MARATHON

TONY NORTH

ΑΙΣΧΥΛΟΝ ΕΥΦΟΡΙΩΝΟΣ ΑΘΗΝΑΙΟΝ ΤΟΔΕ ΕΥΘΕΙ
ΜΝΗΜΑ ΚΑΤΑΦΘΙΜΕΝΟΝ ΠΥΡΟΦΟΡΟΙΟ ΓΕΛΑΣ·
ΑΛΚΗΝ Δ'ΕΥΔΟΚΙΜΟΝ ΜΑΡΑΘΩΝΙΟΝ ΑΛΣΟΣ ΑΝ
ΕΙΠΟΙ ΚΑΙ ΒΑΡΥΧΑΙΤΗΕΙΣ ΜΗΔΟΣ ΕΠΙΣΤΑΜΕΝΟΣ

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For Κάτερινά

Maps at the front of this book:

1. The Persian Empire, 500BC
2. Greece, 490BC
3. Athens, 490BC
4. Attica, 490BC
5. The Plain of Marathon

At the back:

1. Diagram of a hoplite's arms
2. Diagram showing how the phalanx was formed
3. Photos: Hoplite re-enactors, Athens, Marathon, and busts of Aeschylos, Themistokles, and Miltiades
4. How do you say that? A guide to pronunciation of the Greek names in this book
5. Statement of historical (in)accuracy
6. What happened next?

Lots more information on hoplite warfare and the battle of Marathon may be found on my website:

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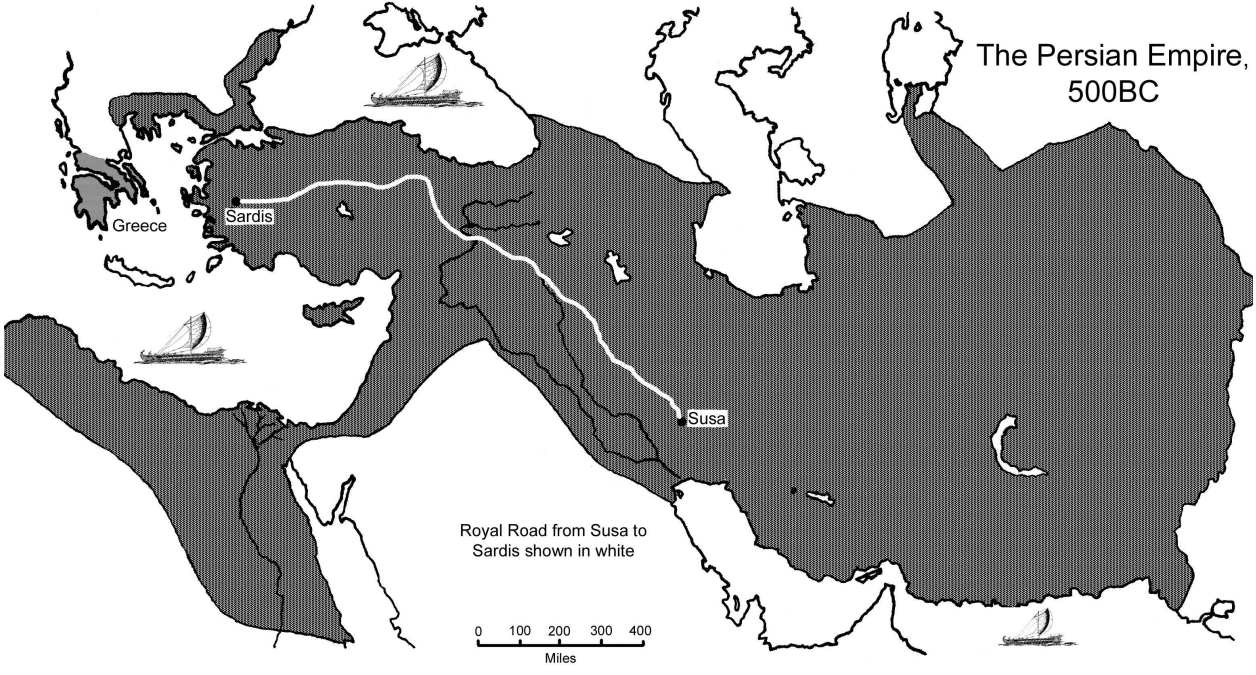
Email me at: tnorth67@hotmail.com

‘The secret of happiness is freedom.
The secret of freedom is courage.’
-Thucydides, Greek Historian


The Persian Empire,
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Susa
Royal Road from Susa to
Sardis shown in white
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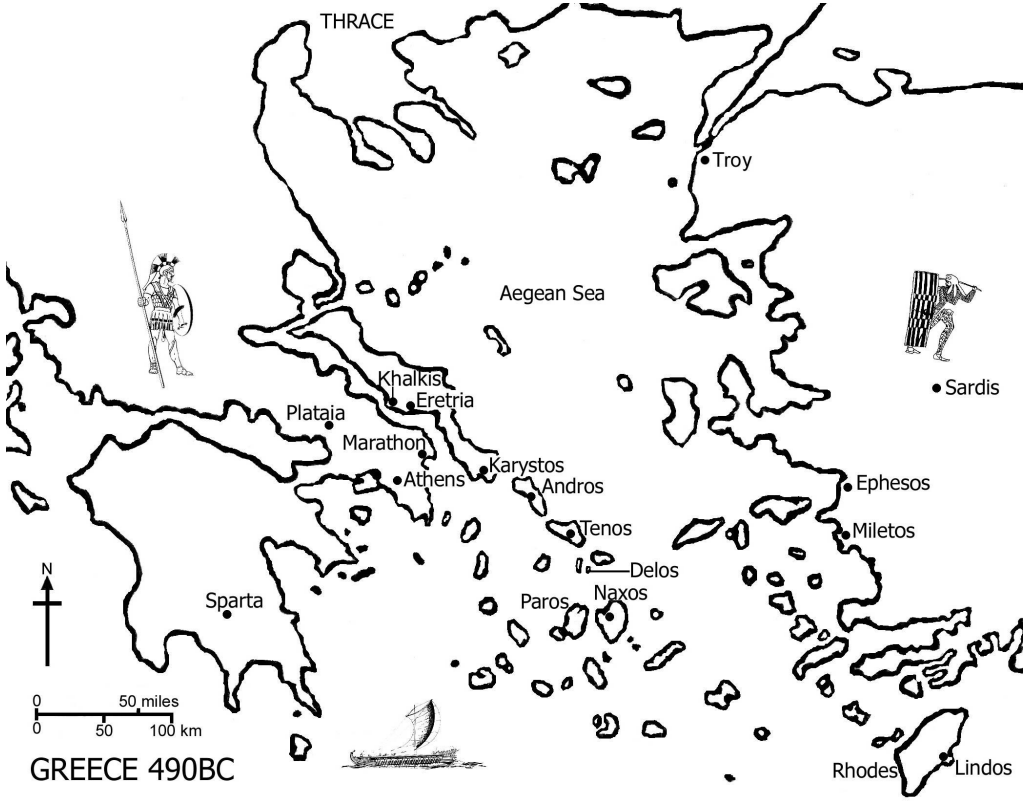
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Troy
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Sardis
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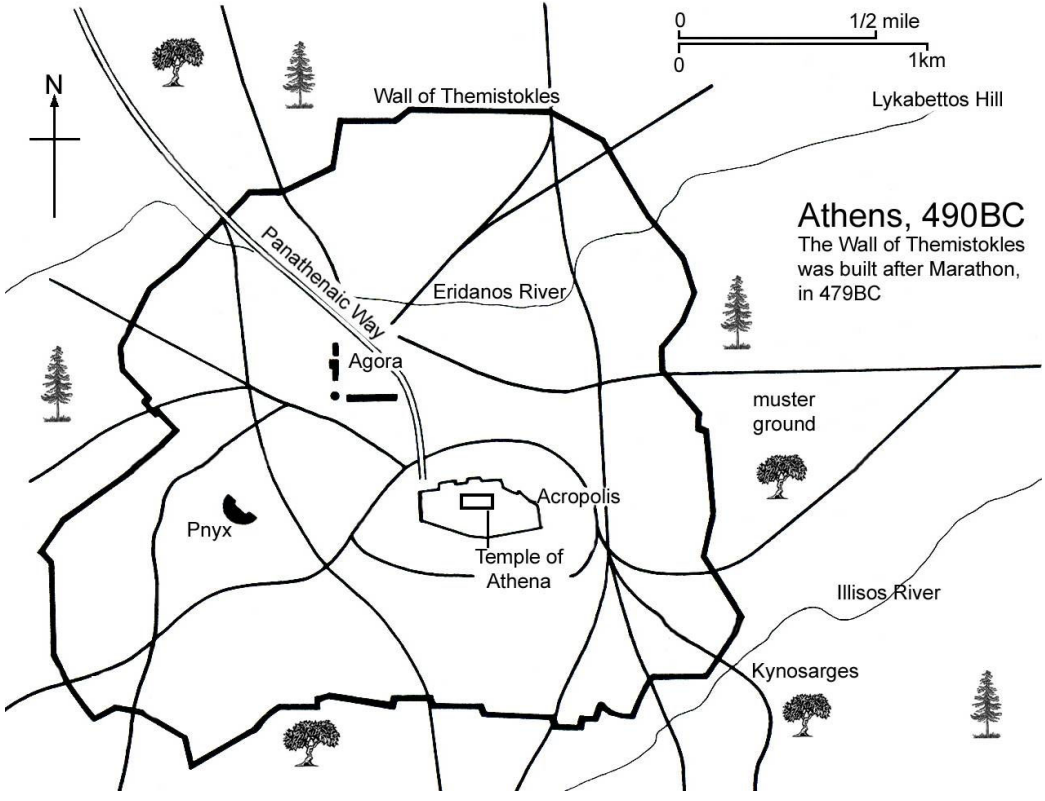
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Wall of Themistokles
Lykabettos Hill
Athens, 490BC
The Wall of Themistokles was built after Marathon, in 479BC
Panathenaic Way
Eridanos River
Agora
muster ground
Acropolis
Pnyx
Temple of Athena
Illisos River
Kynosarges


Khalkis
Euboea
Eretria
Thebes
Oropos
Plataia
Parnes Mountains
Pentelikon
Mountains
Oinoe
Marathon
Eleusis
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Karystos
Megara
Athens
Halai
Hymettos
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The Route to Marathon
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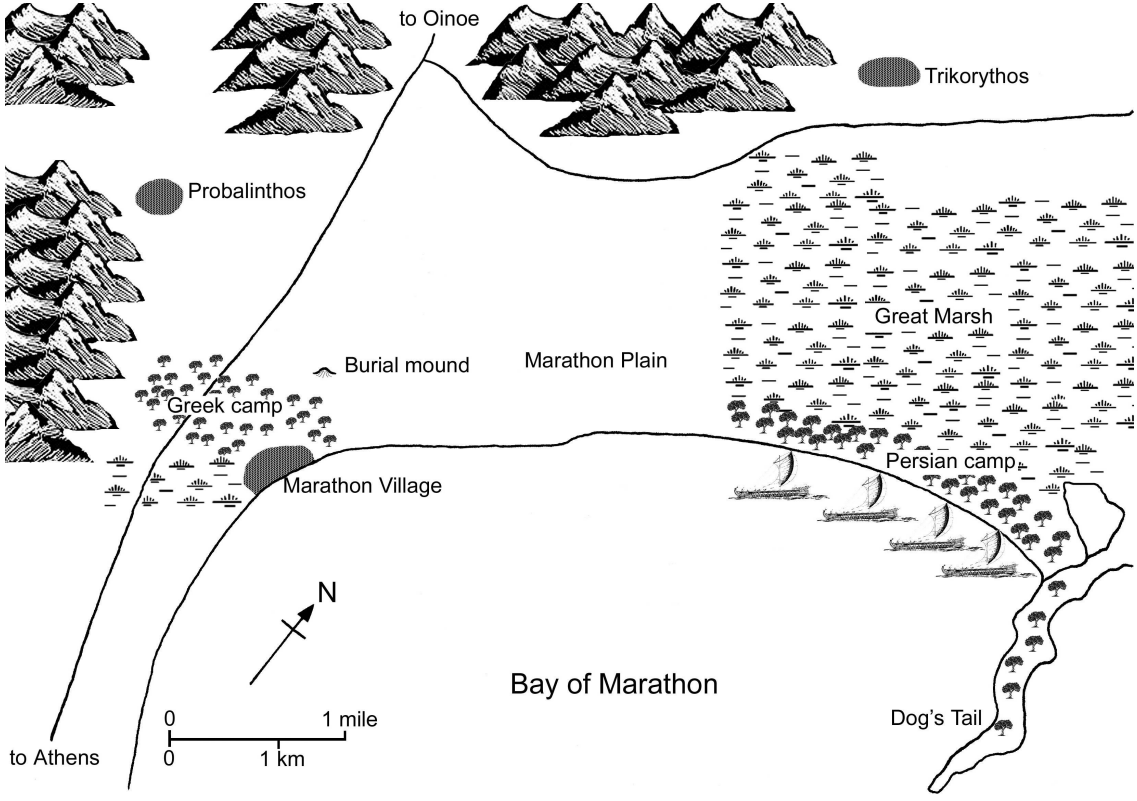
to Oinoe
Trikorythos
Probalinthos
Great Marsh
Burial mound
Marathon Plain
Greek camp
Persian camp
Marathon Village
N
Bay of Marathon
0
1 mile
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1 km
to Athens
Dog's Tail

Chapter 1 The Persians

A cock crowed, and Euphorion son of Aeschylos awoke on the last day of his innocence.

He didn't want to go to school. He was tired of learning Homer. There were twenty-seven thousand lines of it, by Zeus! And whenever the schoolmaster said 'by your age, your father knew the whole thing by heart,' Euphorion determined to forget whatever verses the master pounded into his head that day.

He yawned and turned face down. The cock crowed again. Euphorion heard the front door shut and his father's feet march off down the narrow street toward the centre of Athens. How Euphorion wished he were eighteen and could enter the world of the citizen. A boy, even a wealthy poet's son like him, had no more control over his life than a slave. Or a woman.

One of the slaves, Xanthias, entered the bedroom.

'Time to rise, lazybones.' Xanthias yanked the blanket off him and slapped his behind. 'Your father's gone to the Pnyx. Something to do with those Persians that came yesterday. He didn't seem too happy about it, anyway.'

'Leave me alone.' It annoyed Euphorion that a mere slave was allowed to treat him so. Xanthias threw him his tunic.

'I can look after myself. Buzz off.'

'Yes, young master is quite the hoplite.'

Dawn rays lit the room. It was already warm and would no doubt be an August day as roasting as yesterday.

In the shady courtyard Euphorion sat by his five year-old brother Euaion. His mother Trygaea spooned honey into his porridge. She smiled.

'One day your father's going to catch me and it'll be the end of that sweet tooth of yours.'

Morning dullness cleared from Euphorion's head as he savoured the milky barley. A word flashed into his thoughts, something Xanthias had said.

'Mummy, are the Persians here?'

'The Persians! The Persians!' cried Euaion.

'Only two of them, Euphorion,' said Trygaea. 'Don't worry about that. It's time for school. Where's your lyre?'

There was a knock at the front door. It was Philokles, panting from running. Although only a year older, Philokles had begun the change and had noticeably heftier shoulders than Euphorion. He even had a wispy moustache, of which he was far too proud. And his sweat stank a lot more than it had last summer.

'School's off!' he blurted.

'Why, Philokles?' said Trygaea.

'Schoolmaster's gone to the Pnyx. He said they've all gone, every citizen for miles. He said Athens has to make a big, big decision.'

'Is it about the Persians?' said Euphorion. He saw his mother trying to hide a look of worry.

'What about the Persians?' said Philokles.

'They're here, dummy.'

'The Persians are here?'

'Is that all you can do, repeat what I say?'

Philokles sat and squeezed his shoulder hard. Euphorion tried to wriggle out. 'No,' said his cousin. 'I can run faster than you, I can jump farther than you, I can throw a javelin *and* a discus farther than you, and…what else, Euaion?'

'You can beat him at wrestling!' cried Euaion.

Euphorion pushed his cousin off him. 'Big deal.'

'That's enough, you two,' said Trygaea.

'Let's go out,' said Philokles. 'Climb some trees.'

'I don't know…what would your father say?' said Trygaea.

'He won't mind,' said Philokles, getting up.

Euphorion glanced at his mother.

'Don't go far…Xanthias, watch them,' she said as Philokles dragged Euphorion into the narrow street.

The boys darted off, Xanthias hobbling after. He had been captured long ago in some battle, during which he had wounded his leg. 'Masters, wait!' he called, but the boys were soon out of sight down an alley.

They left Athens and climbed a tall pine tree. Grey mountains

arose all round the horizon, except to the south west where the Aegean Sea lay. They gazed over the sprawl of Athens, tightly packed whitewashed houses with red roofs. In the centre stood the Acropolis, the sacred hill of Athena, crowned with her marble temple and bronze statues. To the right of that rose the hill of the Pnyx. Through the dark trees it was impossible to see the Pnyx itself, but it had to be bristling with citizens.

'What are they up to?' Euphorion wondered out loud.

'Who?'

'The assembly.'

'It's a trial.'

'Oh. Who's on trial?'

Philokles shrugged. 'Something to do with those Persians, I bet. Is their army here?'

'Holy Maiden! If the Persian army was here, I think we'd know about it. It's just two of them. Heralds, I suppose.'

'The Persians – they're our enemies, right?'

Euphorion rolled his eyes. '*Everyone* knows that. *Euaion* knows that. My *cat* knows that.'

'So do I,' said Philokles, poking him in the ribs. 'You think you're so clever, but you aren't any cleverer than me.'

'Of course, you know all about the Persians.'

'As much as you, Squeak.'

'Go on then, genius. Tell me about them.'

Philokles pursed his lips. 'They're from Persia.'

'Really? The Persians are from Persia?' Euphorion guffawed.

'Shut it. I'm just starting. Persia is in Asia. And it's very big…and there's a king – er…'

'Darius.'

'I know that.'

'And it's not Persia that's big, it's their empire. The biggest in the world. Forty-six countries they've conquered.'

Philokles stopped what he was about to say. '*Forty-six?*'

'Yes…so what?'

'So what? You aren't half as clever as you think you are. If the Persians are our enemies, what do you *think* their heralds are

doing here?' Philokles peered toward the Pnyx. 'Let's go and see.'

'But we're not allowed.'

'Scaredy cat. It's all right, I know a secret spot.'

'But my father will kill me…and yours will kill you.'

'Wah, wah, wah. Some hoplite you'll make.'

Euphorion's heart raced. Philokles was always daring him and he could never say no. Philokles climbed down the tree and darted off into the city.

'Hey! Wait for me!'

The boys crept from rugged boulder to ruddy-barked pine. Euphorion grasped a trunk and got sticky resin on his fingers.

'Let's go back, Philo.' He was terrified of the punishment his father would inflict, finding him on the citizen-only Pnyx.

Philokles grabbed his tunic and dragged him up to the next rock. 'Stop bawling like a baby. We're going to see the enemy.'

Euphorion caught his breath. Persians – sent by Darius, the Great King himself. Not even his father had seen a Persian. Philokles' father had; Uncle Kynegeiros had even fought them, eight years ago. And lost.

But why were they here? Most people thought foreigners were savages. In Euphorion's imagination they were gorgons, whose hideous features – snake hair, huge fangs and long tongues – were so terrifying, one glimpse would turn a man to stone.

But he was being ridiculous. Just over the brow of this hill about five thousand pairs of eyes were clapped on the two heralds, and from all the shouts, jeers, and applause, the assembly had not been petrified.

Philokles dragged him up to a tree and forced him flat onto the pine needle-scattered ground.

'Get off me.'

Philokles seemed to enjoy any chance to show his superior strength. He grabbed Euphorion's arm and wrenched it up his back. 'Submit?'

'Go to Hades.' Euphorion tried to smack his cousin with his other hand. Philokles grabbed that too and twisted his wrist.

'Ow! Stop it, they'll hear us.'

Philokles let him go and scrambled to the lip of the hill.

A chorus of angry voices shook the air. Euphorion could not make out any words, but he sensed hate in those voices. Trembling, he crawled up like a centipede. And then he saw the Pnyx for the first time in his life.

A great mass of citizens was spread out over a rocky semicircle facing the speaker's platform to his left. Nervously Euphorion looked for his father. He could not see him, but he did recognise some of those at the front. Miltiades, a white-haired, stocky old man, was famous. Some people thought he wanted to rule Athens as a tyrant, and feared him. Most loved him, though, and he had been voted general of his tribe for the last two years.

And there was Themistokles, another general. He had the meaty look of a boxer, with a tree-trunk neck and a bulldog jaw. He was famous for knowing every citizen by name. And on the platform was yet another general, Xanthippos, a tall, haughty fellow, and Miltiades' sworn enemy. He had just finished speaking and the crowd was jeering him.

But far more interesting than all these generals were the Persians. They stood out a mile, their silk gowns shimmering gold, purple, green – bright beetle colours, unlike the earthy browns, blues and reds of the Athenians. Their black hair and beards were curled into long ringlets and their noses were thin and hawk-like. They stood under guard, lips tight in annoyance.

'Silence for Themistokles,' cried the Council leader.

The assembly applauded as Themistokles bounded onto the platform. He raised a fist and the cheers swelled.

'Citizens,' said Themistokles, 'I am amazed. I did not know weasels could speak.'

Laughter burst out all over the Pnyx.

'Submit to Darius? Clearly Xanthippos does not know you, citizens. Not as I do.'

Themistokles pointed to the middle of the crowd.

'Ariston, how many times have I bought your fine shoes? Simon, how often have I tasted your eels? Lykis, did you not carve

me a chair last week? All of you, is there any man who knows the hearts of his fellow citizens better than I? And I say to you, there is nothing more important to a free Athenian than his honour.'

The citizens gave a resounding cheer.

'But what is it that gives us our honour? Above all, it is our freedom.' He turned to the heralds. 'Look, Persians: here before you stand rich men and poor, but all are equal. All may speak their mind, all decide their own laws. Tell me, in all your vast empire, is any man truly free? Only Darius, your king. But here on this assembly ground, no man calls another master, not even the cobbler, the fishmonger, or the carpenter. We submit only to our own laws. And you ask us to exchange this for slavery!'

He pointed at Xanthippos.

'The weasel promises us defeat. But what does *he* know? General Miltiades, on the other hand, is an expert – he has spoken with the Great King, and many times defied him. And he is of a different opinion. Is it not true, citizens, that one hoplite is equal to ten Persian warriors? Has it not been said, they are weak and womanish – that they even wear trousers on the battlefield?'

This was met with more laughter.

'And we are not the only city to refuse earth and water: Sparta too has denied Darius. What force in all the world could vanquish Athens and Sparta united? And we have faithful friends too - the great city of Eretria, and Plataia, and others. Greece will not fall to foreigners. The gods would not allow it.

'And these foreigners dare to threaten us on our own soil! Condemn them, jurymen! But I see they would speak. Look, Persians: in Athens we allow a man to defend himself. Unlike you, we believe men should not impose their will by force, but by argument. By good, solid reasons.'

One of the Persians spoke. His accent was strong, but each word was clear as ringing steel.

'If it is reasons you seek, we have plenty. If you will give His Majesty the submission he desires, you will receive the many blessings of his rule. Above all, you will know that greatest treasure of all mankind, peace – and her child, prosperity. As a

member state of the Great King's empire there will be no more silly wars with your Greek neighbours, which have devoured so many of your lives.'

'My dear heralds,' said Themistokles, 'we would be delighted to receive all these wondrous benefits, if it were not for one little word in your charming speech: *submission*. We –' he gestured to the whole of the Pnyx, '– do not *submit*.'

'Then consider this,' said the herald. 'If you do agree, Sparta will stand alone against us. We shall surely destroy them, and you will have no rival in Greece. You will be masters of all.'

'If you had it your way,' replied Themistokles, 'we would not even be masters of *ourselves*.'

The herald's voice grew harsh. 'Do you imagine the Great King will forget this? He will not allow one puny city to burn the temple of our god and escape unpunished!'

Miltiades stood. 'Enough!'

Themistokles let him take the stand. The Pnyx hushed.

'I have had my fill of these barbarians. I have accused them of threatening us with all manner of doom and death. It is time for the jury to decide.'

The Council leader joined him. 'Now we shall vote.'

'What do you think?' whispered Euphorion.

Philokles gave him a look which said, 'isn't it obvious?'

'All who vote guilty raise their hands,' said the leader.

A forest of arms shot up. Many others followed more slowly.

'Now the vote for not guilty.'

A group around Xanthippos raised their hands, and a few scattered others, to whistles and hisses from the rest.

'The verdict is guilty,' said the leader. 'Miltiades, you are the accuser. What punishment do you propose?'

Miltiades scanned the crowd gravely. 'One month ago two other Persians arrived in Sparta, for the same evil purpose. King Kleomenes cast them into a well, saying, "there you shall find your earth and water." We in Athens should do no less. I call for the penalty of death.'

Euphorion shivered.

'Excellent,' said Philokles.

'Persians, you have been found guilty,' said the leader. 'What punishment do you propose?'

'We do not recognise this court, this jury, this so-called justice!' yelled the herald who had spoken earlier.

His companion seized his arm. 'Wise citizens, if you love justice as you say you do, you will fine us one thousand silver drachmas, which we have with us, and send us on our way.'

'Gentlemen of the jury,' said the leader, 'the choice is death, or a fine of one thousand drachmas. Raise your hands for a fine.'

Euphorion saw arms held up all over the Pnyx, but fewer than half, he felt sure.

'Now for the penalty of death.'

There was pause, as if the citizens sensed they were about to make a dreadful decision. Then hands arose everywhere.

Euphorion's heart pounded. 'They're going to do it.'

'The penalty is death,' said the leader. He met Miltiades' eyes for a moment. Miltiades gave him a nod. 'Sentence to be carried out immediately.'

The guards drove the heralds at sword point through the crowd. They vanished down the stone steps toward the city, the citizens following in a dense, chattering throng.

'I want to see it,' said Philokles.

Euphorion gulped. He knew there was no point in arguing.

They climbed down the hill and joined the crowd, now trickling through the streets to the northwest corner of Athens.

To the barathron.

The citizens streamed out of the city like a pack of wolves. At last they reached a craggy hill covered in thorn bushes. The boys wormed their way toward the front. The eagerness in Philokles' eyes was growing, as was the horror in Euphorion's heart. He looked around for their fathers.

The crowd came to a stop, bodies tightly pressed. Euphorion felt he would choke in the stifling heat. They flowed forward again, into a bowl-shaped dip in the hill. Soon the hollow was

packed with citizens peering down. Philokles squeezed through, dragging Euphorion by the wrist. Suddenly he stopped.

They were at the edge of a pit, eye-shaped, as deep as a pine tree was tall. It had been hacked out of a natural chasm and its sides had been fitted with iron hooks. On the far side stood the heralds, hands tied behind their backs. Near them were Miltiades, Themistokles, and the Council leader.

'They'll see us, Philo.' Euphorion tried to pull his cousin back into the crowd but Philokles gripped his arm. On one side the crowd surged and a man stumbled on the edge of the pit. He cried out and two of his neighbours seized him just in time.

'Be still!' cried the Council leader.

Everyone was panting. Euphorion could not tell whether it was because of the hot climb, or what was about to happen.

'Heralds of Darius,' announced the leader, 'you have been convicted by a jury and sentenced to death. You may utter your final words.'

One herald raised his eyes to the sky and spoke in his own tongue. The second stared wildly about.

A priest poured red wine into the chasm. 'Zeus of the Lower Earth, lord of justice, send up Your righteous vengeance from hell, and crush the doer of reckless wrong.'

'You will curse this day!' cried the second Persian. 'Our blood will cry for vengeance, and the Great King will answer. He will not forget Sardis. He will not forget Eretria. And he will not forget Athens!'

'Carry out the sentence,' said the Council leader.

Two soldiers forced the first herald to the edge of the barathron and drove him in with their swords. He gave a horrible moan as he fell. Euphorion saw his body crumple at the bottom. It twitched a few times then sagged.

The second herald was taken to a different point on the pit edge. 'Miletos!' he shrieked. As he trembled on the brink he looked at Euphorion and Philokles. 'Your fathers will regret this.'

With a final poke the Persian tumbled into the chasm. His skull cracked on the rocks. A scarlet pool formed by his neck,

staining his silk robes.

Euphorion felt faint. He leant on his knees, gasping for air. There was a movement behind him in the crowd. A powerful hand seized Philokles' hair and spun him round. It was a heavyset, red-faced man with a silvery beard: his father, Kynegeiros.

Another hand grabbed Euphorion. He was not surprised to find it was his own father, Aeschylos.

Chapter 2 Time for Iron

Everyone was staring at them. Even Miltiades and Themistokles. Even the priest.

Kynegeiros threw Philokles to the ground and began beating him with a stick.

Aeschylos gripped his son's hair and glared at him.

Euphorion burst into tears. His father seemed ashamed, and marched him off through the crowd. When they were alone Euphorion managed to speak.

'I'm sorry, father. We saw everyone walking, and wanted to see where they were going.'

'And you could not see that it was only citizens?'

'It was Philokles' idea– '

Aeschylos whirled him around.

'You, and the gods, decide your destiny. Not your cousin.'

They continued. Euphorion glanced back; Philokles was walking with an awkward stoop. He caught Euphorion's eye and straightened up. It cheered Euphorion to see his cousin's indomitable spirit. He would make a fine hoplite. Euphorion wasn't so sure about himself; he did not have the same iron in his backbone.

They entered the courtyard and the boys sat around the stone altar. Aeschylos leant on his bronze statue of Theseus slaying the Minotaur. Both fathers stared at the ground. They already seemed to have forgotten the boys' crime.

Trygaea appeared from the women's quarters above.

'There you are!' she began angrily, then, sensing the atmosphere, she descended the stairs and placed a hand on her son's cheek. 'Euphorion, you mustn't run away like that.'

'He has been punished,' said Aeschylos.

Trygaea saw her son's red eyes. She glanced at the men, and at Philokles, sitting with his shoulders hunched.

'What has happened?'

No one answered. Philokles looked like he wanted to, but caught his father's gaze and shut his mouth.

'Xanthias,' called Trygaea, 'fetch some barley cakes and wine. Come sit, brother. How is Ismene? It's so long since I saw her. Why don't you bring her here now and then?'

Kynegeiros smiled. Like his brother his nose was long and his eyes baggy, but his extra years had plumped up the folds about his face. 'She has no time for idle chatter, sister.'

'No, I suppose only men have time for that. Oh – it's wonderful to have you all here. Euphorion, play your lyre.'

Euphorion glanced at his father, who frowned a 'no'.

Xanthias poured red wine into a bronze mixing bowl, added water, and scooped everyone a cup.

They drank. Wine still tasted bitter to Euphorion. He wished he could add honey.

'*Now* will someone tell me what happened?' said Trygaea.

'They killed the Persians,' blurted Philokles. 'They chucked them into a big hole and smashed their brains in.'

His father clipped him round the ear. 'Quiet.'

'What?' said Trygaea, blinking.

Aeschylos sighed. 'Yes, my dear. The citizens voted to execute the heralds.'

'Oh – Athena save us.'

'They were tried by jury, fair and square,' said Kynegeiros. 'A clear majority decided they were guilty.'

'Guilty of what?' said Trygaea.

'They brought Darius' threats,' said Aeschylos. 'If anyone is guilty it is he, not his heralds.'

'Darius is thousands of miles away, so his heralds will have to do,' said Kynegeiros. 'You voted for this too, Aeschylos.'

'Not for execution.'

'It was the will of the people, lawful and just.'

'Just because a majority wishes something, that does not make it right.'

Kynegeiros gave a barking laugh. 'You'd better keep that idea to yourself, brother. The citizens might not like it.'

'In any case, what matters is that Darius will not find it lawful or just.'

'Yes,' said Trygaea. 'Aren't there rules between nations, about not harming heralds?'

Kynegeiros barked again. 'Tell me, which laws did Persia respect when it reduced forty-six nations to slavery?'

'True, brother,' said Aeschylos. 'But what are we bringing upon ourselves?'

The question hung in the air like a rain cloud.

'Actually, it was a clever move by Miltiades,' said Kynegeiros. 'At one stroke he has tied our fate to that of Sparta. Who would have thought it? By casting Persians into holes in the ground, the two strongest cities in Greece are brought together. And together, Athens and Sparta will surely defeat Darius.'

'If it were Darius on his own, I'd not be so troubled.'

'Brother, Athens will never give in to slavery. We must stand proud, a bold army going cheerfully into battle. This execution has got everyone's blood up. Now we are ready to fight.'

'And that justifies the killing of innocent men?'

'*Innocent*?' Kynegeiros snorted.

'Zeus will not reward wrongful killing. Here, or anywhere else.'

Kynegeiros glared. 'If you mean Sardis, say so.'

Euphorion could not bear the tension between his father and uncle. 'Are they going to come to Athens?' he said.

'It's a long and trying road for an army to march all the way from Asia,' said Kynegeiros.

'Still, they will come,' said Aeschylos.

'We'll beat them, though, won't we?' asked Philokles.

'We are strong,' said his father. 'And the gods will protect us.'

'Why can't they leave us alone?' said Euphorion. 'Isn't forty-six nations enough?'

'We burned down Sardis,' said Philokles. 'My father was there.'

Euphorion remembered. Eight years ago, Kynegeiros had sailed away to attack the local Persian capital, Sardis, with Athens' ally Eretria. For some reason his father had not gone. His uncle had returned two months later with his thigh bound in bloodstained bandages. There was the scar, long, jagged and red.

'After Sardis,' said Philokles, 'Darius shot an arrow into the sky and asked Zeus for revenge. And he told his servant to say three times before each meal, "Master, remember the Athenians".'

Kynegeiros snorted. 'A likely tale.'

'It might well be true,' said Aeschylos.

'No. Darius is not after revenge on Athens and Eretria, for destroying his temple in Sardis. He sought earth and water from *every* city in Greece. To him, we are just one more gem to add to his vast treasury of nations. The wealthiest man on earth is also the greediest. And executing those envoys makes no difference to him. What are two slaves out of millions?'

'Father,' asked Euphorion, 'We *will* we beat them, won't we?'

'If Zeus and the Fates will it.'

'But…what if they don't?'

Euphorion's mother put her arms round his shoulders. 'You must leave these questions for the men.'

'It'll be like Miletos, won't it?' said Philokles. 'That's why the herald shouted "Miletos!".'

'Shut up, boy,' snapped his father.

Euphorion remembered Miletos too. After the attack on Sardis, many of the Greek cities across the Aegean Sea had revolted against their Persian masters. Two years ago, Miletos, the last of the rebels, had been crushed. The Persians burned it to ashes, slaughtered all the men, and enslaved all the women and children. Everyone in Athens had been heartbroken.

And that herald had threatened Athens with the same fate.

'Will you have to fight, father?' asked Euphorion.

Kynegeiros laughed. 'Do you think poets have a special exemption from war?'

'Of course I will fight, my son,' said Aeschylos.

'Where are your arms, uncle?' said Philokles. 'Can I get them?'

Aeschylos frowned.

'Have you been keeping them in shape?' asked Kynegeiros.

Aeschylos huffed. 'Go fetch them, Euphorion.'

Aeschylos' military gear was hung in the men's drinking room. Euphorion brought everything into the yard and stood the spear in the ground by means of the bronze spike at the bottom, the lizarder.

Philokles gazed at the tools of war. He reached out to touch the helmet but his father smacked his hand away. Kynegeiros picked it up and brushed its red horsehair crest.

'A little rusty, I think.'

'It will do its job,' said Aeschylos.

Philokles peered up at the leaf-shaped blade of the spear, his hands by his sides to avoid another slap. 'Isn't iron better than bronze? Yours is iron, isn't it, father?'

'Well-sharpened bronze will part any man's flesh,' said Aeschylos.

'What kind of wood is it?' said Philokles. 'Ash is best, isn't it?'

'Looks like pine to me,' said Kynegeiros.

'Is anything else not to your satisfaction?' growled Aeschylos.

Kynegeiros chuckled.

Philokles turned to the shield, still in its leather bag. 'Can I try it, uncle?'

Aeschylos nodded wearily. Philokles took the shield out. It was over half his own height, and bowl shaped, with a flat rim. Euphorion knew that shields were made of wood and plated with bronze; his father's was painted with an owl.

Philokles slipped the shield on his arm. He took the spear, aimed it out at head height, and stuck out his tongue. His father placed the helmet over his head.

'Show me your grip,' said Kynegeiros.

Philokles lofted the spear, his palm under the shaft and thumb pointing backwards. 'Oo-aa, eleleo, elelaa!' he whooped.

Euphorion snickered.

'That's one way to hold it,' said Kynegeiros. 'But not the best. Try to reach me, but keep your feet still.'

Philokles thrust the spear towards his father, about six feet away. Because of his grip the spear curved to the ground.

'See? With such a hold you cannot thrust far – you'll only strike your enemy's legs, or even your own man in front of you. Mind you, a thigh wound will send a man to his knees, and then he is at your mercy. I dispatched a few that way myself, at Sardis.'

'Uncle, why didn't you go to Sardis?' asked Philokles.

Aeschylos folded his arms. 'I was not permitted.'

Kynegeiros took his son's hand and reversed the grip. Now his thumb was forward and his palm was above the shaft.

'Try again.'

Philokles jabbed the weapon. This time he kept it horizontal, and managed to touch his father's chest with the tip. 'Got you!'

He thrust again. After a while his arm seemed to grow tired, but he kept going. Euphorion's envy was growing too. He wanted a try, but the look on his father's face did not give him hope.

'Show me something else,' said Philokles.

'You are too young,' said Aeschylos. 'It takes manly strength to bear arms. Why do you think we spend so much time in the gym? Keep training, and one day you will both fight for Athens. Although I pray by then this fuss with Persia will be over.'

'Of course, it takes more than strength and prowess to make a good hoplite,' said Kynegeiros.

Euphorion knew what his uncle meant; it was drilled into him every day at school and the gym. 'You must be brave.'

'Indeed,' said his uncle. 'You must fight bravely for your country. That is how a hoplite wins glory. But courage is easy to find in the comfort of the courtyard. When you face the ranks of the enemy, spears tearing the air, arrows raining on your head, courage can dribble away like water. All your clever tricks will

vanish in the fury of battle. One moment's inattention, and keen bronze will send your ghost down to Hades.'

'I should see to Euaion,' said Trygaea. She left, trembling.

'I'm not afraid of any Persians,' said Philokles.

Kynegeiros gave his booming laugh. 'I suppose you think that bravery means feeling no fear.'

Philokles grinned uncertainly. 'Yes.'

'My son, a brave man feels fear as much as a coward. Do you think I felt no fear at Ephesos, when a thousand horse-borne warriors bore down on me? No. A brave man feels fear, but he overcomes it. He does not break rank – either to charge the enemy to win glory for himself, or to run away and save his skin.'

'I know that,' said Philokles.

Kynegeiros smiled. 'I'm sure you do.' He led his son to the corner of the yard. 'Stand your ground; I will not harm you.' Philokles raised the shield. Kynegeiros walked calmly to the far corner, turned, and raised the spear to head height. Then he roared furiously, and dashed at his son.

Philokles yelped and fell on his backside, banging his helmeted head on the wall. Kynegeiros stopped a few feet away.

'That wasn't fair,' panted Philokles. 'I wasn't ready. Do it again. I'll be fine next time.'

Kynegeiros gave him a look of disdain. 'In battle there is no "next time".'

Euphorion laughed and Philokles glared at him.

'You see, lads?' said Aeschylos. 'You will not be true hoplites, or even honest citizens, until you have learned self-discipline. Every hoplite knows this – whether or not he has been tried in battle.'

Kynegeiros jammed the spear in the earth. 'Let us hope so, brother, for three quarters of our army has never tasted war.'

'Maybe it just…won't happen,' said Euphorion.

'If Zeus has willed it,' said his father, 'then no prayer will stop it.' He took his spear and stroked the blade. 'Perhaps it is time for iron.'

Chapter 3 The Race

Twelve months passed without a Persian foot resting on Athenian soil. Euphorion saw them only in his dreams. He was pressed by sweating bodies and choking air. He pushed, and saw a golden man fall into a hole. The man dragged Euphorion down with him, and they slashed their arms on spear tips protruding from the wall. He told his mother of the dream, but no one else.

Soon after the execution came news that Eretria, Athens' partner on the trip to Sardis, had also refused earth and water. So too had the islands of Naxos and Rhodes. But most of the rest of Greece had caved in, much to the annoyance of Athens.

In May rumours arrived that Darius had commanded the construction of a huge fleet. After that Aeschylos went to the agora to buy a new spear, of ash and iron, as well as a shiny helmet and a new cuirass – a stiff linen breastplate.

For Euphorion life went on as usual – Homer, the lyre, training for the Pentathlon, and mucking about with Philokles. He gradually took control in his nightmares, now shoving the Persians into the pit and chuckling at their cries for mercy.

As summer's heat dried the land Euphorion and his cousin trained hard for the athletic games of the Great Panathenaia, the festival of Athena that took place every four years. On August 8th, two weeks before the event, their fathers found themselves in the Kynosarges gym with a similar purpose in mind.

They strode naked into the shade of trees bordering the running ground. Young men jogged or sprinted up and down, their tawny muscles glistening with sweat. A few wore helmets and shields, practising for the hoplite race. Under the trees men of all ages, even saggy greybeards, sat and chatted. Some lifted stone weights, others wiped the sweat and dirt from their skin with olive oil and curved scrapers. In one corner a statue of Herakles watched over the athletes – the strongest man who had ever lived, an inspiration to all.

The brothers began stretching their arms and legs. 'So you still fancy yourself for the four hundred yards?' said Kynegeiros.

Aeschylos eyed the sprinters. 'I can take them.'

'They're at their peak, which is more than you can say.'

'I'm only thirty-four!' Kynegeiros' smirk was a thorn in Aeschylos' neck. 'Who could beat me in the Panathenaia?'

'Our new war arkhon, for one.'

'Kallimachos?' Aeschylos wanted to argue, but knew he was on shaky ground. 'He's not bad. I hope he is as good a military commander.'

'Pfff. Why should he be? I'll trust our generals first. Miltiades knows what he's doing.'

Aeschylos peered at the Kallimachos. Those legs did look powerful. 'Maybe I should try the hoplite race instead.'

'Oho! Moving in on my territory?'

'Why not? If I'm past it, then you certainly are. When was your last victory? Eight years ago, I believe.'

Kynegeiros slapped him on the back, a tad too hard. 'This would be the time to drop it, little brother. You can't win this.'

Blood rushed to Aeschylos' face. 'It would be an interesting contest, you and me. A one-time champion, against a fitter, younger man – although I prefer to run unburdened.'

'Of course you do, but that won't train you for battle. Running naked is quite different to running with helmet, shield, and greaves.'

'Which is why we lift weights,' said Aeschylos, hoisting a dumbbell.

'Trust me, brother, you don't know what you're talking about.'

Aeschylos' face grew hot. 'Let's do it.'

Kynegeiros lowered his dumbbells. 'I suppose it will be an education for you. We need a judge; wait here.'

He soon returned with Themistokles and two sets of shields, helmets, and greaves – bronze shin pads.

'This I have to see,' said Themistokles. 'It's not really your thing though, is it, Aeschylos?'

'Do you know how old my brother is now?' said Aeschylos. 'Look at those chicken flaps under his neck.'

'Shut up and suit up,' said Kynegeiros, 'and we'll see what difference your smooth neck makes.'

Within minutes everyone knew about the race. The brothers were cheered down to the track, now lined with spectators. Aeschylos already felt hot under his helmet. He slipped his arm into the shield handles and leaned forward. What had he got himself into? Still, Kynegeiros *was* five years older, and well past his prime. He even had some flab round his middle. But this shield would be awkward to run with.

'Four hundred yards in armour,' cried Themistokles. 'And a laurel wreath to the winner.'

Aeschylos fitted his feet into the starting holes. Kynegeiros stared intently at the far end of the track.

'We have no trumpet,' said Themistokles, 'so I will just shout…*go*!'

Off they sprinted. Aeschylos edged ahead over the first of the two lengths of the track. He felt strong, his muscles full of vigour. As they neared the turning post he kept his lead, and got a rush of joy. He was going to beat him after all – his brother, who had always been stronger, who had always beaten him in wrestling, and whom he had never dared to challenge in the hoplite race.

The turn was difficult with the extra weight. On the way back the shield began to pull on his shoulder. Sweat trickled into his eyes, and he could barely see out of the helmet. His legs were burning logs, his chest a furnace. The shield sank to his knees. Half way back Kynegeiros passed him, thundering like a horse, wheezing as Aeschylos was, but his shield still up by his chest.

Aeschylos felt at his limit. But he could not bear to lose. He drew on the last licks of life in his legs, but it was only enough to stop from falling further behind. They crossed the line and staggered on, legs wobbling. Aeschylos dropped the shield and clutched his chest. This was an agony he had never known.

Kynegeiros gasped as the younger athletes crowded round him. 'D'you see now, brother?' He took off his helmet and someone placed a wreath on his head. He grinned.

'Hey Aeschylos,' called one lad, 'will you write a victory song

for your brother?' The others roared with laughter.

Aeschylos was too exhausted to make a witty reply. Over by the gym he noticed Themistokles reading a message, a young boy by his side.

Themistokles raised a hand. 'Friends, I have news.'

Everyone gathered round him. He looked grim.

'This morning a wine merchant arrived in Athens with word from Rhodes. A fleet of Phoenician galleys was seen there – he says, more than one thousand.'

A thin fellow murmured something.

'Yes, Philippides, you heard me correctly. Twelve hundred, to be exact, commanded by Datis, one of Darius' top men. They besieged the city of Lindos. The people fled to the acropolis and lasted several days. They were about to run out of water when the arkhon had a dream; Athena told him she would save them by asking her father for water. The arkhon begged Datis to wait five more days – for that is how much water they had – and if by then Zeus had not provided water, they would surrender.'

The athletes tittered.

'Datis too found this amusing. Nonetheless, the next day a cloud gathered about the acropolis and showered life-giving rain upon the Lindians.'

The young men whistled in amazement.

'The blessed maiden will not forsake us,' said Philippides.

'It's an omen, I am sure,' said Themistokles. 'After this Datis sent a gold necklace, his scimitar, and his chariot as offerings to Athena's shrine, saying, "these men are protected by the gods".'

'As are we,' said Philippides.

'Well said, my friend.' Themistokles turned to the boy. 'Has Miltiades seen this yet?'

'Yes, general.'

'And what did he say?'

'He said, "Do not fear, the gods are on our side, and so am I".'

'By Zeus, I am glad of that,' said Themistokles. 'Who is next?'

'General Aristeides.'

'My old rival. Tell him not to feel bad he came after me; he

must be used to that by now.' The athletes chuckled. 'Gentlemen, keep up your exercises. We must all be true hoplites now. Stay strong; the hour of glory is almost upon us.'

They beamed at him. As he left, Themistokles clapped a hand on Aeschylos' shoulder. 'You ran well.'

'No one remembers the loser, Themistokles.'

'At the Olympics, perhaps. But you gave your all, and that is what Athens needs now. You will be a valiant warrior, I have no doubt.' He strode off.

'You did well,' said Kynegeiros. 'Better than I expected.'

'But not as well as *I* expected.'

'No matter; we have more important things to think about now.'

'I wonder, what is Darius doing? Twelve hundred ships?'

'Perhaps this time there is no land force,' said Kynegeiros.

'But twelve hundred – it's preposterous.'

'Darius commands half the earth. He's capable of that.'

'No. It's the same number of ships that went to Troy. Someone's made it up. Poetic exaggeration.'

'You should know all about that,' said Kynegeiros. 'I tell you though, if it's only a fleet, that means a smaller army. Each galley carries only thirty or forty warriors.'

'That's still forty thousand men! And they'll get here much faster by ship.'

Kynegeiros frowned. '*Much* faster. Let's pray they make plenty of stops on the way.'

Aeschylos felt gloomy. 'Those Naxians don't stand a chance. Perhaps I should forget the four hundred yards and concentrate on – what did you call it? Your "territory".'

'Perhaps. And we must train every day, for Poseidon's waves are bringing us the greatest threat that Athens has known.'

Aeschylos gazed at the gym, the olive grove, the fine young men, and beyond, the terracotta roofs of Athens' houses, and up on the sacred rock, the white marble of Athena's temple.

It all seemed more precious than ever.

Chapter 4 The Flight of the Javelin

Six days passed. Each one the gym was busier, as were the stalls of the shield and helmet makers, and the blacksmiths, hammering out spears and swords. Fear and bravado jostled in every citizen's face. Women and slaves felt it too, even children. Men spoke louder, as if Datis, out on his boat somewhere on the Aegean, would hear their good cheer. But arguments and brawls grew more common too.

On the afternoon of the 14th August Euphorion and Philokles were training for the pentathlon in the boys' section of the Kynosarges gym. A troop of lads practised the javelin under the eyes of the gym master. Xanthias was sitting under the trees with the other boys' slaves.

Euphorion was fed up. An elite had formed, of boys who had a real chance at the Panathenaia. Philokles was among this elite, and he was not. Still, that did not give Philokles an excuse to ignore him, as if they were no longer best friends, or even cousins.

He fiddled with his javelin. It was shorter than a spear, with a tiny pyramid-shaped tip. How could he catch up to Philokles? Perhaps if he worked at his technique – was he wrapping the thong properly? Throwing at the right moment? It wasn't fair. Philo's arms were longer.

Philokles took his turn. It was a good throw – close to the best. The boys hummed their appreciation.

'Excellent,' said the master. 'Euphorion.'

Euphorion looped the thong around his big toe and wound the other end onto the middle of the javelin. Only a year ago he'd been able to out-throw his cousin. That really irked him. He transferred the loop from his toe to the middle two fingers of his right hand, and raised the javelin. He held it as far back as he could, keeping the thong taut by pressing back the javelin tip with his left hand.

Sweating with shame, as the older boys got ready to mock him, Euphorion went to the start of his run up. Had he wound the thong in the right place? It was too late – they were all watching

him. Usually he was an insect: now they could have a good laugh, they paid him attention. Nerves – that was why he kept fluffing it.

'Get on with it!' snapped the master.

He ran and slung the javelin. The thong set it spinning, but its flight was wobbly, not arrow-straight as Philokles' had been. It landed several yards short of the best throws.

The boys' snickering was restrained – they knew it wasn't a bad effort for a runt like him. But Philokles bent over, chortling.

'Don't worry, when the Persians come you can throw pebbles at them.'

'Next,' said the master. One of the boys got ready. The master shook his head at Euphorion. 'You'd better forget the Panathenaia, lad. You can enter next time, in the youth games.'

Next time? That was four years away! Philokles was grinning at him. Euphorion's shame turned to anger.

'He's going to cry,' said Philokles.

'Shut it.'

'That's enough, you two,' said the master.

Philokles cackled. Euphorion picked up a spare javelin and gripped it as if he were going to whack him. Philokles squared up to him. 'Go on, Squeak.'

'I'm warning you!' said the master.

'Now, Euphorion,' said Xanthias, 'think of what your father will say.'

Euphorion's lungs shook with the humiliation of being told off by everyone – even a slave. He smacked his javelin against a tree, snapping it. Philokles guffawed.

'That's it!' The master grabbed them by their braids and banged their heads together. The pain shocked Euphorion to tears.

Philokles rubbed his forehead. 'See? He's such a whiner.'

'Another word from you and I'll pummel you purple.'

Euphorion tried to choke back his tears.

And then something worse happened. Their fathers arrived.

Aeschylos looked worried. 'Why are you crying?'

'Because he's a baby,' said Philokles.

The master told them what had happened. Kynegeiros

slapped his son in the back of the head. 'You're such an idiot.'

Aeschylos heaved a sigh. 'This does not fill me with fatherly pride. Come, both of you. We're taking you home.'

The boys got dressed and their fathers marched them off.

'He said I was afraid of the Persians,' said Euphorion.

'He is, the coward,' said Philokles.

'While you are quite unconcerned about them, I suppose?' said Aeschylos.

Philokles shrugged.

'Damned fool,' growled his father. 'Euphorion has more sense than you'll ever have.'

Euphorion brightened a little. 'And he laughed at me just because he threw his javelin a tiny bit further than me.'

'And that makes you weep?' said Aeschylos. 'What will you do when the Persians come kicking down our door?'

Euphorion hung his head. Aeschylos held him back from the other two. 'You have much growing up to do, my son. If your cousin bests you in the javelin, what should you do?'

'What *can* I do? He's bigger.'

'Then why cry? If you cannot beat him now, what do you do?'

'Wait till I'm older?'

'*Wait?*' Aeschylos rolled his eyes.

'Er…keep training?'

'Train *harder*, son. Always harder. That is what makes a champion – and a hoplite too. Do you think a soldier has time for arguing with friends? Or for crying? Or climbing trees? You are Euphorion, son of Aeschylos, son of Euphorion. Live up to your grandfather's name. Bring honour to it. And don't be crushed by your cousin's rude words. They are only noise.'

Euphorion saw it now. Something was on his father's mind.

'Listen, son, there's bad news. Naxos is destroyed.'

'Destroyed? Why?'

'Six days ago the Persian fleet arrived. Six hundred ships, not twelve.'

'Oh, that's better.'

Aeschylos snorted. 'Yes, we can all breathe easily now.'

'What happened, father?'

Philokles and Kynegeiros were listening now.

'What do you expect? Naxos was on their black list. The citizens fled to the hills, but the city was torched. Any they caught were enslaved. All in the space of a single day.

'After that they went to Paros. The Parians had given Darius earth and water, so they were spared the flames. Datis got food and supplies there – those ships can't carry much, with all those warriors aboard. But the next stop was Delos.'

Euphorion was appalled. Delos was one of the holiest places in Greece. 'Did he…?'

'He visited on his own. It's remarkable: he could have robbed Apollo's shrines – unimaginable quantities of gold. Instead he burned three hundred talents of frankincense on the altar.'

'Three hundred talents? It must have stunk!'

'Picture it – one great plume of white smoke rising from Delos, and another, even greater, black plume from Naxos. A clearer message one could not send.'

'How dare he try to turn our own god against us,' said Kynegeiros.

'And then something even more remarkable happened,' said Aeschylos. 'Delos was shaken by an earthquake.'

The boys stared at him.

'There has *never* been an earthquake on Delos.'

'What does it mean?' asked Philokles.

'It is the god's anger,' said his father, 'that the barbarian dared enter his sanctuary.'

Aeschylos raised his eyebrows. Euphorion knew what that meant. He didn't believe what Kynegeiros had just said. That earthquake was an omen. And not a good one.

'How far away is Delos from Athens?' asked Philokles.

'Two days' sail,' said Kynegeiros.

Euphorion blinked.

Two days?

Chapter 5 The Eretrians

The city's preparations for the Great Panathenaia grew more intense, as did everyone's jumpiness. All everyone talked about was, *when will the Persians get here*, and *what will happen when they do?*

Euphorion wrestled his cousin every day, always getting battered, but managing to give Philokles plenty of bruises too. He sometimes wondered if he hated his cousin more than he loved him. He saw little of his father, who spent every morning at the assembly or the agora, and every afternoon at the gym, building up his stamina in the hoplite race. One day Aeschylos left for a training session of the whole army. It turned out the numbers fell far short of the standard nine hundred in each of the ten tribes, and no one was sure what to do about it.

On the 20th August the festival began with musical contests. The same day, word came that the Persian fleet had reached Karystos, a nearby city across the water. On the 21st, sentries reported a dark haze filling the sky above the cornfields of Karystos.

The festival was a rare occasion when women, children, and even slaves were allowed in the agora, now set up with grandstands and ivy trailing everywhere. Citizens were allowed to carry their weapons, and it was odd to see so many swords, spears, and helmets. Euphorion kept expecting a trumpet blast to signal battle formation on the race track.

The boys' pentathlon was in the afternoon. Philokles won in the 200 yards, came second in the discus and long jump, and looked promising in the javelin. He was preparing to make his last throw, still needing to top his rival's best effort, when there was a commotion at the entrance to the square.

Five older men were shouting and wagging their fingers in each others' faces. Three were arkhons, town leaders. The other two held staffs tipped with two circles on top of each other, the upper opened into a pincer – the sign of a herald.

'It's Strepsiades,' said Kynegeiros.

'Your friend from Eretria?' said Aeschylos.

'A good soldier. Tough as oak.'

The king arkhon was waving his hand side to side. The heralds shook their heads, fuming. The king arkhon strode off, motioning for everyone to continue with the athletics.

Philokles raised his javelin, but the games master told him to wait until the crowd had settled. Philokles paced around and looked up at the stands to see his father. Kynegeiros however was on his way down to speak to the heralds.

The master ordered Philokles to throw. He seemed distracted, but wrapped the thong on his fingers, lifted the javelin, and went to the run up. Again he glanced round for his father. The flute played for his run. Philokles frowned and made his throw.

It was his poorest by far. Philokles swore and stormed off, shoving younger boys out of the way. Euphorion found him sitting under the grandstand.

'What are you doing?'

'Leave me alone. I've had enough.'

'But you've still got the wrestling. You'll win that. You'll probably come second overall.'

'Buzz off.'

'Second's pretty good…'

Philokles ignored him. Euphorion knew this mood. It was best to let the bonfire in his head burn itself out. He felt bad for his cousin's disappointment, but he was also relieved that now Philokles wasn't going to be unbearably full of himself. He left him and found his father and uncle chatting to the heralds.

'My brother lives at Phaleron, an hour's walk away,' Aeschylos was saying. 'Stay with me instead. Whatever the assembly decides tomorrow, at least you will have known true Athenian hospitality.'

The elder of the two Eretrians bowed. 'You honour us, as you honour Zeus, god of guests. Please forgive my anger.'

'It is you who should forgive us,' said Kynegeiros.

'But we hope you understand our decision not to interrupt the festival,' said Aeschylos. 'Now more than ever we need Athena's

goodwill.'

'Let us not talk of it now,' said Kynegeiros. 'Come enjoy the sports. My son was about to throw the javelin, I believe.'

That night Euphorion crouched outside the door of the men's dining room to eavesdrop. His mother shooed him away, but he crept back. The second time she caught him she tutted and joined him, pretending to polish a bronze bowl.

Kynegeiros and Strepsiades were reminiscing about their voyage to Sardis nine years ago.

'Who was it that started that fire?' asked Aeschylos.

'One of yours, I think,' said Kynegeiros.

'One of *yours*, more likely,' said Strepsiades. 'Fiery lot, you Athenians. I felt bad when I saw women and children burned in their homes.'

'They shouldn't make them out of reeds and straw,' said Kynegeiros. 'That's a holocaust waiting to happen.'

'They got their revenge afterwards, though.'

'You fought in a phalanx at Ephesos?' asked Aeschylos.

'That's all we hoplites know,' said Strepsiades. 'But it's no match for cavalry on open land. We were lucky to escape.'

'I suppose their goddess did not rejoice at your destroying her temple,' said Aeschylos.

'Here we go again,' said Kynegeiros. 'He thinks because we burned their temple *that's* why the Persians are here. Six hundred ships swarm all over Greece because of a few charred columns.'

Strepsiades chuckled politely.

'My brother thinks I am a fool,' said Aeschylos.

'Oh, stop it,' said Kynegeiros. 'Drink more wine and give us one of your pretty little ditties.'

Aeschylos huffed through his nose.

'Anyway, they are here,' said Strepsiades. 'And whatever the reason, we must stop them.'

'And by Zeus, we shall!' barked Kynegeiros. 'Don't worry, Strepsiades. Tomorrow we shall vote to send our young warriors to your aid.'

'I pray so. Our cities must join together if we are to beat the Persians. We are bound together by fate, we who fought at Sardis and Ephesos. We must stand together, or I fear the enemy will swallow us in two bites – us, then you.'

Aeschylos coughed. 'I should tell you, Strepsiades, the citizens may not vote to send our entire force to Eretria.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Kynegeiros.

'Aeschylos is right,' said Strepsiades. 'But it will be a grim day for us, and for Greece, I promise you.'

'But you Eretrians are renowned warriors,' said Aeschylos.

'Yes, but this enemy is different. Six hundred sea-craft, twenty or thirty thousand soldiers, a thousand horse, Zeus knows how many bows. Consider the cities they have crushed on their way here: Naxos, Tenos, Andros, and now Karystos. If we fall next, it is but a short step to your own shores, my friend.'

Aeschylos shook his head. 'Persia has not yet been tested. Not by a true hoplite army. You will give them a slap in the face, Strepsiades. Perhaps we should fight together. But I fear that tomorrow some will sway the multitude against you.'

Kynegeiros grunted. 'You mean the weasel.'

'What will they say against us, Aeschylos?'

'What if Datis heads to Athens instead of Eretria – after we have sent our men to *your* defence? That would be a disaster.'

'But I told you,' said Strepsiades, 'our spies have learned that Eretria is their next target.'

'But what if Persian spies discover that Athens lies undefended? Plans can change, Strepsiades. And even if their plans did not change, and our eight thousand array themselves on your city walls – what if we are held there, while Datis sends a portion of his fleet to Athens? And what if, while our men are being transported across the straits, the Persian fleet attacks them? There are too many possible catastrophes for my liking.'

'You sound as if *you* will vote with the weasels,' grumbled Kynegeiros.

'I only point out what some will say. And many will listen – they have their wives and children to think of.'

'Then we will convince them of the right cause!'

Euphorion heard the anger rising in his uncle's voice. His mother bit her lip. He knew she wanted to go in to calm them, but she was afraid.

'He is right, Kynegeiros,' said Strepsiades. 'In times of danger each man seeks to protect what is his. I only fear that by doing so, Athens will bring about her own doom, as well as ours. Aeschylos, you are a poet, an actor skilled in speech – will you speak for Eretria at the assembly?'

There was an uneasy silence.

'Of course he will. Won't you, brother?' said Kynegeiros.

'If I can.'

'If you *can?'*

'We shall hear all views and make a wise judgment.'

'You shame me, brother.'

'Kynegeiros, we cannot help them. We *must* not.'

'Does it mean nothing to you, to be Greek?'

'Are we not Athenians first? Do you wish Ismene to be one of Darius' wenches? Or your son to be one of his eunuchs, serving his wine? All for some stupid idea of honour?'

There was a sound of shattering pottery.

'That was expensive!' cried Aeschylos.

'Screw your damned cup! Will you care as much when the Persians do the same thing to Strepsiades' head?'

Strepsiades laughed. 'Zeus willing, *I* will have something to say about that.'

Euphorion heard his father muttering a curse.

'So my honour is stupid, is it?' said Kynegeiros. 'What is it that stops me from smashing your ugly mug, if not my honour?'

'Look at him, Strepsiades,' said Aeschylos. 'It takes only a jug of wine to turn him into a blustering cretin.'

'Oh! A cretin, now? Well I'd rather be a cretin than a coward.'

'To hell with you!'

Euphorion trembled. Were they about to get into a punch up? Uncle Kynegeiros was stronger than his father. His mother gripped her bowl, close to tears.

'I beg you,' said Strepsiades, 'don't maim each other on my account. Your city will need your arms in a very short time.'

'It is only what people will say, what I have told you,' said Aeschylos. 'We shall make the wisest judgment.'

'I hope so,' said Strepsiades. 'We must face Datis with the strongest force Greece can muster. If only Sparta were not so far away, we'd be invincible.'

Kynegeiros stormed out of the room. Euphorion and his mother slipped into the kitchen as he went into the street to pee. Euphorion slunk back to the doorway.

'We do understand, Aeschylos,' said Strepsiades' companion. 'We Eretrians are divided too. Many wish to flee into the hills and pursue the fight from there, rather than risk open battle. Some would even surrender to Datis. But most, I believe, will vote to defend the city from its high walls.'

'You do not fear the fate of Karystos?' said Aeschylos. 'Your corn, your vines, your olive trees?'

'We cannot try open battle,' said Strepsiades. 'They have four times our number. They will first reduce our ranks with arrows, poking so many holes in our thick wall of men that when they throw their sheer weight of numbers against us, we shall topple. No Greek army has resisted Darius' hordes in the field. A hoplite phalanx is the deadliest force on earth, but even the fiercest lion cannot defeat a pack of wolves. Two or three lions, however…'

At that point Kynegeiros returned from the street, saw Euphorion lurking, and yanked him off to bed.

Euphorion lay awake for a long time. When he slept, he dreamt he was encircled by ravening wolves, their teeth bared as they edged closer. They leapt on him and tore his flesh.

He awoke shivering, and listened to the hooting of owls on the Acropolis.

At dawn Aeschylos and Kynegeiros left for the Pnyx. Everyone else went to the agora to wait for the men's athletics. When the citizens flooded down mid-morning, word quickly spread: Athens had refused to send its army to the aid of Eretria. The official

reason was that they were in the middle of Athena's festival, and could not risk offending her. Instead the assembly had agreed to request the help of two thousand Athenians living in Khalkis, a colony close to Eretria. The runner Philippides was sent to alert the Khalkians of their duty.

After they had all watched Kallimachos win the 400 yard foot race, Euphorion and Philokles joined their fathers as they bade farewell to the heralds.

'The cowardice of my people shames me,' said Kynegeiros.

'You did what you could, my friend,' said Strepsiades.

'Yes, *I* did.'

There was an awkward glance between Strepsiades and Aeschylos. 'I thank you for your hospitality,' said the herald. 'You are welcome in my home whenever you wish – if coming events allow it.'

'Thank you, Strepsiades. I will pray for you.'

'And I for you. If any city can stop the Persian wolves, it is Athens. Certainly with the aid of Sparta. You would do well to get a message to them.'

'Let us hope they honour us more than we have honoured you,' said Kynegeiros.

The heralds departed.

'I should go with them,' said Kynegeiros. 'I know, Aeschylos: it is not the will of the people. Or of you.'

'We must abide by the law, brother.'

'Perhaps it is not always right to do what one is told.'

'You should keep that idea to yourself. Some of our citizens might not like it.'

As they walked back to the agora Euphorion noticed Kynegeiros did not look Aeschylos in the eye.

'Father, in the assembly, did you…?'

'I did what was right, my son. For Athens, for you and Euaion, and for your mother. And your uncle too.'

Kynegeiros strode ahead. Aeschylos gazed sadly after him.

The Panathenaia came to an end with the great procession, in

which the whole population marched through the city up to the Acropolis. As gifts for the goddess they brought incense, bulls, sheep, and a new robe, which young maidens had spent the last four years weaving.

The next day Euphorion and Philokles were playing piggyback in the streets when there was a flood of people – families carrying sacks on their backs, the men with spears and helmets.

'What's going on?' Philokles asked a boy.

'We're from Khalkis. Our fathers went to Eretria to fight the Persians, but they told us to save Athens first. We saw the Persian ships arriving. There's hundreds of them!'

'What? Eretria didn't want any help?'

The boy shrugged. 'They've got no chance now.'

Euphorion was amazed. The Eretrians, facing destruction, had thought of Athens before themselves. 'Why did they do that?'

'What are you complaining about?' said Philokles. 'That means more soldiers for us.'

'But those poor Eretrians…'

Philokles clenched a fist. 'Soon it'll be those poor *Persians*.'

But Euphorion thought of Strepsiades, and was ashamed.

Chapter 6 Arrival

Five days passed as Athens waited for news. Aeschylos sacrificed a goat to Athena, and asked her to lend her mighty arms to the Eretrians. Euphorion saw hope in his father's eyes, but not faith.

On 31st August Aeschylos and Kynegeiros took their sons up to the Acropolis. A visit was a rare honour for Euphorion. To step on the sacred stone, to behold Athena's mansion up close, struck reverence into his soul. Like many others they had brought offerings, small sculptures engraved with promises of greater gifts if the goddess should aid them.

They prayed before a tall bronze statue of the goddess, standing proudly with helmet and spear. In the temple enclosure

a sacrifice burned on the great altar. A priestess lugged out a basket of bloody intestines and threw them over the battlements.

Aeschylos kept staring at the mountains in the distance.

'Father, do you think the Eretrians have beaten the Persians?'

'If Zeus willed it.'

'They had *no* chance,' said Philokles. 'They're probably getting massacred right now.'

His father slapped him in the back of his skull, knocking him to his knees. Philokles grimaced and rubbed himself.

'Athena will save us, won't she?' asked Euphorion.

'We've done all we can to sway her,' said Aeschylos.

'Father, do the Persians have gods too?'

'Of course. They worship the sun and the moon, and they call Zeus by another name, but yes.'

'And they make offerings and sacrifices to them, like we do?'

'Yes.'

'So won't their gods help them too?'

'There is no greater god than Zeus, Euphorion. And His home is on Mount Olympus, in Greece. Do you think Zeus, god of justice, wishes His own land to be overrun by foreigners? Men who do not even speak Greek?'

'But if the Persians are so rich, can't they give better offerings to the gods, like that three hundred talents of incense Datis gave Apollo, so the gods will be on their side?'

'This lad will be a politician one day,' said Kynegeiros.

'He's always going on with himself,' said Philokles.

Euphorion pouted and looked to his father for support. At that moment however there was a distant roar. They climbed to the northern parapet and looked down. A crowd was gathering in the agora. They were listening to two men standing on plinths.

'We'd better go,' said Aeschylos.

'Has something happened?' asked Euphorion.

A groan arose from the crowd.

'It's Eretria, isn't it?' said Philokles.

The air seemed to chill.

'Are the Persians coming here now?' asked Euphorion.

Aeschylos peered at the horizon. 'Not yet.'

'Let's look for the ships!' cried Philokles, and he dashed to the southern wall. Euphorion followed, and they gazed three miles away to the sea at Phaleron. The Aegean was scattered with boats, but there was no vast enemy fleet.

Aeschylos waved them back. 'They won't come that way.'

They descended the stone steps to the city.

'Why not, father?' said Euphorion. 'Won't they sail round Cape Sounion to get to Athens?'

'No. We would see them coming a long way off and harass them while they landed. Six hundred ships, with horses and gear, will take a long time to disembark. They need somewhere safe.'

'Like where?'

'That's what the beacons will tell us,' said Aeschylos.

'Enough of this blasted defeatism!' bellowed Kynegeiros. 'For all we know the Eretrians have hurt them enough to send them back to Persia.'

Aeschylos raised his eyebrows.

They reached the entrance to the agora along a street lined with seafood stalls.

'Back to the house, you two,' said Aeschylos.

'Can't we wait here?' said Philokles.

'Back!' roared Kynegeiros.

The fathers joined the throng in the middle of the square. Philokles pulled Euphorion beside a stall with octopuses hanging above and fish glistening below. An old woman was watching the commotion in the agora.

Euphorion tried to leave but Philokles gripped his arm.

'Do you know the news?' he asked the woman.

'Oh, laddie, it's terrible,' she said. 'It's those Eretrians.'

'What happened?'

'The Persians got them, didn't they?'

'But what actually happened?'

'Here's my husband, ask him.'

A white-haired, withered old man in a fish-stained smock approached, clucking to himself.

'What's the news?' asked Philokles.

'Eeh…it's bad, young lad. It's your fathers' turn now. Wish I could join them, I do.'

'Why, what's happened?'

'It's Eretria. Awful. But only as expected.'

'Well?' said Philokles, beginning to lose patience.

'Those foreigners, they got the best of them. Besieged 'em. The Eretrians killed not a few Persians, kept 'em out of their city. All those horses and arrows, kept 'em all out. But oh, it's wicked, I can't say it.'

'What?' said Philokles. 'Spit it out, won't you?'

'Don't you talk to me like that. We're all equal now, rich and poor.'

'Never mind that, Simon,' said his wife. 'What have they decided?'

'Decided? It's up to us, lass, not them. There's an emergency assembly tomorrow. I say fight – we can take those foreign swine.'

'*We*, he says. It won't be you fighting, you silly sod.'

'Aye, they don't let you if you can't afford helmet and shield. War for the rich, that is. And you know what? They want to send to *Sparta* for help. See that Philippides over there? Says he's ready to go. Hundred and fifty miles, over mountains, too.'

'He can do it,' said Philokles. 'He's an Olympic champion.'

'Aye, but should he?' said Simon. 'Sparta?'

'I suppose you think we can do without them,' said his wife.

'I don't trust 'em. Treacherous lot, those Spartans. Tried to crush our freedoms, you know. Put the tyrants back in.'

'That was *years* ago,' said the fishwife.

'They're our allies now,' said Philokles. 'They *have* to help.'

'Just like we helped Eretria,' said Euphorion.

Philokles was about to argue when they saw their fathers coming. They scarpered back to the house.

Everyone sat round the courtyard. Trygaea had dragged out of everyone the news of Eretria's defeat. As with the Persians' other victims, the city had been put to the flames and the entire

population enslaved. But Euphorion could tell there was something their fathers were holding back.

Xanthias limped in with a jar of wine and some cups. Kynegeiros poured wine on the altar and spoke a prayer for the Eretrians.

'They fought as bravely as any Greek should. They were truly a match for the enemy.'

'So why did they lose?' asked Euphorion.

'They should not have,' said Kynegeiros. 'Even without our help, they kept the foreigners at bay for six days.'

'They were betrayed by two of their leaders,' said Aeschylos. 'On the sixth night they opened the city gates. The rest you can imagine.'

'Their own leaders?' said Euphorion. 'Why did they do that?'

'It seems Datis had promised them land in return for their treachery.'

Kynegeiros spat in the dust. 'May Zeus send eagles to pick at their livers.'

'By Artemis,' said Trygaea. 'Could that happen here?'

'No, my dear,' said Aeschylos. 'Not in Athens.'

But Euphorion saw doubt in his father's eyes.

Trygaea rested a hand on Kynegeiros' shoulder. 'What of Strepsiades? Is there word?'

'He is either a slave, or a corpse,' said Kynegeiros. 'And if I know him, he chose death. Soon enough his wife and children will wish they had joined him on his trip to Hades.'

Trygaea trembled. 'Then…what are we to do?'

'Are we going up to the Acropolis?' asked Euphorion.

'We're going to kick their teeth in,' said Philokles. He booted the altar. 'If they come here, I'm going to slice their kidneys, I'm going to spike 'em in the liver–'

'You'll stay put and do as you're told,' snapped his father.

'I expect we'll choose a siege,' said Aeschylos. 'But it's a hopeless throw of the dice. Every city has tried that so far, and it has got them nowhere. If we hole up on the hill, they'll wreck Athens first, then wait. We'll run out of food, and our bodies and

spirits will be weak. And then someone will open the gates.'

'You suggest we face them in open battle?' said Kynegeiros. 'You have more backbone than I thought, brother.'

'There is another option,' said Aeschylos. 'Not one I favour, but someone will raise it at the assembly.'

Kynegeiros eyed him suspiciously. 'And what is that?'

'To agree to Darius' demands.'

'To *give in*?'

'Let us be prepared to hear the argument, brother. It is true we can avoid the destruction of our city, and the enslavement of our families, by accepting Darius' rule.'

'And you don't call that slavery?'

'Yes I do, and that's why I *don't* support surrender.'

'By Zeus, I should hope not!'

There was an uncomfortable silence.

'When will they get here?' asked Euphorion.

'Soon,' said Aeschylos. 'The question is, which way will they come?'

'That depends on where they land,' said Kynegeiros. 'They need an open plain to deploy horses, a broad beach to harbour the fleet, and a good supply of food and water.'

'Megara, perhaps?'

'Too far. Halai, I think. Or Oropos – that's closest to Eretria.'

'What about Marathon? It has a long sandy beach, a lake for horses, and it's the most fertile part of Attica.'

'We'll know soon enough,' said Kynegeiros. 'Once a beacon flares, the mountain will tell us the landing site. If smoke rises from Salamis, it's Megara. Mount Hymettos means Halai, Mount Parnes means Oropos, and Pentelikon means Marathon.'

'But will we beat them?' asked Euphorion.

'Course we will!' cried Philokles. 'We'll chop them into little chunks, and make sausages out of their guts.'

Their fathers gazed darkly at the ground.

'We shall prevail, with Zeus' help,' said Kynegeiros.

Aeschylos nodded. 'And Sparta's.'

The next day the assembly voted to send Philippides to Sparta. Aeschylos and Kynegeiros watched as the famed athlete approached Miltiades on the speaker's stand to receive his orders. He was already kitted out with water flask and herald's wand. After a prayer to Hermes he loped off, with the easy gait of the long-distance runner. In a way, thought Aeschylos, the fate of the city lay in those scrawny legs. Philippides' rival Eukles was chosen to jog to another of Athens' allies, the tiny town of Plataia.

A call to arms was agreed, and more messengers were sent to every part of Attica – although most of the country's hoplites had already made their way to Athens and were right there on the Pnyx.

The problem of insufficient troops was also addressed. Miltiades persuaded the citizens to make up the nine hundred per tribe by offering freedom to slaves – those with enough power in their limbs, and whose masters could provide them with helmet, shield and spear.

And so for the rest of the day all eyes, free and slave, young and old, were trained on the mountains encircling the city.

Early the following morning Euphorion ran out of the city. He scaled a pine tree and scanned the hilltops. In the fields slaves picked grapes from long rows of vine bushes. How glad he was he did not have to spend his days breaking his back like that. He would never have to work with his hands. And one day he would get to thrust a spear and swing a sword. The Fates decided if you were born to drudgery or to wealth – although there was plenty of drudgery in all those lines of Homer.

Something in the distance caught his eye. A flash of orange?

Yes – and a stream of smoke, drifting south in the wind.

That was the peak of Mount Pentelikon. Euphorion's heart thumped.

The Persians had landed at Marathon.

Chapter 7 The Decision, Part 1

Once more Philokles dragged his cousin up the slope of the Pnyx. Since yesterday Euphorion had been in a state of nervous excitement. When he had sprinted back to tell his parents the news, his mother had collapsed against the wall, quivering. His father had merely nodded.

Euphorion had asked him when the Persians would arrive.

'It'll be a while. Six hundred boats will take some time to disembark. Then they must find food and water. I pity the poor folk of the plain; invaders do not pay for barley and wine. And one hundred and twenty thousand men will need a lot of barley and wine.'

'So they'll just steal it?'

'If the Marathonians are lucky, that's all they will do.'

'And then they'll come here?'

'Yes.'

'What are we going to do?' Trygaea had asked.

And that was what they had come to the Pnyx to find out. It was crammed to overflowing – indeed there were citizens just feet below their noses. Hoplites from all over Attica had arrived over the last few days and the gear of war glittered everywhere.

Themistokles was on the platform, bawling in his deep voice.

'Time is woefully short, citizens. Let us waste as little as possible on this coward's nonsense. As we quibble, Datis drinks wine in a tent pitched on *our* soil. In our hearts there should be only outrage, and lust for action. Shame on those who would submit! Still, we must let the traitor have his say.'

With his usual punch into the air Themistokles stepped down from the platform. To the usual jeers Xanthippos took his place.

'Themistokles calls me traitor, but does a traitor wish to save his city, his gods, his people, from destruction? What Themistokles proposes – that we hide behind the walls of the Acropolis – will bring about exactly that.

'How many cities have resisted Persia? And how many have succeeded? Do we wish the same fate as Eretria, as Naxos, as

Miletos? We cannot win a siege! Athens has no towering city walls, only its sacred hill. Sooner or later they will break in, or starve us out, and in the meantime reduce our homes to rubble. Even if we do hold out, can we rely on Sparta? They are many days away, if they *do* come. And by then we'll be on our knees.

'Perhaps we could sally forth to fight. I know you would all gladly give your lives in such a struggle. But we are greatly outnumbered, and could not form a phalanx in our narrow streets.

'And how shall we fit our entire population on that little hill? Thousands will be stranded outside, and be slain or captured. Even those on the Acropolis will eventually be taken. Do you wish your wives, your sons and your daughters, to become slaves?

'Then there is the question of betrayal. We all know what happened in Eretria. I fear that after days of hunger, out of despair, perhaps even bribery, someone will open the gates.'

'Someone like you!' cried Themistokles.

Xanthippos gave him a hateful look.

'Athena will save us,' called someone in the crowd.

Xanthippos shook his head. 'I fear she is angry. We propose to bring about the ruin of her temple! We broke sacred laws when Miltiades executed the heralds, and when we interrupted her festival for the Eretrians.

'Citizens, if we give Datis earth and water, we shall lose our democracy, but not our lives, or our city. Which is the greater dishonour? To submit to foreign rule, or to cause the wreckage of all we love?'

The crowd murmured uncertainly. Euphorion had a lump in his throat. Were a new set of masters about to swallow up Athens without a fight?

One barrel-chested old man in the front row raised his hand.

'Silence for Miltiades,' cried the Council leader.

The old general took the stand.

'Citizens, friends. Xanthippos has given us some formidable arguments against resisting Datis from our high fortress. And for once, he is right.'

Gasps filled the Pnyx.

'But not when he says we should give in. *Give in*? The day I surrender to barbarians, may Zeus smite me with His thunderbolt, till I am no more than ashes reeking on the ground!'

The assembly yelled its approval.

'Still, Xanthippos is right: a siege would end badly for us. We would lose our homes, and many of our people. And it is true that we cannot rely on the Spartans. We shall starve, waiting for them, and when we finally clash shields with the enemy we shall not be at our best. No, there is only one way. My fellow warriors, are we not all good men, brave and true?'

There were a few cheers.

'*Are we*?' boomed Miltiades.

The citizens roared, thrusting spears skywards.

'Then let us fight! Let us march to Marathon and fight!'

There was a stunned silence. The crowd cheered again, but weakly. Euphorion saw his father frowning.

'Be bold, men of Athens! We must face the Persian on the meadows of Marathon and water them with his blood. I know the enemy. He will not expect this. Indeed, no true Greek phalanx has ever faced the Persians in the field. The shock will shatter their spirits, and lift ours. We are better men than they – stronger, fitter, better armed. We *shall* beat them. Trust me.'

Xanthippos waved his hand frantically, wanting to speak. Miltiades allowed him to take the stand.

Xanthippos shook his head. 'I hardly know where to begin, citizens. Fight the Persians in open battle? They, who have thrice our number, who have never been defeated, whose warriors have fought countless times, while most of ours have fought not even once? And many of our number are *slaves*!

'Moreover, as Miltiades, a man of military experience, knows, when one army outnumbers another they will outflank them. Those men on the wings who are unopposed will attack us in the rear, and destroy us. And not only that, the Persians have many horsemen, who wrought havoc at Ephesos. I know, I was there. And worse, they have thousands of bowmen, while we have none. How shall we face so many arrows? We'll be pricked like

hedgehogs before we reach the battle line.

'Citizens, I know we have one of the finest armies in the world. I do not say we'll be defeated, but our losses will be tremendous. And when a few months or a year later Darius sends a fresh force, we shall be in no state to resist. This is what Miltiades wants. Do not forget, it was *Miltiades* who killed the heralds and brought all this upon us.' He stepped down.

Miltiades returned to the platform.

'Friends, I know the Persian army, and I know we are strong enough to beat them. Marathon is too rocky for horses, and our shields will deflect their flimsy arrows. I know you are concerned about the enemy's archers. But do not fear: we shall reduce losses by running as soon as they begin to fire. That way they'll have less time to shoot before we smash into them.

'The entrance to the plain is narrow, between mountain and sea, so we shall camp there and block their way. They will not be able to outflank us. Trust me, citizens, this is the only way to save our city and our honour. And if the gods are on our side they will send the Spartans in time. I propose this: let us sacrifice, and if the omens are good, let us march to Marathon.'

The Council leader took the stand.

'We shall vote on the three choices given to us: submit to Darius, gather our population on the Acropolis, or confront the enemy at Marathon. First, the vote for submission.'

Very few citizens raised their hands.

'Now the vote for siege.'

Hands arose, and to Euphorion the result was clear.

'And now for marching to Marathon.'

Thousands of hands shot up, and a great cheer reverberated round the rocks.

A goat was brought onto the Pnyx. A priest sprinkled water on its head, then gripped it between his legs and slit its throat. Blood sprayed out and the animal wobbled to the ground. The priest sliced its belly and pulled out a glistening purple lump. He inspected it as the crowd waited.

'The omens are favourable,' he cried. 'The gods wish us to

fight at Marathon.'

Euphorion felt a chill. 'Zeus help us.'

Philokles punched the soil. '*Yes*.'

Chapter 8 The Decision, Part 2

Euphorion stumbled down the hill. His lungs felt too tight to breathe. Philokles dawdled behind.

'Hurry up! Our dads will be home soon.'

Philokles stared at the ground. 'I'm going.'

'Oh…see you later then.'

'I mean to Marathon.'

Euphorion came to a halt. 'What did you say?'

'I'm going to slaughter some Persians.' Philokles picked up a branch and began stabbing the air.

Euphorion laughed. 'You don't know how to fight.'

Philokles held up his left arm as though carrying a shield and aimed his stick at Euphorion's face. 'Yes I do. My Dad's shown me. And I've seen them training, lots of times.'

Euphorion waved the stick away. 'You donkey, you can't just join in. You have to train how to fight in a phalanx.'

Philokles poked him in the chest. 'I'll stand at the back and take my turn. They need me. We're outnumbered three to one! They're taking slaves, by Apollo! I can fight better than a slave. You just have to stay in rank, overlap your shield, and keep your spear over the man in front.'

For a moment Euphorion was speechless.

'Look – even if you could fight, they wouldn't let you. You're not twenty. You're nowhere *near* twenty!'

'What about Theseus? He was young when he killed all those monsters and bandits.'

'Yes, but he wasn't *fourteen*.'

Philokles shrugged. 'I'll just keep out of sight until they're fighting, then join in at the back.'

'They won't let you! And your father will kill you.'

'He'll be proud. He wants me to be a good hoplite.'

'In six years!'

'By Zeus, Squeak! In six *days* we might be all dead. You can hide under your bed if you want, but I'm going. Those bastards have come to kill my dad, and take my mother and sister, and I'm not going to let them.'

'You're a lunatic.'

'No, I'm a man. You're still a boy; you don't understand.'

Euphorion's face burned. Was he really that fearless?

'You can't, Philo. You'll be in huge trouble with your dad.'

'My father said it's not always right to do what you're told.'

'But he *did* do what he was told. He didn't go to Eretria.'

'Maybe he should have. Anyway, I'm going to Marathon. If you want to come, meet me at that oak tree at dawn.'

'We *can't*.'

'You're always talking about things, Squeak, but I *do* them. And doing is what makes a difference. Well, see you after the battle.' He marched off.

'A complete lunatic,' muttered Euphorion.

That afternoon Euphorion lay on his bed, his mind a whirl. He heard his father and mother talking in the courtyard and went to the balcony to listen. Aeschylos' helmet, shield, and cuirass were resting on the altar and he was sharpening his spear with a whetstone. His cuirass was brand new, a sleeveless body suit made of layers of white linen stiffened with glue, with leather flaps to protect the thighs. Trygaea was stuffing clothing into a satchel and Euaion was wheeling his wooden horse around.

'There, you have a nice fresh outfit for each day,' said Trygaea in a high, cheerful voice.

'What's this? My finest tunic? I'm going to battle, woman, not the theatre.'

'I'll change it,' she murmured, then grew upset. 'Oh, why don't you do it yourself?' She sat on the altar and sobbed.

'Calm yourself, Trygaea. Where are my sandals? Oh, here. Xanthias, fetch the tent, will you? Check all the poles, the ropes,

what have you.'

He stroked his wife's hair. 'This is not becoming.'

Euaion waddled to his mother and began to wail.

'By Apollo,' muttered Aeschylos.

Trygaea cuddled her little boy and together they wept.

'Enough of this,' said Aeschylos. 'I need you to be brave for me. You too, little one.'

'Forgive me,' said Trygaea. 'I'm very frightened.'

Xanthias brought in the tent and unrolled it, humming a battle hymn. He'd been in high spirits ever since Miltiades' promise of freedom for the slaves. Aeschylos wished his wife had such faith.

'Cheer up, my dear. This will be Athens' greatest hour.'

'Please don't let them kill you. I could not bear it.'

'If Zeus wills it, I cannot avoid it. And it would be a glorious death. You should be proud, not miserable like this.'

'I *am* proud. But if I lose you, what is left for me? Only our sons. Athens is yours, not mine. You have your assembly, your parties, your gym; every day you're among friends. But I…even Xanthias has more freedom than I. My husband, you are very precious to me.'

'Do you not think I grieve at the thought of you without your husband? But I'd die of shame if I shirked battle. I'll do my best to survive, I promise you. But I must fight.'

Trygaea wiped her eyes. 'Are you sure you have enough bread and cheese? You always get hungry at night. Let me get some more.'

She put down Euaion and went to the kitchen, still shaking.

Aeschylos donned his helmet with its tall red crest.

'What do you think, Euaion? Will I scare the Persians?' He growled comically. Euaion moaned and backed away.

Aeschylos sighed. 'Don't fear, son. The gods will protect us.'

Euphorion went back to bed and hid under his blanket.

That night he dreamt again of the barathron. This time he was surrounded by Persians, but could not push them in. Instead they shoved his mother and brother into the chasm. Euphorion struggled but his arms were weak as twigs.

He awoke sweating. All was dark and silent. He went to the kitchen, filled a water skin, and stuffed his school bag with bread, onions and grapes. Back in his bedroom he rummaged in a box for a spare tunic and sandals.

'What are you doing?' came a sleepy voice.

'Nothing. Going for a walk.'

'Why have you got a bag? Where are you going?'

'To see Philokles. I have to stop him doing something.'

'Are you going to Marathon, like Daddy?'

'Don't be stupid.'

'You *are* going.'

'Shut up.'

Euaion pulled a face and his voice became a whine. 'You're going to get killed like daddy.'

In a moment he was going to wake everyone up.

'No I'm not. Look, don't tell Mummy, or else.'

Euphorion clenched his fist and Euaion started to cry.

'By Zeus, keep quiet. I'll bring you a Persian shield.'

Euaion sniffed. 'A real Persian shield?'

'Yes, and a helmet.'

'Do you promise?'

'If you promise not to say anything. Swear?'

Euaion nodded. 'A shield *and* a helmet.'

'And don't worry, I'll be back soon. And so will Daddy.'

An hour later the sky grew pale. Euphorion heard movement in the courtyard and went down. Kynegeiros was there with his slave Nikias, his mule, and another mule which they were loading with Aeschylos' gear. Kynegeiros ruffled Euphorion's hair, but no one spoke.

Trygaea came out with a jug and a bowl. Euphorion could not bear the look in her eyes.

'Is it time?' she said.

Aeschylos nodded. Trygaea poured wine from the jug into the bowl then spilled some on the ground.

'Holy goddess, protector of our city, bless my husband and

his brother. If you love them as I do, shield them and bring them back to their families.'

She drank from the bowl and gave the rest to Aeschylos.

Aeschylos embraced his wife. 'My dear, you are all a man could wish for. The greatest reason I could have to kill my enemy is to return to you.'

He put his hand on Euphorion's shoulder.

'My son, it is time for you to grow up. I need your courage. Look after your mother and brother until I return.'

He seemed to want to say more, but could not.

'Yes, father. Good luck.'

'We shall need much of that.' He strapped on his sword and took his spear. 'Ready, Xanthias? Now you shall win your freedom, as we defend ours.' He led the way, Xanthias driving the heavily loaded mule behind.

As the door closed Trygaea sat on the altar, staring at the ground.

'Mother, I'm tired. Can I go back to bed?'

'Yes dear.'

Soon Euphorion was climbing out of his bedroom window. He dashed to the woods northeast of the city and climbed the oak tree. The sun had almost risen above the mountains. But Philokles was nowhere to be seen.

He peered toward the muster ground. Among the trees a horde of warriors was milling about. The sun rose, and trumpets blew. The generals were forming the men into their tribal regiments.

Where in Hades was Philokles? It wasn't too late – he could get back before his mother realised he was gone.

'Oy!' cried a voice below.

'I thought you weren't coming!'

'It's three miles from Phaleron, you know.'

Philokles climbed the tree. He had a rucksack like Euphorion's and two javelins strapped to his back.

'You're coming, then,' he said, nodding at Euphorion's bag.

'We can still go back, Philo. They won't know.'

'Big surprise.'

'I can't go. My father told me to look after my mother and brother.'

'By Zeus, Squeak. If the Persians beat us and come to Athens, what can *you* do about it? It'll be a bit late. Either we smash them at Marathon, or we're all sausage meat.'

Euphorion bit his lip.

Philokles ate some bread and cheese. Euphorion felt his soul pulled in two directions so hard it might split apart.

At last the army emerged from the trees onto the road to Marathon. For the next hour the river of warriors, slaves and mules flowed east.

Philokles clambered to the ground. Euphorion followed.

'See you later,' said Philokles. 'If the gods allow it.'

He marched toward the sun.

Euphorion's heart filled his chest. His mother would know he was gone now. Whatever happened he would be in trouble.

Kynegeiros had said a hoplite felt fear, but overcame it.

But how? How was he supposed to move his legs toward Marathon?

He could take one step and see how it felt.

That wasn't so bad. How about another one?

Two steps. Should he carry on?

Philokles looked back at him.

'Wait for me!' cried Euphorion.

Philokles grinned. 'Hurry up, Squeak! There's *miles* to go.'

Chapter 9 There

Aeschylos gazed at the swirling sea of warriors. Each man was loaded with gear, his cuirass and greaves already strapped on. They seemed more interested in showing off their polished helmets and shields, and bragging about how many Persians they were going to kill, than getting into battle order. One man showed Aeschylos and Kynegeiros a sack he had brought for Persian

booty. Another pulled out three such sacks.

Kynegeiros chortled. 'Now there's confidence.'

The great variety of shield designs kept Aeschylos's eyes swivelling – bulls, snakes, scorpions, horses, eyes, legs, ships, 'A's for Athens, and dazzling patterns – diamonds, spirals, and spots. Kynegeiros' shield, which like his helmet had been passed down from their father, featured a wild boar. In the midst of battle, each man would be known by his shield, and each man's heroic deeds would not go unnoticed.

With much bellowing and bugling the three commanders of each tribe arranged their men into rows, and the whole army into a semicircle. All fell quiet as the priestess of Athena appeared in flowing red robes. A bull was led forward, its horns gilded and tied with ribbons. She sprinkled its head with barley grains and cut its throat. As its life spurted onto the grass she cried a prayer.

'We give thee blood, Athena; now let us take blood.'

The animal tumbled, twitched, and lay still.

Let our victory be so swift, thought Aeschylos. Or our defeat.

At last the commander-in-chief strode out with Miltiades and mounted a tree stump. His shield was painted with a white leg to remind everyone of his victory in the Panathenaic Games, and his helmet bore not only three red crests but two tall ostrich plumes, one above each ear.

'Bold warriors!' cried Kallimachos, 'Athens is proud of you. No city has shown such courage as we do now. We know the challenge that faces us – and yet my heart overflows to see the eagerness in your eyes, the desire for action. I would not change places with Datis for all the gold in Persia!'

The men gave a cheer. Aeschylos laughed out loud.

'With luck we shall reach Marathon by nightfall and camp at the entrance to the plain. There is no way to know how long we shall remain there; Zeus willing, long enough for the Spartans to arrive. Although I am sure we can beat the enemy without their aid. Well, that will do.'

Miltiades muttered in Kallimachos' ear.

'Also,' he added, 'while we are encamped, no one is to go

outside the bounds of the wood. Except of course for authorised patrols, or to fetch water. Or to relieve himself. No need to stink out the camp, eh lads? But otherwise stay around and stay sharp, for we may have to fight at any moment.'

Miltiades spoke to him again.

'Oh, and no drinking. I mean to excess, of course. One or two cups never hurt a man.'

Kynegeiros' voice boomed out. 'What are we going to do about being outflanked?'

Grumbling spread through the army.

Kallimachos licked his lips. 'Yes, I know that is a concern. But do not worry, I have a plan. Which I shall explain in due course.'

'When will that be?' someone shouted.

Kallimachos smiled broadly.

'He hasn't got any plan,' muttered Kynegeiros.

'All in good time,' said Kallimachos. 'Now, as we all know, this whole venture was mainly Miltiades' idea, so I think we owe him the honour of a few words before we set off.'

'The voice of reason,' said Kynegeiros.

Miltiades called out in his gruff voice.

'My dear hoplites – each one of you is dear to me. And each one of you shall win glory as no other Greek has since the days of Achilles. We shall defeat our enemy. We shall!

'But let us not deceive ourselves. The struggle to come must bring out the best in us. These things a soldier must learn: to follow orders; to have his arms ready quickly; to overcome fatigue; and to look after himself in camp.

'Our camp ground shall be the woods around the sacred grove of Herakles. Your commanders will arrange each of our ten tribes in battle order, in a line from Erechtheis under the mountains to Aiantis by the sea. This way we shall block the route to Athens, and the trees will give us protection from cavalry.

'One last thing, men. In war, chaos stands ever ready to take command. If panic spreads, all is lost. Keep a firm grip on yourselves, and stay in rank. Slaves will fight in the rear. And remember, slaves, what you are fighting for. If we win, you are

free; if we lose, you will die.

'That is all. May the gods go with us!'

'Thank you, general,' said Kallimachos. 'Remember all that, men: follow orders, stay in rank, and, well, I'm sure we all know how to look after ourselves in camp. Let's get rolling!'

The march began, the tribe of Erechtheis leading off into a column four hoplites wide, with slaves and pack animals in between. It took a long time to form this column, and Aeschylos' tribe being last it was an hour before his feet were moving. For most of that hour the air was torn by the shrieks of women on rooftops, crying *ololuge* – the traditional farewell to an army. Aeschylos was glad he could not see Trygaea. It sounded too much like a lament to him, as if they were already dead.

On the far side of little Mount Lykabettos Aeschylos began to cheer up. At first he had been stunned by the vote to march to Marathon – the army might as well have thrown themselves off Cape Sounion. But he had to admit there was no better option, and Miltiades had indeed fired everyone's spirits.

'We're off to die, but we don't cry,
Come let those arrows fly!
We're off to die, but we don't sigh,
We hold our shields up high!'

They'd been singing that song joyfully for an hour now, raising their shields at the end of each verse, creating a giant glittering serpent that belonged in a myth. Or given all the spears, a giant hairy caterpillar.

All those left arms were growing tired, though, and with another twenty miles to go they were growing bored of that song. More and more men were strapping their shields to their mules. Even with his helmet tilted back, the morning sun on all that bronze made Aeschylos feel as though his head were in an oven. And with a spear in one hand and a shield in the other he could not wipe the sweat and dust from his eyes.

He put the shield back in its bag and fitted it to the mule Xanthias was driving. To show his toughness Kynegeiros continued in full gear for another mile or so, then he too offloaded his shield.

Aeschylos drank water and offered his flask to his brother.

'I'm fine.'

'We must stay in shape. We may have to fight today.'

'There's nothing wrong with my shape, Aeschylos. It's these accursed mules. They're slowing us down. We should have marched ahead.'

'Twenty five miles carrying our own arms, water, and food?'

'We could do it.'

'But we'd hardly be at our best if we met the enemy.'

'We must stop the Persians from exiting the Marathon plain. Xanthippos had a point; we can't let them outflank us.'

'We'll make it, Kynegeiros.'

'But we also need time to practise this running manoeuvre.'

'What's so difficult about running to the battle line?'

'Use your famous imagination, Aeschylos. Will everyone run at the same speed? Not all are fit enough to run two hundred yards in full panoply, and still fight with vigour. And when exactly do we close order?'

'Close to the enemy, I suppose.'

'While they are firing arrows at us, at point blank range. We might as well stick our heads in a wasps' nest.'

Aeschylos did begin to imagine it. It would not be pleasant for those in the first rank.

'The life of a soldier. *And* we have to walk at the back.'

'Wait till it's blood and brains you have to wade through.'

Indeed the road had half vanished under mule droppings. Their tribe, being last in battle order, had to march behind nine thousand warriors, and as many beasts of burden. And all those animals and the slaves who drove them had trampled all that mule's poo and pee into a disgusting brown mulch.

Still, the men were in good cheer. Flutes played constantly down the whole line of the army, which had to be a couple of

miles long. These were tough lads, for the most part. There was the odd fatty, or oldie, or skinny, whom the men had ribbed mercilessly at the muster ground. But even the fit young athletes were of all shapes and sizes. Few were as perfectly sculpted as the statues dotted round Athens. Real men were flawed – one's legs were too short, another was bald, another chinless.

But what mattered was, how would they fight?

Aeschylos wasn't sure how *he* would fight. He was in the third rank, right behind his brother. Both Kynegeiros and the man in front of him, Krito, would have to fall before Aeschylos faced a Persian shield to shield. His own spear poked out just far enough to reach *their* front man – but would that man's spear reach to Aeschylos? He would find out soon enough.

When the sun was at its scorching worst the army turned into a thistly field. Again the troops formed a giant semicircle. A stream at the field's edge was soon clogged with mules and men relieving their thirst, and each bush soon had a warrior behind it, emptying his bowels. Aeschylos noticed they washed the sponges they had wiped themselves with in the same brook everyone was drinking from.

'I wonder if the streams at Marathon will receive the same reverence.'

'Army life is not for the lover of luxury,' said Kynegeiros.

'Xanthias, take these flasks upstream before you fill them. A *long way* upstream.'

Kynegeiros chuckled and clapped him on the back.

Aeschylos ate some bread, cheese, and salted fish. They had travelled only ten miles, but his feet were sore; he wasn't used to these new hobnailed boots.

But that was the least of his worries. Before the day was out he might have to raise his shield against a hailstorm of arrows – and after that a thousand bringers of death. Would the slaughter stop at the second rank? Or the third? A sick taste of fear rose in his throat. He washed it down with wine.

He noticed Kallimachos jotting on a piece of paper. Most of the generals were talking with their own tribesmen, but Miltiades

was strolling through the whole army, shaking hands and chatting. He came over to Aeschylos and Kynegeiros.

'The famous brothers! It's a fine thing to have you older types here. The young ones look up to you; they need your guidance.'

'We do our best,' said Kynegeiros. 'They keep asking me what it was like to fight the Persian cavalry.'

'Not so glorious,' said Aeschylos.

Kynegeiros bristled. 'They took us by surprise.'

'This time we'll be ready for them,' said Miltiades.

'It's good for the men's spirits that you trouble to visit them,' said Aeschylos.

'I feel almost as a father to them.'

'Kallimachos, however…' said Kynegeiros. 'If you don't mind my saying, he's not up to the job.'

Miltiades gazed at the war arkhon.

'Really, though,' said Kynegeiros, leaning close to him. 'He's as much use as a cheese spear.'

Miltiades laughed. 'Well, that's democracy for you. What do you suppose he's thinking right now?'

'How in Hades we're going to win this battle.'

'What do you reckon, Aeschylos?'

'It's a lot for a young man to cope with. Not only does he command nine thousand men, he holds the fate of Athens in his hands. And he is only thirty-two. His mind must be petrified with such a heavy duty. He fears he will fail and land himself in disgrace. And yet he is a champion athlete and a popular politician. He is used to feeling confident, to others' flattery.'

'And so?'

'And so I fear he may be too confident. I fear he will clutch at some half-stewed strategy, to seem a strong leader. He sorely needs the advice of men like you, Miltiades; but he wants to seem wiser than he is. Success puffs up a man's pride and makes him take himself too seriously. Of course, I don't mean you…'

Miltiades chuckled. 'He did permit me to speak this morning.'

'Which is good,' said Kynegeiros. 'But you must impress your wisdom on him. For all our sakes.'

'And how should I do that?'

'Just tell him straight.'

'But in private,' said Aeschylos, 'so he can pretend the ideas are his own. Do not make him envy you, general.'

'You are a thoughtful soul, Aeschylos,' said Miltiades. 'I'll see you both at Marathon.'

Aeschylos watched as the general continued his tour, faces lighting up wherever he went. That was a gift, and one he did not have himself. But he would play his part.

Kallimachos beckoned Miltiades over. The war arkhon showed him his paper and drew in the air with his finger. Miltiades took the paper and pen and added something. Kallimachos waved his hand, as if this was a minor change and one he could easily have thought of himself.

Soon the trumpets blew and Kallimachos addressed the army.

'Men, we shall soon be on our way, and I know you are all eager to spear a barbarian or three. When we do face the enemy, however, because of his greater numbers we must be careful not to be outflanked. We must therefore spread out to match the enemy line.

'We know the enemy usually places his strongest troops in the centre – the Sakai with their axes, and the Persian Immortals with their spears. Those on the flanks are lesser men. We shall therefore divide our usual eight ranks into four, on our left and right wings. That is, Erechtheis and Aiantis will thin out, in order to double their width. They will form their usual phalanx of eight ranks, but in open order, two paces between each file. Then, to close ranks, the rear four in each file will slip in between the front four, as with a normal phalanx. Now…'

He squinted at his paper.

'Does he know what he's talking about?' muttered Kynegeiros.

Kallimachos continued. 'We must of course keep our strongest troops near the front, and so we cannot simply take the back four ranks as they are, and move them forwards. This would move a man at rank five right to the front. Therefore, the files of eight

shall be reordered as follows. The first man, and the eighth man, shall stay where they are. The second man shall move to the fifth position, the third to the second, the fourth to the sixth, the fifth to the third, the sixth to the seventh, and the seventh to the fourth. When the ranks are closed, this should bring the best men forward. Well, I hope that is all clear.'

There was a pause. 'Not really,' shouted someone.

There was much laughter.

'Can you repeat that?' said someone else.

'Yes, yes, of course.' Kallimachos explained the changes once more. 'Don't worry, those two tribes will practise that in a moment. Fear not, Athenians, the enemy cannot stop us now. Very well, carry on.'

The trumpets sounded, and Erechtheis and Aiantis spread across the field while the rest of the army got into its marching column. For the next hour chaos reigned as the commanders of these two tribes tried to teach the men – and themselves – how to form the new four rank phalanxes. The soldiers in the other tribes jeered at the confusion, while some complained that the Persians would already be half way to Athens.

Finally everything seemed to be sorted out and the army got on its way again. But Aeschylos was hot and bothered. By thinning to four ranks his own tribe's strength been halved. And he himself was now in the second rank. Now, only one man would protect him from a barrage of spears and arrows. That man was Krito, the victor in the wrestling at the Panathenaia. Krito was built like a pile of boulders, but a single arrow could take him down. It was worse for Kynegeiros; he had moved up to first rank, alongside Krito and his wrestling friend Hippolytos.

'Will this be enough to match their line?' Aeschylos asked his brother.

'It depends how deep *their* ranks are. And there's still the cavalry.'

'Ah, well. One step closer to death.'

Kynegeiros frowned.

'Are you worried about being at the front?' Aeschylos asked

him.

'Of course not. It's an honour. No, brother, it's just that you have never fought before. When you were behind me, I could protect you. Now I must rely on Krito alone.'

Aeschylos felt a burst of love for his brother. 'I'll be fine. Anyway, it's eight years since your last battle. We must all protect each other now.'

Kynegeiros patted his back. 'And the gods are with us.'

Aeschylos smiled. But his guts wanted to crawl out of his mouth.

Through the burning afternoon the army rounded the Pentelikon slopes. Many were discussing whether or not Kallimachos' plan would work. Some came up with their own ideas, which others shot down. Aeschylos sensed their unease. No one in Aiantis wanted the rest to think he opposed the plan out of fear. No one wanted to sound like a coward. Indeed many said they relished the chance to show the greatness of Aiantis.

It certainly was a chance for glory. But Aeschylos wasn't sure he was looking forward to it.

As the sun sank behind them a cheer came from the head of the column. A mile later the reason for it came into view: the Bay of Marathon, a six mile crescent curving round the Aegean Sea. The fierce Thracian wind stirred up white horses across the bay and bent palm trees southwards. The coast ended in a peninsula, the Dog's Tail. In its shelter Aeschylos saw a trail of dots.

'I see the ships.'

'You and your eagle eyes. How many?'

'It's too far to tell. A great number.'

The sight of the Persians making themselves at home on Athenian territory made the soldiers furious.

'Hades damn them!'

'They'll get my spear in their teeth!'

Aeschylos noticed a grey haze in the plain behind the camp.

'Something's burning over there. A village, or fields perhaps.'

'Swine,' muttered a man behind them. 'That's my town,

Trikorythos. I sent my family to the Marathon village. I hope the goddess protected them.'

'My own family is at home in Marathon,' said another fellow. 'By Zeus, if they have set foot in my house…'

Other hoplites from the four villages of the Marathon area began fretting about their families, praying they would not be too late to save them. Kynegeiros seethed with rage.

The colossal caterpillar crawled down to the gateway to the plain, hills to the left and the sea just out of sight on the right. They passed through a dried-up marsh with tall burnt-looking reeds, and crossed a stream. An olive and pine wood appeared ahead. Half a mile away on the coast the reddish roofs of the Marathon township appeared between the trees, but neither smoke nor living person could be seen.

Now the sun was hidden by mountains the sweat on Aeschylos' skin was cold. His feet ached and he was more than glad to reach the twilit trees. The tribe curved right past four others and halted at the edge of the wood within earshot of the crashing sea. He flopped to the sandy ground.

'Zeus, if You could hold off the enemy till I've had a good night's sleep, I'd be most grateful.'

'Or a little longer, even,' said Kynegeiros.

'Yes, let's pray Philippides did his job properly. Xanthias, get that tent up and make supper. I'm starving.'

'Yes, master.'

It was hard for the boys to miss the trail of the army – so many feet and hooves and droppings had turned the road into the inside of a stable. Now and then they passed farmers shovelling manure onto carts. The army's current location was revealed by a distant dust cloud.

Euphorion's mind was as hazy as that cloud. It hardly seemed real that he was following his cousin to battle.

'You really mean to fight?'

'Yes.'

'With *javelins*?'

'Yes.'

'But they're not spears. What do you do when you've thrown them?'

'Find something else to fight with! You're so stupid.'

'But what about a shield? And a helmet?'

'I'll borrow one, I'll steal one, whatever.'

Euphorion stopped. Terror stung his belly. 'We have to go back, Philo.'

'By Apollo, not again.'

'Our dads will kill us. And if they don't, the Persians will.'

'So you'd rather wait at home, to get caught by the Persians? Do you know what they do to sons of noblemen? They make them into eunuchs. You know what that means, don't you?' Philokles pretended to cut between his legs. 'Chop chop.'

Euphorion swallowed. 'My dad's going to leather me.'

Philokles strode on.

'And…and we'll have to work like slaves, cleaning, getting water, all that rubbish.'

'What, you don't want to help out, so we can beat the enemy? Go home then. I wouldn't want to be you, though.' He made the cutting motion again. 'Chop chop.'

'I might as well. They won't let us stay. Come on, Philo.'

'I'm no mouse. But you are. You're just like your…'

'Like who?' Euphorion grew angry. He stood face to face with Philokles, till he could see the blackheads on his nose.

'Just like your dad.' Philokles knew he'd stepped over the line, but he was enjoying being nasty.

Euphorion bumped chests with him. 'What about my dad?'

'Some hoplite *he* is.'

'He's not a coward!'

'So why didn't he go to Sardis?'

'He – they only sent a thousand men. He *wanted* to go.'

'*My* father went.'

'So what?'

Philokles' lips curled into an evil smirk.

'Yours was too busy writing plays to fight.'

'Well, he's going to Marathon, and he's going to kill more Persians than *your* father.'

Philokles snorted. 'Mine beat yours in the hoplite race. He's stronger and faster than your dad.'

'Shut up!'

He gave Philokles a shove. Philokles dropped his gear and leapt on him. They fought in the dirt, grabbing, kneeing, and shoving. At last Euphorion managed to punch Philokles' eyebrow. He rolled Euphorion over and elbowed him in the nose. Euphorion felt blood trickling. He tried to wriggle away.

'Baby,' said Philokles, getting off him.

Euphorion leant over, watching the red drips fall into the dust. His stomach tightened as he tried not to cry. 'Bastard!'

He ran at his cousin and again they wrestled. Soon Philokles got him in a headlock.

'Submit.'

'Take it back. My dad's not a coward.'

Philokles squeezed his neck. Euphorion could barely breathe. Blood streamed down his chin and neck.

'Submit.'

'Take it back!' sputtered Euphorion, red drops spraying.

'Submit first.'

'All right!'

Philokles let him go. He looked ashamed, but only a little.

'Birdbrains!' cried a hoarse voice. It was an aged farmer with a basket of grapes. 'Your fathers are trying to save us from the enemy, and you're acting like savages. You should be ashamed.'

'Mind your own business,' said Philokles.

The farmer tutted at him.

Philokles went red. He lifted Euphorion to his feet. 'You're all right. Just squeeze it for a while.'

They got their packs back on and walked. At last Euphorion's nose stopped bleeding and his heart slowed. 'My dad's going to fight bravely and kill lots of Persians.'

'I hope so.' Philokles laughed. 'You look like you've been in a battle yourself. Come on, we've got to get to the far side of that

mountain.' He wrapped his arm round Euphorion's shoulder and they sped up.

The day stretched on. Each mile of trudging made Euphorion's feet ache more. He was sure they were covered in blisters, but he didn't want to show any suffering. At last the sea came into view and they began the descent to the plain. It was almost dark by the time they reached the marsh and the borders of the wood. Soldiers and slaves were everywhere, outside their tents eating supper and drinking wine.

Their fathers wouldn't see them if they stayed in the tall grass. They squashed some reeds to make a bed and munched bread and onions. The sun set and the three quarter moon painted their grassy hideout a dim grey. Euphorion listened to the crickets trilling. It was getting cold.

'Do you think we'll have to fight in the morning?'

'Ask Datis,' mumbled Philokles. Soon he was snoring.

But Euphorion could not sleep. He went over what he was going to say to his father. But he could think of nothing that would prevent a beating. There had to be some way to make him understand…

'Pa-pa-paaa! Pa-pa-paaa!'

Euphorion leapt to his feet. It was dawn and trumpets were blaring all over the wood. There was a great deal of shouting too. He shook Philokles awake. Philokles rubbed his eyes and listened.

'That's the signal for battle muster.'

'You mean…?'

Philokles stood, breathing fast. 'Time to kill.'

Chapter 10 Muster

Dawn spread her rosy fingers across the sky as Euphorion followed his cousin through the reeds. Philokles' javelins were as tall as he was, but mere twigs compared to a hoplite's spear. Peeking from a tree they saw men streaming to the fields on the

far side of the wood. Many were still strapping on their cuirasses and quaffing a last mouthful of wine.

Trumpets sounded up and down the camp. Eventually the wood was empty of warriors. The boys crept past tents, mules, and slaves tidying up. At the edge of the wood they scaled an olive tree. Euphorion kept losing his grip. Why had Athena created such a lumpy, stumpy tree? Actually olives were easy to climb. It was fear that made his fingers fumble.

Through the green and silver leaves they saw the muster. Nine thousand warriors stood with spears against shoulders, their helmet crests nodding. Red-cloaked officers yelled as they formed the men into open order. Flutes piped as files of sixteen were directed next to each other.

Themistokles strode up and down in front of the nearest tribe. To the boys' left the army stretched to the grey mountains, to their right all the way to the sea. Miles ahead the mountains bordered the plain, like a theatre of the gods.

Euphorion had never seen so many men in one place. Then he remembered that the Persians had at least twice this number.

At last the hoplites seemed to be in position, but for a while longer the commanders and generals marched between the files, bawling, '*Open* order, for Apollo's sake! That's two paces between each man!', 'Hold it near the bottom, slave!', and 'You call that a straight line?'

'Where are the Persians?' said Euphorion.

Philokles peered into the distance. 'On their way.'

Themistokles walked away from the phalanx toward the middle of the plain. Down the line the other generals were doing the same. About three stadium lengths away they stopped and turned. The hoplites lowered their spears, level with the ground. The flutes sang and the men marched forward.

Philokles breathed hard. 'Are you coming? You can have one of my javelins.'

Euphorion froze. He had visions of spears entering his belly.

'I…might.'

Philokles squeezed his arm. 'It's all right, Squeak.'

But then something strange happened. Half way to the generals the soldiers lifted their spears to their shoulders and their shields over their heads, and began to trot. Some at the back failed to raise their spears quickly, or even dropped them, and got a good shouting for it. When they reached the generals the soldiers stopped and lowered their shields. More yelling echoed across the plain.

'What in Hades?' said Euphorion.

'They're closing ranks,' said Philokles. 'The back half of each file goes into the gaps between the files. That's how you get eight ranks. See where they've stopped? That's where they're going to fight.'

Philokles dropped to the ground. He unstrapped a javelin from his back, gave Euphorion an odd look, and strode towards the army. Euphorion panicked.

'Philo! Maybe you should wait till the Persians get there. They'll send you back if you go now.'

Philokles stopped. 'Yes. Maybe.'

To Euphorion's great relief he climbed back up the tree.

They waited. And then something even stranger happened. The men about-faced and marched back.

'What's going on?' said Euphorion.

'Change of plan. Retreat.'

The army returned to where it had begun, back in open order, then about-faced again. Themistokles yelled at his tribe. Euphorion only caught the words 'appalling!' and 'abysmal!', but it was clear he was not pleased. Soon the trumpets blew, and the previous manoeuvre unfolded in exactly the same way.

'Can't they make their minds up?' said Philokles.

Then Euphorion realised. 'They're practising. The Persians aren't coming.'

Philokles grumbled, but Euphorion sensed his relief.

The drill was performed a third time. When the men returned, most were wobbly on their feet. Some fell onto their bottoms. A shouting match ensued between a fat hoplite, gasping on his knees, and the commander of his regiment.

'I don't care if you're a councillor, you do what I tell you.'

The men laughed as the obese official struggled to his feet. The unfit hoplites, however, were saved from further pains by a signal to dismiss the army. Everyone trickled back to the wood.

'We'd better go, Philo.'

They climbed down, but Philokles stayed there, gazing in fascination at the sweaty warriors.

'Come on, Philo!'

A couple of young hoplites returned to a nearby tent, their muscles pumped.

'Bread and wine, slave,' said one. He poured water over his face and unclipped his armour.

'By Apollo, Tereos,' said his companion, 'I hope the foreigners don't want to hold this rumble today.'

'Need a lie down, do you, Neleos?'

'Ha, ha. I mean the slaves and old chaps. Damned useless.'

Tereos noticed the boys. 'What are you staring at, slaves?'

'We're not slaves,' said Euphorion.

'Was that a practice?' said Philokles.

Neleos grunted a 'yes'.

'Who are you, then?' said Tereos.

'Servants,' said Euphorion. 'From Aiantis.'

'Did you think it was the real thing?' asked Philokles.

'At first,' laughed Neleos. 'Thank Zeus it wasn't. A touch more training needed, methinks.'

'What's it like, in the phalanx?'

'Just one moment,' said Tereos. 'I know you. You were in the boys' pentathlon. Kynegeiros' son, right? What's your name?'

'Philokles,' said Euphorion. 'I'm his cousin.'

'Why did you run across the field?' asked Philokles. 'I thought you always marched, to keep formation.'

'You mean your fathers brought you here?'

'Yes,' said Philokles. 'But why–'

'So what are you doing here, in Leontis?'

'He's right, Philo, we'd better get back,' said Euphorion.

'And what are you doing with those javelins?' said Tereos.

At last Philokles allowed Euphorion to drag him away.

But the warriors grabbed their tunics.

'Hold it. How many hoplites' sons do you see in this camp?'

Philokles struggled. 'Hey! Kynegeiros is my father.'

'Then let's have a chat with him, shall we?'

Euphorion gulped as the men bundled them to the sea end of the camp. 'I told you this was going to happen, Philo.'

'Shut it, Squeak.'

'These two belong to you, I believe,' said Tereos as they reached the cube-shaped tent of Aeschylos and Kynegeiros. The fathers were sitting on folding stools, munching bread and figs.

'They said you brought them with you, but from the look in your eyes I'd say that was a fib,' said Tereos. With a chuckle he and Neleos left.

'Oh, boys,' said Xanthias. 'I wouldn't be you for all the silver in Sardis.'

Kynegeiros threw down his bread and grabbed his son's ear.

'In Zeus' name, what?'

Philokles yelped as his father yanked his head side to side.

Aeschylos seized his son's long braids. A pair of gigantic hoplites were watching; Euphorion recognised them from the Panathenaia, the wrestlers Krito and Hippolytos.

'I *told* you to stay and look after your mother and brother,' growled Aeschylos, red-faced.

'I'm sorry, father.'

'Sorry! As if you have no brain. You can't help yourself!' He smacked Euphorion's ear. It stung and throbbed.

Kynegeiros' face was more purple than red. He threw his son to the ground, picked up a branch, and started whacking him on the back. Philokles covered his head.

'Give me one good reason why I should not beat you black and blue,' said Aeschylos to his son.

'We – we came to help.'

'I want to fight the Persians,' gasped Philokles as his father clobbered him.

'Shut up, boy! I'll teach you to disobey me, to dishonour me.' He stripped the javelins from Philokles' back and threw them away. 'You're stupid, as well as disobedient.'

Euphorion's father glared at him.

'Can you imagine your mother's pain at this moment? Can *you*, Philokles? As if they needed more heartache! Do they know you are here?'

Euphorion stared at the ground.

'Answer me!'

'No, father. But that's why we came, for our mothers. I know you said to look after her, but if you lose the battle, what can we do? Isn't it better to help Athens win?'

Aeschylos looked to the sky. 'Father Zeus, show me where I went wrong in raising my son.'

Euphorion's eyes filled with tears. 'I want to stop them hurting mummy. Please let me help save mummy and Euaion.'

His father released his hair. Kynegeiros threw away his stick and gave a heavy sigh.

'Father,' said Philokles, 'you said it's not always right to do what you're told.'

'How dare you use my own words against me!' Kynegeiros raised a fist.

'Why don't you let them stay?' said Krito.

'You might as well, now they're here,' said Hippolytos.

Kynegeiros turned to his brother. 'Shall we send them back with Xanthias? We need Nikias for the fight.'

'We need Xanthias too,' said Aeschylos. 'Anyway, they'll only run away from him. I suppose we could send word back with a runner.' He shook his head at the boys. 'You say you want to help, but what use can you be if you won't obey us? This is war, for Zeus' sake! Do you not understand?'

'Yes, father,' said Euphorion. 'That's why we're *here*.'

'They're not lacking in courage,' said Hippolytos.

'It takes a lot more than that,' said Aeschylos. 'As was just demonstrated in that drill.'

'We'll obey, I swear by Apollo,' said Euphorion. 'We'll do

anything you say.'

'Anything,' said Philokles.

Kynegeiros' face was now more red than purple. Euphorion took this as a good omen.

The fathers took deep breaths. They glanced at each other.

'Have you noticed,' said Aeschylos, 'our campsite is growing filthier by the hour?' He nodded to large piles of droppings at the rear end of the mules. 'We can't let that build up.'

'It does reek,' said Kynegeiros.

'Xanthias, give the boys a sack,' said Aeschylos.

Krito and Hippolytos burst into laughter.

'Erm…can we have a shovel?' said Euphorion.

Aeschylos raised his eyebrows. Xanthias chuckled.

'Come on, Squeak,' said Philokles. 'It's not poison.'

Grimacing, Euphorion scooped a handful of droppings into the sack. They filled it, emptied it in the marsh, and returned.

'Can we stay now?' asked Euphorion.

Kynegeiros snorted. 'You think that's enough punishment?'

'There are many more mules in this camp,' said Aeschylos. 'Do the rest of the tribe, and we'll think about it.'

Euphorion stared in dismay around the wood. 'That'll take forever!'

'It's your choice: clean up, or go home.'

'It's all right, Eu,' said Philokles. 'We'll borrow a cart and shovel.'

'Disobey us once more, and you go back,' said Aeschylos.

'And if you don't,' growled Kynegeiros, 'the blazing thunderbolts of Zeus will be nothing compared with my wrath.'

For the rest of the morning the boys mucked out the campsite. They grew more and more exhausted, sweaty, and filthy, causing much merriment among the hoplites. At last they had visited every animal in the tribe and returned, hoping for lunch.

Aeschylos wrinkled his nose. 'Wash yourselves in the sea.'

They dashed to the beach. The sand turned to rocks in the water, but they gladly stripped off and sprang in. They splashed

about in the breakers, until a wave bowled Euphorion onto something sharp.

'Ow!'

'Watch it, there's sea urchins everywhere.'

They stepped back on the beach. Euphorion's right buttock, thigh, and wrist were studded with tiny black spines. He swore.

Philokles laughed and began squeezing them out with his fingernails. Euphorion tried not to wince.

'Can you see the ships?' said Philokles.

Euphorion peered. Four miles away the wavy-backed snake of the Dog's Tail stuck out into the bay. To its left Euphorion saw a yellow line of sand, spattered with hundreds of tiny specks.

'I see it.'

They gazed a while, their ears filled with the roar of the waves and the flapping of wind in the trees. Back in the camp they chewed bread and cheese and watered their dry throats.

'Do you have another job for us?' asked Euphorion.

'You haven't finished the first one yet,' said Kynegeiros.

Euphorion blinked at him.

'Do you think donkeys defecate only once a day?'

Euphorion groaned, but his father laughed.

'We're only joking. You can take a break. But don't leave the camp without permission. Ever, do you understand? Except to fetch water, or to relieve yourselves.'

After lunch the boys dozed in the shade of a tree. Aeschylos took his spear and shield and tried a few thrusts into mid air. His brother, sitting on a stool and polishing his sword, eyed him with a faint smile. Aeschylos bristled. It would have been less irritating if Kynegeiros had openly mocked him. He thrust as far as he could, a good ten feet from back heel to iron tip.

His arms were beginning to ache. That was not a good sign. Why hadn't he practised this at home? It was odd – the hundreds of hours every lad spent learning the lyre, and yet each man was simply expected to be able to handle an eight-foot spear.

'You can't do that from the second rank,' said Kynegeiros.

'You'll have to hold it over Krito's shoulder.'

'I know.' Aeschylos raised his arm high and aimed the spear down. His reach was much shorter now, and the strain on his arm much greater. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. Was there time to build his strength before the battle?

'Can I have a go, uncle?' asked Philokles.

'You're too young.'

Aeschylos continued to stab his invisible foe. Kynegeiros leaned back, on the verge of laughter. Aeschylos' skin prickled.

Nearby, the ten generals emerged from Kallimachos' tent and strode past in their scarlet capes. Miltiades and Themistokles saw the brothers and approached. Themistokles nodded at the boys.

'We heard about you two. A pair of mini-hoplites, are you?'

Philokles grinned.

'Are we sticking with the plan?' asked Kynegeiros.

'For now,' said Miltiades. 'We are not all of the same mind, but the plan still stands. Aeschylos, could we borrow you? We're off for a spot of spying, and your eyes would be most useful.'

'Spying?' said Kynegeiros, in an envious tone.

'Nothing too perilous. I'll have him back in one piece, I promise. By the way, I'm having a party tonight, and you're both invited. I do value your military experience, Kynegeiros; I hope you'll come.'

'Yes, of course.'

Miltiades pointed a finger at the boys. 'And you two keep out of trouble, eh? There are nine other tribes, you know, and that's a lot of excrement.'

Aeschylos followed the two generals to the far end of the camp, then up a rocky path ascending the hillside. The slope was thick with trees and bushes, some covered with thorns as long as his finger, like some dreadful torture device. The path vanished and Miltiades drew his sword to hack a way through. Aeschylos marvelled at the stout strength of this man in his sixties, too proud to take off his heavy bronze breastplate.

He was curious. It was true he was known for his keen eyesight, but there were lots of younger men with better eyes than

his. He could see two on the crest of the hill, watching for enemy advances. And he had none of his brother's admired military experience. He also sensed from Themistokles' averted gaze that it hadn't been *his* idea to bring him along.

They stopped half way up, where a break in the trees gave a clear view of the plain. The camp was an embroidery of trees and tents. In the fields north of the wood men were building watch fires. The plain was mostly scruffy yellow-grey pasture, with the odd goat or cow. Here and there terracotta roofs stood out amid barley fields and vineyards. On the coast south of the wood lay the village of Marathon. Fishing boats in the sea flashed blue, red, and white.

A mile to their left stood the village of Probalinthos. To the north of that the curve of the mountains was broken by a valley leading to another village, Oinoë. Far off in the north-east of the plain lay Trikorythos. Most of this region was part of Aeschylos' own tribe, and he knew men from each village. Probalinthos was close enough to the Greek camp to be safe, but what of Oinoe? And the farmsteads on the plain? What would happen to them? Or had already happened?

'Do you see the galleys, Aeschylos?' asked Miltiades.

'I see them.'

'And what is inland of the enemy camp?'

'A wide, green patch.'

'The Great Marsh. A vast, wet place.'

'And unsuitable for combat,' said Themistokles. 'It is cursed by Artemis, full of malaria, mosquitoes, and leeches.'

'I take it Trikorythos is plundered?' said Aeschylos.

'Plundered, burned, looted. The townsfolk slain or enslaved.'

'Foreign swine.'

'They will get their reward for it,' said Miltiades. 'Tell me, Aeschylos, do you see any patrols?'

'I see figures here and there. Some horsemen in the middle of the plain. But I can't tell if they are Persian.'

'They are,' said Themistokles. 'Every Greek has fled to Marathon or Probalinthos.'

'The question is,' said Miltiades, 'where will the battle take place? And more important, where do we *want* it to take place?'

'We cannot attack the camp,' said Themistokles. 'Not in any numbers. They are well protected by mountains and marsh.'

'And those pine trees shielding their tents,' added Miltiades.

'There is a small lake at the end of the plain, so they are well supplied with water. And without ships of our own, we cannot assail them by sea.'

'So they chose their site well,' said Miltiades.

'And they can stay there as long as they like,' said Aeschylos.

'As long as they have food,' said Themistokles.

'And how long will that be?' asked Aeschylos.

'A good question,' said Miltiades. 'The plain abounds in crops, but they have a great number of mouths to feed. In any case, it's clear the battle will not take place at the enemy camp.'

'But neither will they assault ours,' said Themistokles. 'The trees would hinder their horse and arrows. And they cannot outflank us.'

'Perhaps they will simply board their boats and sail to Athens,' said Aeschylos.

'We would outrun them,' said Miltiades. 'It's a fair trip round the cape, and even if they managed to land at Phaleron, it's another three miles to the city. We'd get back in time.'

'They will seek to fight us on the plain,' said Themistokles. 'But we must be careful not to end up with our backs to the sea. Or to the mountains.'

'Then we must face them as we are,' said Aeschylos.

'With their backs to the Great Marsh,' said Themistokles.

Miltiades clapped a hand on Themistokles' shoulder.

'You have a fine military mind, my friend. I'm glad you're on our side.'

Aeschylos gazed into the plain. The future of Greece would be decided out there. How much Athenian blood would soak that dry earth?

'Generals, Kallimachos' plan…is it a good one, in your minds? I mean, for the outflanking problem.'

'Another good question,' said Miltiades.

'That depends on you and Erechtheis, doesn't it?' said Themistokles. 'You're fine warriors, Aeschylos. Do not fear.'

'I'm not afraid. It's an honour to be the ones who…' he sought for the words.

'Get dumped in it?' offered Themistokles.

They laughed.

'But how long will they wait to attack?' said Aeschylos.

'Tell me,' said Miltiades. 'What do you imagine is going on in Datis' mind?'

He pondered. 'For Datis, this is the end of a long campaign, and a most successful one. But he and his men are tired. Tired of fighting, of rowing, of being holed up in hot, rolling ships. They must welcome this rest, a break from warfare.

'And this war is not a personal matter for them. They are all very far from home, and this is just another campaign. They do not hate us; not as we hate them. Perhaps Datis does not mind taking his time, in the certainty he will win.

'And yet Datis expects great glory from this final victory. He looks forward to Darius' rewards, for gaining revenge on the men who burned Sardis and executed the envoys.

'And even greater than that is the glory of stamping a firm foot on Greek soil – of taking the first step in the conquest of Greece. Yes, Datis relishes the thought of that fame. He will be raised to the foremost of generals. And so he is determined to win. And yet…I do think he will be taken aback at our coming here. It is a bold move, which he could not have foreseen.'

'And so?'

'And so he has a dilemma. Are we here because we are indeed strong enough to resist his mighty army? Do we have allies on the way? Should he attack now, before they arrive? On the other hand, are we merely bluffing, trying to scare him off? Or are we simply mad?'

Miltiades laughed. 'You are full of good questions today.'

'So Datis has much to consider – whether to attack, when to attack, and where.'

'Do you think he might delay?'

Aeschylos took a deep breath. He wasn't sure they should base their entire strategy on the opinions of a poet.

'Perhaps. Yes, I think so. Datis knows that each day that passes our resolve will weaken.'

'You think so?' said Themistokles testily.

'I am not sure. But Datis hopes so. Each day we wait here we face the threat of annihilation. That will surely take its toll on the men.'

'They are tougher than you think,' growled Themistokles. 'Each day the invader sits on our soil, steals our food, and holds our women and children captive, the men will grow *stronger* in their resolve to destroy him.'

'Of course. I only say what Datis will think. Or may think.'

'Let us pray he does delay. If he hears that the Spartans are coming, he will certainly attack before they arrive.'

'He will not hear,' said Miltiades. 'Zeus willing, the Spartans left this morning, so they should be here in three or four days. Still, we must be ready to fight without them.'

'I don't think he will expect the Spartans,' said Aeschylos.

'Why not?'

'We did not help Eretria, though they are much closer than Sparta. Datis surely sees our Greek cities as lacking in solidarity. We war with each other more than we support each other.'

'The Spartans *will* come,' said Themistokles.

'Certainly, but…'

Themistokles nodded. 'It is what Datis will think.'

'You see?' said Miltiades. 'I told you we should bring him.'

Aeschylos flushed with pride.

They watched the plain. Aeschylos spotted a column of men approaching along the northern road.

'I see warriors.'

'It must be that detachment we sent to bring refugees,' said Themistokles.

'No, each man bears a spear. And there are hundreds.'

Miltiades squinted. 'Is it the enemy?'

'I cannot tell.'

They all stared as the distant troops grew nearer.

Chapter 11 The Party

'They have round shields, long spears, and tall crests,' said Aeschylos. 'And their helmets have wide rims over the eyes.'

'Boeotian helmets,' said Miltiades.

Themistokles shook a fist. 'It's the Plataians!'

Miltiades exhaled. 'The gods *are* on our side.'

Whoops of delight swept through the wood as word spread that tiny Plataia had sent a thousand men to strengthen the Greek cause. Back at the tent, however, this had started an argument between the brothers.

'For Apollo's sake, Aeschylos, can't you even smile about it?'

'I'm as pleased as you are. Only more realistic.'

'What in Hades does that mean?'

'Before, we were nine thousand against twenty thousand – or more. Now we are ten against twenty. Mathematically, it makes little difference.'

'By all the gods, Aeschylos, you know how to spoil a celebration. Of course it makes a difference. A thousand brave men! Think of their courage – one little town sending every last man. Doesn't it fill your sails? Doesn't it show once and for all that we are favoured by Zeus?'

'The enemy still outnumbers us two or three to one. We still need the Spartans; without them the odds are against us.'

'I am aware of that, Aeschylos. But each man *does* make a difference. I suppose, if you think that one thousand men do not make a difference, then one alone certainly does not.'

'One?' Aeschylos snorted.

'Then since *you* are one man, and one man has no value, why don't you go back to Athens?'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Why not? Is it only that you fear disgrace?'

'Well, I am of *some* use.'

'Ah! But surely if *you*, one man alone, are of some use, then mathematically, one thousand are of *enormous* use.'

Aeschylos sighed. 'You miss my point.'

Kynegeiros chortled. 'See, boys? He may be a clever swine, but it is possible to defeat him in an argument.'

After sunset the brothers left for Miltiades' party. Loud voices and music in Kallimachos' tent revealed he was having his own gathering. All over the camp hoplites were sitting round fires drinking, singing, and blowing flutes. In front of the wood, watch fires sent sparks up to the stars. Beyond the fires Euphorion saw guards eyeing the plain. He wondered, would the Persians strike at night? Could Athens form phalanx in the dark? Or would the enemy send spies to slay them all in their sleep?

He and Philokles joined Krito, Hippolytos, and a host of other revellers. They listened to a song of the great hero, Theseus, who killed the Minotaur and saved Athens from the sacrifice of its youths and maidens. Afterwards a man stood, tears in his eyes, and poured wine onto the fire. As the embers hissed he spoke a prayer.

'Theseus, son of Poseidon who stirs the waves, I speak to you, down in Hades' realm. You once saved our city from cruel foreigners. I beg you, call on all the powers of Lower Earth to grant me revenge on the invaders. They destroyed all I possess, and took my wife and my daughters into captivity. Come again to our aid, Theseus. Give us victory; give me vengeance.'

Euphorion gazed at him in confusion.

Krito said, 'He is from Trikorythos.'

Euphorion felt his own tears welling. This man had lost everything he loved. And for what? Why did the gods let such things happen?

Philokles' eyes were filled only with hate. He looked very much like his father.

A slave approached. 'General Miltiades requests the presence of the sons of Aeschylos and Kynegeiros.'

They followed and waited outside Miltiades' tent. His guests were reclining on cushions around platters of olives, anchovies, grapes, and chickpeas. As well as their fathers Euphorion saw Themistokles, the general of Aiantis, who was called Stesilaos, and one other he did not recognise.

'I understand, my friends, truly I do,' Miltiades was saying. 'But we must rally behind our leader, or the men will lose heart. They need faith in our plans, or their fears will shake them.'

He saw the boys. 'Ah, come in, lads. This is Arimnestos, commander of the Plataians. You will not guess, Arimnestos, what they are doing here. Tell us, boys.'

'We came to fight, general,' said Philokles.

'We want to save Athens,' said Euphorion. 'And our mothers.'

'Isn't that marvellous?' said Miltiades. 'You're two very naughty boys, but what courage, eh?'

'What lack of obedience to their fathers,' said Aeschylos.

'Yes, but that's boys, isn't it? More like wild beasts than men.' He tousled Philokles' hair.

'It's another good omen, I'd say,' said Stesilaos. 'First we are blessed with your fine troops, Arimnestos, and now this. If such young lads are brave enough to come to Marathon, then what boldness there must be in our men.'

'If all our ten thousand have such spirit,' said Arimnestos, 'the enemy would do well to pack his tents this very night.'

'Let us hope our ten thousand are better disciplined than these two,' said Kynegeiros.

'Sir,' said Philokles.

Miltiades nodded for him to speak.

'*Can* I fight?'

They all erupted into laughter, so hard that Stesilaos choked on his wine and Arimnestos had to smack him on the back.

'Boys, boys, boys,' said Miltiades. 'Sweet smelling breath and smooth skin. How time rots us.' He gazed at his crinkly hands.

'They didn't smell so sweet this afternoon,' said Aeschylos.

'Tell me, Euphorion,' said Miltiades, 'what can you do?'

'He's all right on the lyre,' said Kynegeiros.

'A song!' cried Stesilaos.

'Give him my lyre, slave,' said Miltiades.

'You brought your lyre?' exclaimed Themistokles.

'Oh yes, I can't be without music. My voice is cracked with age now. But do I know some of your odes, Aeschylos.'

'Really?' said Aeschylos. Kynegeiros coughed.

The slave handed Euphorion the lyre. He picked a few notes, his fingers trembling badly. Aeschylos rolled his eyes.

'Give the boy some wine,' said Arimnestos. 'Not too much: one cup will steady him, two will make him worse.'

Euphorion gulped the wine. It was bitter, but he needed steadying. Everyone was watching him now, except Philokles, who was scowling at the ground.

'Give us one of your father's songs,' said Miltiades.

Aeschylos nodded at his son. Euphorion plucked the lyre and sang.

'Whatever is shaped and fixed
In Zeus' ruling mind,
Dark as a solemn grove,
Shadowed with leaves,
His paths of purpose twist,
A marvel to men's eyes.
Struck by Him, knocked down
From their towering hopes,
Mortals lie low and still.
Tireless, effortless, the arm of Zeus
Works forth His will.
God, on His holy seat,
Calm in His power,
Brings forth the deed,
At its appointed hour.'

Everyone applauded and Euphorion blushed happily.

Aeschylos pursed his lips. 'It was "Calm in His *unarmed* power".'

'Oh, what's one word?' said Kynegeiros.

'One word can make all the difference,' said Aeschylos. 'Take "yes" and "no". Shall we beat the Persians? Yes or no?'

'Still, a good show,' said Arimnestos. 'And a fine ode, Aeschylos.'

Themistokles yawned.

Miltiades chuckled. 'Not a great lover of the arts, are you?'

'In school,' said Stesilaos, 'He used to say he had no time for tuning a lyre – he would rather take a city, and make it great.'

'And I make no apology for it,' said Themistokles.

'Hear, hear,' said Kynegeiros.

Miltiades turned to Philokles. 'And what about you?'

Philokles gave a sullen shrug.

'Now now,' said Themistokles. 'You should not be envious of your cousin. You are the elder. You are stronger than he, and should be his protector.'

Philokles perked up.

'Aren't you an athlete?' Stesilaos asked him.

'He can toss a javelin,' said Kynegeiros. 'He even brought them with him, to hurl at Datis.'

Everyone bellowed with laughter, and Philokles sagged.

'That is the sort of skill I admire,' said Themistokles, pointing at Philokles. 'Songs and dances are fine, but show me a man who can put out a Persian eye.'

Philokles puffed up again.

'What we really need is a wise commander-in-chief,' said Kynegeiros.

Everyone glanced at Miltiades.

'A good captain counts for much,' said Themistokles. 'If we could fire an arrow from here into Datis' heart, it would be like slaying half his warriors.'

'You'd need a massive bow!' cried Philokles.

'And arms as strong as Herakles',' said Stesilaos.

'Or Hades' helmet of invisibility,' added Arimnestos.

'Or Hermes' winged sandals,' suggested Themistokles.

'Or Odysseus' cunning,' offered Aeschylos.

'Shall we build them a wooden horse?' said Stesilaos.

'I think they might see through that,' said Miltiades.

'What about a wooden goat?' said Kynegeiros, and everyone chortled.

'We must not underestimate them, that's for certain,' said Miltiades.

'You've spent a lot of time with the Persians,' said Aeschylos. 'Would you tell us of them? Their customs, their character?'

The rest added their encouragement.

Miltiades nodded. 'They're an extraordinary race. They've built an empire so vast that we in our little city-states can hardly imagine it.'

'How big is it?' asked Philokles.

His father slapped the back of his head. 'Don't interrupt.'

'Very big indeed,' said Miltiades. 'Tell me, Philokles, how long would it take you to walk the breadth of Attica?'

'Two days.'

'Well, to walk from one end of the Persian Empire to the other would take you six months.'

'Six months! By Apollo!'

'The road from Sardis to their capital, Susa, is a ninety day march. And yet, because of a wondrous system of one hundred and eleven rest stops, a rider will take only seven days.'

Stesilaos whistled.

'You are not building my hopes, Miltiades,' said Arimnestos.

'As I said, we must not underestimate them.'

'But what are they like as men?' said Aeschylos.

'They value honour no less than we do. A nobleman devotes himself to exercise and hunting, and strives to become a tough soldier. Above all, they hate lying – and after that, being in debt, which encourages lying. Also, Persians love their birthdays. A man will celebrate by roasting a whole ox, or even a horse or a camel. But they will not vomit, or urinate, in front of one another. Nor in a river; they hold rivers in high regard.'

More than we do, I believe,' said Aeschylos. 'The water from that stream tastes quite peculiar after it's trickled past nine tribes.'

Miltiades smiled. 'They do have one rather odd custom. If

they have an important matter to debate, they will get drunk first; then, if they feel the same way in the morning when they are sober, the decision is final. Or if they decide a matter when they are sober, they will get blind drunk and think about it again.'

Kynegeiros guffawed. 'Those Persians are smarter than I thought.'

'The question is,' said Arimnestos, 'what are they like as warriors?

'That *is* the question. Ask Kynegeiros; he's fought them.'

'Only their cavalry,' said Kynegeiros. 'You know better, Miltiades.'

'Well, the Immortals are sturdy souls, with shields, spears, and cuirasses much like our own. But their flanks are much weaker – mostly archers, without shields and only a sword for hand-to-hand combat. The front men alone bear shields, of wicker and leather. Tough enough for most blows, but a well-aimed spear will pass between those sticks. And their caps are only leather – I wouldn't even call them helmets.'

Aeschylos spirits lifted. 'So on the wings we are a match for them?'

'In eight ranks, certainly. Four…' He shook his head, and Aeschylos' spirits sank again. 'Gentlemen, we must finish; let us set a good example to the men.'

'Let us thank Dionysos for such a pleasant evening,' said Themistokles, emptying his cup on the ground. 'God of wine and wilds, speed Philippides on his way, with the answer we seek.'

As they walked back Euphorion noticed a far away look on his cousin's face. At the tent Philokles picked up a javelin.

'I can do eighty yards, you know. You've seen me do that.'

'They'll never let you fight, Philo. Forget it.'

Philokles stared into the dark plain. Euphorion knew that look. He had decided something, and not even the Fates could change his mind.

At dawn the trumpets sounded for battle. Aeschylos, Kynegeiros, and the two slaves rushed to arm themselves, and once again the

army formed in open order. Kallimachos emerged late from his tent, pale and unsteady on his feet. The boys soon realised it was another drill, and they watched, fascinated by the stupendously long rows of warriors, a river of shiny metal and fluffy horsehair. It was odd, though, that their own tribe was half as thick and twice as wide as the rest. Wouldn't that weaken them a lot?

When their fathers returned, sweaty and tired, Philokles was full of questions. Euphorion wondered why his cousin couldn't see that sometimes people didn't want to be bothered.

'Why is our tribe only in four ranks? What rank are you in, father? Are we going to beat them?'

His father gulped water. Philokles picked up his spear. Kynegeiros grabbed it off him. 'You're not here to fight, boy. Get that into that rock you call a head.'

'Actually you have a new job, with our commander-in-chief,' said Aeschylos. 'Miltiades put in a good word for you.'

'Why *are* you in four rows, father?' asked Euphorion.

'Our front needs to be wider, to match the enemy line.'

'But why Aiantis? What about the other tribes?'

'You can ask Kallimachos. Go on, he's waiting for you.'

Euphorion noticed a large stack of wine jars in the corner of the war arkhon's tent. The air reeked of wine, as did Kallimachos' breath, and his eyes were bloodshot.

'I hear you two are decent athletes. Would you like to carry messages for me?'

They nodded gleefully.

'I'm faster than him, though,' said Philokles.

'It's not a race, or I'd do it myself,' said Kallimachos. 'Here, take this note to the general of Erechtheis, then to the Plataians.'

The boys jogged the length of the camp, passing the sanctuary of Herakles in the middle. A low wall enclosed a small stone temple; outside stood a statue of the hero amid olive trees.

The general of Erechtheis seemed pleased with the note. 'Back to eight ranks, then. But the Plataians won't like this.'

He was right. Arimnestos' brow darkened as he read.

'What is it, general?' asked one of his officers.

'We've been ordered to thin our ranks to four, so as to match the Persian line. A fine welcome, Kallimachos.'

The messengers dashed back. Half way they heard shouting and saw men standing in a line. A thin fellow with limbs like knotted rope was half-jogging, half-staggering through the trees. Everyone was asking him, 'are they coming?' but he ignored them, or was simply too shattered to speak.

The boys followed the crowd to the war leader's tent where the jogger was on his knees, wheezing. Kallimachos came out and eyed him nervously.

It was Philippides.

Chapter 12 The Final Offer

'Gentlemen, Philippides deserves a rest,' said Kallimachos, ushering the trembling athlete into his tent. 'I shall hear his report and share it with you very soon.'

'Oh come on, Kallimachos!' cried a hoplite, and others added their complaints.

He raised a hand and smiled at them. 'Euphorion, Philokles, inform the generals that Philippides is here.' They darted off.

Within the hour all eleven generals were packed in the war arkhon's tent. It seemed half the army was sitting or standing outside it. The soldiers were grumbling, not only for being kept waiting, but because they feared the reason for it was bad news.

The messengers had squeezed to the front and could hear arguing among the generals. At last the flaps opened and Kallimachos emerged, beaming as usual. The generals followed with stony expressions.

'Good men of Athens,' said Kallimachos, 'never was a greater feat of endurance performed for love of country than by our Philippides. He is an Olympic champion, but he has far outdone himself. In the space of five days, he has run more than three hundred miles to seek the aid of our allies in this perilous time.'

'What did they say?' asked someone, provoking a barrage of voices.

Kallimachos cleared his throat. 'I know you all wish to hear Philippides' news. First, however, let us remember that we are a formidable force in ourselves, quite able to drive the invader from our shores, with or without outside support.'

The hoplites groaned. Euphorion felt sick.

'Three days ago Philippides met with the ephors, Sparta's true rulers. It seems they are in the midst of a festival of Apollo, the Karneia. As long as the moon is waxing they are forbidden by sacred law to march to war. They have promised to send an advance guard the very morning after the full moon.'

After a moment of shock the warriors burst into horrified moans. Euphorion blinked. They were not even going to *leave* for another four days. And then how long would it take them to march one hundred and seventy miles? Four days, surely, even for super-fit Spartans. And he could see that everyone was now asking themselves the question, what chance was there that the Persians would wait eight more days to attack?

Some began to leave, shaking their heads. The rest shouted at Kallimachos. He looked rattled.

'Gentlemen, please!'

Miltiades stepped forward and the voices silenced.

'Comrades, I know this must seem a great blow. But do not lose heart. The Spartans cannot risk offending Apollo, any more than we would wish to do so. As I have said all along, I believe we can defeat the enemy on our own. Hold fast to your courage; Datis has no idea what is coming to him.

'And there is good reason for hope. As Philippides was crossing the mountains on his way home, he saw a giant figure on the slopes above, a man with goat's legs and horns, playing those pipes that are named after him. Yes, he saw the god, Pan! And Pan spoke to him, saying, "Philippides! Why do you pay no attention to Pan, who is a good friend to the people of Athens, who has helped you in the past, and will do so again?"'

The audience gasped.

'*And will do so again*. Dear hoplites, what better omen than that a god should voice his love for our city, and promise to come to our aid? Let us not forget, it is Pan who spreads panic in one army, and fires courage in the other. How can we lose, with such divine favour? We must begin sacrificing to him each day. Now all of you go back to your tribes and we shall train again in the morning.'

'One more thing, friends,' said Themistokles. 'We may still hope that Datis will delay long enough for the Spartans to arrive. True, we are prepared to fight alone, but of course we prefer their company. So it is essential the enemy does not learn when the Spartans are expected, for they would certainly attack before that.

'Therefore no man must speak of this to anyone outside the camp. There will soon be forays for supplies, as our provisions run out, and we must all keep an eye out for spies.'

Everyone drifted away. Some seemed happier than others; Xanthippos had a particularly sour look.

The boys went back for a bite to eat.

'Father, can we win without Sparta?' asked Philokles.

Kynegeiros patted his shoulder.

'Will Pan help us?' asked Euphorion.

'Let us pray so,' said Aeschylos. 'Although it is possible Philippides made that story up to sweeten his bitter tidings.'

'Why am I not surprised to hear that from you?' said Kynegeiros.

'I don't say Philippides was lying. Perhaps, in his despair and his exhaustion, he saw what he wanted to see.'

'Or perhaps Pan *does* want to help us,' said Kynegeiros.

'But can we beat them on our own?' repeated Philokles.

'Of course, son,' said Kynegeiros. 'Haven't I told you that fable of Aesop, about the bull and the mouse? Well, a bull was bitten by a mouse. Smarting from the sting, the bull chased the mouse, but the mouse was too quick and hid in the depths of his hole. The bull came to a halt and dug his horns into the walls, until he finally sank down in exhaustion and went to sleep, right there in front of the hole. The mouse crept up on the bull, bit him

again, and ran back inside his hole. The bull leapt to his feet but had no idea what to do. "It's not always the big one who has the power," said the mouse, "in some cases being humble and small is a strength."'

Aeschylos raised his eyebrows. 'How is smallness a strength for us? Are we going to hide in some hole?'

'For Apollo's sake, Aeschylos. The point is that one must never despair. Ignore him, boys. His is a gloomy nature. It is by faith in ourselves, and in the gods, that we shall win.'

Euphorion was encouraged by his uncle. But also he knew his father was no fool.

'Can you show me some combat skills?' said Philokles.

To Philokles' delight his father placed a helmet on his head and gave him a shield and spear.

'Show me your thrust.'

Philokles held the spear as his father had once shown him, hand over the shaft and thumb forwards. He poked it out, touching his father's chest.

'Good,' said Kynegeiros. 'But what if I am further away?'

He stepped back and Philokles thrust out again. He had to stretch much further, and took a step forwards, twisting his body sideways.

'Where is your shield?' said his father.

Philokles looked down at the shield, now facing to his left. Kynegeiros took a knife and held it to his son's exposed ribs. 'You wouldn't last long in battle, lad. Try again.'

Philokles performed the step and thrust once more, this time keeping the shield in front.

'Better,' said his father.

'Eleleo! Eleleo!' cried Philokles.

His father took the spear and pointed it at him. 'Now, what should you aim at with this titan's toothpick?'

'The heart?'

Kynegeiros poked the spear at his shield. 'No. It is well covered.'

'The head?'

Kynegeiros tapped Philokles' helmet with the spear tip. 'That may be also well protected. Aim for the *neck*. Just under the helmet there is a space; if you can find it, your man is dead in moments. And that is your goal – a swift kill. Real battle is not like a boy's stick fight, whacking each other over and over, parrying, all that nonsense. One deadly strike is all it takes. If you do not get your spear in there right away, your enemy will – and you will bite the dust. Life or death is a matter of a heartbeat, my son.'

Philokles grinned, and even Euphorion felt cheered up. That was the best relief for wretched worry: action.

That afternoon as the boys flitted from tribe to tribe with notes Euphorion sensed a change in the air. Perhaps it was simply a hot day, but the men seemed restless. They oiled their helmets and shields, sharpened their spears and swords, exercised under the trees, and in many ways kept themselves busy, but here and there quarrels broke out. One hoplite had borrowed another's razor without asking. Another had drunk more than his share of wine. Another had emptied his bowels in the camp last night, and everyone was calling him 'stinker'. There were even a few punch-ups. Euphorion heard curses aimed at the Spartans too: some called them traitors, others cowards. Some were carving statuettes for Herakles, and there was a constant flow of visitors to his sanctuary. Others prayed to Pan, and Euphorion saw many a goat slaughtered to the god.

The following morning there was another drill. The boys now assumed the trumpet call was not the real thing, and after their chores they went to the beach, swimming and throwing javelins. When the army had finished training they sat outside Kallimachos' tent awaiting orders. Inside, Miltiades and Xanthippos were arguing with each other yet again.

Euphorion spotted a glimmer of gold in the distance. Two figures were approaching on horseback. He soon recognised their silken robes.

'Look, Philo. Persians!'

Kallimachos emerged with Miltiades and Xanthippos. The

heralds arrived but did not dismount.

'You are the general of this army?' asked one.

'I am Kallimachos, arkhon of war. To what do I owe this pleasure?'

Men from Aiantis gathered round the glade.

'We may speak unmolested? You have not always treated envoys with their due respect.'

'You are safe, I swear by Zeus,' said Kallimachos.

The herald opened a satchel and withdrew a clay tablet inscribed with complex patterns of wedge-shapes.

'The high commander of the Great King's army, Lord Datis, speaks to you now through me.

'How I am delighted and rejoiced to greet my noble friends of Athens. I see you have assembled your warriors at the exit to this plain. I presume that you intend to resist the advance of His Majesty's army. I therefore find it necessary to make certain observations.

'First, as my scouts have informed me, your Greek numbers are paltry in comparison with my own. Second, you possess only foot soldiers, and neither bowmen nor horsemen. Third, we have most successfully defeated Eretria and carried off its people into slavery. It may interest you to know that I commanded my men to link hands in a line across the whole country. They then swept across Eretria, ensuring that not a single man, woman, or child escaped capture.

'As I am sure you do not desire the same fate for your own families, you will wish to hear my most generous offer. I now give you one more chance to submit to His Majesty's rule. Rest assured that this is not cowardice on our part. We naturally prefer your submission, as we will profit more if you and your city are not destroyed. And you too ought to prefer it, for the alternative is disaster. And more: with your submission the Great King is even prepared to forgive the treacherous attack on Sardis, and the murder of his envoys.

'I make one final offer, to the common soldiery.' The herald glanced at the listening crowd. 'If foolishly your commanders

refuse submission, I shall nonetheless welcome any man who sees the wiser course and joins us. He and his family shall keep their freedom, once Athens is taken.'

'That won't work with us!' roared Miltiades. He drew his sword. Kallimachos placed a hand on his arm.

The herald continued. 'We have with us many Greek-speaking men: Ionians, Aeolians, Parians, and others who would welcome their Athenian brothers. Even Miltiades' own son, Metiochos, whom we captured three years ago, now rules his own domain in Asia Minor, in the service of the Great King.'

There were many shocked expressions.

'He'd rather be here at my side, I promise you,' said Miltiades.

The herald smirked. 'I conclude my greeting and my offer, and urge you to consider your city, your liberty, and your lives.' He put away the tablet. 'What is your answer, Kallimachos?'

The war arkhon opened his mouth, but before he could speak Miltiades and Xanthippos closed round him, whispering intently. At last Kallimachos nodded.

'Naturally we shall need some time to discuss your offer. Can you come back in, say, two days?'

'You have four hours,' said the herald. They rode off.

'We're not giving in, are we?' asked a young soldier.

'Of course not,' said Miltiades. He turned to the boys. 'You two, fetch the rest of the generals. We'll meet in my tent.'

'*Your* tent?' said Xanthippos.

'It's in the middle, man. Does it matter?'

'Aristeides is nearer the middle than you.'

'And he just happens to be a friend of yours. Very well, Aristeides it is.'

Soon a heated debate was under way in Aristeides' quarters. At last Miltiades and Xanthippos returned to Kallimachos' tent. Euphorion strained to hear the fateful decision.

'We are evenly split,' said Xanthippos. 'Five of us are for fighting, five for submission.'

'I see,' said the commander in chief. 'Then that means…'

'That the deciding vote is yours,' said Xanthippos. 'And we

each have our case to present to you.'

'Good, good,' said Kallimachos. 'You begin, Xanthippos.'

'Commander, a weightier decision has never fallen to any man. The choice is simple: give in to Darius, or to destruction. The Spartans will not be here in time! Datis will not wait nine more days. He may even know about the Spartans already. And no one can deny his superiority, both in numbers and experience.

'We have trained hard, but forgive me, Kallimachos, despite your strategy, I doubt we can hold back the enemy and prevent him outflanking us. We cannot form phalanx in the wood, and yet on the plain their horses, their bows, and their sheer multitude will swing the balance in their favour.

'In truth, we have only six solid ranks – the slaves and old ones at the back are just padding. And our wings are thinned, and so fragile. All the men know this. And now with this news from Sparta, their spirits are low. We cannot win, so we must submit. The decision is yours, commander: do not forget how much rests upon it.'

Miltiades snorted. 'Themistokles called you weasel. I would not do so in public. But now we are in private, so: you are a weasel. I and the fine men of this army would prefer a glorious death on the battlefield to the disgrace of slavery. And I know you feel the same, Kallimachos.

'But that is beside the point, for we shall not lose! The courage of our men is undaunted. Look at those two boys out there – not a hair on their chins, yet here they are, begging for a spear. With such hearts our numbers are doubled. Add in our superior arms, and our rock-hard phalanx, and they are tripled. We are more than a match for these barbarians.

'And they? Where is *their* spirit? To them, this is just one more battle. They are weary. They long for their homes, many miles away. When they see our mighty warriors running at them, spears levelled at their throats, their courage will crumble.'

'Ha!' snorted Xanthippos. Miltiades ignored him.

'And so it falls to you, Kallimachos, whether Athens be free or enslaved. If you choose to fight, all will happen as I have said, and

Athens will be the foremost city in Greece. If you do not, all will be lost. And men will remember who it was who handed our city over to a slave master.'

There was a silence.

'It is difficult to decide such a thing with you two staring at me like buzzards.'

'Shall we wait outside?' said Xanthippos.

'Perhaps we could ask for one more day to think about it.'

'Kallimachos,' said Miltiades. 'We cannot delay. If we do not make a firm decision to engage, this dispute among the generals will shake the souls of the Athenians. We must give no man reason to desert. If we fight before this rottenness infects our men, then we shall win, if the gods treat us fairly.'

'I agree that we must decide quickly,' said Xanthippos, 'or Datis' patience may run out, and he will attack anyway.'

'Yes…actually, would you mind giving me a few moments?'

The two generals left the tent. Miltiades saw the boys.

'What do you say? Fight, or give in?'

'Fight, sir,' said Philokles. Euphorion nodded.

'How can we lose with you two on our side, eh?'

'General, I do want to fight,' said Philokles.

'Ah, lad, "no sword for the boy" – you know that. Your great deeds lie in the future.'

'But general, you're already famous. How would you like it if you had to wait six more years just to be a hoplite?'

'I should like it very much. Don't be in a hurry to live your life, lad; it's short enough as it is.'

Kallimachos emerged, his face twitching. He glanced at Miltiades and nodded.

Miltiades clapped him on the back. 'Good man.'

'Let's face it, Miltiades,' said Kallimachos, 'you know a lot more about this war business than I do. I'd rather you handled strategy from here on.'

Xanthippos sputtered in disbelief and stormed off.

'He always was a sore loser,' said Miltiades. 'You two, go and tell your fathers to meet me on the beach in half an hour.'

Aeschylos and Kynegeiros made their way to the shore and waited. Miltiades arrived with Themistokles.

'Congratulations,' said Kynegeiros. 'The men will sleep soundly now you are in charge.'

'Thank you, my friend. Gentlemen, I have chosen you for several reasons. First, you are intelligent, sound thinkers. Second, you are honourable men, with a firm sense of duty to your city, and I trust you to tell me honestly what you think is the best means of saving it. Third, you are friends, and I prefer your company to that of others.'

Themistokles laughed.

'It's true,' said Miltiades. 'You will not quibble for the sake of opposing me, as some do. And fourth, each of you has his own talents. Themistokles, you have a practical military mind second to none, and you are fearless. And popular, too: any strategy you support, the men will support.

'Kynegeiros, you fought at Sardis, Ephesos, and elsewhere. You have as much military experience as any Athenian.'

'Except you, Miltiades.'

'Perhaps. And Aeschylos, you are a poet. You possess a power of putting your eyeballs into other men's sockets. Those plays of yours show it: you understand how men see things, and what stirs their hearts. In war I find that a most useful skill – a skill you have already shown on our jaunt up that hill.'

Aeschylos saw his brother was itching to make fun of him.

Miltiades noticed too. 'Our enemy is a man, Kynegeiros, and to outmanoeuvre him we must think like him.'

Kynegeiros grunted. 'So we're here to discuss strategy?'

'Yes. It is time for us to untangle a most knotty problem. How shall we win this battle?'

Chapter 13 The Strategy

'I take it, then,' said Aeschylos, 'that you are not entirely satisfied

with Kallimachos' solution?'

'It has perhaps occurred to you that it contains a fatal flaw,' said Themistokles.

The brothers remained silent.

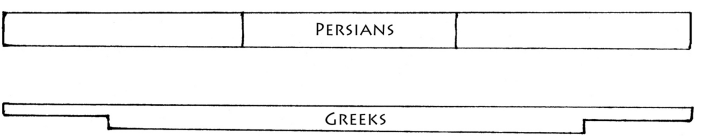
'As I said, you are both men of honour,' said Miltiades. 'But what Athens needs now is your cold reason. Forget for a moment questions of glory or shame. Think only of the need for victory. Think of what must be done to prevent horrors being visited on your own wives and children.'

'We understand,' said Aeschylos.

Themistokles drew his sword and scraped a thin rectangle in the sand, four paces long and a hand's length wide.

'That is the Persian deployment, normally ten ranks.' He added two lines, dividing the rectangle into thirds. 'The centre contains their strongest troops, Persians and Sakai.'

He drew another rectangle. It was equal in length to the Persian line, but thinner, and on the ends half as thin again.



'That is Kallimachos' plan,' said Miltiades. 'If we understand the Persian numbers correctly, the lines should match. Now, gentlemen, exercise your minds. Let us assume our tactic of running to the enemy is successful: losses are few, and the phalanx is quickly formed. What will happen next?'

Aeschylos kept quiet. He had mulled this over many times, but now he was in the company of two respected generals and a war veteran, and did not want to sound like an ignorant braggart.

But Kynegeiros hesitated too, and Aeschylos knew why. He did not want to criticise the plan lest he seem a coward, for not wanting to fight in only four ranks.

'Come,' said Miltiades. 'It is vital that you speak openly.'

Aeschylos drew his sword and pointed. 'There is a risk on the

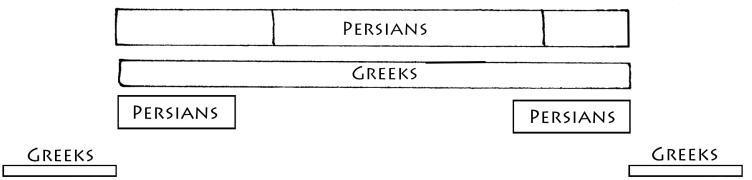
wings; four ranks may be overwhelmed by ten. Each man may be equal to two foes, but hardly three. Certainly not our rear ranks.'

'And so?'

'And so eventually both flanks will give way.'

'Show me,' said Miltiades.

Aeschylos erased the Greek wings and redrew them further back. 'Now, I fear, our centre is exposed.' He drew the Persian flanks attacking the Greek centre from the rear. 'We shall be like fish caught in a net.'



'It is not a pretty picture,' agreed Themistokles.

'I am sure many a bright soldier has reached the same conclusion,' said Miltiades. 'And you, Kynegeiros?'

Kynegeiros stared grimly at the lines in the sand. 'It's hard to say. In battle, men's actions cannot be foreseen.'

'My friend, we all know you would gladly fight in four ranks and die for your city. But if it would lead to that city's destruction, it is a pointless death. Tell me your honest opinion; that is your solemn duty.'

Kynegeiros exhaled. 'I agree with Aeschylos.'

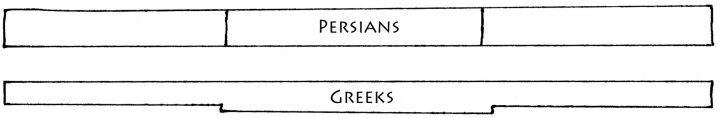
'Then Kallimachos' plan is no more.' Miltiades smoothed out all the lines with the flat of his sword and redrew the Persian formation.

'So, gentlemen. If that won't work, what will?'

They stared at the blank canvas.

'What if we thin more evenly?' said Kynegeiros. 'Six ranks along our entire length.' He pondered a moment. 'Except in the middle.'

He scraped a diagram. 'If the outer two or three tribes are reduced to six ranks, that should allow the needed width.'



'So now we have six ranks fighting ten on the wings,' said Themistokles. 'It would take a complete reorganisation of the files, but if we worked on it all morning, we could sort it out.'

'We may not have that time,' said Miltiades. 'And would it work? We must be confident of success.'

Everyone thought again. The swish of sea on sand seemed to help Aeschylos' concentration.

'I'm not sure,' he said. 'It is still possible that six ranks – some of whom are slaves, or old, will not be enough. And we must remember that many will be out of breath after a three hundred yard dash in full panoply.'

'I daresay we could hold them with six,' said Kynegeiros. 'And we have practised running for several days now.'

'But that is not enough to make a man fully fit,' said Aeschylos. 'I've trained for the hoplite race ever since you beat me a month ago, brother, and I am stronger now. But these men have had only a few days.'

'You are both right,' said Themistokles. 'We may hold, we may not. But we cannot be certain of holding all the way along. Once the line is breached, say here, and here,' he wiped holes in the Greek flanks, 'we are done for.'

'Or not,' said Miltiades. 'In any case it is too doubtful for my liking.'

'Does anyone have a better idea?' grumbled Kynegeiros.

'Keep thinking, my friends,' said Miltiades.

Aeschylos had a feeling the two generals had already come up with a plan, and were hoping he and Kynegeiros would arrive at it by themselves.

'Kynegeiros, do you remember that fable you once told me?' said Miltiades. 'The one about the bull and the mouse?'

'We are not mice, Miltiades.'

'Sometimes smallness is a strength,' murmured Aeschylos. What was he getting at? What other options were there? They needed a solid front, so no gaps – but they also had to match the Persian width, so they had to thin. But where? There was another possibility, but would that work?

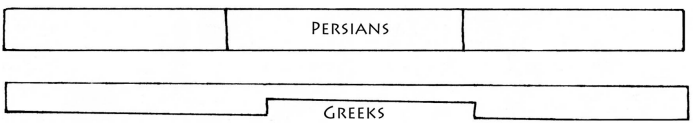
The generals looked at him expectantly.

'You mean – in the middle?'

Kynegeiros snorted.

'Try it,' said Miltiades.

Aeschylos sketched the Greek position thinned to four ranks in the centre.



Then, in a series of erasures and redrawings, he and Kynegeiros plotted the likely sequence of events. At the end Miltiades and Themistokles grinned at each other.

'You really think it will unfold in this way?' said Kynegeiros.

'Our best minds now agree on it,' said Miltiades. 'If the gods do not oppose us, then yes, I believe it shall.'

Aeschylos tried not to look relieved. Back to eight ranks, then; and back to third row for him.

'You are asking much of these men,' said Kynegeiros. 'Everything depends on them keeping a cool head and remembering instructions. In the heat of battle, I do not see how they can reform phalanx in this way.'

'We shall train every day, until the battle,' said Themistokles.

'Which might be tomorrow.'

'Then we shall trust in Zeus and the Fates. There is no better option, unless you can think of one.'

'I cannot. But it's a risky throw of the bones.'

'They are thrown,' said Miltiades.

'But this may upset the men,' said Aeschylos. 'Such a big

change in strategy, as well as leadership – it may make them wonder, well…'

'If we know what the hell we're doing?' said Miltiades.

'Perhaps we should get drunk and think about it again,' said Themistokles.

Everyone laughed. 'I could do with a drink,' said Kynegeiros.

'Of course,' Miltiades said to Themistokles, 'this means *you're* in the manure now.'

'But so is Aristeides,' said Themistokles, 'and that is enough consolation for me.'

But still Kynegeiros did not look happy. 'Aren't we forgetting something, gentlemen? A thousand horsemen? I can tell you from experience they are not to be ignored.'

'Trust me, my friend,' said Miltiades. 'The plain is not suitable for horses. And even if they do use them, one thousand horses are only equal to the one thousand men upon their backs – men who must cling on for dear life, while we are well planted on the earth, and can deal far heavier blows than they.'

Everyone nodded, but Aeschylos was still unsettled. In his brother's eyes he saw the memory of the cavalry attack at Ephesos, where many a hoplite had died. He was proud he had helped devise this new battle strategy, but he did not have much confidence in it.

That afternoon the boys conveyed the new orders to all the generals. Not all were impressed; some even laughed. But around the camp Euphorion sensed a new bravado. Some had built straw figures, clothing them in long-sleeved tunics and trousers like Persian warriors, and were assailing them with spears. Onlookers cheered with each thrust.

The boys were outside Miltiades' tent when the envoys returned.

Miltiades raised his palms in mock prayer. 'How we are "delighted and rejoiced" to greet our foreign guests once more.' There was some snickering from hoplites who had gathered to watch. 'I do hope you are comfortable on our sand over there?'

'Comfortable enough.'

'Not in a hurry to get on with things? Datis does not fear his king's impatience?'

'His Majesty is most satisfied with our progress. We are in no hurry, but neither do we wish to delay. What is your answer? Submit, or die?'

'If you put it like that, neither. We are not afraid of you, or we should not have come here. Our men excel in all the qualities required for battle: they are fit, strong, well-disciplined, and eager to tear the flesh from your bones. Why then should we submit?'

'An unwise decision,' said the herald. 'And proof that this democracy of yours is quite preposterous. That the common man should choose even his generals! So, you shall die; and those few who survive will witness the end of their city, and of their much-prized freedom.'

'We are ready when you are,' said Miltiades. 'Bring your troops out, and we shall teach them a Greek lesson.'

The herald smiled. 'Now you presume to direct *our* army as well as your own. We look forward to our next meeting, at which a cloud of arrows shall rain, and a river of blood shall flow.'

'Fine. We'll see who gets bored of camping first.'

The herald looked at the hoplites. 'Your new commander is a simpleton. But for you there is still time.'

They turned their horses and left.

The men crowded round Miltiades, congratulating him.

'Well lads,' he said, 'no going back now.'

Chapter 14 The Farm

That night as their fathers wined and dined in Miltiades' tent Euphorion and Philokles sat around a fire with the hoplites they were coming to know. The conversation had turned to Sparta.

'They are traitors to our alliance,' said Krito. 'They hope we will be defeated so *they* can be masters of Greece.'

Hippolytos chortled. 'They would still have the small matter

of a Persian army to contend with.'

'After we've slapped the foreigners about a bit they'll be weak enough for Sparta to handle.'

'Who needs the Spartans anyway?' said Philokles. 'Why are they so special?'

'We Athenians are a mighty force,' said Hippolytos, 'but I don't mind admitting there is no army in the world like that of Sparta.'

'If you were Spartan,' said Krito, 'you'd have been living in military school since the age of seven, training every day.'

'Wouldn't bother me,' said Philokles.

'Indeed? Every day you'd sup on a disgusting black broth made of pig's blood, and sleep without blankets, even in winter. And they'd beat you for no reason, just to toughen you up.'

'Sounds better than learning Homer.'

Hippolytos grinned. 'You'll learn as much about war from Homer as you will from your gym master.'

The man from Trikorythos piped up.

'It's a punishment from Zeus.'

'What?' said Hippolytos. 'Our missing Spartans?'

'No. The whole invasion.'

'A punishment for what, exactly?' said Krito. 'You don't mean Sardis?'

'No, what does Zeus care about Sardis? I mean Eretria. If we had honoured our friendship, if we had done the right thing…'

'We offered them two thousand men! We kept our honour, and Zeus knows that.' Krito glared at the fire.

'Anyway,' said Hippolytos, 'the Spartans know that the best chance of saving Greece, and themselves, is to join forces with us. They'll come.'

'Yes,' said the Trikorythian, 'but when?'

'They have the swiftest legs in Greece, my friend.'

'Unless they're all as fit as Philippides, they'll not be swift enough.'

'Enough of this whining,' said another man. 'Myself, I'm sick of sitting on my backside. Do your worst, Datis, that's what I say.'

Hippolytos saw his friend was down in the dumps. He gave him a flute and Krito began to play. This cheered him up, and everyone joined their voices to the song.

That night Euphorion dreamt of a thunderstorm, of lightning like glowing steel, which split the trees and blasted men to cinders. He ran and fell on his face. The clouds burst with rain, which turned to a thousand black arrows, pricking his back.

He awoke, trembling. An owl hooted, and he calmed down: Athena was watching over them. But those sea urchin spines were sore. He lay gazing at the moon through the black leaves, and wondered – now they had refused their last chance of submission, would the enemy attack? Would this be the last day of his father's life, or his uncle's? Or his own?

At sunrise the men left for a drill. Now Euphorion saw that Aiantis was back to eight ranks he was relieved. After watering the mules at the stream he and Philokles ran to the beach. Finding a spot where the sea bed was smooth and sandy they dived into the foamy waves, revelling in their moment of freedom.

A short way down the beach the houses of Marathon hugged the shoreline. Out on the bay fishing boats filled their nets, some less than a mile from the vast Persian fleet. Euphorion marvelled at them, as fearless as flies buzzing round the mouth of a lion.

Philokles dashed back into the camp. He returned with his javelins and one of the dummies they had seen the day before, straw poking out of its tattered tunic. He stuffed it back into shape, carried it sixty yards up the beach, and propped it up in the sand. He came back and began throwing javelins at it.

'Can I have a go?' said Euphorion after Philokles had missed a few times.

'In a bit.'

Finally a javelin flew through the figure's abdomen.

'Eleleu!' cried Philokles, prancing a little war dance.

'Nice shot. Can I try now?'

Philokles moved the straw man back fifteen yards and continued his target practice. Euphorion sat sulking on a rock.

Philo knew he couldn't throw that far.

'It won't be that easy in battle. What if you hit one of ours?'

'I'm not stupid, Squeak. That's why I'm practising. This wind makes it harder.'

Back at the village a fishing boat landed before a house. A middle-aged man and a boy pulled the boat onto the sand and hauled out a net flashing with silver.

The boy was watching them. Philokles noticed and made an extra effort to kill his enemy. Instead he overshot it.

'Wow – that was eighty yards, easy.' He glanced at the boy.

'Let me have a go, Philo.'

'Let's get some fish for lunch. Our dads will love that.'

'How? We haven't got any money.'

Philokles spiked the javelins into the sand and strode toward the boat. Euphorion took one and threw it. The javelin landed in the sea a long way short of the dummy. He retrieved it, dispirited: Philokles wasn't even watching. He ran to catch him up.

The man and his boy eyed them suspiciously as they approached. Both had the sun-beaten skin of the poor. The boy was about twelve, but had an unsettled expression that made him look older. They were plucking slimy creatures from their catch and tossing them on the beach to die.

'Can we have some fish?' asked Philokles.

'Who are you?' said the man. 'I've seen you mucking about.'

'Our fathers are in the army.' Philokles picked up a mullet, shining red and gold. 'Ten of these will do.'

'That'll be two drachmas.'

'Are you kidding?'

'What do you know about the price of fish? You've never had to go shopping.'

'We haven't got any money anyway.'

'You'd better clear off then, hadn't you?'

Philokles laughed. 'Can you believe this, Eu? Our fathers tramp all the way from Athens to save this old goat's neck, and he won't even give us a few teeny fish.'

'I've got to make a living, haven't I?'

'You won't *be* living if our army doesn't beat the Persians.'

'Now, it's not as I don't appreciate our soldiers' efforts. But if I give you these mullet they'll *all* be over here expecting their free fish. And then what will us in Marathon eat?'

'The food's already running out, so they'll be here soon.'

'Well, until then, hop it!'

Philokles chucked the fish into the sea. 'To Hades with you.'

The man was shaking, clearly wanting to belt him.

'Go on, scarper!'

'Idiot,' muttered Philokles. They went back up the beach.

Euphorion began picking at the spines in his legs.

'Let me,' said Philokles. 'They're really red now.'

'Ow!'

'I haven't got any fingernails. I can't grab them.'

'Leave it. It'll be all right.'

When the fisherman went into his house the boy came over.

'Here,' he said, holding out a small sack. It was full of fish.

'Won't you get in trouble with your dad?' said Philokles.

'He's not my dad. You need to put olive oil on them.'

'What?'

'The spines. Leave it a while, then they're easier to get out.'

He eyed the javelins.

'Do you want a go?' Philokles asked him.

The boy shook his head. 'I've never been to a gym.'

'What's your name?'

'Euelpides. But my nickname's Birdie, because I catch birds.'

'I'm Philokles. That's my cousin, Euphorion. His nickname's Squeak.'

'No it isn't,' said Euphorion. 'Only to you.'

The boy gave half a smile.

'Go on, try,' said Philokles. 'I'll show you.'

He looped the thong onto Birdie's finger and wrapped it onto the javelin. Blinking with uncertainty, Birdie took a run and cast the javelin into the sea.

'Not bad,' said Philokles. 'Almost as good as you, Squeak.'

Birdie gave a three-quarter smile.

'If you're a bird trapper,' said Euphorion, 'why are you catching fish?'

'They wanted me to. I'm not from here. I'm from Trikorythos.'

'Oh. It was attacked, wasn't it?'

Birdie's gaze fell. 'I hope your fathers kill lots of Persians.'

'How did you escape?' said Philokles. 'Where's your family?'

'I was hunting in the marsh. I had two mallards and a godwit in my snares. I smelled smoke, then I saw the village was burning.'

'Did you see Persians?'

'They wear trousers, and funny hats with big flaps. And they ride horses.'

'What about your family?' said Euphorion.

'They tied up everyone in the village and took them away. Well, not everyone.'

'Did some escape like you?'

'They killed them, with arrows. And they stole our wine and our grain.'

'What did you do?'

'I hid in the marsh. Someone chased me but it's like the Minotaur's labyrinth in there. Ponds, and reeds as high as a man on horseback.'

'What happened to the villagers?'

'Meton says they're slaves. I'm living with him now. He says if the Persians win the battle they'll take everyone back to King Darius. Everyone in the whole of Attica. And the Eretrians too. He must need a lot of slaves, that Darius.'

'We'll beat them,' said Philokles. 'And we'll rescue the prisoners.'

The boy's cheeks flushed. 'I wish I could kill the ones who took my mother and my sister.'

Euphorion felt Birdie's anger burning in his own chest.

'We'll kill them all,' he said. 'I swear.'

'I tried to find them. I went to the camp and saw lots of Persians, but no one from Trikorythos.'

'You went to the Persian camp?' exclaimed Philokles.

'At night. I could see by the moon. The marsh goes right up to the pine trees. You can get close if you know the ways through. I know it all, like the Minotaur knows his labyrinth. Everyone says it's cursed because of the malaria and the leeches. But if you know it…' He shrugged. 'I've caught all sorts of birds there – herons, reed warblers, dabchicks – even a flamingo, once.'

'But why didn't they see you? Haven't they got watches?'

'Not where the marsh is. They don't need them. You couldn't attack through there.'

Philokles squinted across the bay. He had that look again, of brewing mischief.

'So we'll beat them?' said Birdie. 'Everyone thinks so?'

'We have a good plan now,' said Euphorion.

'And the Spartans are coming?'

'In about five days.'

Birdie stared at him. '*Five days*?'

'It's all right,' said Philokles. 'We don't need them.'

Birdie turned away with tears in his eyes.

'Do you want to throw again?' Philokles asked him, but he shook his head and strode back to the house.

Euphorion watched him. He felt terribly gloomy.

'I want to see the Persians too,' said Philokles. 'Hey – see that headland, about half way? We'll get a great view from there.'

'And we'll get captured!'

'Don't be stupid. The camp's another mile after that.'

Euphorion's heart raced. 'The army will finish soon. We haven't got time.'

'All right, a couple more throws then we'll take Datis back.'

That afternoon the boys were sitting outside Miltiades' quarters while he spoke inside with Themistokles. Euphorion was watching a trail of ants streaming in front of the tent. They were carrying flecks of grass to a nest under a tree. Euphorion traced the route around another tree, across a path, and between two tents. Here the ants arrived, found a husk, and turned for home. The whole journey had to be twenty yards. And yet there was

plenty of dry grass right outside the nest. Why were they going so far? Stupid ants.

'Hey Eu,' said Philokles. 'I've got some oil. For your spines.'

He dabbed the oil onto Euphorion's bottom, leg and wrist. They waited a while, then Philokles tried squeezing them out.

'I still need nails. But it's a lot easier.'

At that point Xanthippos arrived, with a group of hoplites and some poor farmers. They looked annoyed.

Miltiades emerged with Themistokles.

'Now now, citizens. What's all the fuss?'

The farmers glanced nervously at the hoplites.

'Please, state your grievance,' said Miltiades.

'Begging your pardon, general,' said one of the farmers, 'but these young lads are trying to rob us blind. They came over to Probalinthos this morning wanting barley and wine, and onions and cheese, but they refused to pay and carted it all off on their wagons. We know it's wartime, general, but that doesn't justify daylight robbery.'

'Greedy peasants,' growled one of the hoplites. '*You're* the ones trying to rob *us*. They tried to charge us twice what it was all worth. And here we are protecting *them* from the enemy. They should take a look at Trikorythos, because that's what'll happen to them if we don't win this battle. And we're not going to fight very well on empty stomachs, are we?'

The farmers and soldiers burst into a cacophony of accusations. Xanthippos folded his arms and stared at Miltiades.

Miltiades raised his hand. 'Is this true? You were trying to skin your countrymen?'

Neither the farmers nor the hoplites seemed sure to whom he was speaking.

'It's wartime, general,' said a farmer. 'Prices always go up. We need food for ourselves, you know.'

'So you simply took what you wanted?' said Miltiades to the soldiers.

'We offered a fair price.'

'No you didn't!' cried the farmer who had just spoken. 'They

just stole it. More like bandits than hoplites, this lot.'

Some of the soldiers had sheepish looks.

Miltiades sighed. 'If Datis could see this, how "delighted and rejoiced" he would be. Very well. You soldiers will pay the standard price for what you have taken. And for your crime, you shall each pay the farmers a fine of fifty drachmas.'

The hoplites opened their mouths.

'You're joking. Us pay them?'

Xanthippos stepped up to Miltiades. 'Who gave *you* the right to mete out punishments? What sort of trial is this?'

'This is indeed wartime,' said Miltiades. 'Would you have us form a jury of two thousand and one? What a fine chance for the enemy *that* would be.'

Xanthippos' face darkened.

'It may be wartime,' said one of the hoplites, 'but we are still citizens, with equal rights under the law.'

'Then don't break it!' snapped Miltiades. 'Now, pay up and get back to your camp, or I'll have you all whipped.'

The soldiers looked like they wanted to strangle him. Euphorion heard the word 'tyrant' muttered.

'This is an outrage,' snarled Xanthippos. 'Who put you in charge?'

'Kallimachos, I believe. Weren't you there?'

'He asked you to take over strategy, not the whole camp!'

Themistokles stepped in. 'Perhaps you'd like to take this to him, Xanthippos? Of course he might ask Miltiades to manage discipline, too.'

'This is not just, Miltiades. One day the Athenians will see you for what you are: a tyrant indeed.'

Miltiades snorted. 'This from the man who wants to shackle our entire population and give the keys to Darius. Or does Darius not count as a tyrant? Rather, a kindly master to his loyal slave – Xanthippos son of Ariphron?'

'It's you who are leading us into slavery, Miltiades. Our families, that is; we at least will have the fortune to die.'

Miltiades shook his head. 'What an inspiring leader you are.'

Xanthippos stormed off with his men, and the farmers followed.

Themistokles laughed. 'I tell you, Miltiades, we'd better fight the Persians soon, or we'll be fighting each other.'

At lunch Aeschylos and Kynegeiros seemed delighted with their grilled fish.

'Father, do you think Datis will attack before the Spartans get here?' asked Philokles.

'Who can say? He's been here five days; he might leave it another five.'

Aeschylos raised his eyebrows.

'It's all in the hands of the gods,' added Kynegeiros.

'Do you think we can win on our own, with the new strategy?' said Philokles.

'That too is in the hands of the gods,' said Aeschylos.

'I'm sure we'll win, son,' said Kynegeiros.

Philokles stared at the two fathers in turn, as if trying to work out which one to believe. 'So why don't we attack now, instead of sitting around? Everyone wants to fight, don't they?'

'Yes, son. But we can't.'

'It's all about the battle line,' said Aeschylos. 'If we advance first, Datis may arrange his troops to surround us. We are safer waiting to see the length of their line before we engage.'

'Also, while there is hope of the Spartans getting here, we should wait,' said Kynegeiros.

'If there *is* hope,' said Aeschylos.

'Father…what does Datis look like?' asked Philokles.

'How should I know? Do you think I've met him at a party?'

'I mean, how could you tell it was him if you saw him?'

'He'd be dressed like a Persian officer. Gold headbands with rosettes, big skirts, and shirts with broad sleeves. And bracelets – thick gold tubes with rams' or birds' heads. Why, son?'

'Just in case, if we aren't doing well, I can throw my javelins.'

Kynegeiros pointed a finger in his face. 'Now you stay out of it, do you hear? Or you won't know what's hit you.'

Philokles pouted. 'I'm only trying to help.'

'Well you aren't helping, so keep your fool ideas to yourself.'

They finished the fish in silence. Kynegeiros sighed.

'Listen, son, I know you want to prove yourself, and to help. But only men may fight. "No sword for the boy" – you know that.'

'But let's say we lose the battle, then Euphorion and I might have to fight. Just to protect ourselves, I mean.'

'No. If we lose, and your uncle and I are killed, or captured, then both of you must go straight home and take the whole family to Salamis. We have friends there who will look after you.'

'And then what?'

'Then Sparta will save Greece, and you can go back home.'

Philokles was quiet a moment. 'Can I try your spear and shield again?'

Kynegeiros barked a laugh. 'He's like that damned Thracian wind, this one – never gives up.'

The sun rose the next morning on a day Euphorion would never forget. As soon as their fathers left for battle practice Philokles rushed him through their chores, tied the javelins to his back, and led him to the beach.

'We're going for a peek at that Persian camp.'

'But–'

'We've got loads of time, Squeak. It won't take long to get to that point up there.'

Before Euphorion could think of an argument Philokles was on his way. Philokles knew him too well; despite his terror, he wasn't going to be left behind on such a thrilling trip.

They trudged through the sand, now and then passing bulls in the fields on their left. Each stopped grazing to stare at them menacingly. Euphorion looked away, hoping if he ignored them they would ignore him. But it did not help his nerves.

At last the boys reached the rocky bump in the coast half way between the two encampments. They crouched behind barnacled boulders and gazed at the fleet. There were hundreds of ships, moored along the shore in four rows. Philokles climbed a tree.

'I still can't see properly. We need a really tall one.'

'There aren't any. Let's go back now.'

'Look.' Philokles pointed to a cluster of whitewashed farm buildings, a quarter of a mile closer to the enemy. Barley fields sprawled around them and a row of white poplars ran inland, taller than anything they had climbed before. Philokles headed off. Euphorion hesitated.

'All right, but we've got to be *quick*.'

They waded through the barley, a large patch of which had been burnt to stubble. Next to the buildings lay a vineyard. Each bush had been chopped, its props pulled up, and the grapes crushed into the soil.

'I don't get it, Philo. It must have taken ages to do this. If they conquer us, then all these fields will be theirs. Why destroy them?'

Philokles shrugged. At the entrance to the farmyard he took a javelin from his back.

'Do you think they're still here?' Euphorion asked him.

'No. Those fires burned out ages ago. They must have ransacked every farm in the plain, the foreign swine.'

'This place must belong to one of the hoplites in our tribe. I hope he got his family out in time.'

'Let's find out,' said Philokles. He led the way into the yard.

It was as if a whirlwind had torn the place apart. Furniture lay smashed about the square, and countless shards of pottery. The purple patches on the ground had to be wine. Why had they wasted it? An altar in the middle was strangely untouched, however.

Philokles poked his head into a barn. 'All the grain's gone.'

A sickly smell reached Euphorion's nose. Behind the altar lay a black dog, a pool of dried blood by its belly, out of which its intestines protruded. Flies hovered and maggots crawled inside.

'What a stink.'

'Must have been a guard dog,' said Philokles. 'Loyal, too.'

'Is all this because of Sardis?'

'No, it's just soldiers having fun.'

'Can't they do sports or something?'

'This *is* sport, for a soldier.'

Euphorion had a nasty feeling that Philokles understood all of this too well. Would he do the same if he were a soldier? And what exactly had his father got up into Sardis?

Behind a charred chest Euphorion noticed a pile of rags and another cloud of flies. He swallowed. Philokles pulled the cloth aside. It was an old woman, dried out, her toothless mouth open in an expression of agony. Under her gown the earth was caked in blood. And the stench was foul.

Euphorion stepped back. He felt like throwing up.

'But – why? Why did they do it?'

'No use as a slave, I suppose.'

'But why kill her?'

'That's what soldiers do, kill.'

'Let's go back, Philo.'

'We've got loads of time. Let's look in the house. Someone might be alive.'

'And there might be Persians in there!'

'Dimwit. Why would they come back? It's stripped clean.'

The farmhouse was finely constructed, with the same red and white walls as Euphorion's house. The floor of the men's dining room was a black and white pebble mosaic of two dolphins. But like the yard, the house was a scene of destruction. Boxes and jars lay shattered or emptied, personal items were scattered everywhere, and there were so many fragments of marble it was impossible to tell to which statue they had belonged. Philokles found a bronze mirror and admired his moustache.

'Mother will like this.' He slipped it into his tunic.

Euphorion grabbed it from him. 'Idiot, it belongs to someone.'

They checked each room on the ground floor but found no survivors. As they ascended the stairs to the women's quarters Euphorion had an ominous feeling. There was a smell up there like the one outside. And in one bedroom he saw a sight that made him want to run all the way back to Athens.

On the floor lay a little boy, about a year younger than Euaion, face down. His neck was purple, and it had a rope around it.

Philokles came in. He turned the boy over and stared at the pale face. Euphorion looked away.

'They strangled him,' said Philokles.

'They could have taken him as a slave. He would have grown up. Why did they do it?'

'I don't know!' yelled his cousin and stomped out.

Euphorion forced himself to look at the boy. His eyes were open and his tongue was sticking out. He couldn't leave him like that. Trembling, he took a blanket from the bed and covered the boy with it.

That wasn't enough. Steeling himself he picked up the body. It was heavy and limp. He wrapped it and laid it on the bed.

Should they take him back to camp? Someone in Aiantis was his father.

No. He couldn't bring himself to do it. He would just find the father and tell him. The poor fellow. What would he do? Weep? Go mad? Rush to the farm? Or to the Persian camp, to kill as many of them as he could?

Euphorion felt dizzy and hot. He went down to Philokles, who was toying with one of his javelins.

'I'm fed up playing messenger boy,' said Philokles.

'Why? What's wrong with it?'

'Anyone can do that.'

'What else can we do?'

Philokles jabbed his javelin into the earth. 'Something.'

'Let's go back, Philo. I've had enough.'

They left the yard. A road led into the plain, lined with tall poplar trees.

'Let's look at the camp,' said Philokles. 'We can climb that one.'

'Philo…'

'Then we'll go back, I promise.'

He strapped on the javelin and shimmied up the smooth, pale trunk. Euphorion reached up for his cousin to hoist him. Near the top, the leaves were thicker – broad stars with silver undersides. They found a gap and gazed.

Philokles whistled. The Persian camp was at least a mile long, the pine wood several hundred yards across. Glints of red, blue and gold showed through the trees. On the beach men were building fires.

And the fleet – the fleet was enormous. They were Phoenician triremes, with three banks of oars and pennants at both ends. Euphorion had seen such ships at Phaleron. It must have taken forever just to get everyone ashore.

'We've seen it. Can we go now?'

'Birdie was right. The marsh goes all the way up to the camp.'

'Philo, if we're late they'll kill us.'

Euphorion began to climb down, but then he froze. Two men were riding up the road on horseback. They wore stripy trousers, long-sleeved shirts, and bronze-scaled cuirasses. Big flaps flopped from their caps like hares' ears. Over their shoulders were bows, and quivers crammed with arrows.

'Philo!' hissed Euphorion. 'Persians!'

Chapter 15 The Mission

The riders approached until Euphorion could see their heads below his feet. Both were looking side to side. They went on. Philokles squeezed Euphorion's arm to keep him still.

The scouts came into view down the road. The second Persian turned his head back. He looked sharply up and said something. Both stopped and stared at the boys.

Philokles swore. He glanced up but the higher branches were too thin to support them. The Persians rode back.

'Hey, little birds,' called one in a throaty accent. 'What are you doing perched all the way up there?'

'We're just playing,' said Euphorion. 'We're only boys.'

'Why don't you fly down and chat with us, little birds?'

'No thanks, we're fine.'

Philokles gripped one of his javelins, breathing hard.

'Come now, we'd like to meet you,' said the scout. 'You can

tell us what you have seen from up there.'

'Buzz off, you stinking foreigners!' yelled Philokles. 'You murdering scum!'

'Oh, I see,' said the scout. He unslung his bow.

Euphorion panicked. 'Stop it, Philo…'

'Leave us alone,' cried Philokles. 'Our fathers are important hoplites.'

'Is that so? And you two birds are only playing, so close to our camp, with such a good view of it?'

'He thinks we're spies,' said Euphorion.

'He's right,' said Philokles. 'We *are* spies.'

'Come down,' said the Persian, 'or we will bring you down.'

Philokles raised the javelin.

'What are you doing?' hissed Euphorion.

'Killing them before they kill us.'

The second scout took aim with his bow. An arrow fizzed through the foliage. Euphorion yelped.

'That was rubbish,' called Philokles. 'You're a rubbish shot.'

'No, he is an excellent shot,' said the first scout. 'That was only a warning. We would rather take you alive. Once our general has spoken with you we shall let you go.'

'No you won't. You'll keep us as slaves.'

'Perhaps. But you will live. And your very important fathers will pay a nice ransom to get you back. That is not so bad, is it?'

'That sounds all right, Philo,' said Euphorion, shaking badly.

'No. They'll torture us.'

'You won't torture us, will you?' shouted Euphorion.

'We are not savages,' replied the Persian, as if offended.

'Apollo, Lord of the silver bow,' whispered Philokles, 'aim this shaft into my enemy.'

He hurled the javelin. It pierced the thigh of the second Persian's horse and stuck there. The beast neighed and threw off his rider. The rider landed hard. The first scout leapt off his own horse to look at his companion, who was clutching his shoulder.

Philokles had his other javelin ready. The first scout saw this and dragged the injured man behind a tree. A few moments later

an arrow zipped into the branch Philokles was holding, nicking the skin between his fingers.

'Ow! Bastard got me!' He sucked the blood from the cut. 'Apollo, you helped me just now; help me again and I'll dedicate my javelins to you.'

He threw, but the javelin landed in the road next to the tree.

Euphorion groaned.

'We've got to jump down,' said Philokles.

'What? It must be sixty feet!'

'We'll climb down a bit first.'

'So he can shoot us? We have to surrender, Philo.'

'It's too late for that, Squeak.'

The Persian emerged slowly from his tree, another arrow slotted. He darted to a tree with a better view of the boys. They hugged the trunk, showing him as little of themselves as possible.

Another arrow flew, making a slit in the side of Philokles' thigh as it shot into the sky. He hissed in pain.

The Persian drew another arrow from his quiver.

'Athena, goddess, I beg,' said Euphorion, 'help us now, and I vow my lyre to you.'

Another dart flitted through the leaves, this time barely missing Euphorion's ear.

And then it seemed that the goddess planted an idea in his head. He pointed in the direction of the Greek camp.

'Help! Help!'

The Persian looked around.

'Help! Hey you, there's a band of hoplites coming to rescue us. They'll be here in a minute. Help!'

The scout crossed to a tall patch of fennel. He waded through and peered across the fields, then returned and took aim again.

'Watch it, we have more javelins,' cried Philokles.

'Show me,' replied the Persian.

'You'll see, scum.'

The scout fired his arrow. It thudded into the trunk between Euphorion's knees. He drew another from his quiver.

'I'm going down,' said Philokles. But only his chest moved,

rising and falling. Blood dribbled down his leg onto the pale bark.

And then Euphorion did see hoplites – two, striding through the barley by the farm.

'Help!' he yelled. 'Persians! *Help*!'

The scout tutted. 'The little bird needs to find a new song.'

'No, they're coming, look! HEEELP!'

Philokles saw them too and joined the shouting. The Persian seemed unsettled, and his next shot went a couple of feet wide. He moved to get a better angle. The boys shuffled round the trunk, still yelling.

At last the hoplites heard them and ran. They reached the end of the road just as the scout released another arrow. This missed too. The hoplites drew their swords, gave a war cry, and sprinted. The scout jumped on his horse and galloped off.

The wounded Persian tried to mount his horse with his good arm, but the hoplites dragged him to the ground and punched him in the face.

'A nice catch for Miltiades,' said one.

The boys climbed down.

'Thanks,' said Philokles, wincing from his cuts.

'What in Hades are you two doing here?' said the hoplite.

'Uh…we're just two boys from Marathon.'

'No you aren't. You're our messenger boys. So, once again: what are you doing here?'

'Spying. For Miltiades.'

'He sent you here? To spy?'

Philokles nodded.

The men took a long, hard look at them.

'I think we'll join you as you make your report to him.'

One of the hoplites tied the prisoner's hands behind his back, while the other bound Philokles' thigh wound.

Euphorion's head spun. They were in the worst trouble in the world. And why did Philokles have to lie? He'd made it even worse.

Miltiades turned up the prisoner's chin with the tip of his sword.

'Well done, gentlemen. I'll enjoy picking this one's brains. Tie him to a tree, will you, Kadmos?' A guard led the sullen Persian away. 'Now, what about you two?'

'I hurt him, general,' said Philokles. 'I cast my javelin into his horse, and he fell off, and–'

'Where was this?' said Miltiades.

'Uh…over there.' Philokles pointed into the plain.

'About a mile from the enemy camp,' said one of the hoplites.

Miltiades' eyes opened wide. 'What in Zeus' name were you doing there?'

'He said they were spying, general. On your orders.'

'Really, do you think I would send *boys* to spy?'

'No, I certainly do not, general.'

Miltiades stroked his curly beard. 'You two have outdone yourselves. We have few enough rules in this camp, yet you managed to break the most important. I shall have no further use for your services. Take them to their fathers; I trust they shall administer a suitable punishment.'

'But general, we captured a spy for you,' said Philokles.

'No, these two gentlemen here captured him. But for them, you boys would now be under a Persian lash, spilling all our most cherished beans.' He grew furious. 'Get them out of my sight, before I whip them myself.'

The hoplite led them away. Philokles tried to look tough, but from his hard breathing it was clear he was as upset as Euphorion.

Kynegeiros bared his teeth as he listened to the tale. He threw his son to the ground, ripping his tunic, then took a branch from last night's fire and whacked him on the back, leaving a sooty stripe.

'What are you? A mule? A wild dog? Or just a senseless damned fool?' He punctuated each insult with a blow.

Aeschylos grabbed his son's hair and slapped his head. Euphorion squeezed his eyes shut.

'And don't give me sorry! What a waste of years it is to raise a son. What if they had killed you, or captured you? What would I say to your mother *then*?' He raised a fist and Euphorion's knees

gave way. His father let him collapse to the ground.

'We – we wanted to see the camp, to help, to spy–'

'Shut your damned trap!'

Philokles was lying still, his back a mass of dirty red marks. Krito and Hippolytos were shaking their heads.

'Get your rucksacks on,' said Kynegeiros. 'Both of you.'

'Wha– why?' said Euphorion.

'You know what we told you,' said Aeschylos. 'Off you go.'

'Can we have some food?'

Aeschylos stuffed a loaf of bread and a water skin into his son's hands.

'Go!'

'You too,' said Kynegeiros.

Philokles got up, trembling with pain, or shame, or both. They both packed their kits, Euphorion trying not to cry. Philokles, his torn tunic about his legs, tied his javelins onto his bare back, and with a final glance at their fathers they left.

Aeschylos strode after his son. 'Go quickly, and tell your mother not to worry, we'll be home soon.'

'Yes father. I – I'm sorry.'

'Euphorion, how can I make you understand? Beating you seems to do no good. It is truly time to grow up. You must stand up against those who push you around. Go now.'

Euphorion's tears flowed as he followed his cousin.

Soldiers asked what was wrong, but they did not answer. Some had heard already and stared at them in disgust. Philokles looked like he wanted to kill someone.

They left the woods and passed through the marsh. Then Philokles stopped. He gazed back at the marsh, and at the hills.

'Come on, Philo. We have to hurry or it'll get dark.'

Philokles flopped onto the tall grass at the side of the road. He stared into space, brushing his moustache with his finger.

'Philo…I want to go home. My mother needs me.'

Euphorion hadn't realised how much he missed her. Fury rose in his throat. 'This is all your fault! Why do I listen to you? Everything you do is stupid. You're just a boy who wants to be a

hoplite. A *boy*! I swear…'

'What, Squeak? What do you swear? You're such a coward. "We have to go home now, hurry up before it gets dark, I'm so afraid, I need my mummy."'

Euphorion leapt on him and they wrestled furiously. Philokles got on his back and slammed his face into the road.

'Ow! Let go!'

Philokles got up. Euphorion's cheek stung. 'Bastard.'

They sat across the road from each other, scowling.

'I'm going back,' said Philokles.

'Thank Zeus.'

Euphorion got up. But Philokles did not move.

'I mean to the camp.'

'Didn't your father beat you enough? Do you want a broken back?'

'The *Persian* camp, idiot. I'm going at night. Birdie can take me through the marshes. I'm going to kill Datis.'

Euphorion laughed.

Philokles took a javelin from his back. 'Once I find him I'll throw this, from eighty yards away, so I can escape.'

Euphorion got a horrible chill. Philokles really was a wild beast. Perhaps he should set him free, leave him to his madness. It was an awful feeling, giving up on his cousin. As if he had died.

'Don't you see?' said Philokles. 'There's twenty-odd thousand of them! They're going to batter our army, burn down Athens, and take our families away. Just like Miletos, just like Eretria. Don't you get it? The Spartans aren't coming!'

'We might still win. Miltiades says so.'

'*Might*. Half the generals don't think we will. Half!' He grabbed Euphorion's tunic. 'We have to do something.'

'But *what*? We're just boys.'

'We'll go there at night, find Datis, and kill him. Themistokles said if we kill him it's like killing half their soldiers.'

'That's why you've been practising with that dummy.' How long had he been planning this? Ever since the party? 'But there'll be thousands of Persians around. It's ridiculous.'

'No, they've got lots of Greeks in their army. The herald said so. We'll look like servants. As soon as we throw, we run.'

Euphorion blinked.

'Look, I'm going,' said Philokles. 'If you want you can have my other javelin. If I miss I'll have to throw again, and they might catch me. But if we both throw at the same time, we'll get away.'

'But I can't throw eighty yards.'

'All right, we'll do it from sixty. That's still enough to escape.'

Dread crawled into every nerve in Euphorion's body. Once again his cousin was going to talk him into it. His father had said not to let people push him around. But the Persians were pushing all of them around. And if the army lost, everything would go to blazes anyway.

Philokles sat by him. 'Think about it, Eu. Think of the glory. It's like a labour of Herakles. We'd be famous. Instead of…'

Euphorion nodded. Instead of this stinking disgrace.

'But Herakles was a man. And he was the son of Zeus! We're boys, not heroes.'

'But that means even more glory. All those hoplites…they'll be sorry we got sent home. We *will* be heroes.'

Euphorion felt faint. 'Zeus, I beg you, give us a sign. Should we go home? Or do what Philokles says?'

They waited.

A cricket leapt out of the grass into the middle of the road.

'There!' cried Philokles.

'That's not one of Zeus' animals is it?'

'It must be. Look, it jumped towards the Persians.'

'Did it?'

'More or less. See? Zeus says to kill Datis.'

Euphorion stared at the cricket. 'Are you from Zeus?'

The cricket bounded into the grass on the far side of the road.

Philokles laughed. 'You can't argue with *Zeus*.'

He dragged Euphorion across the fields to the village. Euphorion did not feel in control of his own legs.

From behind a wall they saw the seafront of Marathon. An old man mended a net, a woman sliced squid, and boats landed with

glittering catches. At last Birdie and Meton rowed in. When Meton's back was turned Philokles waved at Birdie. He ran over.

'Did you get those prickles out?'

'I think so,' said Euphorion. 'That was a good trick.'

'Listen, Birdie, we need your help,' said Philokles. 'You want us to beat the Persians, don't you? And get your family back?'

'But what can I do?'

'See this?' Philokles showed him a javelin. 'I'm going to bury it in Datis' heart.'

Birdie stared at him. He gave a jerky laugh.

'I mean it, Birdie. I'm going to snuff him out.'

'Is that why you were throwing yesterday?'

'Yes. I know I can aim it now. But we need you to get us through the marsh, to the camp. Tonight.'

'What? That's a bit mad, isn't it?'

'Listen, Birdie. You know what's going to happen if we lose. You've seen it. So have we, now. You have to help us. If we kill Datis then Athens will win. Datis is their head; if you cut off someone's head they die, right?'

'But how will you get there?'

'He's right,' said Euphorion. 'There are sentries all along the Greek camp. We'll have to go round the mountains. It'll take forever.'

'There's an easier way,' said Philokles. 'Isn't there, Birdie?'

Birdie looked back at Meton and nodded.

A couple of hours after sunset the village was quiet. The almost-full moon turned the houses and sea silver, but all else was dark.

The boys stole along the beach and into Meton's boat, covering themselves in his smelly fishing net. They had left their packs behind, but Euphorion's water skin was slung over his shoulder and Philokles had his javelins. Both now wore their dark blue tunics, and also their sandals, to protect them from the stones and thorny seeds that lay all over the plain.

Footsteps crunched on the sand and with a few jerks the boat was shoved into the sea. The wind had dropped but the waves

bobbed the boat up and down, and Euphorion felt seasick.

A hand pulled away the net. It was Birdie.

They dipped the oars and headed out into the bay. Miles away the fires of the enemy were like grains of gold.

'You'll be quick, won't you?' said Birdie.

'Like swooping hawks,' said Philokles.

'How do we find Datis?'

'We look for the biggest tent.'

'What if they see us?'

'They didn't see you, did they?'

'But that was just me. Three of us…I don't know. And there might be nothing to hide behind, where Datis is.'

'He's right, Philo.'

'Shut up. We're doing it.'

'But –' Euphorion stopped himself. He had that feeling again, that Philokles was out of control, an untamed beast. He felt like an animal himself, in a small cage. 'If it's impossible I'm not doing it.'

Philokles ignored him.

A mile or so out Birdie stopped rowing.

'The sentries won't see us now.'

They rowed toward the shore and landed just past the headland. The Persian fires were still a long way down the beach. They followed Birdie inland across fields. The plain seemed endless, the hills like watching giants. The moon was bright, but Euphorion stubbed his toes on rocks, and tripped and pricked his hand on thistles.

'Ow!'

'Ssh!'

'There's no one round here, Philo.'

'What about scouts, you idiot?'

After crossing a stream Birdie stopped. 'This is the marsh.' He led them along a palisade of reeds. Down at his right Euphorion saw a white blob – the moon reflected in a pool. They passed through a patch of rushes and splashed into water.

'We have to go through this for a bit,' said Birdie.

They trudged through water up to their knees along a

bending route through high reeds. Mud oozed over their sandals. At last they climbed onto grass again. Euphorion saw a duck entangled in a net.

'Is that one of yours?'

'Yes,' said Birdie. He was bending down, picking something off his leg.

'Ew!' cried Philokles.

Euphorion shuddered. His calves and feet were covered in slimy things as long as his finger. Leeches.

He pulled them off in horror. They had left little wounds which bled slowly. He felt sick.

'Do we have to do that again, Birdie?'

'It's a big marsh.'

They continued. Something stung Euphorion's cheek.

'Wonderful. Mosquitoes. We'll have no blood at all soon.'

Soon they were all slapping their skin.

'This is the worst part now,' said Birdie.

They stepped into another pool, reaching up to their navels.

'Oh Zeus, those devils will be all over me,' said Euphorion.

'At least you don't feel them,' said Birdie, smacking the back of his neck.

Soon they emerged on a far bank, and again began the frantic plucking of leeches, now all the way up to their stomachs. Euphorion felt ready to vomit. On the way back they would have to go through all this again. He retched, pouring his supper into the pool.

'I can't do it, Philo,' he wheezed.

'Yes you can. Athens needs you, Squeak.'

Euphorion took a mouthful of water and tried to calm down.

They continued through reeds and brambles. Then he saw lights ahead, and smelled smoke.

'That's it,' said Birdie. They followed him to a thicket of rushes and dropped to their bellies.

It was a pine wood. The trees were low, their foliage cloud-shaped. Among them campfires glowed and figures lay asleep on rugs, for as far as they could see.

'How in Hades are we going to find Datis?' said Euphorion.

Philokles looked stumped. Now the vast Persian camp sprawled before them, the preposterousness of his plan was clear.

'Look for massive tents.'

He nodded to the north of the camp. They retreated behind reeds, crept another hundred yards, and wriggled in again.

'Not here,' said Philokles.

'What if Datis' tent is near the beach? We wouldn't see it.'

'We'll see it.'

They repeated their shuffle up the camp, with the same result.

'How big is this blasted wood?' said Philokles.

'A mile and a half,' said Birdie.

Philokles gazed at the moon. 'Artemis, give us a clue.'

At their next stop brighter lights shone from deep in the trees. Everyone seemed to have a tent now, though most were small.

'This is it. Ready, Eu?'

'How do you know?'

'Big tents. Look.'

Euphorion peered. Deep in the wood he saw orange rectangles. Philokles was right: it was a cluster of large tents lit by a bonfire. He heard pipes, and saw men dancing – dropping to one knee, then springing up and clashing shields.

And one man was sitting on a stool. The firelight made dancing dots on his body. Gold jewellery?

'That could be any commander, Philo. It's a huge army. We've got ten generals – they must have fifty.'

'This is the middle of the camp, isn't it, Birdie?'

'More or less.'

'This has to be it. I'm sure.'

'How do you *know*?' said Euphorion.

Philokles looked up again. 'Lady of the wilds, send us a sign – is that Datis' tent over there?'

They waited.

'There,' said Philokles. 'That was an owl.'

'A Scops owl,' said Birdie.

A faint *dyoo dyoo* reached Euphorion's ears.

'Owls belong to Athena, not Artemis.'

'They're sisters, aren't they?'

'Half sisters.'

'That's good enough for me.'

Philokles got up, breathing fast.

Euphorion's legs would not work. 'I can't Philo. I can't.'

'Come *on*!'

Philokles dragged him to his feet. 'Do you want a javelin?'

'I – I don't know.'

Philokles grew angry. 'Make your mind up.'

He opened Euphorion's fingers and stuck the javelin in his hand.

'Hold it by your side so it doesn't show.'

'What if someone asks us what we're doing?'

'Pretend you don't understand. There are men here from all over the empire. They can't all speak the same language.'

'But – shouldn't we have some excuse?'

'We're looking for firewood, all right?'

'Right. Right.'

Philokles took a deep breath and headed into the camp. Euphorion watched him then followed, his heart ready to burst.

Everyone was asleep. And there were thousands of them. In other parts of the camp Euphorion had not spotted weapons; here, every man had a spear and shield, and some a bow and quiver.

What was he doing? He should just run away. Euphorion remembered the promise he had made to his little brother. How ridiculous would it be to grab a shield and run all the way back to Athens?

Philokles led him into a clump of bushes and trees about eighty yards from the big tents. There was a clearing inside, and although it was too dark to see anything, from the stench it had to be a latrine.

'We'll get the javelins ready,' said Philokles, 'then run and throw them.'

'At the same time?'

'Yes.'

'At that man sitting down?'

'Yes.'

As they wrapped the thongs onto their javelins someone entered the clearing.

'Pretend to pee,' hissed Philokles.

They dropped their javelins.

'They don't pee in front of each other,' whispered Euphorion.

'Just do it!'

Philokles began to urinate into a bush, but Euphorion was too terrified to make himself go.

The soldier muttered something in a foreign tongue. Euphorion heard him pull down his trousers and squat. They waited for him to finish his business. He said something louder, and laughed.

Philokles gave a neutral hum. The soldier responded with what sounded like a question. Euphorion glanced over his shoulder. He was standing now, a tall warrior with a curly beard. The zigzags on his long sleeves stood out in the moonlight.

He repeated his question more aggressively. The boys turned round. Philokles picked up his javelin and began to walk out of the bushes. The soldier seized his arm and spat a few words.

'Get off!' said Philokles.

He tried to jerk his arm free but the soldier gripped it, and the javelin too. They tussled, then the Persian smacked Philokles in the face with the palm of his hand. Philokles collapsed and lay still. Euphorion grabbed the javelin. The Persian faced him. Without a thought Euphorion speared him in the ribs.

The soldier held the shaft of the javelin and fell to his knees, choking. He expelled a single word of agony. A black stain appeared around the shaft. He was trying to pull it out. Euphorion gritted his teeth and shoved it in. It was harder than he expected. At last the soldier went limp and slid to the ground.

Euphorion knelt by his cousin. 'Get up, Philo.'

He did not answer.

The bushes rustled and two men appeared, squinting in the gloom. Euphorion's mind seemed to shut down. He found himself

sprinting through the camp.

He saw something pale where the reeds began. Birdie. He headed towards it. The pale blot moved off.

Euphorion heard cries behind him. Soldiers on each side awoke and watched him bolt by. Something whistled by his head and there was a biting pain in his ear.

He reached the marsh and headed after Birdie. Rounding tall reeds he glanced back. Men with torches – three, four, five – running after him.

A fizz in the grass – another arrow. He hurtled on, round bushes, into water. A white bird squawked and flapped off.

Birdie had vanished. The water grew deeper, and Euphorion realised his splashing would draw his pursuers to him. He waded into a small inlet among reeds and lay on his front.

He had left Philokles behind.

Guilt pierced his belly. But what could he have done? Fought the two soldiers on his own? Given himself up?

No. It was all Philokles' fault. All his idea.

Flames approached, and a swish of legs in water. Euphorion filled his lungs and dipped his head under. Would they see his skin through the water? Should he creep deeper into the reeds? Or would the movement give him away?

He stayed under until he felt as if a fox were gnawing its way out of his chest. He lifted his nose and gasped a breath. The torches were gone.

Only now did Euphorion realise he was cold. His chest convulsed and he hissed through chattering teeth. He had to get further into the swamp: he would freeze if he stayed in the water all night, and the leeches would suck him dry. And in daylight he would be seen from the camp.

He stood and stepped out. The moon lit a route deeper into the marsh. He followed it till he reached dry land. Then he picked off the leeches, slumped on the grass, and bawled his heart out.

What would his father say? And his uncle – by Zeus, his uncle.

Chapter 16 Bad Omens

Arrows showered Euphorion from all sides, pricking his back, belly, and thighs. He awoke. It was dawn. Birds screeched in the reeds. He was itching all over; his leech and mosquito bites had swollen into red lumps. He was dreadfully thirsty, but had lost his water skin. And one of his sandals.

Then Euphorion remembered where he was, and why.

He felt sick. What would they do to Philokles?

A memory flashed in his mind, of Philokles snipping with his fingers. 'Chop chop'.

No. He couldn't bear to think of it.

But they wouldn't kill him, would they? There was no reason.

Except they would think he was a spy. What did they do to spies?

He had to get to his father. There would be terrible punishment, but they had to know.

Euphorion had no idea where he was, but if he kept the mountains to his right he knew he would get out of the marsh. He stood, and was struck by a wave of dizziness. He was as wobbly as a newborn calf, but he had to move.

Leaving his remaining sandal he stumbled through grass, reeds, and ponds. Could he drink the water? It was certainly cursed, and would probably poison him.

Had he killed that man? He had tried to. A viciousness had come over him, and made his arms push the javelin deep into the man's flesh. Had Athena directed him?

He saw a white spot and approached it. A duck flapped, caught in a net. It looked like the one from last night. He was on the right track. He tugged at the pegs and released it. The duck landed on the water and floated away as if nothing had happened.

He continued, winding round walls of reeds. The hills were hidden now. Was he going in loops? The sun – yes, the sun had to be in the south east. If he kept it to his left he'd be fine.

At the end of a narrow passage the reeds closed in completely. Euphorion forced his way through. And after that, of all things, a

bramble patch. What else would Artemis throw in his way?

'Goddess, let me through! I'll give you all I have. I'll buy a goat – no, four goats – and sacrifice them to you.'

Nothing happened. To hell with it. He was already cut by arrows and bitten half to death; what were a few scratches?

He picked his way through, dragging away spiky tendrils with forefinger and thumb. Still, the fearsome plant scourged him again and again. The thicket seemed to go on forever, and Euphorion began to lose hope. He had brought the wrath of the gods on his head and this was his punishment. Tears came, but he swallowed them. He had to get back.

He broke through at last. His arms and legs were criss-crossed with lines, beaded with blood. At least this new soreness took his mind off the itching.

He staggered on through more water and more reeds. Then far off he saw trees, tall Corsican pines, not the squat pines of the Persian camp – and that meant the plain.

Winding and wandering Euphorion reached the stream they had crossed last night. Beyond it fields stretched for miles to the hills. He scrambled down the rocky gully and drank his belly full.

Now only the Marathon plain to cross.

Exhaustion and fear grew with each step. The expanse of dry grass and thistles seemed endless, the sun as fierce as ever.

At last Euphorion stepped onto the beach in sight of the Marathon village. Trudging across sand so hot it stung his feet he reached a sentry. The soldier gazed at him.

'You look like you've been to Hades and back.'

'I have.'

'Weren't you sent home by your father?'

'I need to see him.'

'Go ahead. But don't expect a warm welcome.'

'I don't.'

Kynegeiros was performing stretches in the shade of a tree. Aeschylos was sitting, writing on paper. Xanthias, collecting pots for washing, saw him first.

'By Apollo! I wouldn't be you for all the gold in Egypt.'

The fathers blinked at him. Aeschylos grabbed his son's shoulders and shook him. 'How dare you!' He saw the marks all over Euphorion's body. 'What happened? Speak!'

But Euphorion could not. What could he say that would cause the least outrage, the least thrashing?

Aeschylos roared. Kynegeiros handed him a stick.

Euphorion turned and offered him his back. His father clouted him. Krito and Hippolytos stopped sharpening their swords to watch.

'What does it take? Zeus, tell me!' Aeschylos threw the stick away. 'Ah, what's the use?'

'Where is Philokles?' said Kynegeiros. 'Has he gone home?'

'No, uncle.' Euphorion dropped to his knees.

Kynegeiros dragged him up again. 'Where is he?'

'He's…at the Persian camp.'

'*What*?'

'For Zeus' sake, spit it out!' bellowed Aeschylos.

They glared at him. Euphorion would rather have looked at a pair of gorgons. Staring at the ground he told the whole tale, from leaving the camp to his return. When he reached the scuffle with the soldier, Kynegeiros squatted and began pulling out tufts of his hair. After he finished there was a silence. Krito and Hippolytos shook their heads.

'You left him there,' said Kynegeiros.

Euphorion could not answer.

'He had no choice,' said Aeschylos. 'He would only have been captured himself. And executed, after killing one of them.'

'He could have fought.'

'After we have told them over and over that they must not? It is fortunate Euphorion had the good sense to run away. If only he'd had the sense not to listen to Philokles in the first place.'

Aeschylos grabbed his son's hair again. 'Will you ever listen to what I say? How many beatings will it take? Tell me, so I can give them now, and you can grow up once and for all. Well?'

Euphorion shrugged pathetically.

'The idiocy!' cried Kynegeiros. 'Thoughtless, witless fools.'

'It's *your* son who has no wits. Mine lacks only a spine.'

Kynegeiros yanked out a lock of hair. 'Agh!'

'Go home,' Aeschylos said to his son.

'Please, father, can I have some water?'

'He's in no state to walk twenty-five miles,' said Hippolytos.

'He looks like he's got the plague,' said Krito.

'Tomorrow then,' said Aeschylos. 'First thing.' He gave Euphorion his water flask.

Kynegeiros pressed his palms to his temples.

'We must get him back. We know where he is.'

'Where is he, Uncle?' said Euphorion.

'The Persian scout told us they keep captives in two ships, right on the beach. We can do it, Aeschylos. The Trikorythians are up for it. Their wives and children are on those boats. We could muster forty men.' He turned to Krito and Hippolytos. 'You two will come, won't you?'

The wrestlers toyed with their swords.

'Brother,' said Aeschylos, 'you know we cannot. Miltiades has already forbidden that mission. With good reason.'

'At night we could do it. They won't see us coming.'

'With forty men? Even if we got in, by the time we found the ships and freed the prisoners the whole camp would be in uproar. It'd be slaughter – for the prisoners as well as for us. And Athens needs every man it has for the coming battle.'

'This is my son! What if it were Euphorion, suffering who knows what tortures?'

'Then I would feel as you do. I *do* feel as you do, brother. But our best hope for Philokles, and for all our family, is to win the battle. We must do our duty.'

'What of my duty to my son? My only heir?'

'What good will it do Philokles for you to throw your life away? To weaken our phalanx by the loss of forty good men? I swear to you, brother, if it were Euphorion instead of Philokles I would still do my duty to Athens, though it tore my soul. Without Athens, we are nothing.'

Kynegeiros gritted his teeth. He stood and drew his sword.

'This is life's truest test,' said Aeschylos. 'To do what is right, when your heart compels you to do what is wrong.'

'Don't try to teach me about right and wrong, little brother.'

'Then don't act as if you *need* to be taught.'

'He is right, Kynegeiros,' said Hippolytos.

'Agh! Enough! Forget it.'

He aimed his sword at the sky. 'Zeus! Thunderer! Grant me revenge on the invader. When the earth shakes with the din of battle, give us victory, and lead me to my son. Grant me this, Lord. For this I would give my own life.'

He screwed his eyes shut, and with a strangled yell hacked at an olive branch, severing it in one stroke.

'I don't like that omen,' said Krito.

'For Apollo's sake,' said Kynegeiros. 'It's not a sacred olive.'

He flung his sword into the earth and stormed into the tent.

Aeschylos looked sadly at his son. 'Eat, then do your chores.'

'Father, will we save Philokles? Will the enemy hurt him?'

'I don't know, son. Let us pray we win the battle.'

'You must tell Miltiades of this,' said Hippolytos.

Aeschylos' face was grey with shame.

'What is it, father?'

'Don't you see what you have done? The Persians will learn from Philokles when the Spartans are due. We had lasted so long – there was hope of a few more days. The Spartans left this very morning. But now we must prepare to fight alone.'

Euphorion hung his head. 'Father, are you pleased I killed one of the enemy?'

Aeschylos shook his head and went to speak to Miltiades.

Xanthias cleaned Euphorion's cuts and daubed them with honey and oil. Euphorion could not bear the stares Krito and Hippolytos were giving him. He spent the day helping Xanthias water and feed the mules and wash clothes at the stream.

At night the two fathers sat around the fire in silence. Euphorion heard an owl call. Was it a good, or a bad omen?

Aeschylos lifted his head. 'Holy Maiden,' he breathed, 'protect us, strengthen us.'

Kynegeiros nodded.

Euphorion took a deep breath. They had not given up hope.

Aeschylos was woken by a tap on the shoulder. A soldier was at his side.

'Miltiades wishes to speak with you.'

It was dark and everyone was asleep. From the blue ribbon in the east Aeschylos saw that dawn was near. Lamps lit the walls of Miltiades' tent a warm ginger. He was at the entrance, gazing into the plain. A few warriors stood nearby, as if waiting.

Miltiades closed the tent flaps behind them. 'Sit, my friend.'

He seemed agitated, stroking his beard and glancing around.

'What is it, general?'

'I can talk to you, can I not? I mean openly. You have a wonderful understanding of men's hearts.'

'You can always speak to me, Miltiades.'

'Aeschylos…I don't know what I'm doing. I've never commanded an army in battle. Not a pitched battle on open ground, like this. Everything depends on whether I have made the right decisions. Everything, Aeschylos! And I am not sure that I have. What if I am wrong? What if I am leading us over a cliff?'

'Miltiades – I think sometimes, at night, demons come to us in our sleep, and shake our spirits. You will find your true self again. Come, once the sun rises your spirits will revive.'

The general puffed out his chest.

'And Miltiades, remember we have chosen you to lead us. Your own tribe, those four generals, the assembly which you convinced to vote for war, even Kallimachos who gave you his command – we have all chosen you. We Athenians are no fools. We know you are the best man for the job.

'And to be frank, while I do admire you greatly, whether or not we win is not entirely up to you. There are ten thousand hardy souls out there, with strong arms, sturdy legs, and sharp spears. We have trained, and are as ready as ever we shall be. Calm yourself. You must inspire us with your confidence.'

Miltiades embraced him. 'Thank you, my friend. Sometimes a

man needs to be reminded of what he already knows.'

'Then go back to bed, general, and all will be well in the morning.'

'Oh no, we are not going back to bed. The wait is over.'

Aeschylos' heart contracted. 'You mean–'

'Those men out there are Ionian Greeks, from the Persian army. They deserted to tell me that yesterday the enemy's horse boarded ship. And now the oarsmen are joining them.'

'And the army…'

'Is marching into the plain.'

Aeschylos blinked. 'Oh Zeus.'

'But no cavalry, Aeschylos. That gives us hope, eh?'

Miltiades splashed water onto his face from a bowl. He seemed calm again, as if he had handed all his anxiety to Aeschylos. He called a guard in.

'Sound the trumpets for muster.'

Chapter 17 The Advance

Stubble-jawed men rose from their blankets, unaware that the signal was not for just another drill. Some met Aeschylos' eyes and caught on. At first staring terror seized them, but then with raised fists, grins, or simple nods, they showed their manliness. 'Is this it, Aeschylos?' a few asked, and after his first 'It is,' the knowledge flooded through the camp.

Quivering fingers fed mouths with wine-drenched bread. They jabbered at each other as they suited up in starry white or bronze-scaled cuirasses. Aeschylos forced smiles: most were young, and of a lower class than he. He was no more experienced in war than they, but like children they needed older, wiser figures to look up to.

Kynegeiros was already sheathed in armour. Xanthias was waiting to help his master get ready.

'Breakfast, Xanthias.'

Slave offered master a cup and loaf.

'What did Miltiades want?' asked Kynegeiros.

'He had to get something off his chest.'

'And what was that?'

'Brother, the enemy is in the field.'

Kynegeiros nodded solemnly. He took a cup and held it out.

'Zeus of the Lower Earth, today we need You. Receive this blood of the grape. Aid us today, and I swear, before the sun sets You will receive an ocean of the real sort.'

Aeschylos joined his brother in dribbling wine on the ground.

'You too, Xanthias, and Nikias. Your spears join us today.'

The slaves added their libations.

'It's an honour to fight with you, master,' said Xanthias.

Aeschylos tied his cuirass at the side, and with Xanthias' help folded the stiff flaps down over his shoulders, lacing them to a bronze gorgon's head at his stomach.

'Dear old Xanthias. You know, I nearly sold you because of that duff leg of yours. But you made it, and I'm glad. Somehow you've kept pace with us, through all that walking and running. And you've never complained, not in all these years, unlike most. You deserve your freedom, if we win. But I hope you'll stay with us. After all, we'll be war buddies.'

'I have nowhere else to go, master. No man would wish to be a slave – it's a hard life, when you've grown up free. But I could hardly have a better master than you. And despite my game knee I'll fight like a lion against these foreigners. I would have fought even without Miltiades' promise. Nikias feels the same, right lad? What other chance does a slave have to win honour? And even though defeat would only mean exchanging one master for another, I prefer the Athenian sort to the Persian. I may be Thracian, but after so long I feel in my heart an Athenian.'

'By Zeus, Xanthias, that's the most you've ever said to me in one breath! Today you are indeed an Athenian. And if we die, we shall both find ourselves in the realm of Demeter's blessed daughter, living in peace. And as far as I know, there is no slavery in the underworld.'

Stesilaos came by, feeding words of encouragement to his

flock.

'Aeschylos, I heard you spoke with Miltiades. What's the word?'

'The enemy horse boarded ship yesterday, and the oarsmen today. The warriors are in the plain.'

'Datis has the measure of us now. He knows our answer.'

'He'll try to pin us down while his cavalry lands at Phaleron,' said Kynegeiros. 'Or more likely he expects a swift victory, so he can take his soldiers too.'

'We'll see about that,' said Stesilaos. He went on his way.

'Father, what shall I do?' asked Euphorion.

'Help me buckle on these greaves. Then go to your mother and brother.'

'But what if we lose?'

'As I told you, take them to Salamis. And Aunt Ismene and your cousins. The Spartans will soon arrive and take care of things.'

'We will not lose,' said Kynegeiros, hefting his spear.

'But if you do, how will we know to flee Athens?' said Euphorion.

'We'll send a runner,' said his father.

'But aren't the runners fighting?'

'Yes. Every fit man with a shield and spear.'

'Then what if–' Euphorion stopped himself. What if the runners are killed, he was going to say. So shouldn't I – but no. If he didn't ask for permission, it could not be refused.

'Go home, Euphorion. We'll not lose you too.'

'Philokles is not lost,' growled Kynegeiros.

'No, of course not,' said Aeschylos, smiling in reassurance. But Euphorion saw his heart was not in it.

Aeschylos donned his felt cap and helmet, lifting the cheek guards like two wings. He lifted his shield and gripped his spear. 'How do I look?'

Euphorion felt a burst of love for him. 'Fine, father. Like our statue of Theseus.'

Aeschylos cupped his son's cheek.

'If I am slain, it falls to you to bring honour to our family. Be a good citizen, and a good hoplite. If I die, it is a fine death; there could be none better. And we shall be together again. Life is brief, but the afterlife is forever.'

'Please don't die, father,' said Euphorion, choking.

'If the Fates have chosen this day to snip my yarn, Zeus Himself cannot overrule it. I do not fear it, and neither should you.'

The two fathers and their slaves joined the warriors streaming to the fields before the wood. When their eyes were turned Euphorion let his tears fall and packed his bag.

He was not going to abandon them. By Zeus, no.

The myriads formed into files, planting their lances and propping shields at their knees. Everyone knew the wait was over. They had stood before in these long ranks, but this was different. As when on a hot day the sun vanishes behind a cloud, and the skin cools, so the air about the army had changed. They were quieter, as if screwing up their courage, or trying to keep their bowels from opening. Aeschylos noticed many had attached leather curtains to the bottom of their shields, to protect their legs from arrows. Why hadn't he done that?

Someone yelled, a roar somewhere between 'yes!' and 'ha!' The men responded with boisterous cries. Then silence fell, except for heavy breathing and the wind riffling through horse-hair crests. The sun was already warm, and Aeschylos was glad for that cooling wind, a gift of Zeus.

Despite the fear cutting into every soul, there was much relief. Six days of sleeping on hard beds, of worrying and waiting, were over. Even though they had failed to hold Datis back long enough for the Spartans to arrive, Aeschylos saw the men were happy to march into battle. To prove their manhood at last.

Kynegeiros was talking to Krito and Hippolytos. They were two of the strongest men in Athens, but they needed calming words.

He turned back to Aeschylos. 'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine.'

'If we survive the clash, I need you to help me find Philokles. If those triremes depart…'

'That fleet will take hours to set sail. We'll stop those prison ships, don't worry.'

Kynegeiros sighed. 'This is my doing. It's not you, Aeschylos; Euphorion is a good lad. When I get my hands on Philokles…'

'It's not your fault, brother. The Spartans would never have made it in time. And what difference would two thousand make?'

'Two thousand Spartans? A mountain of difference.'

The bugles blared. Ten thousand shields were hooked onto ten thousand left arms, and ten thousand spears were plucked from the soil and leaned against ten thousand right shoulders.

'Well, it's too late, they've missed the show,' said Aeschylos.

A stink pricked his nose.

'Hey, Karion, your slave's crapped himself,' came a voice near the rear.

Laughter rippled through the ranks.

'He's wishing he'd stayed a slave,' called another.

'Miltiades' deal sounded good at the time,' joked a third. 'Not any more.'

The chuckles grew heartier, and Aeschylos saw it: humour was priceless for soothing men's fears.

'For Athens!' cried a hoplite.

'For Athena!' yelled another, and the ranks cheered.

And love, too. Love of home, and of the gods: these drove men on. And even more important was their love for one other. As he watched them grinning, Aeschylos saw that above all it was for each other that these men were about to fight, and perhaps die.

Another signal sounded. Flutes tooted a battle hymn, and the hoplites marched into the plain.

'Now we fight for our fathers' land,
And drain the lifeblood where we stand,
To save our children we fight side by side,
And serried close, we men of youth's pride,

Fear we disdain, and deem light the cost
Of life itself, in glorious battle lost.'

Ten thousand voices, even spread along a thin mile, lifted Aeschylos' heart like wind raising a wave. The hymn not only kept the pace steady, it banished yet more fear. Ahead, mighty bulls that might have menaced a man on his own fled this way and that. After a while the phalanx split around a ransacked farm, whose unfortunate owner was a member of Aiantis. Aeschylos heard curses, and sensed a strengthening of resolve. Vengeance – yet another spur to combat.

Wading through fennel and rows of poplars they reached open pasture again. On they strode to the music of war, a piping tune repeated so much it had become as natural as a heartbeat.

And then, far away, Aeschylos saw it: a long glittering line stretching left to the hills and right to the sea. He shivered. The warriors saw, and roared. Some clanged spear shafts on shields. Others took up the clattering, and it became a cacophony. The enemy was too far away to hear, with the wind blowing hard at the Greeks, but the men were doing it for themselves. Noise – sheer, thundering noise – one more way to kill fear.

Shrill trumpeting cut through the racket. The troops came to a stop. The Persians were about half a mile away – out of arrow range, but close enough to see each shield in the front rank. The shields formed a barricade, and behind stood row after row of bowmen.

Time had sped up dramatically. The slow days of waiting had given way to swift minutes. How long till the seconds of slaughter?

They waited. Stesilaos strode up and down, nervously peering toward the centre of the Greek line.

'What's going on?' said Krito.

'Get on with it,' muttered Hippolytos.

'Patience, lads,' said Kynegeiros. 'Miltiades is making sure the lines match. We mustn't move too soon.'

Aeschylos tried to think of a joke to cheer the men, but he

couldn't. He saw movement in the distance, then heard the hammering of hooves. Lone riders all down the Persian front were galloping forward.

'Steady!' called Stesilaos. 'Form shield wall.'

The front rankers crouched behind their shields. The second row positioned theirs on top, making a man-high barrier, and the rest raised theirs overhead.

A horseman drew near. About fifty yards away he turned and fired an arrow. It bounced off Krito's shield.

Someone blew a raspberry. 'Is that the best you can do?'

There was much laughter.

'Ignore them,' called Kynegeiros. 'They're trying to unnerve us, break the phalanx.'

Another cavalryman pounded toward them.

'Hold still!' yelled a commander.

The rider shot, from much closer this time, but with the same result. As he turned Hippolytos sprang after him, his spear levelled.

'Get back in line!' snapped Stesilaos.

Hippolytos stopped and bawled after the rider, 'Get off your horse, you foreign coward!'

He was roundly cheered by his comrades.

'Back, you idiot!' yelled the general.

Hippolytos returned, grinning at his fellows.

'Ten minutes, lads, and you can skewer them all you like,' said Stesilaos.

Hot, tense moments passed. What was taking Miltiades so long? Was he gripped in self doubt again?

Trumpets echoed along the line. Kallimachos stepped out with a seer, a flautist, and a kid goat. He raised his hands to the sky, his red crests and ostrich feathers fluttering in the breeze.

'Goddess of the wilds! Artemis! Beloved by Athenians, we call to you. Blood we give you from this victim. Blood from our enemy we ask of you. We vow each year on your holy day to sacrifice one kid for each Persian we slay. Give us a sign that you favour us in battle.'

As the flute played, Kallimachos gripped the squirming goat between his knees. He drew his sword, held its chin up, and in one stroke slit its throat. A great shout shook the air as the blood spurted out. The seer watched this crimson spray, then spoke to Kallimachos. Aeschylos heard a quickening in every man's breath.

'The huntress welcomes our vow!' shouted the war arkhon.

The soldiers whooped as the message was passed from general to general.

'My brothers, we have waited long for this moment,' cried Kallimachos. 'We in Athens are proud of our freedom, our laws, our way of life. And rightly so: they are the finest in Greece. But today Zeus extracts a high price for these gifts. Today our freedom is threatened, our courage tested.'

He cupped a handful of earth and let it fall into the breeze.

'This soil has nourished us since we were infants. Shall we let them take it from us?'

'No!' bellowed the troops.

'Not one speck of dust shall they rob. Let us drive them into the sea!'

The roars swelled and spears were battered on shields.

'Now, some of us wish the Spartans were here. But they aren't, and I say to hell with them! This victory will be ours alone. Still, we can learn from them. Why do men admire them? Are they stronger? Braver? Are their spears sharper, their shields tougher? No. Their strength is their discipline, their unflinching phalanx. Let us take this lesson to heart, Athenians. Our ten thousand shields must be one great shield, our ten thousand spears one mighty spear, to drive into our enemy's throat.

'This is it, lads. Now we avenge Miletos; now we avenge Eretria. May Victory, Right, and Zeus supreme stand by our side!'

The cries were deafening. But to Aeschylos it seemed that now they stood in sight of their foe, the men had no need of words. Either they were ready for battle, or they would perish. And he reckoned they were ready. He loved these men. It was clear to him now: he loved his wife, his brother, his sons – his weak-willed Euphorion – even his foolhardy nephew. He loved Athens, and

would put up a ferocious fight to save it.

The trumpets blasted again.

'Our father below is watching us,' said Kynegeiros. 'Let us make him proud.'

Aeschylos flipped down his cheek guards. The warriors lowered their spears to knee level and took their shields from their shoulders. Flutes whistled, and the men marched.

Aeschylos heard a buzzing. It was the rush of blood in his ears. Sweat dribbled into his eyebrows and thoughts zipped through his mind.

About half way he heard a squeaking and a clicking.

Bowstrings.

'Stay together, lads!' cried Kynegeiros.

And then there was an altogether different noise, a twanging and a hissing. A vast cloud of splinters arose from the Persian ranks, their iron tips sparkling like a shoal of fish.

'Run!' yelled the commanders.

'*Eleleu!*' cried the soldiers, and raising their shields they began to trot.

And the rain fell.

Chapter 18 The Battle

A bright clattering filled Aeschylos' ears as arrows skittered off shields. On he pounded after his brother, their feet kicking up puffs of dust. The men continued their war cry, *eleleu*, more a high-pitched tongue wagging than a word.

An arrow thudded off Aeschylos' shield just left of his elbow. He felt the urge to duck but ran on. One stadium length of earth to cross. Half a hoplite race. But they were only jogging: formation had to be kept, and breath saved for the clash.

The thock of released arrows grew louder, the rain heavier. The hoplites lowered their shields: the fire was coming from straight ahead now, and into the gaps between the files. Another arrow bounced off Aeschylos' shield, this time on the right edge

near his fingers. He realised – they were dinting the bronze, but not penetrating. Looking past this edge he saw the Persian line, a row of tall rectangular shields with black and white vertical stripes, held sideways so the archers could fire between them. The bearers of the wicker fence crouched low, spears poking up.

'On, sons of Greece!' cried Stesilaos.

The finishing line was near. Arrows struck more forcefully now. A hoplite stumbled, a shaft deep in his thigh. He growled his fury at missing the fray as his comrades ran past.

But Aeschylos had seen no one else go down, and he felt a burst of hope. Perhaps the bowmen had overshot, not taking into account the hoplite's run, or the wind gusting away from them.

Any second now. Aeschylos' stomach tensed.

And then the Persian line was right before them. Enemy heads popped up. They turned their shields forwards and aimed out their spears.

'Halt!' cried Greek commanders.

Krito slowed to a walk, battered away his foe's lance with his shield, and rammed his blade into the wickerwork. It caught there and the Persian swung it to his left. Krito yanked it out, tearing the leather.

'Form phalanx!' yelled the captains.

'Back, Krito!' cried Kynegeiros.

The rear eight of each file of sixteen slipped into the gaps and lined themselves up with their fellow rankers. Krito, Hippolytos, and their front row comrades raised their spears to shoulder height. They faced their shields forwards, overlapping a little with the man on each side. The bottom edge they held out, making a wall like a steep river bank. Spear shafts rested in the Y shapes where the shields overlapped.

Kynegeiros swung his spear down so the shaft hovered over Krito's right shoulder, poking a couple of feet past him. The other second rankers did the same. Now, with one eye on his brother's sharp lizarder, Aeschylos stepped up. He lowered his spear, lifting his arm to aim it down, over both Krito's and Kynegeiros' shoulders. Those in the fourth ranks and behind were too far back

to reach an enemy, and angled their lances at the sky.

In this way the spiny hedge was formed in ten heartbeats. Aeschylos let his fury swell into lust for Persian blood. He felt strong: his torso was a tree trunk, his legs two thick roots.

And so battle was engaged. It was a jabbing of spears in both directions. It was a dinting of Greek bronze and a hacking of Persian leather and twigs. It was a mind-numbing racket, a clanging and thudding and roaring. And it was all so fast that no one had no time to think, only to strike the enemy and dodge the enemy's own strikes.

And still bowmen fired, and every Athenian, especially those in front, had to watch for arrows as well as spears. They whipped through horse hair plumes and glanced off helmets and shields, each moment a new arrow, each arrow a potential heart-stopper.

But Aeschylos could not reach his enemy, and nor could Kynegeiros, across the six-foot canyon between the lines. To win they had to close that spear-seething space. Round shields had to barge into rectangular.

Soon commanders were crying for an advance. Kynegeiros added his voice and heaved at Krito. But Krito and his front rank comrades had lethal iron in the way. Some did manage to cross the gap, leaving holes in the Greek shield wall.

'Go, lad!' barked Kynegeiros.

Krito blew a hard breath. He swiped a spear out of the way with his shield and stepped forward. His blade pierced the top of his opponent's wicker screen and he sprang forward. His spear now projected six feet past his foe, and he aimed it at the archers behind. Kynegeiros and Aeschylos behind him shoved forward and the Persian shield bearer was forced back a step. Kynegeiros lofted his spear over Krito's shoulder and rammed down at the Persian front man's head, slitting his leather cap at the side. Then Aeschylos stabbed, his blade held vertically like a fish to fit through the twigs. He missed and pulled back.

Kynegeiros heaved again, his broad shield against Krito's ox-like back. The archers now realised they could not shoot hoplites so close to their own front men, and that these front men were

about to be bowled over, so they added their own weight to the pushing match. Warriors on both sides grunted with the strain.

Hippolytos, on Krito's right side, unbalanced his foe. The Persian staggered back, for a moment dropping his shield cover. Hippolytos sliced into his belly, and his guts spilled out, uncoiling. On his knees he held them with a look of astonishment. The man behind him grabbed his shield and took Hippolytos on with his curved Asiatic sword.

Krito, Kynegeiros and Aeschylos took turns to lunge, while still heaving. Aeschylos' skin seethed at the enemies who jabbed at his brother and himself. He returned those jabs; but killing was not so easy, for each man was doing his best to avoid maiming blows. And Aeschylos was growing hotter, and wearier.

Two files to the left a first ranker groaned: an arrow had entered his leg above the greave, and stuck out – the bone had stopped it. He slumped, and his opponent drove a spear at him. The Greek second ranker met the blow with his shield, another clang of iron on bronze, lost in the thousands like one seagull's call in a flock. Somehow the injured hoplite tottered back to safety.

Dust clouds rose like smoke. Aeschylos blinked as specks entered his eyes. Kynegeiros thrust and skimmed off his Persian shield man's cap. The Persian grimaced but seemed unhurt. Aeschylos took his chance and stabbed into the shield, through it and into the arm. The Persian yelped.

'Kill! Kill the barbarians!' cried a hoarse voice.

Some of the archers had drawn swords and were hacking at Krito's spear. They used their bows to parry the shaft away, then danced about, out of range and back in with a swipe. One blow snapped the pole. Krito dropped it and drew his own sword. With a short weapon he could now strike the man whose frame he pressed with overhead chops.

The bows were poor protectors, however. Archers hooked spear shafts in the curling ends of their bows and tried to flick them away, but many soon lost their hold. Before they could step back the blade looped around and spiked a leg, groin, or stomach.

'They're afraid!' piped a Greek voice.

'No mercy!' yelled another.

With his mighty wrestler's arm Krito chopped into his enemy's bare skull. The Persian reeled as if drunk and Krito cracked him again. Blood spurted and he crumpled, clawing the ground. Krito howled in delight, but then an arrow popped into his neck. Red droplets sprayed from his mouth.

'Send him back!' cried Kynegeiros, thrusting to cover Krito's retreat. The danger for Aeschylos, now in the second rank, had just doubled.

An archer dropped his bow and grabbed his dead comrade's tattered shield, just in time to defend his head from Kynegeiros' darting blade. The spear tore the shield almost in two and the bowman rolled back with it.

Hippolytos roared at his friend's fate. He strode into the midst of the enemy ranks, stabbing forwards, and backwards too with the lizarder. In moments he slew one, two, three shocked archers.

'Hippolytos! Back!' barked Kynegeiros.

But it was too late. A curved scimitar lopped his spear, and before he could unsheathe his sword the Persian hacked his helm, knocking it off, and again at his neck. Blades sank into Hippolytos' nape like wolves' teeth on a goat. Soon he was on his knees, his head toppled to one side, held on only by skin. Crimson fountains spouted from the stump.

'That's what happens if you break rank!' yelled Kynegeiros.

Aeschylos shivered. Death was a thoughtless moment away.

The savage plunging of spears did not let up. But Aeschylos noticed now, as he stepped over a corpse, that they had moved forward: the sturdy legs of the front ranks had driven the Persians back. And he glimpsed more enemy carcasses. Two files to the right a Trikorythian braced his heel against a bloody chest to pull out his spear point.

But Aeschylos was tiring badly. His arm could not forever bear the weight of his spear, held so high. It was far easier to hold it at shoulder height and support it under the elbow. How much longer before that arm became useless? But he could not rest: his brother needed him.

The shoving began again, each man gasping with exhaustion. And still the arrows zipped. Not so many now, for the archers could not easily find gaps between their own jostling front men. An arrow thudded off Aeschylos' helmet and for a moment he was dazed.

'After three, a push!' cried Kynegeiros. 'One, two, three!'

Aeschylos felt a great force behind him and tried to add to it. The ranks crammed forward like a herd of horses breaking through a fence. The Persians stumbled back. Lances lunged at them. Many met only wickerwork or empty air, but some slashed arms, legs, chests, and necks.

The Persian lines looked unsteady. Lives of twenty, thirty, and forty years were ending in seconds. And yet there were so many more of them – a thousand shapes of death, a thousand flailing swords, a thousand hailing arrows.

All was still uncertain. Zeus, watching from far-off Olympus, had not yet weighed the scales. He had not yet decided to whom He would give the day.

An hour earlier a boy climbed another mountain, not so high as Olympus, but to him steep and slippery.

Euphorion forged a winding trail through a thick wood of pines, oaks, and bushes with pricks like viper's fangs. Now and then he turned his head, each time noting a small advance in the ribbon crossing the plain.

He simply could not go straight back to Athens. How could he, without knowing if his father, his uncle, or his cousin had survived? He knew he ought to obey what might be his father's last words to him. But his heart would not let him. He had left Philokles once, left him to – something horrible.

Euphorion cringed. How could he disobey again, after all that had happened? But he *was* going back. In fact this route was a straight line back to Athens – if he could scale the heights of Pentelikon. Once the outcome of the battle was clear, if he could see it with his eagle's eyes, he would find a path across to the city. He would surely get there faster than either of the two armies.

Whichever side won, they would be delayed by tending the wounded, packing, eating, and drinking.

Euphorion clambered on. At last he left the woods and saw the ridge a hundred feet up. He sat on a boulder to catch his breath and peered into the plain.

They were much closer now, the two lines, stretching across half the width of the plain. He could still see the thinner part of the Greek front, the middle third. He was glad his father and uncle were on the right. They were close to the beach, too – to the ships – to that one ship.

There too was the Great Marsh, a vast green sprawl. Seeing it made Euphorion's mosquito bites itch. He swigged water from his father's flask and climbed on. A wild goat appeared on the ridge, stared at him, and trotted out of sight.

Wheezing, legs burning, he reached the spot where the goat had stood. His spirits slumped: from here the mountain tumbled jaggedly down, but then rose and fell in many folds like a rumpled blanket. A few miles away a much greater peak arose – the true Pentelikon, a bear's back compared to the front paw he had just scaled. In between lay cliffs, rocks, and thorny bushes. And no sign of a track. Finding a way past all that would take forever. He wiped the sweat from his brow and turned round.

There was one line now.

Euphorion felt dizzy. It was unearthly, the cool, quiet loneliness of the hilltop, while down on the hot plain men in their thousands were shouting and shrieking, destroying and being destroyed.

'Zeus – You're watching this, I know You are. You see everything we do. These are Your own people, Lord, men who sacrifice to You every day. Please, think of them. Here, I give You my water, which I need for my journey.'

He took one last gulp then poured the rest onto the stones. Immediately he felt thirsty – but there had to be a spring somewhere on this vast rock.

He sat and watched.

Rubbing his temples, Euphorion waited.

Scratching his mosquito bites, he gazed.

Then he realised, the single narrow line had bulged. It had curved, toward the mountain he sat on. And now – yes, it had separated. The line had broken into three sections.

The Athenian centre was losing.

'Oh Zeus! Oh – oh, Athena, forgive me, Holy Maiden, I forgot you.' He rifled in his pack and found a hunk of bread.

'It's not much. But I have no meat or barley.'

He laid it on a rock, not knowing what else to do.

Euphorion's head sank to his knees.

Fear. Awful, gut-stabbing fear.

At first the invaders had simply looked surprised. In previous contests, Aeschylos guessed, their iron hailstorm had wiped out most of their foe before coming face-to-face. Perhaps they had never known such an onslaught – packed ranks of well-protected athletes, armed as much with ferocity as with long lances.

And now fear had crept into those battle-toughened faces. Aeschylos heard roars of joy as the phalanx broke through the Persian fence. Hoplites sprang after archers, who either backed away, fumbling for arrows, or drew their swords. But they had neither shields, nor metal round their skulls. Fear brimmed in their eyes and choked their voices. They were no match for the Athenians and they began to topple.

Hippolytos' replacement hit his man squarely in the chest, the cuirass proving useless. The iron tip entered by the nipple and came out by the shoulder blade. The Persian fell, and warm life ebbed from his bones.

Kynegeiros stepped back just in time as a sword swung at his thigh. Over his shoulder Aeschylos struck, shearing away the man's fingertips. He dropped, scarlet stumps scraping the soil.

Arrows whizzed, but Greek shields and helmets were tough. A shaft stuck in Kynegeiros' left greave: if it had entered the flesh he made no noise about it.

'Phalanx forward!' he bellowed.

The ranks rebuilt their shield wall and trod forward, over

corpses still clutching bows and daggers, over shredded shields and broken arrows.

Terrified enemies slashed with swords and tried to fend off Greek spears with bows – a use they were clearly not designed for. The flicker of hope in Aeschylos' chest burst into flame. Could they, after all, win?

Onward the Greek monster trod with its iron horns. Kynegeiros leapt at a man who quailed too late. The spearhead hooked his jawbone, as a fisherman hooks a fish, and he sprawled.

An archer, eyes staring madly, sprang past Aeschylos' spear and hacked at him. Aeschylos ducked under his shield but his spear, projecting well past the attacker, was useless. The hoplite behind him thrust at the enemy and missed. Aeschylos had no room to manoeuvre. The Persian chopped at his right shoulder and it flared with awesome pain. He shoved the man with his shield. Retreating he brought the Persian back into range and drove the spear into his ribs. The Persian collapsed, lengthening out like an earthworm.

Aeschylos saw his cuirass was slit. The hurt was sharp but the wound felt shallow; he could still wield his weapon.

Kynegeiros slew another, a jab in the jugular. Hot blood showered his helmet. Aeschylos closed up and aimed his spear once more over his brother's shoulder.

And then it happened, so quickly he could barely believe it. All around, the bowmen caught a sound, a word, or a movement from others down the line, which spelled the end. In a great mass they bolted, swords swinging in one hand and bows in the other.

Like a broad river in flood the Greeks chased the invaders – a river that ravages many a farmer's field, and which nothing can stop. But they were getting away. Some hoplites tossed their shields, even their helmets, to lighten their feet. The brothers kept theirs. Aeschylos sensed this was a new race, and neither wanted the other to say he had won only because he had less to carry.

But now he was deeply glad of his training. He kept up with Kynegeiros, and they kept up with the rest. Now and then enemies tripped on bushes or stones, and their end was swift.

A half mile – two hoplite races – and they reached the marsh. The archers were aiming for their ships, but reed beds and brambles had trapped them like birds in a net.

Greeks and Persians met splashing in pools. Success seemed only to have inflamed the hoplites' thirst for blood, and the real massacre began. Aeschylos lost count of the number he slew, and the means – strikes through the chest, groin, neck, temple, eye, thigh. The stagnant ponds became a slaughterhouse, tendrils of blood drifting from sodden cadavers. His spear got stuck in the mud under a foe's gut. As he yanked it out it snapped. He drew his sword, shortening his reach by five feet. But the invaders were so blinded by panic it did not matter.

And now Aeschylos learned of execution by sword – stab through the kidneys, break an arm or take it right off, hack the nape of the neck, or swing up through the tongue and into the brain. On and on it went, until the enemy seemed no longer men, only vermin to be stamped out.

At last Aeschylos found himself pursuing a foe to the dead end of an avenue of tall reeds. The man chopped at the thick stems but saw he was doomed. He dropped his sword and sank to his knees in the water, uttering the same word over and over.

'Mercy? Is that it?'

The man nodded and repeated 'mercy' in a strangled accent.

'Like the mercy you showed for Eretria? For Miletos? Or the mercy you would have shown for Athens? For my wife and sons?'

The man collapsed, gibbering. Aeschylos gripped his neck and jammed the sword in his gut. The archer's eyes bulged and he slumped face forward in the water.

Aeschylos strode back out to the broader scene of carnage. His throat was parched; he had no water, and the pools were diseased. He realised he was exhausted, utterly, and could barely stand. He flopped onto a hump of grass.

He had not paused to look at things properly since that first run at the enemy, what – an hour ago? Watching the savagery all around, he recalled a phrase of Homer: "the shameless butchery of war". He understood it now. It *was* butchery, and the hoplites

revelled in it. As had he.

Nausea gripped his bowels. He was so thirsty, hot, and worn out. Was it over? Where was Kynegeiros?

A younger man splashed up.

'Aeschylos! What a day! How did we do it?'

'It's not over yet, Perithous.'

'We've won, though, haven't we?'

'Have you forgotten the centre? They fight in only four ranks, and they face the Immortals. This lot are pigeons compared to those hawks. Themistokles and Aristeides may be in a great deal of trouble.'

A sense grew in Aeschylos of the need to drag his soul out of the butcher's shop. He had to rally these men and save those comrades out of sight.

'Kynegeiros!' Where was he?

A trumpet blew on the plain. Kynegeiros appeared from a wall of reeds. He still had his spear, bloodsmeared down to his hand. There was a gash on his right leg, still bleeding.

'We must return to the centre,' said Aeschylos. 'We may yet lose the day.'

Kynegeiros removed his helmet. His black and white hair was slathered with sweat. 'Come with me to the ships. They're just past those trees. We'll save the prisoners, then go back.'

'Brother, have you not seen them streaming to their boats? We've slain many, but not most. We would not succeed. We must complete this victory, then send a stronger force.'

'Themistokles is miles away!' roared Kynegeiros, ramming his lizarder into the mud. 'By the time we get there, finish them off, and make it to the beach the ships will be gone. With my son!'

'There are six hundred of those ships. And the slave boats will be last to leave. We cannot succeed in small numbers. Our duty is to Athens first. If the Immortals defeat our centre then they shall turn on us. Perhaps before we have had time to regroup.'

'Forgive me, Kynegeiros, but he is right,' said Perithous.

One of the Trikorythians rested a hand on Kynegeiros' shoulder. 'My friend, I have a wife and daughter on that ship. But

we must defeat our enemy first, or we shall lose everything.'

Kynegeiros glowered at the pines in the distance. A trumpet piped. Up on the plain Stesilaos shouted.

'Hoy! Hoplites over here. Aiantis here!'

They joined the crowd round the general. Xanthias was there, bent over. The slave smiled at his master, too exhausted to speak. Further north Aeschylos saw hundreds more hoplites milling around and heard commanders shouting. One voice sounded like Miltiades', and there indeed was his black crest. How on earth was the old man going to get this weary rabble back into shape?

Everyone was asking everyone else now, 'Do we form files?', 'Where is my file?', 'Shouldn't we just go?'

Stesilaos grew more and more confused and frustrated.

Kynegeiros called to him. 'General, we have no time for this. Forget battle order – we'll hit them in the rear, and it won't make a jot of difference.'

Kynegeiros' booming voice had been heard by many and hoplites began clamouring to run.

'The phalanx is our only strength,' said Stesilaos. But then the matter was decided for him, as up and down the line men began to trot. At the sea end Kallimachos' triple red crest led the way, and soon everyone was heading back into the middle of the plain.

Aeschylos knew each man had barely a lick of energy in his legs, but they were thinking of their wives and children. Many had discarded their shields.

A feeling of brotherhood rose in Aeschylos' chest; they did look up to him, these lads, as much as they looked up to Kynegeiros. His confident words and looks seemed to boost them, and he felt at last a respected leader. He saw it even in Kynegeiros' eyes. After the battle, things would be different between them. Better. What an evil was envy, and what a joy to overcome it. It was a stain on what love should be.

Near the middle of the field Aeschylos saw that the Greek left wing had fared as well as the right, for they too were flocking back in their own gigantic herd. The two wings waved and called to each other like long lost brothers.

The two centre tribes, however, were nowhere to be seen. Only scattered corpses and wounded of both armies gave proof of their struggle. One stunned hoplite was brought round with water. He revealed that after soaking up much deadly pressure, Themistokles and Aristeides had ordered a retreat, or, as he put it, they had fled for their lives.

'They were ten hardy ranks against our four. And our rear, slaves and weaklings, hardly counted. We could not allow ourselves to be slaughtered, or they would have turned on you.'

Miltiades called on two men to loft Aeschylos on a shield so he could scan for the missing portion of the army. It was nearly two miles, but the flatness of the plain and its lack of trees allowed him to detect a glimmer of motion.

'They are engaged at the camp.'

'What of the ships?' asked Kynegeiros.

In the opposite direction, at about the same distance, Aeschylos saw a very different sort of activity.

'Some have moved offshore. Perhaps half.'

'Half! By Apollo!'

'All right, Kynegeiros,' said Miltiades. 'First things first.' He raised his voice to its maximum. 'To the grove of Herakles!'

The two wings of the Greek army joined together, and the warriors trotted on.

A long, long jog it seemed. Slowly the mountain loomed larger and the olive trees came into view. And there they were: the Persian Immortals and the axe-wielding Sakai, hardened warriors with oval shields as solid as the Greeks' own. Across the middle third of the camp they stretched, hard at it with the men of Themistokles' and Aristeides' tribes.

The thundering feet and battle-yelling of seven thousand men could not go unnoticed. With a quarter mile to go the enemy saw, and Pan infected them with his panic. Captains on horseback cantered back and forth, trying to marshal their ranks into fighting order. But these men were no fools, and they saw they would soon be swallowed up like sardines in the mouth of a whale. A trickle of escapees at each flank became a gushing river. By the time iron

cracked into wood, Aeschylos guessed a third had fled, most toward the beach.

The remainder of the enemy fought fiercely. Aeschylos found himself by his brother's side in what was hardly a phalanx, as few possessed their shields, but was still a tight, murderous pack. In one hand he thrust his spear, in the other he parried and chopped with his sword.

It was a massacre. Aeschylos glimpsed the rear ranks of Leontis and Antiochis rallying in the wood, encouraged by the rescue, and soon Datis' men were surrounded. Outnumbered, too, and the result was a shower of flesh. Fingers, hands, even whole arms and legs littered Herakles' hallowed soil, horrible offerings to the greatest of heroes.

Each man, Greek and foreign, was now in the zone beyond exhaustion, where dire need found hidden reserves of energy. But the Greeks had an extra store, unlocked by the promise of victory. The Persians lost their spears, the Sakai their axes, and both, at last, their lives.

In the end the sprawl of ripped and bruised bodies was hideous to see, the moans of dying men yet more hideous to hear. Miserable clusters of Immortals and Sakai begged to be taken captive. Some received no mercy; others were saved by commanders wanting slaves.

The hoplites stared wearily around, at first numbed by it all. But ecstatic cries broke out, and soon all were embracing and congratulating one another.

Aeschylos laughed. 'We did it! Zeus above, we battered them.'

But Kynegeiros did not share in the joy. 'We must go.'

'First let us bandage our wounds; we'll need our blood.'

They wrapped their cuts with linen then went to find Miltiades. He was at the temple, surrounded by young warriors offering him backslaps and flasks of wine.

'It's been a stupendous day, lads, but I can't take all the credit. Let us not forget that god who watches all, and rules all. Zeus, cloud-gatherer, You favoured us today. This is for You.' He poured wine onto the earth, and everyone roared in thanks to the

king of the gods.

Kallimachos strode up. 'But neither must we forget the lady of the hunt. I told you, she would not ignore such a generous offer, one kid for every dead Persian.'

'But look at them,' said Miltiades, gesturing around. 'There aren't enough goats in Greece to honour that promise.'

Kallimachos beamed. He had a look of happy calm; he had proved himself at last. Aeschylos understood, for he felt the same.

'General,' said Kynegeiros, 'let me take a detachment to the ships. We cannot let them escape unpunished.'

'I understand,' said Miltiades. 'You want to save your son.'

'It is not only my son. If we sit on our backsides forty Trikorythians will lose their families.'

'I know, but the men need a moment's rest.'

Miltiades saw Kynegeiros' anger. He gripped his shoulder.

'We'll send those who have the legs for it.'

'I shall lead them,' said Kallimachos. 'I fought alongside these good men of Trikorythos, and shall be honoured to do so again. I made the right choice, I think, in delegating strategy to you, Miltiades. But now I shall prove that those who elected me were no fools.'

Miltiades sent messages to every general, asking them to send volunteers. Before long a thousand hoplites were mustered before the Aiantis portion of the wood. Stesilaos was there, Themistokles too. Kynegeiros thanked them.

'I'll not be remembered for running away; that is an ill fame,' said Themistokles.

'We have all lost our shields today,' said Stesilaos, 'or swapped them.' He smirked at his diamond-patterned shield. 'In any case, whether we live or die, glory has been won by all.'

'I, for one, have not had my fill of glory,' answered Themistokles.

'Let's get on with it, Kallimachos,' grumbled Kynegeiros.

The war arkhon mounted a rock.

'Men! Across that bay some rather large fish wait to be caught. We must not let them get away. Are you ready for one last

rumble?'

They shook their spears, and the rescue mission headed off. They followed the coast, just off the beach so as not to slow weary bodies on the sand. Kallimachos led the way with his racer's legs, then the brothers, then Themistokles and Stesilaos. Aeschylos saw his brother's frustration that the hoplites did not run, but it was a marvel they were even moving. He was trying not to show the soreness dragging down both his arms. He ought to be resting that gash in his shoulder – it was throbbing now. But who among them did not have some nick or lump? Most were a patchwork of bloody bandages.

Half way they reached a bulge in the coastline fringed with rocks and seaweed. After that the ships came into view again.

Kynegeiros groaned. Most were now too far out to sea to catch. The Immortals and Sakai had reached any sea-craft still anchored and were clambering aboard. Thousands still crowded the sand. More galleys remained at the far end of the bay.

Oarsmen lined the bottoms of some of the beached ships, heaving them into the water, then climbing in and offering arms to waiting warriors. It was a sight like none Aeschylos had seen, nor expected to see again: the mighty forces of the Great King fleeing in panic; hundreds of triremes, their three banks of oars dipping frantically. Those in the middle of the bay were raising their sails to catch the Thracian wind.

Kynegeiros began to jog and the men picked up his pace.

'Many remain on the beach,' said Aeschylos. 'But if we fail, brother, you must not blame yourself.'

'I blame Zeus, not myself!' snapped Kynegeiros. 'Curse Him – that so-called god of justice.' He cast a sideways glance at Aeschylos. 'Why did you have to let them stay? You and your damned leniency – look where it's got us.'

'You agreed to it; I didn't force you. Do you really think that ridiculous adventure was Euphorion's idea? It was your son who bullied him into it. And into coming here in the first place.'

'If you had taught your son to stiffen his backbone, mine would never have been able to bully him.'

'And if you had taught your son a little more sense, he would not *be* a bully. And none of this would have happened.'

Fury and shame battled in Kynegeiros' face.

'I know that. But it's too late. Zeus has punished us both.'

'We'll succeed, brother.'

As the Greeks approached the camp Kallimachos directed them into the pines. Aeschylos guessed he sought cover from the archers – as well, perhaps, as a degree of surprise.

The enemy had left in a hurry. Campfires remained with pots still smelling of last night's stews. Mats and blankets still lay on the sandy earth. As they neared the section of the beach teeming with enemies trying to board ships, the hoplites spread out into a front of about one stadium length.

At a shout from Kallimachos they strode through the cool shadows into the midday sun, closing the gaps into a phalanx of four ranks. Aeschylos was in the first rank next to his brother, with Themistokles and Stesilaos nearby.

Observing all this, the Immortals and Sakai had ordered themselves into an opposing line. Soon only a few spear lengths of sand separated the two forces. Kynegeiros' gaze darted among the nearby galleys.

'Forward!' cried the war arkhon. Spears and swords were levelled on both sides, and the fragment of one army strode into the fragment of another.

Kynegeiros leaned his shoulder into his shield and rammed it into his enemy's chest, knocking him back. Aeschylos raised his own shield as a Persian swung with a long dagger. Iron edge met bronze sheet with a nerve-shredding screech. He poked at the man's groin; the spear passed between leather flaps and into his bladder. He groaned and bit the sand. Kynegeiros stabbed his man through the shoulder and downed him too.

This time the numbers were nearly equal, but Aeschylos saw the enemy's spirit had been crushed. A familiar savagery steeled his limbs. A few steps away Themistokles, bull of a man, kicked sand into the face of an axe-wielder, and as he blinked the general hacked at his neck. Blood shot from the artery. He staggered back,

but did not avoid the final thrust into his gut.

At the rear Persians and Sakai began to flee, some to the nearby ships, others down the beach to those at the Dog's Tail, perhaps hoping the Greeks would not pursue them a third time.

Furiously the brothers swung their spears and shields, trying to clear a way to the sea-craft. The ships were all in the water now, oars at the ready, awaiting survivors.

'Stesilaos!' came a cry. Glancing right Aeschylos saw an Immortal withdraw a spear tip from the eyehole of the general's helmet. Hoplites dragged him back, but he had met his end. Men of Aiantis roared and fought yet more vigorously.

Then Kynegeiros found his gap. He beckoned to Aeschylos and they dashed into the sea. 'Philokles!' he yelled.

Trikorythians followed, each shouting the names of his loved ones. Into the calm, clear waters they splashed, calling for fire to torch the ships, although they knew well enough that all the campfires had burned out.

'Philokles!' Along the shore the brothers waded, knee deep, shouting over and over. Persians dashed past, ignoring them.

Kallimachos led the Trikorythians to a trireme smothered in Immortals, grasping arms lowered to them and handing up wounded. Seeing the Greeks approach they stopped to fight. The tireless war arkhon maimed one Persian after another, but they soon isolated him. It seemed they recognised him from his many-crested helmet, and wanted to avenge their defeat on him.

Aeschylos wondered whether to follow Kynegeiros or go to Kallimachos' aid. But his mind was soon made up for him: in quick succession three Persians shoved their spears into Kallimachos' torso, driving them through and into the sand. He flopped, supported by this gruesome tripod. In boats all around enemies jeered, as if they had won the day with this one kill.

The Trikorythians made short work of Kallimachos' assassins and began to board the ship. Back on the beach Greek shouts suggested victory. Aeschylos glimpsed Immortals kneeling in surrender and others fleeing in terror. Five or six ships were now under attack by bloodthirsty Greeks. It would all be over soon.

'Philokles!' cried Kynegeiros, three or four boats away. Aeschylos waded after him. Then Kynegeiros stopped, pointed at a galley twenty yards out, and yelled, 'He's there!' He cast away his spear and shield and dashed after the ship.

Aeschylos followed him, shouting back to the Trikorythians, 'Hoy! The other slave boat!'

The ship had cleared the sand, one hundred and sixty oars propelling it. It had not gained momentum, however, and Kynegeiros was closing on it.

'Wait!' cried Aeschylos, but Kynegeiros ignored him. By the time he had reached the ship he was up to his hips in sea water. He seized an ornament on the stern and began hauling himself up.

A Sakai appeared above, battle-axe raised.

'Watch out!' cried Aeschylos, wading desperately.

Kynegeiros looked up as the axe hacked into his wrist. His right hand fell off and blood gushed from the stump. He crashed into the sea and vanished.

Aeschylos dropped everything and swam.

Chapter 19 Lost and Found

Aeschylos could not move his battle-bruised limbs quickly enough. His right arm ached from the cut and a thousand spear thrusts. He stood and waded. Kynegeiros was nowhere to be seen.

Panic stabbed his ribs. Kynegeiros rose coughing from the sea. He stared at his wrist spouting blood into the air, gave a cry, and stumbled back into the water.

Aeschylos turned and yelled, so hard his throat stung.

'The other ship! The prisoners!'

He dashed through the gentle waves to where Kynegeiros' face appeared just above the water, gasping, eyes wandering. An archer joined the axeman at the stern of the ship and slotted an arrow. Aeschylos sank behind his brother and dragged him toward the shore. With each of Kynegeiros' heartbeats a red cloud bloomed in the water, trailing behind his wrist.

An arrow plopped into the sea by Aeschylos' ear. His legs shook with the strain. He saw hoplites striding to the prison ship. Soon the shallow water forced him to stand and the weight increased greatly. In the midst of his blazing panic one thought glimmered in his mind.

Fire. He had to seal the wound.

On the beach he sat and cradled his brother in his arms. 'Fire!' he yelled hoarsely. It was long after the theatre season and his voice, normally as powerful as his brother's, was out of shape. He yelled again. But Greeks were busy in their own combats.

'Fire! A brand!'

There were bonfires all over the beach, but no wisp of smoke. Panic shivered into horror. Blood still spurted from the ragged stump; the sand was soaked with it. Kynegeiros' legs and torso glistened red. Everything was turning red.

Kynegeiros hissed through gritted teeth, eyes squeezed tight.

'Perithous!' Aeschylos saw his friend run by. 'Get me fire, an ember.' Perithous dashed off.

He had to think. Unfreeze his mind.

A cloth–

He tore a strip from Kynegeiros' tunic, wrapped it round the wrist and pulled tight. Kynegeiros shrieked. He opened his eyes.

'Stop the ship. Save him. I heard him – there, black sail–'

'I must save *you*, brother. Our comrades will rescue Philokles.'

'No, leave me – stop the ship.'

'Look, they have it now. See them boarding? You did it, brother. You saved him.'

Kynegeiros blinked at the boat. A spasm of agony crumpled his cheeks.

'Fire!' cried Aeschylos. 'Perithous!'

The young hoplite was rooting in the charred chunks of a bonfire. He ran to another. Only dead and wounded were left on the beach now. The frenzy continued round the ships, however, and the death cries of Persians and Sakai shattered the air.

The cloth round Kynegeiros' wrist was drenched. Blood was dripping from his elbow at an alarming rate.

'I feel sick. Dizzy…'

'Stay strong, brother. We'll seal the wound.'

'I'm dying, Aeschylos.' His right hand was grey, his lips too.

Perithous had given up on another fire. 'They're all out!'

'Take father's arms,' breathed Kynegeiros. 'You are eldest now.' The pain seemed to have lessened. 'Look after them. Ismene…' He gasped. 'Not for me to see my wife in her joy, my darling children…'

'Live, Kynegeiros. You'll see them again.' Aeschylos cupped his brother's cheek, felt the springiness of his beard.

'I will, in Hades' realm. Tell her I'll wait, to see her lovely face.' His eyes rolled, as if following a fly. 'Is Philokles safe?'

'The ship is taken. You'll see him soon. Hold on, see your son.'

'Aeschylos, teach him. Do what I could not, teach him to be a man.'

'You shall do that yourself, dear brother.'

'It's my doing,' said Kynegeiros. A tear rolled down his cheek. 'I was a poor father.'

'No, you are a fine father.'

'But I fought my best. I did my duty, did I not?'

'You fought like Achilles. You won glory for our father's name.'

'So did you, brother.' He closed his eyes.

'Zeus!' cried Aeschylos. 'If ever You have listened to my prayers with a glad heart, now, I beg, give me fire!' He screamed again at Perithous – 'Fire!' – but he knew there was none.

Kynegeiros was mumbling now. Aeschylos pressed his cheek to his temple. The heartbeat was slow, uncertain.

'Ismene,' murmured Kynegeiros. 'Where's my wine? Uh…feel ill. Water, slave. Philokles – damned fool. No discipline. All words, no discipline.'

Aeschylos took a small leather flask from his belt, opened Kynegeiros' pale lips and poured some water in. Kynegeiros coughed feebly and the water dribbled down his chin. He went limp. Aeschylos lowered his face to his brother's mouth. He felt a faint breath.

The men of Trikorythos were leading their wives and children from the prison ships. Persian and Greek corpses bobbed in the shallows. The waves had washed bodies up all along the shore. Aeschylos stroked his brother's white-flecked hair.

He saw Philokles descending the ship's ladder.

'Look, your son.'

Kynegeiros' face and arms were ashen. Aeschylos held him tightly, as if to stop his spirit fleeing.

Philokles staggered toward them through the water. His legs and arms were cut by shackles and whiplash, and blood trickled from a fresh cut on his lip. He fell at his father's feet.

'Father, I'm back,' he croaked.

Aeschylos saw he had been beaten and starved. But in his own agony he felt nothing for him.

'He is dying, Philokles.'

Philokles leaned close to his father's face. 'Forgive me, father. I wanted to help Athens, help save mother. Father, wake up.'

Kynegeiros did not respond. Philokles touched his father's hair, tears making tracks through the filth on his cheeks.

'Uncle, did Euphorion get back?'

'How do you think we knew what happened to you?' snapped Aeschylos. 'Imbecile!'

Aeschylos pressed his cheek to his brother's. No heartbeat. He held the back of his hand to Kynegeiros' mouth. No breath.

He laid his brother down.

'Nooo…' moaned Philokles. 'Nooo…'

Fury rose in Aeschylos' chest, black, rotten fury. He stood and drew his sword. Philokles shrank back. He strode to the water's edge where Persians lay dying. One of them, his chest and arms horribly slashed, gargled a word. Mercy? Water?

Aeschylos glared at him. 'You Immortals were poorly named.'

He drove his sword into the Persian's chest and drew it out, painted red. The life he had taken made his hate stronger. On he went, finishing off invaders, his rage blinding him to all else. One enemy, his legs mangled, was dragging himself across the sand. As Aeschylos bent over he cried out in Greek.

'No kill! Take as slave. I your slave!'

Aeschylos raised his blade to pierce the man's heart. Then he saw the costume was that of a Sakai. His fury grew white-hot. He stepped on the man's right forearm. With his left the Sakai gripped Aeschylos' calf.

'I beg – I soldier, like you. Take as slave!'

'You are not like me. You are a slave already.'

'Yes, is true! I slave. Is no my fault. No kill!'

Aeschylos hacked at the man's wrist. The Sakai screamed. The iron edge was dulled by use, however, and it took two more swings to cut through. Still screaming the Sakai rolled away, gripping his arm, blood gushing onto the sand.

As Aeschylos watched him a grey vapour fell on his soul. He knelt and pressed his palms into his temples.

After a while thoughts began to emerge.

Was it his fault? He had allowed Euphorion to stay. Would Philokles have got up to any of those idiotic antics on his own? Kynegeiros was right. He had not taught his son to stiffen his backbone.

A hand rested on his shoulder.

'Athens needs you.' It was Themistokles.

All but seven of the galleys were gone now; those seven were being shoved by their oarsmen back onto the beach under the orders of hoplites. The Trikorythian captives were in the embraces of their fathers, husbands and sons.

'I grieve for Kynegeiros,' said Themistokles. 'He was one of our finest, and a good friend.'

'He is in the company of better men now: Achilles, Herakles, and Theseus.'

'And well he deserves that company. But Aeschylos, I need your eyes.'

'It's over, Themistokles. Let us mourn. Let us sing songs for the dead.'

Themistokles nodded into the bay. 'What do you see?'

'I see a herd of sea-cows bearing poisoned milk. I see the Great King's army whipped and driven home. Why, what do you

see?'

'Look again, my friend.'

Aeschylos peered at the great spread of triremes, thousands of oars dipping in time, hundreds of sails being raised. One small segment of the fleet was heading round the Dog's Tail – presumably to pick up the Eretrian captives they had left behind. But the rest–

Horror stabbed Aeschylos' heart. It was not over yet.

Half way to the clouds a boy crouched behind a rock, watching. He might have been chained to that rock, for had been unable to tear himself away from it for two hours.

Euphorion had followed the battle up to the final victory at the sacred grove. But he still did not know if his father and uncle had survived. And his cousin still languished on a slave ship at the end of the bay. He had begun descending to join the rejoicing warriors when he noticed a column of them head along the coast – surely to the rescue of the captives. But those galleys were departing as fast as their oarsmen could take them, out of the shelter of the Dog's Tail and into the wind-chopped sea.

Euphorion tried to drag himself away from the rock and obey his father's command. But he had to know – he had to see at least some of those ships captured.

And there was something else blocking his return to Athens, a barrier as great as the jagged mountains. His mother. He was terrified of her anger, of the suffering he had caused her.

It was too far to see what was happening on that far beach. But as time crept by, fewer and fewer boats remained near the sand. At last all, as far as he could tell, had embarked for Asia.

Euphorion noticed a cluster of triremes detach themselves and curve round the peninsula. Most however stayed on course, forming an oval at least a mile long, many hundreds of sea-craft.

Headed for–

Euphorion remembered a map of Greece his father had shown him. If the Persians were going home they way they had come, then surely that wasn't the right direction.

They were following the coast of Attica. South.

It was only a small difference. Was the wind blowing them off course? But each ship had one hundred and sixty oarsmen.

The fleet was headed for Cape Sounion. Once round that, it wasn't far to Phaleron.

Euphorion had no choice. It was his duty.

Off he sprang down the crumbling rocks.

At last he reached the tent of the commander-in-chief. The wood was in uproar: men danced and drank, sang songs to Pan, and howled with laughter. Cups were poured to Zeus, Athena, Artemis, and any other god they could think of. Many, shattered and battered, lay asleep on their blankets.

Miltiades was enveloped by revellers. He was lounging on a heap of rich cloaks torn from dead Immortals, soaking in praise with a broad smile.

'Let me through,' said Euphorion to a man at the back. 'I must see Miltiades.'

'Eh, lad? It's the messenger boy!' he turned back.

'Let me past! I have to see him!'

'Join the queue. Everyone wants to see him now.'

Euphorion fell to his hands and knees and squirmed through stout pairs of legs, until he was face to face with the general.

'Oho! What do we have here? You're like a boil on the bum, lad. Can't get rid of you.'

'Sir, I must speak to you. I was up on the hill, on my way home, and I saw the enemy fleet leaving.'

Miltiades was only half listening. A drunk tripped and spilled wine over Euphorion's head.

'By Apollo, listen! The Persians are sailing to Athens!'

Miltiades narrowed his eyes. 'What's that?'

'Er, I'm not totally sure, but I think the Persians are going to Athens.'

Miltiades waved to the crowd for silence. They ignored him. He stood, hands on hips. 'Cork it one cursed minute!'

The warriors froze.

'Say that again, boy.'

A league away Themistokles was bawling commands.

'Glaukos, you and your fellows from Trikorythos, stay and tend the wounded. Take them to Datis' tents; there'll be plenty of food, wine, and other comforts. Lysias, Hipparkhos, Philagros: find all the captains and tell them to rally everyone here. We return without delay.'

'Don't the men deserve a drop of that foreign wine?' said Lysias.

'And a nap on those Persian rugs?' added Hipparkhos.

Themistokles spread his arms wide. 'Go ahead, lads, ease yourselves! That is, if you wish to find your homes reduced to smoking cinders.'

They looked puzzled, then turned to watch the fleet.

'By Zeus…' muttered Lysias. They trotted off.

Aeschylos sat at his brother's feet with a rock in his belly. He did not know what to do with that quivering boy behind him. Philokles was in a bad way, but Aeschylos could not bring himself to look at him, never mind speak to him.

One of the prisoners, a woman his own age, was sipping water while her husband caressed her. She kept glancing over.

'Uncle, is it me? Did father die because of me?'

Aeschylos could not answer him.

The woman approached with her husband.

'Aeschylos.' Her voice was cracked from days of thirst. 'I wish to thank you. We on that ship owe our lives to you, and to your brother. My heart breaks that he gave his life to save us. He was a good man.'

Aeschylos nodded. The woman knelt and touched his knees.

'I beg you…your nephew suffered much. They questioned him, and hurt him terribly. He is only a boy. But he was brave – he told them he had come to kill Datis. He said this to Datis himself. And Datis laughed at him and said one day he would make a fine warrior for Darius.'

'That's what he told you, at any rate.'

'He was not lying, Aeschylos. Look at him. And even if he was lying, he needs you now. He needs his family. Forgive me, I

could not hold my tongue.'

'She is a woman,' said her husband, still stroking her head. 'I grieve too, Aeschylos. I too lost my brother today. And I have just learned that my mother and father were slain in their own home.' He was struggling to speak. 'It is true what they say. Zeus alone never tastes woe.'

'What is your name?'

'Castor. I sang in your chorus two years ago.'

'I remember.' Tears came to Aeschylos' eyes. Castor and his wife left him.

He turned to his nephew. The look in his eyes did not belong to the Philokles he knew. He had been broken by torture, fear, and now unbearable grief.

And yet it was all his own doing. Was it not?

Aeschylos peered at the departing ships. He thought of Kynegeiros, and felt a pang of loss. His brother was gone. He thought of his last words, his last wish. And he understood.

'Philokles.'

The boy raised bloodshot eyes to him. 'Is it my fault, uncle?'

'No. It is Darius, that so-called "great king". He would rule the whole world, that man. From the Pillars of Herakles to the ends of India, he wants all of it. And more than anything, the gods hate such arrogance. Today Zeus reminded Darius that he is a man, not a god. We men of Athens – one pinprick on Darius' map of the world – we gave him such a hiding, he will not be able to sit down for weeks.'

'So, it's not my fault?'

Aeschylos rested a hand on his shoulder. 'We are one family, Philokles. Your Aunt and I will look after you now, and your mother and sisters too. We must go.'

Philokles kissed his father's forehead and followed his uncle.

The sun was well on its way to the western hills when the weary rescue mission reached the Greek camp. They joined the back of a vast circle of warriors, all peering at a man-high rock at the centre. Atop this rock were two folding stools, on one of which sat

Aristeides in a noble pose. Themistokles strode toward him through the hoplites, greeting many by name. Cheers arose in the crowd and Themistokles beamed, until he realised the acclaim was not for him but for a stout, white-haired figure now being hoisted up the rock.

The noise grew into a din to rival the best of Zeus' thunderstorms. Miltiades stood hands on hips.

'What news of the enemy camp?' he cried to Themistokles.

'Victory!'

The warriors whooped and clapped. Themistokles bounded onto the rock.

'Citizens of Athens,' he cried, 'we come from another crushing defeat of the enemy. We took a great number of souls on that far beach. You will grieve to hear that many a good man fell in order to hound the barbarians from our shores. Kallimachos, Stesilaos, Antinoos, Polydamas, and Kynegeiros – all brave men, and true friends. But I bring graver news still.' He paused.

'We know,' said Miltiades. 'That's why we are gathered here.'

'We have much to celebrate,' continued Themistokles, 'much to thank the gods for – but I must urge you–'

'Yes, Themistokles, we are aware of the problem. Thank you.' He gave Themistokles a firm stare. '*Thank* you.'

Themistokles frowned and sat on the free stool.

'Men of Athens,' said Miltiades, 'I shall be brief. I am sure word of our danger has spread to you all, and you are eager to be on your way. A marvellous feat was accomplished here today: a deed to match that of those other Greeks, long ago, who stormed the walls of Troy and sent another great army crashing. I salute you, Athenians: men will sing of your valour for ages to come.'

'And of your genius!' cried someone.

'I daresay I played my part,' answered Miltiades.

Themistokles grunted.

'As did we all. You know, I said to Kallimachos – our valiant, departed friend – that if we fought as I had planned, we should win. I *said* we did not need those damned Spartans.'

Everyone cheered.

'What slaves, what women those Persians are! Twice our number, yet we stamped on them like crawling ants. Some, I recall, advised submission.'

He aimed a stare at Xanthippos. Jeers filled the air.

'I *said* we would win!' yelped Xanthippos.

'Another thing I said to Kallimachos was that after our victory, we would be the greatest city in Greece. And so we shall be. But one more task faces us. A task perhaps as great as that we faced this morning.' He pointed to the coast. 'Out there, six hundred triremes sail for Athens. They bear fifteen thousand warriors to Phaleron, as well as a great many horse.

'We all know what this means. While the foreigners rest their bruised bodies on wooden planks, ours must carry us back to Athens. And we have no time to waste. In one hour, no more, the last man of Aiantis must bid farewell to those olive trees which have shaded us these last six days.'

He beckoned behind him and Philippides clambered up the rock. 'Young man, can you run to Athens?'

He grinned. 'Yes, general. It's a lot nearer than Sparta.'

'Then go, and tell the arkhons to gather the people onto the Acropolis by nightfall. Assure them we will be back in time.'

Philippides bowed and leapt down the rock.

Anxiety was now drowning the jubilant mood in the army.

'We do not have time to bring mules,' said Miltiades. 'Leave slaves to tend those; you must carry your own gear.'

There were some groans. The general raised a disapproving eyebrow. 'I am sixty-four, lads; if I can do it then so can you.

'Arimnestos, I do not ask you to come. Athens shall never forget what you did. Go back to your families, and take our deepest thanks with you.'

The crowd cheered the men of Plataia.

'One more thing, hoplites. I have asked Aristeides and his tribe to remain, to care for the injured and gather our dead. They, and Leontis, sacrificed much for Athens. Aristeides, as we all know, has an unstained reputation for justice, and so I have also asked him to collect the enemy booty.'

Aristeides bowed to the applause. Themistokles glowered.

'Well then, brave Athenians: today you have drunk deep of glory. Do you thirst for more?'

The shout was loud, but brief.

'Let us be quick. Your children's lives depend on it.' They stared at him. He spread his arms. 'Go! Now!'

Back at the tent Aeschylos was wiping the blood from his cuirass and greaves while Xanthias packed food and water.

'Are you sure you want to stay with me? You can go anywhere you like. Don't you have family in Thrace?'

'No, Aeschylos.' Xanthias chuckled. 'It's odd, calling you by name. No, if I do, they have long forgotten me. I prefer to remain with your family.'

'Then you may consider it your own. And in time, perhaps we shall learn to treat each other as brothers.'

'I should like that,' said Xanthias. He whistled a war tune as he packed.

One of Miltiades' men approached. Behind him cowered Euphorion.

'Miltiades wishes you to know your son had a sound reason for returning, and begs you not to punish him.'

'Zeus above, give me strength.'

'Father…'

'Let's hear it.'

'I – I saw the Persians going south – I thought they were going to Athens, so I had to tell Miltiades. Didn't I, father?'

Aeschylos sighed.

'Father…is it true? About uncle?'

'It is true.'

'What about Philokles?'

'He's in the tent.'

Awkwardly Euphorion opened the flaps of the tent. His cousin was lying on his father's bedroll.

'Philo…'

'Hey, Squeak.'

There was an awful emptiness in his eyes.
'I – I'm sorry I ran away, Philo. Do you forgive me?'
Philokles made a weak noise like a laugh. '*You're* sorry?'
'Are you going back to Athens?'
'Not today, son,' said Aeschylos. 'He's had a bad time of it.'
A trumpet sounded and Aeschylos shouldered his shield.
'Father, can I come with you?'
'It's a long journey, Euphorion.'
'I know. I want to come.'
Aeschylos handed him his spear. 'Then carry this for me.'
Euphorion nodded and wept.

Chapter 20 Back

Soon they found themselves at the rear of a giant column of hoplites snaking its way to Athens. Euphorion leaned his father's spear against his right shoulder, the blade poking four feet above his head. The sun was low over the hills.

The men sang with full hearts, stepping in time to flutes just as they had seven days before. But as the sun vanished, their exhaustion took hold. Now and then Euphorion and his father passed men bent over with cramps, or sitting with wounds bleeding, their comrades restitching or rebinding them.

'Father, will we make it back in time?'

'Zeus willing.'

'What if we don't? What about mother and Euaion?'

'They'll be safe on the Acropolis,' said Aeschylos, but he sounded uncertain.

'How long will it take those ships to get to Phaleron? Will they sail through the night?'

'The moon is bright. But it's much farther for them.'

'Did we offend Zeus, father? Has He cursed us?'

'Zeus cursed us from our creation, son. Man is ever savage, selfish, and proud. War is his eternal punishment. It is only through suffering that men will learn Zeus' lessons.'

Euphorion fell quiet. His father seemed shaken with grief.

The sky grew dark and cloudy, and the road was hard to see. Shoulders were sagging now, but faces were etched with determination. A runner approached from the front of the column.

'Aeschylos, General Miltiades desires a word.'

They sped up, passing each tribe one by one. Many hoplites bore Persians spears and shields, having lost their own. Miltiades was at the head of the snake, enjoying the admiration of the men of Erechtheis.

'Why do we need a war arkhon?' one man was saying. 'The generals are enough. Imagine if Miltiades had not been in command today. If we had followed Kallimachos' strategy, where would we be now?'

'In shackles,' said another. 'On a boat to Asia.'

'I'll propose it at the next assembly.'

'That might be a good idea,' said Miltiades.

'If you ask me we only need one general, too.'

Miltiades chuckled.

'You wanted to see me,' said Aeschylos.

He saw Miltiades' exhaustion; his barrel chest and belly now seemed more a burden than a sign of strength.

'Aeschylos, I need your eyes again. We cannot afford to lose our way in this gloom.' He drew them out of earshot of the rest. 'I also wanted to pick your brains again.'

'By all means,' said Aeschylos. 'Do you think we'll make it in time?'

'That was my first question to you. Tell me, did the gods not favour us today?'

'Without doubt.'

'Then they would not abandon us now, would they?'

'I…cannot say. One need only read Homer to know the fickleness of the gods. Zeus gives one day to Greece, the next to Troy.'

'But the day is not over yet.'

'If we fight again, it will be tomorrow, Miltiades.'

The general pulled his beard. 'I've heard many reports of

divine aid at Marathon. Many saw Theseus himself leading the charge, his knotted club in hand. Some say Pan joined the fray, chasing the ships out to sea.'

Aeschylos laughed. 'I was there, general. I must have been looking the other way.'

'Well, I for one have faith in the gods. And in our warriors.'

'As do I, general. They will fight again, if needs be.'

'They will. And I tell you, we *shall* make it back in time.'

'I hope so, but we are worn out by battle. And even if we do make it, we have left one tribe behind, and lost the Plataians – not to mention Zeus knows how many dead and injured.'

'Too many,' said Miltiades. 'But as long as He sends that Thracian wind, the enemy's journey will be slowed. Those Phoenician galleys go swiftest on smooth waters.'

'But general, you said yourself, while we march they lie at rest on those galleys. And what of the cavalry? They did not even take part in the battle. At Ephesos…'

'I know, your brother fought at Ephesos, and they were overcome by horsemen. I have no answer to that, my friend.'

'Still,' said Aeschylos, 'our honour, and our fears for our families, made us fight today like a lioness guarding her cubs. When we face them outside our homes, we shall be fiercer yet.'

'Tell me, Aeschylos, how do you read the mind of Datis now?'

'His pride is wounded. If he feared Darius' wrath before, he is terrified of it now. He will do his utmost, at least to hurt us, to burn Athens as we burnt Sardis. And to take captives. But Miltiades, if he does capture our wives and children, how can we give chase? We have only seventy ships.'

Euphorion gave a start.

Miltiades ignored the question. 'So if he gets there before us, he will destroy the city. What then?'

'I think he will leave, rather than risk a second defeat.'

'Despite all you just said – our fatigue, his horsemen?'

'I – I am not sure, Miltiades. Forgive me, I'm only a poet.'

'And what if we do reach Athens in time? He will not give battle?'

'If he sees our weariness…' Aeschylos shook his head. 'We shall get no more than three hours' sleep before dawn, Miltiades.'

'I know. And he will send spies before trying an assault.'

'And what if he makes that assault?'

Miltiades paused. 'Then I am not certain we can win.'

Euphorion shivered. That could not be allowed to happen.

'General, may I speak? I have an idea.'

Euphorion had trodden the same route a few days earlier, but in the dark it seemed otherworldly, like the path to Hades' realm. And it seemed much farther this time. Perhaps they had taken a wrong turn, and were indeed on the road to the underworld.

The thrill of victory had drained from the hoplites' eyes, leaving only stone-hearted resolve. Each man had switched his shield from left shoulder to right and back again several times now. Euphorion had offered to carry his father's shield but Aeschylos seemed almost to enjoy the pain.

Euphorion too was nearing exhaustion. But he thought of the boy in the farm, and when he saw Euaion with a rope around his neck he found new energy.

Passing through the sleeping village of Pallene the soldiers' hearts lifted, for they would soon be in sight of Athens. Not long after, Euphorion spotted tiny orange flickers in the distance.

'Look, father!'

'That's the Acropolis.'

A few miles later they came in full view of the city. Cheers erupted; the men forgot their aching legs and the pace increased.

Miltiades, now limping but refusing his slave's arm, directed the hoplites to the Kynosarges gym, south east of the city. Shields were propped against trees, columns, and statues, and spears were spiked in the earth. Hoplites dropped to their hands and knees. Many lay on the grass and fell asleep.

Miltiades sat on a bench, head in his hands. He drank some water then poured the rest on the ground.

'Athena, you must have walked with us tonight, or some god did. I beg you, stay with us one more day. Whatever sacrifice you

desire I shall give you. Take what you will, but preserve this city.'

'Can you continue?' asked Aeschylos. 'Perhaps Themistokles could take your place.'

Miltiades gave a hoarse laugh. 'You don't need to goad me, Aeschylos. My head throbs as if one of those Sakai had planted his axe in it. But I can manage one more mile.'

Through the dark city they strode, the general, the poet, and his son. No lamp was lit, no flute or lyre sang, no partygoer stumbled home through the alleys. Either the Persians had come and gone, or the people had made it to the citadel. Euphorion feared for his mother and his brother, but he was hopeful – no battered doors lay open, no shattered pottery littered the streets, and no wine stained the earth – or blood.

They reached the slopes of the Acropolis. On the battlements above, braziers blazed and guards stood watching to sea. At the gates a watchman greeted them.

'General! Oh, we are pleased to see you. Come in, come in. We heard of the victory and got every man, woman and child up here, as best we can tell. It's rather packed – you'll see for yourself. Not everyone likes it. But take no notice – you've saved them, general, and to most of them, well, you're another Theseus.'

The sentry's chatter went on up the stone steps, which Miltiades took one at a time, resting both feet on each, and pausing now and then to rub his temples.

'Theseus never felt like this,' he grunted. Euphorion took his elbow, and for once he allowed himself to be aided.

Within the citadel was a sight which opened Euphorion's eyes wide. Every open space was covered in blankets, pillows, and sleeping refugees. In fact, he realised, most were not asleep – they shifted, muttered, and held crying babies at the shoulder or fed them at the breast. It was not long before they spotted Miltiades.

'Where are our husbands? Must they fight again?'

A throng grew and pressed on the weary general.

'You are all safe,' he said. 'We have marched ten hours to guard the city. We expect the enemy fleet in the morning, but do not fear, we are strong, and ready to defeat them a second time.'

'After walking all night?' said one of the arkhons.

'I promise you. All the omens are in our favour.'

'But where are they?'

'In Kynosarges. I beg you, leave them be. They need their rest. Go back to sleep, all of you.'

When the crowd had dispersed, two women remained.

Euphorion hid behind his father.

'Aeschylos,' said Trygaea in a choked voice.

He went to her. 'My darling.'

Trygaea waved to her son. He dragged himself over and she hugged them both.

'I'm sorry, mother, I–'

She slapped him. 'Wicked child! How could you torture me so?' She squeezed him and began to sob.

'I wanted to fight, mother…we wanted to stop them – they were coming to Athens and I had to…we – we both–'

'Don't ever run away again. Do you hear me?'

'He won't, my dear,' said Aeschylos. 'Will you, son?'

'No, I promise.'

'And you,' said Trygaea, with an anguished look at her husband. 'Why did you not send him home? Was my heart not torn enough?'

'Can you forgive me, Trygaea? It is such a joy to see you again. I feared I would not.'

She wept and beat his chest.

'Brother,' came a timid voice. It was Ismene.

Aeschylos could not look at her.

'Where is Philokles?'

'At Marathon, in care of Nikias and Xanthias.'

'He is well?'

'Well enough. He'll be home tomorrow, perhaps.'

Ismene looked at him with hollow eyes. 'And my husband?'

'He…' Aeschylos' throat tightened. 'He was wounded.'

'Wounded? How?'

He sat her on a step. 'Dear sister.'

'Aeschylos, tell me what happened, I beg you.'

'We were chasing the Persian ships. He was reaching up to one, and was struck with an axe. He…lost his hand.'

Ismene's head began to quiver. 'His hand?'

'I tried to stop the bleeding, but there was no fire. I called for it, Ismene, but there was none. He bled…I could not stop it.'

Ismene took his hands. 'You mean…he's gone?'

Trygaea wept. She kissed Ismene's head. 'This is what you dream for, you men. This war, you lust for it. That is your first love, not us.'

'It is for you we fight!' snapped Aeschylos. 'It is for you women that we hack each other to pieces.'

'Is it?' murmured Ismene.

'Would you rather be slaves at some Persian well, or loom?'

Ismene seemed not to hear him. She went to her daughters and sat staring at nothing.

'If you are to fight again, you should rest,' said Trygaea, trembling.

He caressed her head. What could he say? There was a good chance that soon she too would lose her husband, and any words of comfort would only sound false. At least he could make sure that her last memory of him was one of love.

They embraced for a long time. Then Trygaea lay down with her two sons, and at last everyone was asleep, or as close as they could manage. Only Aeschylos remained awake, fretting, pondering, grieving.

'Wake up, son.'

It was still dark. Euphorion rose, his shoulder sore from lying on rock, and followed his father to the battlements. Miltiades was there. The moon was low over the island of Salamis and the sea shimmered silver in its light. The eastern sky was turning blue. The army was a darkness around the gym.

Euphorion gazed at the sea. He saw black spots on the grey waters. Hundreds of them. Drifting north.

The sky lightened, and the fleet was revealed: a gigantic herd of sea-cows spread over a blue field.

Euphorion felt cold. The sleepers began to rise, and came to the southern wall. They saw the army down in the gym and waved to them in glee.

Miltiades looked pale and sickly. 'Here they come.'

Euphorion spotted them: two riders in gold silks, galloping up the road from the harbour. A sentry outside the city motioned them to the Acropolis. They cantered between houses and reappeared below. They were admitted on foot to the Acropolis, where Miltiades awaited them.

'How pleasant to see you again. I hope you enjoyed our welcome party yesterday. Or was it perhaps a little too warm?'

The heralds looked down their long noses at him.

'Yesterday has no bearing on today, Miltiades. General Datis wishes to state the facts to you. His ships lie within sight of this city, bearing full sixteen thousand warriors. And more: he commands one thousand horsemen, who wish to prove that the only reason for yesterday's setback was their absence from the battlefield. You, however, command a hill-full of old men, women, and cripples.' He smirked at the wretched mass of Athenians.

'Given your performance yesterday,' said Miltiades, 'I daresay the two sides are well matched.'

The herald pursed his lips. 'This is your final chance to submit, or by noon not one living soul shall remain on this rock.'

'I believe I have heard those words before, "final chance". Still, it is a generous offer. And we would be most "delighted and rejoiced" to accept – but for one small matter.' He nodded to the gym. 'Does anything catch your eye, my gilded slaves?'

They saw, and glanced at each other.

'Granted,' said one, 'you have done well to bring your men here. But your few thousands, after so many hours fighting, so many miles marching, and so little sleep, must be in poor shape. They cannot overcome our refreshed and much greater numbers. This time you would not be so fortunate, Miltiades. If the gods have favoured you with sense, you will submit.'

'If you like,' said Miltiades, 'you can go and see for yourself

what shape our men are in. But I'd be careful if I were you; they took great offence at your uninvited visit to our shores, and now much greater offence at your threatening their wives and children. Go and see them; but I warn you, any Persian who comes within a spear length will regret his error.'

He motioned to a slave, who lit a torch and waved it side to side.

A great din arose from the gym – a myriad voices roaring, a myriad weapons battering shields. Although the gym was a mile away the noise was loud enough to scare the birds on the Acropolis; thrushes, doves, and sparrows flapped into the air twittering.

Miltiades ordered a second signal and the racket faded.

'That is my reply.'

The first herald snorted. 'So your warriors can still shout and bang things together. Combat is a different matter.'

'Try us. We are ready for you.'

'We see for ourselves what shape you are in, Miltiades. If the wind were any stronger it would blow you over.'

Miltiades' eyes burned. 'I am sixty-four. I fought with my men yesterday and walked with them all night, twenty-five miles without rest. As for my men…Euphorion, tell them – why did you follow your father to Marathon, against his command?'

'To fight the Persians, sir.'

'Not only that, he and his cousin – of their own accord, mind you – sneaked into your camp two nights ago, meaning to hurl a spear into Datis' heart. You know this to be true, for you caught that cousin. And these are boys! *That* is what we Athenians are made of. So, you have your answer. Now get out of my city.'

With a look of contempt the heralds strode off the hill.

Euphorion watched as they raced away on their horses. Miltiades pulled at his beard. Aeschylos clenched his fists.

Soon the riders reappeared on the road to Phaleron.

Euphorion exhaled. The first part of their ploy, at least, had worked: they had stopped Datis from discovering the true state of the Greek army. And his pride glowed; Miltiades had used *him* as

an example of Athenian courage.

But it was not over yet. The heralds vanished in the distance and all was silent on the Acropolis, but for the cries of birds and the wails of infants.

Everyone watched. Everyone waited.

Euphorion's heart thumped. 'They're moving.'

'He's right,' said Aeschylos.

'Which way?' said Miltiades.

Aeschylos swallowed. 'This way.'

Chapter 21 Fall

The ships swerved toward the coast. Miltiades kicked the wall.

'Damn you, Kallimachos! It was *Athena* to whom we should have offered the goats, not Artemis.' He raised his hands to a bronze statue of the goddess, spear in hand, shield by her legs.

'Holy Maiden, I offer you all I have. You have protected us so far; will you forsake us now?'

He sat on the parapet. 'I need a new strategy, Aeschylos. They wouldn't fall for the same trick twice, would they?'

But Aeschylos was not listening. The ships had continued their curving courses, and now each galley was facing in the opposite direction.

South.

'Are they going back to Marathon?' said Euphorion. 'Do we have to march all the way back again?'

His father blinked in astonishment. 'No, son. They're going back to Persia.' Turning to the people he cried, 'They're going home! They've given up!'

The crowd gasped, then shrieked for joy.

Miltiades sank before the statue, tears in his eyes.

'Athena, guardian of our city, you are great indeed.'

'Father, can we go home now?'

'Yes, yes!' cried Aeschylos, lifting Euphorion high, and laughing from the depths of his bosom.

* * *

'The Spartans! The Spartans!'

Euphorion opened a sleepy eye at his brother, closed it, and tried to drift back into his dream of skewering Persians with a twenty-foot spear.

'Spartans! Here!'

The cat jumped on Euphorion's face and licked his nose.

'Here? Where?'

'The agora. Take me, I want to see.'

That morning when they had walked home from the Acropolis Euaion had been upset that his big brother had brought him neither a Persian shield nor a helmet. Euphorion had calmed him with a promise of amazing stories, to be told another day. And so he had flopped into bed till mid-afternoon.

'Don't be daft. You can't go into the agora.'

'Father won't get up. Take me!'

Euphorion yawned. He'd never seen a Spartan. And right now there were two thousand of them in the middle of Athens. He pulled on his tunic, grabbed some bread from the kitchen and headed to the front door, Euaion following.

'Where you going?'

'For a walk.'

'Take me! I want to see!'

Fortunately the nursemaid came in and distracted Euaion with his pig rattle long enough for Euphorion to slip out.

The Spartans – supposedly the greatest warriors in Greece. Better than the Athenians? Could *they* have stomped on twice as many Persians?

Euphorion stood on a boundary stone at the edge of the agora. Although big enough to house the Panathenaic Games and all its spectators, it was bursting its belly. Most of the crowd were elderly and poor citizens who had not gone to Marathon, but a few hoplites had given up their beds to join the celebrations. Some still wore their helmets, even their cuirasses and greaves.

In the middle of the square was a dense pack of warriors,

spears sticking up, scarlet cloaks about their shoulders. Many bore shields with a lambda, Λ, for Lakedaimon, the region ruled by Sparta. On a plinth stood two Spartans whose helmet crests went sideways. Themistokles was sharing a cup of wine with them. Euphorion smelled wine everywhere. There had been sacrifices too: he saw smoke rising from Athena's altar on the Acropolis.

There was a mixed mood in the air. Clearly the citizens had been rejoicing all day, singing, dancing, and getting blind drunk. But now a deadly force was in their midst, and fear had dampened their joy.

No one was sure whether the Spartans could be trusted. Twenty years ago, Kleomenes their king had led an invasion of Athens and tried to overthrow the new democracy. On the other hand, last year Kleomenes had booted two Persians into a well, and as Euphorion would never forget, Athens had done pretty much the same thing, so uniting the two cities against Darius.

Euphorion heard applause and whistles from behind. Miltiades was approaching with his slaves. A runner handed him a scroll. He yawned and read it.

'By Zeus – this is correct?'

'General Aristeides was most careful, sir.'

'I don't doubt it. No one else has seen this?'

'No, sir. Aristeides said you were to be the first to know.'

'Well done, lad.' With a curious smile Miltiades stuffed the scroll in his cloak and entered the agora. 'Excuse me, gentlemen.'

Cheers arose around him.

Themistokles noticed this and raised his fist.

'Citizens!' They fell silent. 'As a general of the glorious Athenian army, I extend our city's welcome to King Kleomenes of Sparta, to his younger brother Leonidas, and to their fellows. My friends, we can all breathe easy: they have come to save us from the Persians!'

The crowd roared with laughter. But around Miltiades a separate racket was growing. Citizens had lifted him on their shoulders and were bearing him to the platform. Soon the agora was ringing with a chorus of 'Milti-a-des! Milti-a-des!'

Themistokles frowned. Kleomenes and his brother watched curiously as the old general, shaking hands all around and receiving garlands of myrtle, was delivered to them. He stood on the plinth while the crowd yelled their devotion. It went on for some time, and Euphorion began to feel embarrassed for the Spartans – who, however, seemed quite patient. Themistokles disappeared into the crowd.

At last Miltiades raised his hand in mock humility, and the tumult faded.

'Kleomenes, welcome,' he said. 'My apologies for being late.'

'We also regret our lateness, Miltiades.'

'No matter; it seems we didn't need you after all. So sorry to have bothered you.'

The Athenians tittered.

'It was no bother,' said Kleomenes. 'We are only sorry to have missed the fray. We came as quickly as we could: we left only three days ago.'

'An astounding achievement. There's been a few of those recently.' Miltiades beamed at the crowd.

'Milti-a-des! Milti-a-des!'

'So we have heard,' said the Spartan king. 'It must be true what they say: those trouser-wearing Persians are womanish indeed.'

Now the Spartan warriors were amused.

'Oh, you think it was easy, do you?' replied Miltiades. 'I can tell you, twenty thousand warriors and their arrows take a little puzzling out.'

'I meant no insult. It was an ingenious strategy, for a dolphin to swallow a whale. Your fame is well-deserved.'

'Do I hear the sweet tones of envy?'

'The deed will take some outdoing. But we Spartans like a challenge – don't we, lads?'

With a thunderous shout the Spartans punched their spears into the sky. Euphorion jumped.

'I have no doubt your turn will come,' said Miltiades. 'And I can assure you, I am not done with the enemy myself.'

'Then we shall be on our way. With your permission, we should like to see the battlefield with our own eyes.'

'Oho! You think we're telling tales, do you?'

Kleomenes' expression barely changed.

Miltiades chuckled. 'Of course you may go.'

'How much further is it to Marathon?' asked Leonidas.

'About twenty-six miles.'

'Good – then we're almost there.'

'Your losses must have been great,' said Kleomenes. 'I see few soldiers.'

'They're in bed, dear king! All-day fighting and all-night marching will do that to a man. By the way, since you mention losses, perhaps you'd like to hear the figures.'

He turned to the crowd. 'Citizens, despite our outstanding valour yesterday, many brave men fell. I have the count of the dead on each side.'

He unrolled the scroll and all voices hushed.

'Aristeides' men gathered all our dead; the number includes those who died overnight from their wounds. Aristeides also counted the Persian corpses, from the field to the sea. The captives shall bury them before they rot and pollute that sacred soil.

'First, the Persian dead: six thousand four hundred.'

Euphorion's cheeks tingled. Cheers broke out, and citizens slapped Athenian hoplites on their backs.

'Regarding our own dead, as a special honour I propose that instead of returning them to Athens, we bury them on the battlefield.'

The crowd applauded this idea. Miltiades gazed solemnly at them. 'Dear citizens, our glorious army fought so valiantly, and with such ferocity, that despite facing twice its number, and a sky blackened with arrows, we lost–' he paused, and everyone held their breath, '–only one hundred and ninety-two men.'

There was a moment of lightning-struck amazement, and then the loudest-yet yelling and whooping shook the agora.

'Now I am more eager than ever to see this killing ground,' said Kleomenes. He led his troops out of the agora.

Euphorion wondered what was going on in those stony faces. Had they been trained to look tough all the time, or were they truly unimpressed by what they had just heard? In the first-ever pitched battle between a Greek and Persian army, Athens had not only crushed its enemy, they had lost a mere one hundred and ninety-two men. Euphorion repeated to the number to himself, but it was like something from a myth. He felt a delirious pride and joy, along with everyone else who remained in the agora, once more singing, dancing, and drinking.

But then he remembered one of those hundred and ninety-two. One he had known and loved all his life. One he would never see alive again. One who had died to save his cousin – a cousin who, without Euphorion's help, might never have needed to be saved.

His joy all washed away, Euphorion went home.

The next day the whole family, and hundreds of others, walked to Marathon for the funeral. They met Philokles and Xanthias at the tent. Philokles was still in shock and said little. During the funeral procession, Ismene, usually quiet, let her grief gush out. In a column of other wives, mothers, and daughters, all in grey and black, she wailed and beat her chest.

The following day the shrouded bodies were laid on pyres filling a whole pasture field. The family stood watching them burn for hours. In his father's tortured eyes Euphorion read a thought – there you would not be, brother, if I had laid my hands on one fragment of that which now consumes you.

The ashes were poured into urns to be buried in a great mound near the grove of Herakles. The names of the dead would be engraved on marble slabs.

And so everyone returned. The further they got from Marathon, the more Philokles' spirits lifted.

'Philo,' Euphorion asked him, 'what happened to you? In the Persian camp, after…' He finished the sentence in his mind: after I ran away and left you on the ground.

'After that bastard whacked me? I woke up in a tent. They

started shouting at me and whipping me. Seems you'd bumped off one of their lieutenants, and they weren't too happy about it.'

'Did you see Datis?'

'Oh yes – short arse! Big belly too. Loads of gold – earrings, bracelets, all sorts. He asked me what Miltiades' plans were. I said as if I'd know, I was just a boy. He said I was a spy. One of them had seen me and you before – must have been that one who got away. I thought that was it, then, I was dead meat. So I said I wasn't a spy, I was an assassin. I'd come to kill him with my javelin. I told him I was the best thrower in Athens, for my age.'

'By Apollo! What did he say to that?'

'He said he wanted me in his army!' Philokles grinned. 'Then he said, what about the Spartans, were they coming? I was a bit scared at that point; I thought he'd see I was lying.'

'Why, what did you tell him?'

'The truth – sort of. I said they had a festival of Apollo going on and they couldn't come and fight. I didn't mention that they were coming *after* the festival. Luckily there was an old Greek chap there who said he knew the Spartans and it was true. Datis seemed pretty pleased about that. He asked me how many men we had. I said twenty thousand. But they whipped me again.'

'So you told them?'

Philokles pouted. 'You try it, being whipped. I'd like to see you keep your mouth shut.'

'No – I would have told them. Really.'

'You're damn right. Anyway, it didn't matter, did it? We still won.'

'What about the ship?'

'They put me in there with the other prisoners. We were in chains, without any food, and not much water. The next day we heard the fighting. Those villagers were terrified the Persians were going to do us in before we got rescued. Then I heard my father shouting my name, so I shouted back, and one of those pigs belted me in the face. I hope they killed him.'

'Philo…I'm sorry. I shouldn't have run off.'

'Forget it.'

'But maybe if I'd stayed–'

'Forget it, Squeak! It's all over.'

'All right, Philo.'

The next day Aeschylos sacrificed the four goats Euphorion had promised Artemis. The day after that the assembly met. At noon Aeschylos returned and related the events to his wife and sons.

'It seems Miltiades wants even more glory. And yet he got a slap in the face.'

'Ooh, tell us about it,' said Trygaea.

'There was a lot of business about the battle; commemorations, new temples and so on. Then Themistokles proposed building a wall round the city. Someone said it was a time for celebrating, not hard labour. He said, you'll build temples and trophies, but not something with real practical use. That didn't go down too well – as if worshipping the gods had no practical use! Then he said, but don't you think they'll be back? Everyone booed him.

'Then Miltiades stepped up. The assembly went wild, and he lapped it up. He told us he thought it *was* worth thanking the gods, and we ought to build a shrine to Pan. The god had promised to aid us, and he had not deceived us. That proposal passed. The citizens were getting a little hysterical at this point. Themistokles had had enough and sloped off. It's sad: there are few men whose love warms to a friend's prosperity.'

'What about the slap in the face?' said Trygaea.

'That was next. By now Miltiades was about as swollen as a man can get. So he says he would like an olive wreath, a small token for the victor of Marathon. Some liked it, but there were a lot of itchy Athenians. You should have seen Xanthippos' face – like a storm cloud. But he kept quiet. Sophanes spoke up, and said that when Miltiades had won a battle on his own he could be the only man awarded a prize. And that proposal failed. Miltiades pretended to be gracious, but I could see he was smarting.

'Next we voted to sacrifice five hundred kid goats to Artemis each year – six thousand four hundred is rather more than we can

afford. Eventually Miltiades got back up, when he thought everyone had forgotten about the olive wreath, I suppose. He told the assembly it was a shame, a disgrace, that some of the Greek islands had submitted to Darius. Some had supplied Datis with food and water, even ships and troops. Those cities had dishonoured the name of Greece and ought to be punished. He asked for seventy ships – the whole navy – to pursue a campaign against them. He didn't say exactly *whom* he was going to attack. But when he spoke of hundreds of talents of silver and gold he would fetch back, the citizens were bewitched.'

'So they voted for it?'

'He leaves in four days.'

'More killing? And for gold? Is he only a pirate?'

'It is an honourable mission, my dear. If we do not punish traitors, they will betray us again. And next time it may matter a great deal more.'

'Father, what do you mean, next time?' asked Euphorion.

'Don't worry, son. The war is over. In any case I invited him for a farewell dinner.'

Before the party Aeschylos did not see Themistokles – indeed it seemed no one had – so he sent Euphorion to invite him.

A slave admitted Euphorion into a dark room with a single oil lamp. Themistokles lay on a couch staring at the ceiling. His beard was untidy, his eyes bloodshot, and he stank as if he hadn't washed in days.

'Euphorion, son of Aeschylos, son of Euphorion,' he said. 'How is the songsmith these days?'

'He is well, sir. He invites you to a drinking party this evening, in honour of Miltiades.'

'Ha! Does he now.'

'Miltiades is leaving tomorrow, and–'

'I know all about Miltiades. Tell your father I decline.'

'Yes sir. Are you…in good health?'

'You have your answer. Off with you.'

At the door Euphorion asked the slave, 'Is the general ill?'

The slave laughed dryly. 'The trophy of Miltiades will not let him sleep.'

'But I thought they were friends.'

'Oh, young one, you have much to learn.'

In the morning the Athenian fleet sailed from Phaleron. Nothing was heard of them for forty days. In the meantime the shrine to Pan was begun, the five hundred kids were sacrificed to Artemis, and Aeschylos wrote an elegy about the battle.

On 31st October, a breezy cold day, Euphorion was at his cousin's house when the navy entered the harbour. They joined the locals on the quay and applauded as the warriors descended the gangplank, but their faces were not triumphant.

When Miltiades appeared the applause grew, and he waved. But the Phaleron villagers seemed uncertain whether to cheer. He looked grim – pale-faced, exhausted, and limping: a red-stained bandage was wrapped round his left thigh. He stepped onto the dock and was whisked away in a chariot. The boys waited to see the riches the hoplites had seized, but none appeared.

'What happened?' Philokles asked a soldier.

'A lot of nothing,' he answered. He told them that the fleet had sailed for Paros, an island that had supplied Datis with provisions and a trireme. They had besieged the city, demanding one hundred talents, but had been unable to stop the Parians from getting food in. The Athenians had ravaged the island, destroying the grape crop and burning olive trees, but after twenty-six days they had made no impression on the city's fortifications. Then a priestess had come to Miltiades, promising to show him a way in.

He was in the sanctuary of Demeter, where no man was supposed to walk, when he had a cold sense of horror – fear of the goddess, he said – and quickly departed. But as he leapt from the fence he injured his thigh, so gravely that he gave up the siege. And so they had come home with not a penny more than when they had left.

Aeschylos held another party to celebrate Miltiades' return. Euphorion helped serve food and wine so he could eavesdrop.

Miltiades asked if Themistokles had been invited; Aeschylos said he had.

'Still sulking? By Apollo, he'll have his day. I'm an old man.'

'Tell us of your adventures,' said a poet friend of Aeschylos.

'They were on the point of surrender, I tell you. But then a fire broke out on a nearby island, Mykonos, and the Parians thought the Persian fleet was still there, the idiots. Datis did stop at Mykonos on his way home, but he was long gone. They thought he was signalling to them, so they held out.' He sighed. 'All the wealth of Paros, in my fingers…'

'Have you given up your campaign?' asked Aeschylos.

'Against traitors to Greece? By Zeus, no. I just need to sort this leg out, get approval from the assembly, and I'll be off again.'

'I have to say, that thigh doesn't look too good.'

'Rather stinks, to be frank,' said the poet.

'Let me take a look,' said another guest, a medic.

'Very well, if you don't mind being put off your wine.'

Miltiades unwrapped the filthy bandages. He had a deep gash on the outside of his thigh, blackened round the edges and seeping yellow pus.

The poet wrinkled his nose. 'Ugh!'

'It's putrefying,' said the medic. 'You need to wash it as soon as you get home, and apply honey and olive oil before you dress it again. Let me come to you; I'll bring opium for the pain.'

'Thank you. I'm sure it'll be fine.'

'You don't look at all well,' said Aeschylos.

'This wine has gone to my head. Perhaps I should go.'

With Euphorion on one arm and his slave on the other Miltiades got up, and Aeschylos escorted him to the door.

In the alley they found Xanthippos and one of the arkhons.

'What are you doing, skulking round here?' said Miltiades.

'Waiting for the hero of Athens,' said Xanthippos. 'Untold riches you promised us. Seventy ships, three thousand men, and a lot of money we gave you. And in return, what do we get?'

'Oh, buzz off, horse fly.'

The arkhon seemed embarrassed. He coughed at Xanthippos.

'Miltiades, son of Kimon,' said Xanthippos, 'I accuse you of deceiving the Athenian people. Histaeos here is my witness.'

Miltiades gave a scornful laugh.

'It is a capital charge,' said Xanthippos. 'You would do well to take it seriously.'

Euphorion shuddered. That meant he could be executed – thrown into the barathron like the Persian heralds.

'Damn you, Xanthippos! You're a swine and a fool. Do you think any jury in Athens will convict *me*? The victor of Marathon?'

'Is this true, Histaeos?' asked Aeschylos.

'I regret so,' said the arkhon. 'Xanthippos has the right to make this charge. You must appear for trial in two days, Miltiades.'

'Two days?' exclaimed Miltiades.

'We select a jury of two thousand and one tomorrow.'

'Deceive the…' Miltiades, drunken, ill, and stunned, could not speak.

'This is a gross insult,' said Aeschylos. 'Miltiades is no traitor.'

'The people of Athens shall decide that,' said Xanthippos.

They left.

Miltiades breathed hard.

'Don't worry,' said Aeschylos. 'You're far too popular for that weasel to get his way.'

'Of course.' Miltiades turned to go, but stopped. 'Listen, Aeschylos, I could really do with Themistokles' help in this. Do you mind asking him for me?'

'Not at all. I'm sure he'll speak for you.'

The trial took place on the Pnyx. Autumn's chill had set in and most of the jurymen sat in woollen cloaks. Next to the speaker's platform Miltiades lay on a couch. Gangrene had blossomed in his thigh and he was too groggy to speak. Around him sat his son Kimon, Aeschylos, and his other friends, waiting turns to defend him. Themistokles was nowhere to be seen.

Euphorion had persuaded his cousin to join him in their usual spot among the trees. Xanthippos was speaking, and they listened.

'The evidence is clear, men of the jury. Not once have his defenders claimed any benefit of this whole venture. No island taken, no silver or gold for our coffers. Seventy ships, a full complement of oarsmen, warriors, and food, for forty days – all at *our* expense – and all for nothing.

'Miltiades has deceived us, as surely as we stand on this rock. Have the gods not shown us his guilt? Look at him! He admits his unlawful entry into a sanctuary of the goddess – and the wound that followed is surely her punishment. He is guilty, citizens. Convict him. Condemn the one who deceived you.'

The muttering and shuffling of feet among the jurymen gave Euphorion a horrible pricking on his neck. Surely they wouldn't…

Aeschylos got up to speak. Since he had been rehearsing his plays his voice had grown strong again.

'Men of Athens! It is not two months since we vanquished the Persians at Marathon. Have you forgotten that day? Was it a battle like any other? That day we came closer than ever to losing all we have. But for Marathon we should not be able to sit here, conducting our own trials and deciding our own our own fate.

'And who, more than anyone, is responsible for that victory? This man, whom Xanthippos now accuses. The gods in heaven look down upon us, and they weep; or they laugh. But for Miltiades' leadership, we should all be Darius' slaves!'

'But for Miltiades' ambitions,' cried Xanthippos, 'he would not be on trial. Did we fend off one king to be ruled by another?'

'Be silent, Xanthippos,' said Histaeos.

'You harp on that still?' said Aeschylos. 'That old tyrant nonsense? Miltiades is the man who saved Athens! Because of him we are still free.'

'Ten thousand fought at Marathon, not one!' yelled Xanthippos.

Euphorion again felt a crawling on his neck. Many of the jury were nodding at what Xanthippos had said, and this time Histaeos did not shut him up.

Aeschylos continued. 'At Troy, it was not the valour of the Greeks, nor even Achilles' prowess, that won the war. It was an

idea which brought down Troy – that wooden horse, which sprang from the mind of Odysseus. And so too at Marathon we should not have won – for even though man for man we were stronger, we were far outnumbered. No, we should not have won but for Miltiades, his idea, his command. And now we would punish him? For attempting further glories for Athens?'

'For himself!' cried Xanthippos.

'And for Athens too! Yes, he failed. But who has not failed at some enterprise? Shall we condemn a man for trying a noble venture, just because he fails?'

'If it had been a noble venture, he would not have failed,' said Xanthippos. 'He sought his own gain, his own glory. If ever a man threatened tyranny, there he lies.'

'Citizens, look at him,' said Aeschylos. 'He is grievously ill, and will die soon anyway. May he not end his days in honour? If we execute him it will be a shameful, wrongful killing.'

'The wrongful execution was that of the Persian heralds,' said Xanthippos. 'Which I recall was another of Miltiades' ideas.'

'We voted for that,' said Aeschylos.

'True. And now we shall vote again.'

Aeschylos was out of ideas. He sat down sadly.

Histaeos called for a decision as to whether Miltiades was guilty. Two thirds of the citizens raised their hands. Miltiades' friends bowed their heads. Euphorion felt sick.

'I don't believe it,' said Philokles. 'They're all mad.'

Then Xanthippos requested the death penalty. Histaeos called for the vote. Aeschylos craned his neck to see the hands.

It was too close for Euphorion to tell. Histaeos peered round the Pnyx and spoke to a couple of other arkhons. Then he announced, 'The vote is against execution.'

'Thank You, Zeus,' murmured Euphorion.

Next Xanthippos suggested a fine of fifty talents. This time the punishment was approved. Miltiades' friends looked furious, but made no objection.

'Fifty talents!' said Philokles. 'That's…'

'Three hundred thousand drachmas.'

'No one has that kind of money!'

'He'll have to stay in jail till he pays it.'

'Then that's where he's going to die. He's in a mess.'

'It's madness,' said Euphorion. 'Total madness.'

Miltiades was moved to the city prison, and over the next few days he grew worse. Aeschylos visited him each day, as did his son Kimon and his other friends. On the third day Aeschylos arrived and found Themistokles sitting in a dark corner of the cell.

'Come to pay your respects, finally?'

'I heard he was close to the end,' said Themistokles. 'He deserves a proper farewell.'

'He deserves more than that! Where were you during the trial? *Then* you might have been of some "practical use".'

'Angry, Aeschylos? I'm not sure you understand politics, my friend. Poetry, theatre, even men's hearts, yes. But me you do not understand.'

'Then teach me.'

'You have no ambitions, Aeschylos. At least not in politics. But I do. I will make my city great – yes, even greater than it is now. I will prepare it for what is to come. But if I associate myself with Miltiades, who is now seen as a traitor, then I will fall with him. One day Athens will need another strong leader. Next year, or in ten years, I do not know; but one day we shall face a threat far worse than that we faced at Marathon.'

'By all the gods, I hope not.'

Miltiades mumbled something. He opened his eyes.

'My friends…is that you, Themistokles? I missed you.'

'You seemed busy. But here I am, to bid you farewell.'

Miltiades gave a feeble laugh. 'I'm not dead yet.'

'It won't be long, old man.'

'Show some respect!' snapped Kimon.

'It's all right, son,' said Miltiades. 'It's true. I wish I could have died at home, but no matter. I've served my country well.' He closed his eyes.

'No one could serve it better, father.'

'We'll see about that,' muttered Themistokles.

The medic mopped Miltiades' brow. 'He is near his end.'

Aeschylos leaned close. 'Men shall remember you better than this, Miltiades, I promise.'

'Thank you, Aeschylos. For your friendship, your wise advice. Use that brain of yours.' He took a rasping breath.

'Greet my brother for me,' said Aeschylos. 'Tell him I look forward to seeing him. Tell him I wish I had been a better brother. Tell him…I envy the dead, for they can no longer lose the ones they love.'

Miltiades was silent now.

'I need fresh air,' said Themistokles. 'It reeks in here. Come, Aeschylos. You'll get nothing more out of him.'

Aeschylos followed him into the sunshine of the prison yard.

'You were a fine brother,' said Themistokles. 'Trust me, there are plenty worse.'

Aeschylos sat on a rock. 'Did you hear they've awarded a victory memorial to Kallimachos?'

'Ha! Well that just about caps it.'

'We Greeks – we worship the heroes of the past, our Herakles, our Theseus – but when we find one in our midst, we fear him.'

'Democracy is a day old babe, Aeschylos, weak, struggling for breath. The people fear anything that may take away their new freedom.'

Euphorion ran into the yard, but saw his elders were talking and stayed quiet.

'What's all this about greater dangers to come?' said Aeschylos.

'You think they won't be back? Six thousand men mean nothing to Darius. He could command an army of a million. No, to him Marathon was a minor affair. To us, it's the most glorious day our city has known; to him, an irritating mosquito bite. And he'll be back one day, to slap that mosquito.'

'I hope next time the Spartans show up before it's all over.'

Themistokles chuckled.

The medic emerged from the cell. 'Dear friends, he is gone.'

Aeschylos shook his head. ‘He did not deserve such an end.’

‘That much is true,’ said Themistokles.

Euphorion was sad but did not know what to say.

‘Father, mother says are you dining at home tonight?’

Aeschylos ruffled his son’s hair. He stepped into the cell where Miltiades’ friends sat around him, heads bowed in grief.

‘Gentlemen, will you join me tonight? Will you drink wine, and remember our friend?’

They agreed.

‘As long as there’s not too much poetry,’ said Themistokles.

‘Very well, not too much poetry. Just enough to remember a great victory, and the man who led us to it. Tonight, let us remember Miltiades; let us remember Marathon.’

As they walked home Euphorion asked his father, ‘Will the Persians be back?’

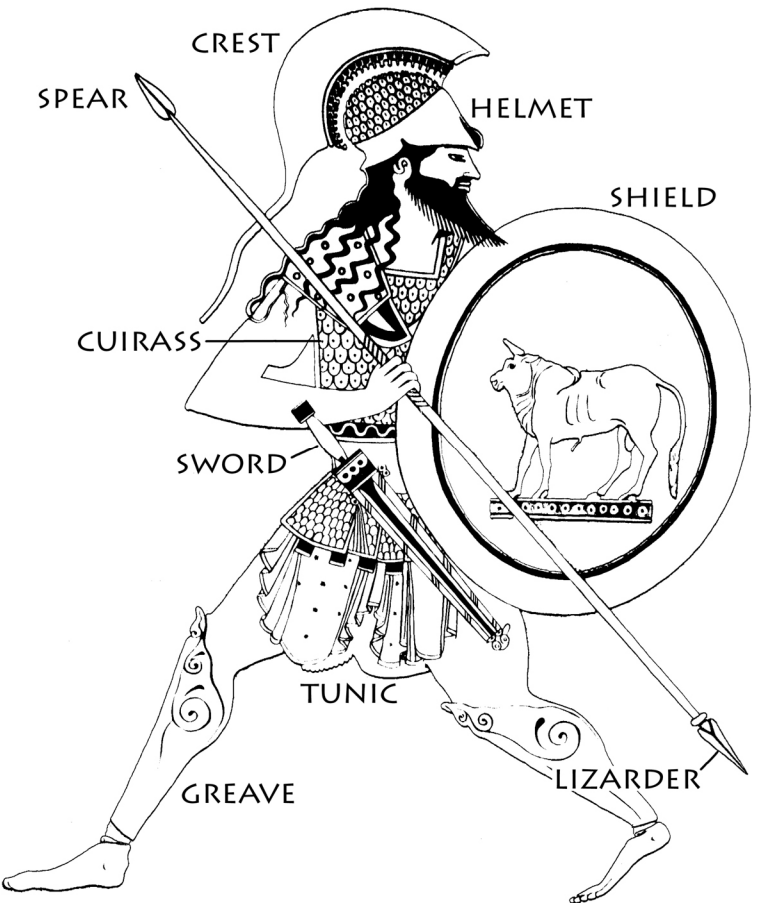
‘If Darius still hungers for Greek soil, and if to him we are truly no more than mosquitoes, then I expect so.’

‘So I might get to fight?’

‘Your turn will come, Euphorion. But don’t be too eager. Glory is a fine thing, but so is peace.’

‘But what is the finest thing of all, father?’

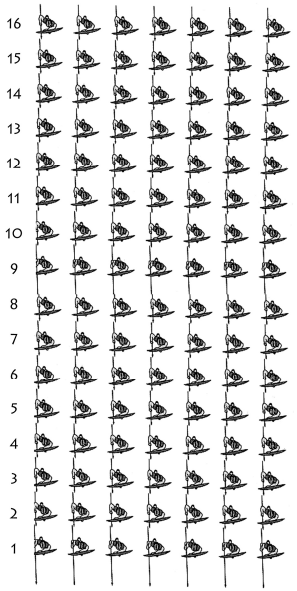
Aeschylos smiled and put his arm round his son’s shoulders.



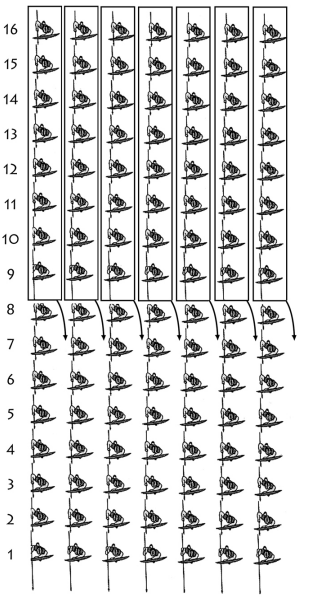
A Greek Hoplite

How phalanx was formed

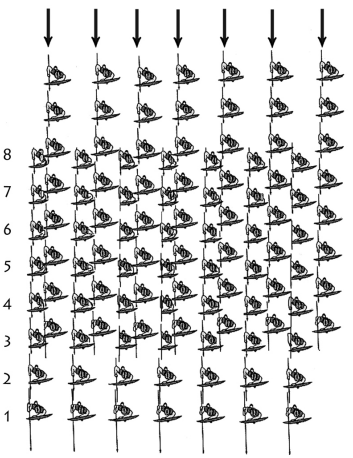
1: Marching in open order
16 in each file



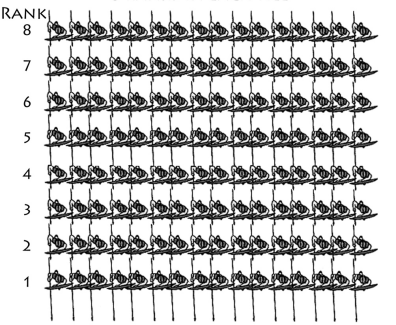
2: Closing order
Rear 8 in each file slips between front 8



3: Closing order:
8 at rear of each file of 16 enter gaps between 8 at the front



4: Closed order
8 ranks in each file



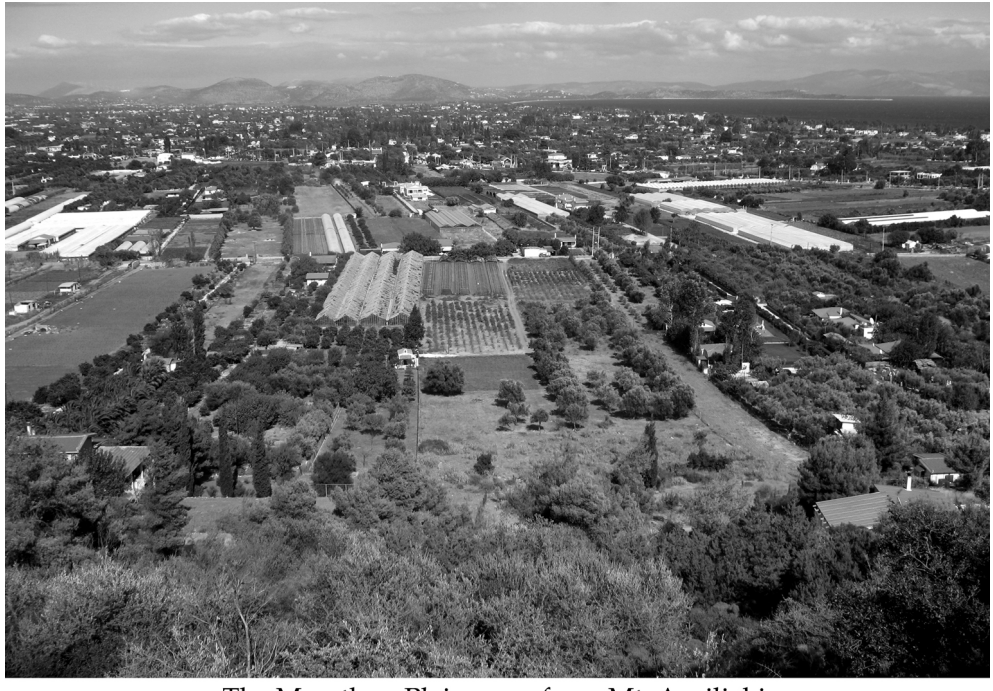
Hoplite re-enactors in phalanx formation

Hoplite re-enactors, demonstrating a file: the front 3 ranks can all fight

The Pnyx, Athens
At the time of Marathon the speaker's platform was on the opposite side

The Acropolis of Athens

The Parthenon and other buildings visible here had not been built at the time of Marathon



The Marathon Plain, seen from Mt. Agrilieki

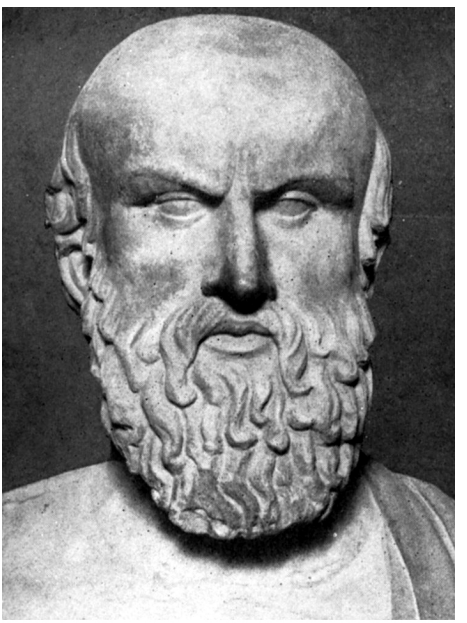
The approximate position from which the characters view the plain in chapter 10

View of the east end of the Marathon plain, location of Persian camp.
The Great Marsh, behind the trees, was dried out in the 1920s & 30s to combat malaria

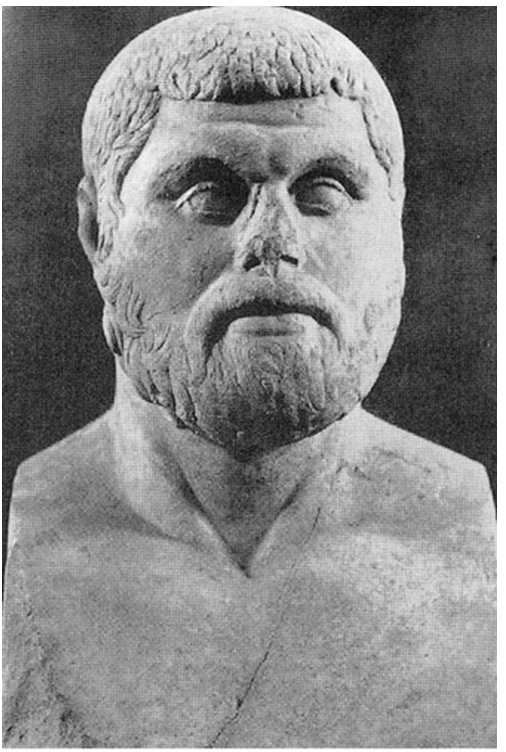
Schoinias Beach

Location of the Persian camp and fleet. Looking west.

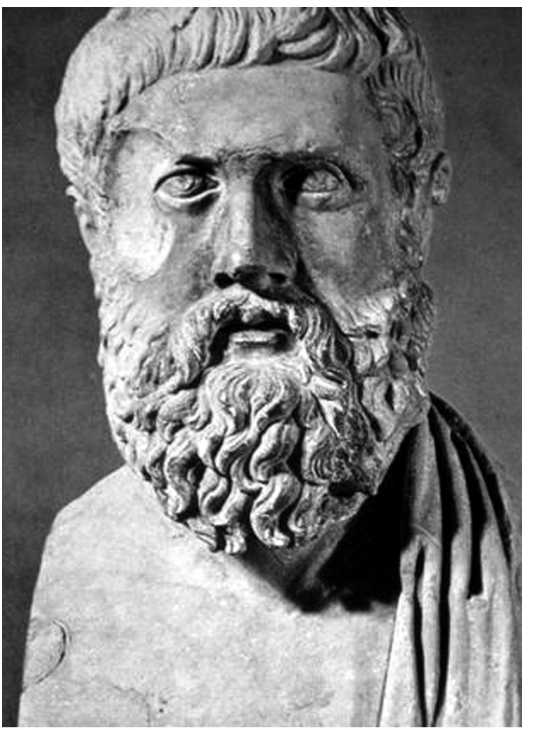
The Burial Mound of the 192 Athenians, Marathon



Aeschylos
carved long after he died; it is
unlikely he looked exactly like this



Themistokles



Miltiades

How do you say that? A guide to the pronunciation of Greek names

Characters

Aeschylos	EE-skuh-lus
Kynegeiros	Kin-uh-GEE-ross
Euphorion	You-FOR-ee-on
Philokles	FILL-uh-kleez
Euaion	You-AY-on
Trygaea	Tri-GYE-a
Ismene	Iss-MEN-ay
Xanthias	KSAN-thee-ass
Miltiades	MILL-tee-uh-deez
Themistokles	Thuh-MISS-tuh-kleez
Xanthippos	Ksan-THIPP-oss
Aristeides	A-RISS-ti-deez
Arimnestos	Arrim-NESS-toss
Stesilaos	Stess-i-LAY-oss
Kallimachos	Kalli-MACK-oss
Euelpides	You-ELL-pi-deez
Strepsiades	STREP-see-a-deez
Philippides	Phi-LIPP-i-deez
Kleomenes	Klee-OM-uh-neez
Hippolytos	Hipp-OLL-ih-toss
Krito	KREE-toe

Gods

Zeus	Zooss
Athena	A-THEE-na
Poseidon	Puh-SYE-dun
Hades	HAY-deez
Apollo	A-POLL-oe
Artemis	AR-tuh-miss
Dionysos	Dye-uh-NYE-soss
Hermes	HER-meez
Demeter	Duh-MEE-ter

Notes:

1. A Greek 'g' is always hard, as in 'goat'.
2. A 'ch' or 'c' in a Greek word is always pronounced as a 'k'.

Heroes

Theseus	THEE-see-us
Herakles	HEH-ruh-kleez
Achilles	A-KILL-eez
Odysseus	Uh-DISS-ee-us
Minotaur	MINE-uh-tor

Places

Miletos	Mye-LEE-tus
Ephesos	EFF-uh-sus
Naxos	NACK-soss
Paros	PAH-ross
Karystos	Kuh-RISS-toss
Eretria	Eh-ri-TREE-a
Khalkis	KALL-kiss
Trikorythos	Trih-KO-rih-thoss
Probalinthos	Prob-uh-LIN-thoss
Oinoe	Oy-NOE-ee
Aegean	Ih-JEE-an
Kynosarges	Kin-uh-SAR-geez
Phaleron	Phuh-LAIR-on
Sounion	SOO-nee-on
Pentelikon	Pen-TELL-ick-on
Salamis	SAL-uh-miss
Plataia	Pluh-TAY-uh
Delos	DELL-oss
Tenos	TENN-oss
Pnyx	P-NIX
Panathenaia	Pan-uh-thuh-NAY-a
Acropolis	A-CROP-uh-liss
Mykonos	MICK-uh-noss
Phoenician	Fuh-NEE-shun

Notes:

3. Some Greek names are pronounced in different ways in English, e.g. Aeschylos can be EE-skuh-lus or ESS-kuh-lus; Miltiades can be MILL-tee-a-deez or Mill-TYE-a-deez.
4. In English we often use the Latin spellings of Greek names, e.g. Aeschylus, Cynegeirus, Miletus, Ephesus, Dionysus, & Theseus.

Statement of Historical (In)Accuracy

or, Did That Really Happen?

The main events surrounding the battle of Marathon, as described in this book, did happen. However I have added a lot that is not in the historical record, but might well have happened. I have even put in things that certainly did *not* happen.

So what is accurate?

Most of the characters in the story are historical, real persons, even the boys. Indeed Euphorion and Philokles both went on to be playwrights like Aeschylos, but with much less success. Also the main events did occur as described in this book, from the attack on Sardis and the execution of the heralds through to Miltiades' attack on Paros, and his final trial and death from gangrene.

So what isn't accurate?

First, a great deal is not known about this period, and to write a story with fleshed out scenes, dialogue etc., I had to make up details. However, these extra details are based on a lot of research. The main ancient source of knowledge about Marathon is the *Histories*, by the Greek writer Herodotus. This is the first true work of history and it is a fascinating book, but it is not necessarily accurate and much is missing. For example Herodotus writes about the battle but says so little that it is very hard to work out exactly what happened. Every modern historian reconstructs it in a different way – with different positions for the two armies, different numbers of Persian warriors, and so on. My description is based on Nicholas Sekunda's book *Marathon 490BC*, as well as several other modern works, and also my own visit to Marathon in 2007. My description of hoplite fighting methods and gear is taken from modern writings, discussions with hoplite re-enactors, trying out manoeuvres myself, and visits to museums to see artefacts. However, the fact is that all of this happened a very long time ago and no one can be sure either what happened at Marathon or how hoplites fought. What I have managed to learn is described on my website, www.timetrips.co.uk.

One more point. The modern marathon is a 26 mile race based on the supposed run of Philippides (often written 'Pheidippides') after the battle, back to Athens, to tell the people about the victory. According to this story Philippides dropped dead immediately after giving his news. However, Herodotus does not mention this at all; indeed, it seems to me highly unlikely that an athlete fit enough to run to Sparta and back in 4 days would die after a mere 26 mile jog. Most modern historians regard the story as a legend, invented much later.

So is the marathon race based on a falsehood? I would say no. The march of the Athenian army back to Athens after fighting a long, hard battle, in full armour and carrying their spears and shields, is a remarkable feat of endurance which deserves to be commemorated by the modern marathon run.

So, what definitely did *not* happen?

Certain elements of my story are completely made up in order to entertain, and for the reader to have some younger characters to identify with. Firstly, Euphorion and Philokles did not go to Marathon. This means that Kynegeiros was not trying to rescue his son when he got his hand chopped off. He did die from such a wound, however, while grabbing the ornament on a Persian ship, as Herodotus describes. Secondly, while Aeschylos and Kynegeiros were both involved in the battle of Marathon, and positioned on the right flank due to their membership of the Aiantis tribe, they did not discuss strategy with the generals. Miltiades probably came up with the idea to thin the troops in the centre on his own. Some historians have argued that at that time military knowledge and training was too simple for Miltiades to have planned the double envelopment (where the left and right wings returned to defeat the Persian centre), and that it must have happened by luck. However, it seems to me that he must have had something in mind to thin the troops in this particular way, as it was known that the Persians were strongest in their centre. Surely it would have made more sense to keep the Greek troops strong in the centre – unless Miltiades had the envelopment plan in mind.

What happened next?

King Darius died in 486BC. His son Xerxes took the throne, and invaded Greece in 480BC. This time he led a far larger army (some say as many as a million) on land, reaching Greece from the north. At the same time a large fleet sailed along the coast. This led to three battles. A sea battle took place at Artemision with no clear victor. At a narrow pass between mountains and sea, at Thermopylae in northern Greece, a force of 300 Spartans and some other Greeks held off the Persian army for three days. They were eventually overcome and Xerxes marched on, burning Athens. Another sea battle followed at Salamis, near Athens. Despite once again being outnumbered, the Athenian fleet, led by Themistokles, destroyed the Persian enemy. This great victory all but ended Xerxes' hopes of conquest, but the next year there was one final land battle, at Plataia. Once again the Greeks were outnumbered, but won – and this time the Spartans were out in full force.

Aeschylos was probably present at the battle of Salamis and perhaps Plataia too. The oldest play in existence is his *Persians*, about the battle of Salamis. After the Persian wars he went on to a glittering career as a poet, winning the play competition at Athens 13 times. He has been called the father of tragedy, and is undoubtedly the first great playwright in history. He died at the age of 69 in Gela, Sicily. According to legend an eagle mistook his bald head for a rock and dropped a tortoise on it (to crack the shell), killing him. Despite his great fame as a poet, the inscription on his tombstone made no mention of his plays. Instead it said:

> Aeschylos the Athenian, Euphorion's son, is dead. This tomb in Gela's cornlands covers him. His glorious courage the sacred field of Marathon could tell, and the longhaired Persian had knowledge of it.