is my destiny.”