

ATHENIAN

THE GATES OF ATHENS

Conn Iggulden

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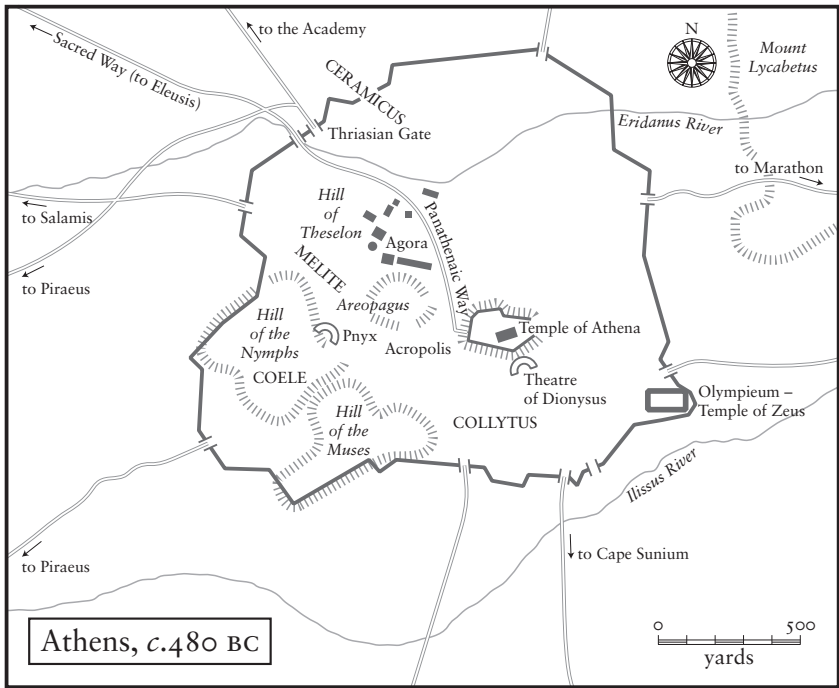
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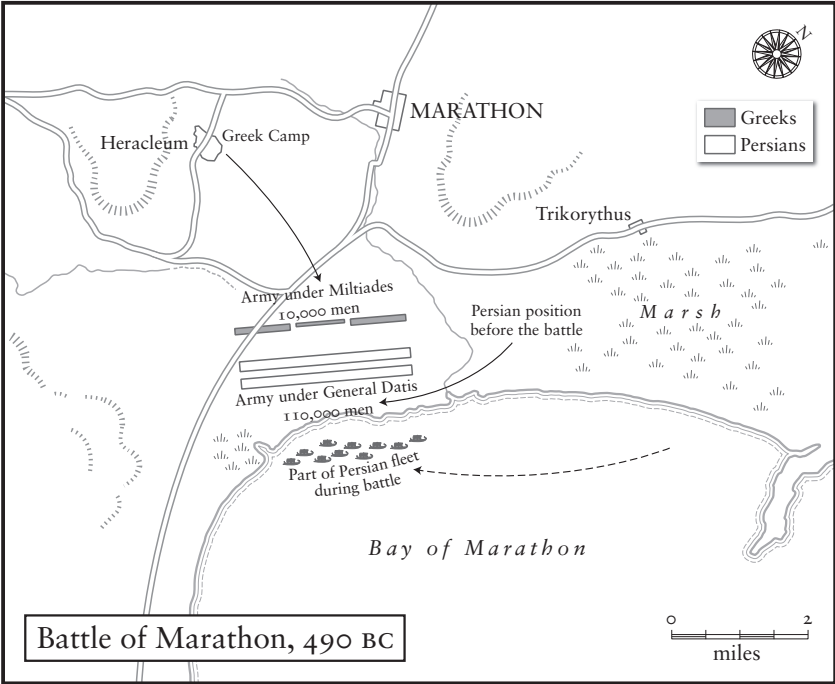
‘He spoke to me – his words had wings.’

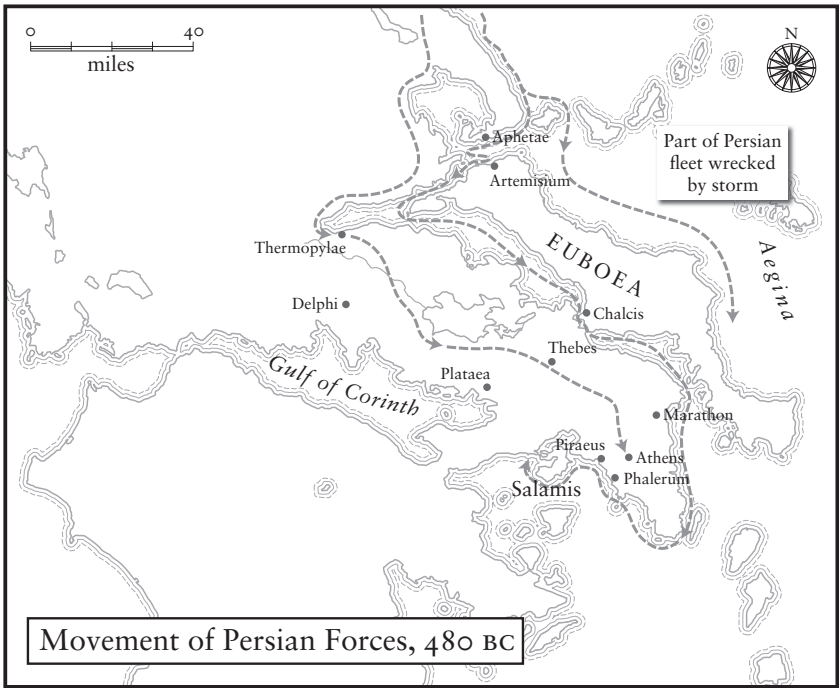
– Homer

‘Quick, bring me a beaker of wine,
that I may wet my mind and say something clever.’

– Aristophanes







Pronunciation

Military terms

	Ancient Greek	Ancient Greek Pronunciation	English Pronunciation	Meaning
archon	ἄρχων	ark-own	<u>ark</u> -on	Ruler, leader.
epistatai	ἐπιστάται	ep-ist-at-eye	ep- <u>ist</u> -at-eye	Second row in phalanx, behind the protostatai.
epistates	ἐπιστάτης	ep-ist-at-air	ep- <u>ist</u> -at-eez	Chairman in the Athenian Assembly.
keleustes	κελευστής	kel-eu-stairs	kel- <u>you</u> -steez	Trireme officer.
phalanx	Φάλαγξ	fal-anks	<u>fal</u> -anks	Body of heavily armed infantry.
protostatai	πρωτοστάται	pro-toss-tat-eye	pro- <u>toss</u> -tat-eye	First row in phalanx, in front of the epistatai.
strategos	στρατηγός	strat-air-goss	<u>strat</u> -egg-oss	General, commander.
trierarch	τριήραρχος	tree-air-ark-oss	<u>try</u> -err-ark	Commander of a trireme.

Underlining indicates stressed syllables.

Locations

Agora	Ἄγορά	ag-or-a	ag- <u>or</u> -a	Open place, market.
Areopagus	Ἄρειος πάγος	a-ray-oss pag-oss	a-ree- <u>op</u> -ag-ous (as in danger-ous)	Rock of Ares. Hill in Athens used as a court.
Ceramicus	Κεραμεικός	ker-a-may-koss	se- <u>ram</u> -ik-ous/ ke- <u>ram</u> -ik-ous	Potters' district of Athens.
Eretria	Ἐρέτρια	e-ret-tree-a	e- <u>ret</u> -tree-a	Greek town in Euboea.
Marathon	Μαραθών	ma-rath-own	<u>ma</u> -rath-on	Fennel plain on the east coast of Attica.
Plataea	Πλάταια	plat-eye-a	pla- <u>tee</u> -a	Greek town in Boeotia.
Pnyx	Πνύξ	p-nooks	p- <u>niks</u>	'Packed in'. Hill. Meeting place of the Assembly in Athens.
Salamis	Σαλαμίς	sal-a-miss	<u>sal</u> -a-miss	Island off Athens.

Characters

Agariste	Ἀγαρίστη	ag-a-ris-t-air	ag-a- <u>rist</u> -ee	Wife of Xanthippus.
Ariphron	Ἀρίφρων	a-ri-frone	<u>a</u> -ri-fron	First son of Xanthippus and Agariste.
Aristides	Ἀριστείδης	a-ris-tay-dairs	a- <u>rist</u> -id-eez	Strategos, eponymous archon 489 BC.
Cimon	Κίμων	kim-own	<u>ky</u> -mon	Son of Miltiades.
Cleisthenes	Κλεισθένης	clay-sthen-air	<u>cl</u> y-sthen-eez	Athenian lawmaker.
Eleni (Helen)	Ἑλένη	hell-en-air	e- <u>lay</u> -nee	Daughter of Xanthippus and Agariste. (Never named in ancient sources.)
Epikeos	Ἐπικλέος	ep-i-kle-oss	ep-i- <u>klay</u> -oss	Friend of Xanthippus.
Heracles	Ἡρακλῆς	hair-a-klairs	<u>herr</u> -a-kleez	Mythical hero famed for strength.
Miltiades	Μιλτιάδης	mill-tee-ad-air	mill- <u>ty</u> -a-deez	Military leader, father of Cimon.
Pericles	Περικλῆς	per-ik-lairs	<u>per</u> -ik-leez	Son of Xanthippus and Agariste.
Pheidippides	Φειδιππίδης	fay-dip-id-air	fy- <u>dip</u> -id-eez	Marathon runner.
Themistocles	Θεμιστοκλῆς	th-mist-o-clairs	th- <u>mist</u> -o-cleez	Eponymous archon 493 BC.
Xanthippus	Ξάνθιππος	ksan-thip-oss	<u>zan</u> -thip-ous	Strategos, leader. Husband to Agariste.
Xerxes	Ξέρξης	kserk-seez	<u>zerk</u> -seez	King of Persia.

Additional words

Athena	Ἀθηνᾶ	ath-air-na	ath- <u>een</u> -a	Patron goddess of Athens.
Eupatridae	Εὐπατρίδαι	eu-pat-rid-eye	you- <u>pat</u> -rid-eye	Hereditary aristocracy of Athens.

Ten tribes of Athens

Erectheis	Ἐρεχθίδς	e-rek-thair-ees	e- <u>rek</u> -thay-iss
Aegeis	Αιγίδς	eye-gair-ees	a- <u>jee</u> -iss
Pandionis	Πανδιονίδς	pand-ee-on-iss	pand-ee- <u>own</u> -iss
Leontis	Λεοντίς	le-ont-iss	lee- <u>ont</u> -iss
Acamantis	Ἀκαμαντίς	ak-am-ant-iss	ak-am- <u>ant</u> -iss
Oeneis	Οἰνήϊς	oy-nair-ees	ee- <u>nee</u> -iss
Cecropis	Κεκροπίς	kek-rop-iss	kek- <u>rop</u> -iss
Hippothontis	Ἴπποθοντίς	hip-oth-ont-iss	hip-oth- <u>ont</u> -iss
Aeantis	Αἰαντίς	eye-ant-iss	eye- <u>ant</u> -iss
Antiochis	Ἀντιοχίδς	ant-i-ok-iss	ant-ee- <u>ok</u> -iss

Prologue

The dust of mountain flowers lay thick on the air, like perfume or boiled varnish. Living things panted in the shade. Goat's-thorn grew on all sides, with scrub grass and bare rocks too hot for anything alive to rest upon. Crickets creaked and sang in the branches of pines that clung to stone and somehow endured.

Into a stillness as old as the hills around them music sounded as a faint thread on the air, swelling into something that rang with brass and voices raised in song. Lizards scuttled out of sight as the king's dancers reached the crest, making the air tremble with cymbals, pipes and drums. At a single order, they halted, panting, dripping with sweat.

The king himself came forward on his stallion, dismounting with a hint of the grace he had known as a young man. Darius tossed the reins to a slave and clambered onto a huge flat stone to stare over the plain. From that height, he could see the scars of the land, the marks of war and fire. He frowned, moved by both the distance and the closeness of the past. He had stood in that same place thirty years before. In that moment, it seemed as if he could take a single step and be there once again, with his father at his side and his life all ahead.

Ruins lay where the city of Sardis had been. The flames had died down long before, though when a whisper of breeze rose, Darius thought he could smell char on it, a scent of burned bricks or perfume, or rot. There were people too, in the distance. The air was so clear, Darius could see the sparks

of cooking fires, with thin trails of smoke rising above. No doubt some of them had run, only to return when the conflagration had died down, or perhaps they had come to loot the ruins, searching for beads of gold that had once been coins.

The funeral pyre of a city could never be a small thing. On that day, from the height and distance of the mountains, it was hard to imagine entire streets and parks and districts consumed in flame. The watchtowers along the great wall had fallen, Darius saw, spilling their stones. Roads too stretched away from the walls, clearly marked. The steps of families had carried ash and soot, making dark trails like the veins in an old man's arm. The king knew pestilence would stalk there now. Those who had survived cared nothing for the dead, not without leadership. Flies crept over corpses – and the living hurried past, desperate not to see.

The Great King did not wince or shake his head at the thought. He had known death before, many times. He knew his workers would have to bury the fallen in vast shallow pits outside the city before they could even begin to rebuild.

Darius turned at last, looking to include his young son in his deliberations. Xerxes sat some way back from the front ranks, one leg tucked beneath the other as he balanced on the shoulders of a young bull elephant. Darius saw the boy was distracted by something, perhaps one of his pets. Xerxes could always find some creature to train and amuse him. The most recent had been a cricket, the one before a tiny blue lizard that held food in both hands to devour it. The Great King had never felt the need for such things himself. He worried the boy was not concerned enough with the empire he would inherit. He sighed. The cares of a father were legion.

The royal procession had come to a halt at his gesture.

Having climbed steadily all morning, relief shone in their faces. Behind the king stood sixty thousand men, back and back, reaching so far down the trail he could not see an end to them. Darius had come prepared for war, but found only ashes.

Ahead, the dancing women rested, quivering in their exhaustion. One of them had fallen just that morning, dropping to the ground in loose-limbed delirium, then shrieking as carts and men behind passed over. Only the royal elephants had stepped around the broken girl, fastidious in what they chose to crush.

Darius knew he didn't have to say a word to his seneschal. Ashar's grim countenance and faint blush was evidence enough of his shame. The mistress of the dancers would certainly be beaten that evening, perhaps bound to a tree and simply left, for lions and wolves to find. The others would see her fate and know not to shame the Great King in the honour he did them.

Darius was no longer the vital young warrior he had once been. As he contemplated climbing down from the rock, he suppressed a wince at the twinge in his hips and lower back. There was a time when he would have leaped down, delighting in his strength. His servants knew him well, however. Steps had been brought as he'd stood and looked out. He walked down then, back straight, his expression perfectly calm.

Xerxes watched warily as his father approached, wondering if he would be punished for something only the king could possibly have noticed or cared about. Seated on a pad of stuffed silk, the boy wore just sandals and a kilt of leather studded in gold. Bare-chested, he was a living reminder of youth that could only sour his father's mood further.

Servants sprinkled dried lavender and myrtle on the dusty path as the Great King approached his son. It was an insult

for Darius to be made to look up, but Xerxes seemed frozen in his seat high on the elephant. The enormous young bull swung its head to eye the man at its side. Both boy and beast were at the most awkward of ages. With a gesture, Darius waved the petal servants away. They trembled on the edges of his vision, ready to make the ground fragrant once more, for steps that shook the world.

‘Come down from there, Xerxes,’ the Great King said softly.

His son nodded and put out one hand so that his elephant could see. The trunk curled round and he stepped onto the muscled length, brought to the ground in perfect smoothness. The boy seemed proud of it. Darius showed no reaction to a trick more suited to the markets or the logging camps. He put his arm around his son’s shoulders and walked with him to where he should have been standing, waiting on his father. There, Darius rested one hand on the great stone, feeling its warmth.

‘You see that city?’ he said. ‘Dark with ash?’

Xerxes made a show of peering in the distance before he nodded, still unbending. Darius found he was proud of the young man who would surely follow him, if Ahura Mazda, the Lord of Wisdom, allowed it. It did not pay to be too sure of the future, aloud or in the most private thoughts. The God of Light heard all.

‘It is Sardis, the capital of this entire region,’ he said. ‘Or it was. It was sacked by an enemy and burned, including the great temple that had stood for two thousand years. This is why I brought so many soldiers, Xerxes. By tomorrow, every home and temple will be cleared to the foundations. We will rebuild it all.’

‘Who would dare attack one of our cities?’ Xerxes asked.

‘Men of Athens, men of Eretria,’ his father replied. ‘The

Greeks. I thought . . . They sent ambassadors here a dozen years ago, asking for friendship. I thought they had agreed to become one of my chosen – my beloved subject peoples. They gave earth and water to my governor and they went home, across the sea. I confess I hardly thought of them after that.’

The king smiled and tried to ruffle his son’s hair. He hid his hurt when Xerxes pulled away.

‘This is the edge of the world, Xerxes. The sea lies not two days from here – and beyond it, lands which have never known the blessing of our laws, our soldiers.’ He waved an arm over the plain. ‘I rule here, from the slave markets to the gold mines. Every pot and cup is mine, every coin and beam and child. Yet we are a long way from civilisation, from the heartlands. Perhaps I have been too gentle with them, too forgiving. I trust too easily. It has always been my weakness.’

He saw his son shift uncomfortably and smiled.

‘No man can say I am without honour, Xerxes. Can you accept that? If I give my word, I keep it, though the world falls around me. If I forgive an enemy, if I welcome him as a child into my house, he knows there will be no more anger from me. Even the Greeks know this. Oh, they may shout and struggle, but for those who are men, who are willing to put aside their pride and offer me tokens of earth and water, I will be always a forgiving god.’

‘But why? Why would you forgive the men who did this, who burned Sardis?’

Darius leaned closer to his son. Though a hundred servants and slaves waited on his slightest whim, though two naked and kohl-eyed women peeped from the curtained litter that adorned his elephant, he was alone still, with his heir.

‘I speak now as a king, Xerxes. Hear me. My word is unbroken because when a man takes the field against my

armies, I want him to look in fear on his allies, to wonder if they will desert him, even in the heat of battle. I want him to know, as he knows his own name, that if he surrenders to me, if he takes the taste of dust onto his lips and offers me water from his cupped hands, I will honour him as an ally to the end of the world, without rancour, without vengeance. Because he will be a living example of my mercy. Do you understand?’

Xerxes shook his head a touch, closing his eyes as the wind picked up, easing the great heat of the day. In that moment of silence and peace, he suddenly saw it. His eyes opened and his father smiled to see the gleam in them.

‘Trusting you weakens them all . . .’ Xerxes said, in something like wonder. ‘It means brother will turn on brother as we approach, friend against friend. But the cost, father? To your honour? You lose vengeance – is it not too high a price to pay?’

‘No. There are forty nations in my empire – Media, Assyria, Lydia, India – by the god that binds, men like silver fish in the ocean, all subject to my throne, my crown. If I were a trickster, a liar, they would have fought much harder to keep me away. Instead, their leaders are given palaces and lands. In their quiet times, they might wonder if they have been conquered at all.’

‘But they have,’ Xerxes said.

His father nodded.

‘Yes. So it is with these cities, this “league of Ionia”. They look to their forefathers the Greeks instead of us. Perhaps they thought I was too far away to care what they did on the very borders of the western seas. They called to Athens for help in their betrayal – and those Greek whores sent ships from Eretria and their hoplite soldiers to roam this coast, to murder and terrorise peoples that are mine. They talk now of

throwing off the yoke I have placed on them, of the “outrage” of our rule.’

The king laughed, though there was little humour in it and his eyes remained black and shadowed by his brows.

‘In the destruction of my garrison, the Greeks set the reed roofs of Sardis aflame. It spread like the wind itself until all was consumed, even the temple to Cybele, Great Mother of the World. That is hard to forgive.’

The king stood looking into the distance for a time. His son did not dare interrupt his thoughts. Nor did he resist when his father placed a hand on his shoulder again.

‘I will rebuild for a season here. The armies I have brought will enter all the towns and cities of this Ionian league and exact punishments as I see fit. They will take men’s hands, so they cannot carry a spear or blade again. The most beautiful children will find their way to our markets. The old men and women will be thrown on the fires. I sometimes think that is a mercy in its way – to those who would have been burdened by them. You see? Even in the furnace of my anger, there can be wisdom. I am no tyrant, Xerxes. When I move, when the mountains move, it is a trembling greater than the tread of a thousand kings. You will know the same, when I am gone. All men are slaves; all kings are slaves to us.’

His son’s face lit with pleasure at the words. Xerxes reached up with his left hand and touched the fingers resting on his bare shoulder. His father’s wisdom had built an empire of such extraordinary wealth and power, it was as he said: the world bowed to him. Xerxes thought even the rain would fall at his command.

‘And what of the Greeks, father?’

‘They have gone back in their ships, like children asleep in innocence. They have butchered my garrisons, after all. They

believe the work is done. They are mistaken. The work has begun! I will see them again, when I am finished here.'

The king looked over his shoulder to the ranks of his bodyguard standing in white panelled coats. The heat must have been oppressive, but they stood in perfect stillness, as if carved from stone. The general who commanded them came forward at that single glance, prostrating himself full-length and raising both hands to his eyes as he lay on the ground, as if blinded. When he rose, dust stuck to the oil of his equipment, giving him the air of a soldier on campaign rather than mere ornament. Darius thought it was a fine omen.

'Fetch me my bow, General Datis.'

The royal weapon was unstrapped from its case and strung in instants, while the king stood with his hand outstretched. Darius accepted the weight of it, a weapon almost as tall as he was himself, though it shone with oil and sunlight on the gold bands wrapping the grips.

'Arrow,' Darius said.

He fitted one to the woven string and drew as easily as any man who had practised every day since childhood. The muscles on his arm, shoulder and chest grew taut and he let it fly into the distance, soaring for an age as the ground dropped away to the plains below.

'I send this shaft as my vow,' Xerxes heard his father murmur. 'God, let me punish the Athenians as they deserve.'

He handed back the bow and crooked a finger to his wine slave. Though the slender young man had served the king for all his twenty years, earning authority in the golden court, he dropped to his belly without hesitation, sensing his master's mood.

'Mishar, you have a new task, from today. Rise now and accept it from my hand.'

The eunuch rose smoothly, standing with eyes downcast

as father and son regarded him. His silks had not fared well on the dusty ground and Xerxes grimaced at patches of sweat. There was no excuse for poor standards, not when there were slaves to bathe and change a man's robes, as many times a day as he could desire. If Mishar was even a man. Xerxes had made the guards hold him down once, so that he could examine the old injury and the shrunken little sack there, dark as a bruise. Mishar had wept like a woman then. It was odd that a slave might understand his life was not his own, yet expect to keep some semblance of dignity – a part owned as surely as the labour of his hands! Xerxes thought his father allowed some of the servants too many liberties, perhaps through long association. He would not make the same mistake when his turn came. He smiled at the thought.

'Mishar,' the king went on, 'you are to approach me each evening, as I sit for dinner. You will interrupt me, without fear of punishment. You will say this: "Master, remember the Greeks." Do you understand what I have said to you?'

The wine slave tried to nod, though he trembled so violently Xerxes thought he might be ill. Mishar too had noted the black ruins of Sardis. He had not known how the king would react. A trickle of sweat showed as a bright line on his forehead, slipping into the creases by his painted mouth.

'I . . . I do . . . I understand, Majesty. It will be as you say.'

'It will indeed, Mishar. If you forget, I will have that fine tongue I own torn out. Now leave us – and find fresh silks. Those you are wearing are fit only for the fire.'

The eunuch bowed and dipped away. Xerxes watched his father in anticipation, seeing the wolf in him, the destroyer of nations.

'So,' the king said, 'I will not forget the debt I owe the Greeks, my son. Not until it is paid a thousand times over. They are a small and scattered people. I will purchase ships

from the Phoenicians and march some of my lazy western garrisons to this place. There are too many palace officers here, Xerxes, men fat and soft, living lives of ease. A little campaign would do them good, I think. Perhaps I will see how my Immortals fare on the open sea. It would amuse me to watch men like General Datis heaving their breakfast over the side!

The king laughed at the thought, his grim mood vanishing. He turned to his son and Xerxes managed not to flinch.

‘Now, have your horse brought up. I would see you ride out with the scouts as we reach the plain.’

‘I would prefer . . .’

‘It would please me, Xerxes,’ his father said softly.

The boy bowed his head immediately.

‘Very well.’

With that settled, the king smiled.

‘Good. The men should see you ride. When the sun sets, I will expect you at the feast for my officers. My generals and I will make plans to punish these Ionian cities who quake before us.’

Xerxes bowed once more. He had hoped for some time to himself, without his father directing every hour before sleep. Still, the rewards for his obedience would come. Though he could not imagine a world that did not have his beloved father in it, one day, the empire would be his. His command would turn the clouds back then, or dim the sun in his father’s memory. It was a good thought.

PART ONE

490 BC

I

Xanthippus stood very still, breathing through his nose, murmuring instructions to the slaves working around him. The three men responded with slight dips of their heads, intent on their tasks. All of them had served his wife's family since childhood. A stray thought came to him that every Spartan had seven slaves whose task it was to ready him for war. Perhaps Athenians were more efficient. Xanthippus neither smiled, nor voiced the thought aloud. His mood was restless, impatient. He was thirty-eight years old and he knew he might die that day.

He could no longer hear the uproar in the city, though he doubted it had lessened. His wife's home was huge, an estate with olive and fig orchards. The room where Xanthippus stood to be armed was right in the centre, far from outer walls that would not have disgraced a fortress. Columns of white stone ringed a central space around him, open to the blue sky above. There was peace there, far from the tumult and fear of war. Around that quiet heart lay a dozen rooms on two floors. Past the outer wall, the house gates opened onto the road to Eleusis, standing to the north-west of the centre of Athens.

Xanthippus had been woken by shouting in the darkness, long before the sun had risen. Runners from the house had been sent into the Agora, to the bronze statues of heroes that represented the ten tribes of Athens. The council of the Areopagus had mounted sheets of fine papyrus there, under each statue. Slaves with torches stood to lend a flickering light to

anyone who needed it. Every tribe was called, every deme of the city and the lands around. All they feared had come.

Xanthippus grunted as his greaves were pressed into place. Moulded to the exact shape of his shin and knee, they needed no straps or thongs, but were held secure by the natural spring in the metal. They gleamed as if made of gold, shining with the same blessed oil that had been rubbed into his limbs.

‘Hold a moment,’ he said.

The men stood back and he dropped into a low lunge. The greaves remained in place and he nodded. As he rose again, one of the men reached around him to fasten a kilt of white linen. His thighs would remain uncovered. It was one thing to run or train naked in the heat of summer. Battle was different. Xanthippus had learned from his father how useful a bit of cloth can be, when sweat or blood is in your eyes.

Bare-chested, Xanthippus eyed his breastplate as it was raised up. The inner layer was of bleached linen, sewn thick and strong. Over that was a greater weight of bronze scales. He knew he would feel it every step he marched away from the city. Yet for all its heaviness and ridiculous expense, it was the skin of war. Some of the other strategoi preferred a solid plate of bronze or leather. Xanthippus disliked the feeling of restriction. He had seen a man who could not tie his sandals without removing his breastplate, helpless as a fish on land. In comparison, his scales made him feel invincible. As his greaves had been shaped to him, the breast-piece was the work of a master smith. Bronze was a warm metal when it touched his skin. Everything about it pleased him.

He nodded and muttered as the armour was fastened, with two straps over his shoulders and a cinch at his waist. Two smaller plates – the wings – hung down over his groin, protecting the great vein at the top of each leg. With his shield

raised, an enemy would see only bronze greaves, round shield and helmet – a man of gold. The thought was good. His arms were left clear of all obstruction and he clenched his hands and swung them, loosening stiff shoulders and checking he had full movement.

His studded sandals were tied securely and he added a cloth headband above his eyes. It would soak up sweat and help cushion the weight of his helmet. Xanthippus felt his heart quicken as a second group of slaves brought in the weapons of a hoplite. These had not been bought for him by the wealth of the Alcmaeonidae, his wife's family, who traced their line back to the adventures of Homer's *Iliad*. No, they showed the years of use, in scratches and dents and even a small patch of brazed repair by the helmet nose-piece. Each part of his gear had saved his life at some point. Xanthippus looked upon the collection with pride and affection, as a man might pat the head of a favourite hound.

'Where is my shield?' he said.

The hoplon shield had not been carried in with the rest. The others looked to the most senior man there to answer. Manias bowed before replying, more serious than usual on such a day.

'The mistress asked to be the one to show it to you.'

'I see. Agariste has had it repainted.'

It was not exactly a question, but Manias dipped his head even so, flushing under the cold gaze of the master of the house. As slave to the Alcmaeonidae, Manias had served the household in various roles for every year of the mistress's life. He was fiercely loyal to Agariste, as only one who had carried her on his shoulders when she had been a little girl could be. Yet that moment was one of silent communication between two men, regardless of their different stations.

Xanthippus said nothing more, though anger radiated from

him, making the other slaves clumsy as he checked his spear for cracks along its length. There were none. On impulse, he waved them back and whirled the great weapon around his head and body, making it sing through the air. As long and half again as he was tall, the weight of the iron-leaf point was perfectly balanced by the bronze spike at the other end – the lizard killer, as young epheboi hoplites called it. The length of Macedonian ash felt good as he twisted it in his palms. He could feel the marks of tools in its planes, the memory and sweat of older craftsmen as they worked on it. He had killed men with that dory spear. It felt right to hold it.

Xanthippus ran a hand through the horsehair plume that formed the crest of his helmet. There was no dust and the massed bristles were neatly trimmed and new. Satisfied, he placed it at his feet and unsheathed his sword, checking the iron blade for imperfections. Some things could not be left to slaves, no matter how experienced. The sword had been well cared for since the last time he had drawn it on behalf of the city. It too shone with olive oil, unmarked by stubborn black spots of rust. Sheath and belt were buckled to his waist and he began to feel heavier, armoured.

Agariste came out of the shadowy cloister beyond the sunlit room. Slender as she was, she bore the weight of his shield, the heaviest part of his kit – and the most important. The bronze circle was covered in a white cloth. He thought he knew what image would be there even so.

‘Leave us,’ she said softly.

The slaves vanished into the gloom around them, skilled in their ability to follow her orders. This was her house, after all, her father’s before her. Her uncle Cleisthenes would have stood where Xanthippus did now, the man who had re-designed democracy in Athens, who had chosen the names of the ten tribes. Hers was a famous line. Xanthippus felt the

weight of it at times. Yet he knew she loved him in all her unmarked youth, the green spring of her life. They had married when she was sixteen and he thirty, just embarking on his political life. Eight years had passed and if he had risen, it was in part due to the support of her family. Yet she had come to a grown man in her first bloom, and still feared his disapproval. A single angry word could bring tears to her eyes, he knew. It was written in every line of her as she approached, terrified Xanthippus would not like what she had done.

‘Show me, then,’ he said. He still held his spear in his right hand and reached out with the left, his fingers splayed.

Mute, with her lower lip held under her teeth, she pulled away the cloth, letting it flutter to the tiles.

He had expected some aspect of a lion the moment he’d heard she had repainted his shield. The dream had tormented Agariste for years, coming again and again to disturb her sleep. He’d heard every detail a dozen times. Yet it did not have the feel of prophecy, at least to his ear. Though he indulged her to keep the peace, Xanthippus thought the gods would not have trusted his foolish young wife with a true vision. He thought instead that it sprang from her worry for him, or for the children. He could not banish a pang of dread at losing the simple old eye on his shield, however. It had glared out at every enemy he’d ever faced, but now it was gone, made blind by her.

‘It is very fine,’ he said.

‘You like it? Truly?’ she said, looking into his eyes. ‘No. You don’t like it.’

‘It is beautiful,’ he said in perfect honesty. In truth, the artist was very skilled. The lion roared out of the centre of the shield, all head and teeth and rage. It was a fine image, though he would still have preferred the old unblinking eye to watch over him.

‘In the dream where I gave birth to a lion,’ she said, choosing to fill the silence with a stream of words, ‘I thought at first it had to be the baby. As I was full of child, what else could it be? But then I saw your shield and I thought . . . what if *you* were the lion? What if I could help to make my Xan the lion of Athens?’

‘I cannot say which is right, not today,’ he replied.

The conversation demanded more of him than he wanted to give in that moment. He needed to be still and grim and silent, with the tools of war in his hand and battle ahead. Yet she continued to draw him out, breaking the cold hardness in him. It was not always welcome.

There were no slaves in sight as he looked around, though he knew they would be within call.

‘Agariste . . . what will happen today . . .?’

‘Oh! The children! I must bring them out to see you off.’

‘No, Aggie . . .’ but she had gone, vanished in a few steps, so that he stood alone in the beam of sunlight under the blue sky. The sun was rising and he was suddenly eager to go. He almost strode from that place, but he heard the voices of his children, the sound catching him like a briar.

Ariphron was the eldest at seven, the boy’s six-year-old sister Eleni approaching in his wake. They came in like little geese, looking with awe at the sight of their father gleaming oil and gold, like a living god. Agariste held the hand of the youngest, stumbling at her side. At five years old, his youngest son seemed close to tears.

Xanthippus laid down his spear and knelt.

‘Come to me, little ones. You too, Pericles. It’s all right. Come.’

The three of them ran to him, thumping their father in the chest and running their hands over the bronze with wide eyes.

‘Are you going to kill Persians?’ Ariphron asked.

Xanthippus looked over to his eldest son and nodded.

‘Many Persians, yes. Hundreds.’

‘Will they come here to kill us?’

‘Never. Every man in Athens is arming himself to face them. They will regret ever coming here.’

To his irritation, his daughter Eleni suddenly started to weep, a process that began with her face crumpling and continued with the issuing-forth of wails and sobbing of extraordinary volume. Xanthippus winced and regretted that he had allowed the moment at all.

‘Perhaps you could take your sister and brother to the kitchens, Ariphton. Find them some fruit, or whatever the cook has on the spit. Would you like that?’

His oldest son nodded solemnly, understanding that he was being trusted with a task of responsibility. Xanthippus could not prevent another embrace, but then the children were gone, Ariphton leading the others.

Agariste reached down to pick up the spear. It looked strange in her hand and Xanthippus took it quickly. There had been too many strange omens that day already – weeping children being the last of them. He had lost the eye on his shield and he did not want her to drop his weapon, for fear of what that might mean. His hand closed over hers and he could feel the warmth of her and smell the perfume she used, a paste of rose and lavender and musk. It filled his nostrils and he wondered if he smelled the sweet oils of his own funeral pyre.

‘Agariste, if we lose . . .’

‘Don’t say it, Xan. You will invite the disaster. Please.’

‘It has to *be* said. I have to know you understand.’

‘Please . . .’

He thought she might turn and run from him. In reply, he felt anger surge. In some ways, she was still an innocent. He gripped her wrist, hard enough to make her cry out.

‘If we lose and they come here, you must kill the children.’

‘I can’t do that,’ she whispered.

She would not look at him and twisted almost unthinkingly, trying to remove his grip. He held her even tighter and he did not relent, though tears ran down her cheek.

‘You are the mistress of the house, Agariste. You *will* do that. If you cannot wield the blade yourself, give it to Manias. Do I need to tell you what Persians do to children they capture? Will you force me to describe the horror of it? They are a plague in the world, Agariste. I have seen the results of their . . . attentions. I have seen the corpses. If we lose, they will make an example of Athens. The city will die and there will be no safe place. It is not like the battles of before, when an army of Sparta came to stand beneath the Acropolis, or the horsemen of Thessaly fought against us. We are Greeks and we know the limits of war – and when there are none. The Persians . . . they are too cruel, my love. And they are many, like grains of sand. If they win, you must save the children and yourself from what will come.’

‘If it is your command, husband, I will do as you say.’

She bowed her head, though when she met his gaze, he realised he was not certain she told the truth. Her family had been wealthy and powerful for centuries. It gave them a sense of confidence, not least in their ability to survive. He could see that in her. He could only pray – to Ares, to Zeus, to Hera the goddess of marriage – that Agariste would be spared, that she would never have to discover how fragile the world truly was.

He kissed her then, without passion, but as a farewell and a promise.

‘If I can, I will come home,’ he said.

He did not tell her how small a chance he judged it to be. Those Greeks who thought they could win the battle had

never seen the armies of Persia. They had been like black locusts in Ionia – and that was said to be just one small part of the whole. Xanthippus had fought then against their garrisons, supporting Greeks who merely wished to live free. He had witnessed Persian vengeance, carried out on innocents. It was rare for him to sleep without some picture from that time coming back to throw him out of slumber. His wife’s doctor had told him the dreams would fade in a few more years, but it seemed he would not be given the time he needed. He had to go to war on Greek soil, a man who had watched Sardis burn.

Xanthippus took up his helmet and pushed it hard onto his head. His hair had been drawn into a knot that served to cushion him from a blow. The lining was old enough for him to recognise the smell of sweat and rancid oil the moment he shoved it down. His view was a crosspiece, like a sword hilt. It brought back memories of all the other times he had worn it and he felt his mood darken. Reverently, he took up his spear and shield, testing the grips for strength. There would be blood sacrifices made on the gathering field by the Academy. As a senior man of the Assembly, he could easily be chosen to slaughter a ram to the gods for their good fortune. He would certainly be called upon to kill men.

‘You will come home,’ Agariste said, suddenly. ‘In glory, with your lion shield. I see it, Xan. I see it now.’

He could not kiss her while he wore the helmet, but she embraced him once more, clinging to his armour. He saw the slaves and staff had gathered. Some fifty of them had abandoned their work to see the master leave for war. Cooks and elderly gardeners knelt as he passed. Horse boys stared at the man in golden bronze who would fight for them and for the city.

Out beyond the walls, in the sun, the road was surprisingly

quiet. Xanthippus had expected crowds of refugees trying to get out. It seemed the people of the city understood what his wife would not. There was nowhere to run. The Persians had landed. If they were not thrown back into the sea, it was the end.

Xanthippus murmured thanks to his groom for bringing his horse. He nodded to the two who would run alongside him out to the gathering ground. Both Xenias and Theos were free men, though they had earned that freedom in trade and skill. They too wore serious expressions and he had a sense of falseness, of wrongness. On the one hand, his wife and her slaves stood to see him off. The children had crept out, of course, clambering up to peer over the wall at him like little owls. Xanthippus nodded to Ariphron. It might almost have been a normal day.

On the other hand, a dark gulf yawned before him. Xanthippus could already sense the silence to come, just moments off. He and his two seconds would leave the estate behind and go to a place where the whole army was gathering, to destroy or be destroyed.

He had to go, to leave his family behind. The fear and seriousness of it lay heavier than armour. He passed his shield and spear to his seconds and mounted his horse, taking up the reins. Xenias and Theos fell in beside him, shining with oil and early sweat. As Xanthippus turned his back on all he loved, the high voices of his children called after him, dwindling with every step. He did not look back.