Gates of Fire

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF STEVEN PRESSFIELD

Steven Pressfield was born in Trinidad while his father was stationed there in the Navy. He graduated from Duke University in 1965 and joined the Marine Corps in 1966. Before becoming a full-time writer, he held a variety of jobs, including teaching, truck driving, and working on an oil rig. He finally published his first book, *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, in 1995; it was made into a film in 2000. Other successful titles include *Tides of War*, a novel about the Peloponnesian War, and *The War of Art*, a nonfiction book on writing. He has also written a number of other screenplays which have been made into Hollywood films and has appeared as a commentator on the History Channel.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The novel takes place in 480 B.C. and the decade leading up to that year's monumental battle between the Greeks and Persians at Thermopylae ("Hot Gates"), Greece. The battle was part of Persia's second invasion of Greece, led by King Xerxes I, against the Spartan King Leonidas and his alliance of Greek city-states. Simultaneous with the land battle, a naval battle took place at Artemisium, Thermopylae's coastal pass. Before the novel begins, the Athenians had defeated a first attempted Persian invasion at the battle of Marathon. Although modern scholarship holds that Persian numbers at Thermopylae were probably much smaller than the traditional estimation of over one million, the Greeks were unquestionably outnumbered, and the Spartans' success in holding off the Persians for seven days is one of the most remarkable such defenses in history. Though the Greeks lost at Thermopylae, they later defeated the Persians' attempt to overrun Greece at the Battles of Salamis and Plataea. Greek victory owed much to the Spartan warrior state. Sparta was at the height of its power at the time of the Greco-Persian wars. Its society was organized around its legendary army, for which soldiers trained from boyhood. Spartan culture was marked by self-discipline, education and rigorous physical training for both men and women, and democratic leanings. Their warriors fought in battle lines, advancing toward the enemy in groups and protecting one another with overlapping shields (a formation called a phalanx). While other Greeks used similar tactics, the Spartans' relentless training gave them unmatched stamina and precision.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In *Gates of Fire*, Xeo is raised to revere and memorize portions of Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, epic poems of the Trojan War which were written several hundred years before the novel's action and are foundational for Greek literature and culture. Pressfield bases his account of the Battle of Thermopylae on Book VII of Herodotus' *Histories*, which was written in 440 B.C., about 40 years after the Greco-Persian Wars. Pressfield also drew from Plutarch's *Sayings of the Spartan Women*, a section of his work titled *Moralia* (c. 100 A.D.), in developing the novel's female characters. Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels* is another modern historical novel which gives a soldier's perspective on a pivotal battle, in this case the American Civil War's Battle of Gettysburg.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Gates of Fire: An Epic Novel of the Battle of Thermopylae
- **When Written:** 1998
- **When Published:** 1998
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical fiction
- **Setting:** Sparta (Lakedaemon) and Thermopylae, Greece
- **Climax:** The Spartans' last stand against the Persians at Thermopylae
- **Antagonist:** King Xerxes and the Persian Army
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Modern Classic. *Gates of Fire* is taught at West Point, the United States Naval Academy, and the Marine Corps' Basic School. Steven Pressfield reports receiving many emails from military readers deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Spartan Wit. Herodotus remarks that the historical Dienekes was known for wry quips, as Pressfield also portrays him in the novel. For instance, when someone remarked that Persian arrows would block out the sun, Dienekes is said to have laughed and said, "Good. Then we'll have our battle in the shade." Such quips are characteristic of what's known as "laconic" (Lakedaemonian/Spartan) humor.

PLOT SUMMARY

This is the story of the Battle of Thermopylae and the Spartans who made their final stand there against the Persians, as transcribed by historian Gobartes at the request of the Persian King Xerxes. Gobartes transcribes the story as dictated by

Xeones (Xeo), a wounded Greek whom the Persians discovered on the battlefield. One evening the Greek prisoner is brought before King Xerxes personally. He explains that he can only tell the tale of an everyday soldier, and Xerxes replies that this is exactly the story he wants to hear. Xeo begins by explaining that, on the brink of death, he was rescued by the god Apollo and charged with telling the tale of Thermopylae.

Xeo explains that he was born in the city of Astakos, but just before his tenth birthday, he and his cousin, Diomache, were made homeless orphans by an attack on their city. The attack occurred early one morning as Xeo and Diomache were making the journey to the Astakos market. They soon learn that their parents have been killed and that the city has been destroyed. They find Bruxieus, Xeo's family's slave. After returning to the family farm to bury Xeo's parents, Diomache is raped by Argive soldiers. The three of them flee to the mountains and spend months struggling for survival in the wilderness. Xeo hears stories of the Spartans and vows to someday live among them so that he can gain the ability to slay Argives in vengeance. One day, Xeo is caught stealing from some farmers and is cruelly nailed to a board.

At this point, Xeo is prompted to make a digression. Two years after he was orphaned, Xeo did live with the Spartans and witnessed the deadly beating of a young boy, Tripod. At this time, Xeo is a servant of Tripod's friend, Alexandros. Alexandros's mentor, Dienekes, comforts him after his friend's death, praising Tripod's nobility in the face of suffering. Xeo then returns to the story of his own suffering, when he screamed helplessly, showing no courage. Bruxieus later tries to comfort him, explaining that nobody can show courage when they're alone and "cityless." Nevertheless, Xeo despairs and goes off in the snow to die. But Apollo appears to him, assuring him that he has a purpose in life. Xeo, his cousin, and Bruxieus survive in the mountains for a few more seasons before a dying Bruxieus sends the children to Athens to assure they'll have a properly civilized life.

Xeo jumps a few years into the future, when he is working as Alexandros's sparring partner. He tells a story that conveys the brutality of the Spartan training regime. One night during a brutal drill, Polynikes angrily breaks Alexandros's nose for a small breach of protocol. In the aftermath, Alexandros develops asthma which seems to be triggered by fear. Dienekes tries to help him master his fear, pushing Xeo to fight Alexandros as hard as he can, because he knows Alexandros will live a disgraced life if he can't become a warrior.

Some time after this, Alexandros and Xeo follow the Spartans to a minor battle against another Greek city-state, Antirhion. In the course of their journey, they're forced to swim across a huge strait. Their survival cements their friendship and hardens Alexandros's courage. Both boys witness the Spartans in battle for the first time and see Leonidas's brotherly leadership as he tells the Spartans that soon they will face a much greater foe: the Persians.

After they return to Sparta, Xeo is interrogated by Alexandros's mother, Paraleia, as to her son's behavior and courage during the journey. Afterward, Dienekes's wife, Arete, befriends Xeo and asks him to keep an eye on her nephew, Rooster, who's gained a reputation for treasonous sentiments. When Xeo asks, she assures him that his childhood vision of Apollo was real, and she becomes a maternal figure to him. A couple of days later, Rooster is assigned as squire to Alexandros's father, Olympieus, and Xeo begins training under Suicide to eventually become Dienekes's squire.

In the coming years, Xeo, Alexandros, and Rooster all marry and father children. After a failed confrontation at Tempe, the Spartans, goaded by their wives' disdain, soon plan for a defense at Thermopylae. The news comes that a force of three hundred soldiers will be sent to fight to the death there. Because only men with sons are being chosen, Dienekes must stay at home.

That night, Rooster—who's repeatedly proven himself a brave warrior and repeatedly turned down offers to become a "stepbrother" Spartan—tries to flee for sanctuary, knowing he's likely to be apprehended as a traitor. Sure enough, some krypteia assassins soon arrest Rooster and his family. Before he can be executed, Arete and Alexandros intervene to spare his life. In the process, it's revealed that Rooster's son is actually Dienekes's son. This means that Dienekes can go to Thermopylae, after all.

Three days before the march-out to Thermopylae, Dienekes takes his platoon on a hunt. He speaks honestly to his youthful warriors about his fear, and they speculate that women actually possess greater andreia, or valor, than men do. Later, Dienekes reveals that this was Leonidas's motive in selecting the Three Hundred—he chose those whose wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters would stand firm after their loved ones' deaths, inspiring all of Greece to resist and prevail in time.

The Three Hundred—along with their squires, helots, and allies—march into Thermopylae, set up camp, and prepare for battle. They reject an embassy from the Persian camp, urging the Spartans to betray their allies and become vassals of Persia. The battle begins only after Xerxes has made himself comfortable in an elaborate mountaintop throne from which he can view the fighting. Soon, a battle of unprecedented ferocity begins. Though the Spartans are vastly outnumbered, they use their discipline and sheltered position to advantage and press back the Persian advance.

That night, as Xeo tends to his injured master, he tells Dienekes what finally happened between him and Diomache. Some time ago, he tracked down Diomache at the sanctuary of Persephone in Athens. He was grieved to find his cousin, who'd supposedly married well, haggard from years of suffering. She consoles Xeo when he wants to whisk her away—they're each

living out the course set for them by the gods, she says.

Early the next morning, Rooster is apprehended with information from the Persian camp. He warns Xeo that the Persians will envelop the Spartans from behind. He also tells him exactly how to infiltrate the Persian camp and get access to Xerxes' tent. A deserting Persian prince corroborates this information, but the Spartans, encouraged by omens they interpret in their own favor, suppose it's a trick.

Though Leonidas refuses to pull out from Thermopylae, he spares some of his best warriors, including Xeo, Rooster, Dienekes, and Alexandros, to attempt to raid Xerxes' tent. The raid is disastrous, and Alexandros is killed, to Dienekes's overwhelming grief. When they bury Alexandros, Polynikes says that he was "the best of us all."

The Persians have indeed been spotted to the Spartan rear, and Leonidas is preparing the troops for a last stand. Rooster is released, and Xeo, as a non-Spartan squire, is also permitted to evacuate. However, he refuses, since Sparta is now his city. Many other allies, helots, and squires stay as well. Leonidas speaks to the remaining men and explains that it's their job to stand and die, inspiring the rest of Greece to complete the victory. If they retreat to spare their own lives, Greece, too, will fall. Xeo reflects that Leonidas is a king who "by his conduct and example makes [people] free"—in contrast to Xerxes, who does not fight alongside his men and who enslaves rather than liberates.

As they make their last stand, the Spartans are annihilated by the vastly more numerous Persians. Xeo, too, is mortally wounded.

The day Xeo finishes his tale, as it happens, the Greek naval forces have just defeated the Persian navy, paving the way for a total Greek victory over further Persian attempts. Xeo, whose health has declined, soon dies. Xeo's body is sent to the sanctuary of Persephone for safekeeping. Later, Diomache bears Xeo's ashes to Thermopylae and honors him there.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Xeones – "Xeo," son of Skamandridas of Astakos, is a young man and squire of the heavy infantry, rescued by Apollo after the battle of Thermopylae and tasked with telling the story of what happened there. While spending his youth in Sparta, at various times he works with Rooster, Alexandros, Suicide, and Dienekes as a servant, sparring partner, and squire. He grew up in Astakos, a city of Akarnania north of the Peloponnese. Just short of his tenth birthday, his city was captured by the Argives and his entire family murdered, except for himself, his cousin Diomache, and the family slave, Bruxieus. The three of them spend two years fending for themselves in the wilderness. Xeo hears stories about the Spartans and vows to someday live among them, thinking of them as "avenging gods." One day, injured and despairing at his own cowardice, Xeo wanders off in the snow to die, but Apollo appears to him and saves his life, prompting him to fulfill his earlier dream of moving to Sparta. He finds Sparta, for all its brutality, to be his new city. At Thermopylae, Xeo ends up filling a gap in the line at Sparta's last stand, even though he was given the option to evacuate. Among the Spartans he's ultimately found not demigods or avengers, but beloved brothers. Xeo survives as a captive in the Persian court after the battle, but dies after he finishes telling his story.

King Xerxes I – Xerxes is the King of Persia. At the beginning of the novel, his forces are overrunning Greece. Having conquered most of Asia, he now has ambitions to overrun Europe as well, beginning with Greece. When Xeo is found and brought to him, Xerxes wishes to hear the full story of the Spartans—both their tactics and their characters. Xerxes comes to trust in Xeo's account because he knows that, unlike his other advisers, Xeo has nothing to gain from him. Unlike his foil, Leonidas, Xerxes remains aloof from his men, motivating them with fear instead of love. Though Xerxes's forces prevail at Thermopylae, they are soundly defeated by Greece the following year.

King Leonidas – Leonidas is the King of Sparta and a foil for King Xerxes. He is around 60 years old at the time of Thermopylae. Leonidas is beloved for treating his men like comrades, training and fighting alongside them. He perceives the Persian threat long before the invasion and leads the Spartans in battle and diplomacy in order to gain the alliance of as many city-states as possible before war comes. He refuses to withdraw his troops from Thermopylae even when prospects are clearly hopeless, knowing Greece will despair if they do. He is killed and his corpse is desecrated by the Persians.

Apollo – Apollo is a god of the Greek pantheon, the deity of archery among many other things. At the beginning of the novel, a dying Xeo sees a vision of him on the battlefield and believes that he chooses Xeo to survive and tell the story of what happened at Thermopylae. Xeo first saw a vision of Apollo when Xeo was a boy; Apollo saved him from death and encouraged him to learn to shoot a bow and arrow. Throughout his life, Xeo maintains a deep devotion to Apollo.

Alexandros – Alexandros is a noble Spartan youth enrolled in the agoge whose service Xeo enters after he's rejected by the helots. He and Xeo become close friends. Alexandros is Olympieus's and Paraleia's son. He is a gentle spirit and an accomplished musician. He struggles with the demands of *agoge* training and is scorned and tormented for this by Polynikes. Dienekes works with him to try to master his fear, and he succeeds in becoming a Spartan warrior. At Thermopylae, he joins a daring raid into Xerxes's tent and dies of his wounds.

Dienekes – Dienekes is a Spartan warrior who serves as

Alexandros's beloved mentor and whom Xeo serves as squire at Thermopylae. His wife is Arete. He loved Arete while she was married to Iatrokles, Dienekes's brother, then married Arete after Iatrokles died. The two have never had any sons. Dienekes is an accomplished warrior but refuses honors and promotions, preferring the obscurity of being a platoon commander. He has a philosophical bent and considers himself a "student of fear" in particular—a science in which he trains Alexandros. He has a workmanlike approach to battle and dies at Thermopylae like a commander doing his "last and dirtiest job."

Dekton ("Rooster") – Dekton is a half-Spartan, the son of Arete's brother Idotychides, and half-Messenian. He serves the Spartan army as a helot and mightily resents the Spartans. He is an atheist, the only one Xeo has ever met. He marries Harmonia and has two children, one of them a son, Messenieus. He repeatedly proves himself to be a brave warrior and is even offered Spartan citizenship, but refuses, gaining a reputation for treasonous sentiments. Nearly executed for treason on the eve of Thermopylae, he's turned loose on the Greek frontier instead, thanks to Alexandros's intervention on his behalf. Arete also reveals that Messenieus is not his son, but Dienekes's. Later, Dekton reveals valuable information to the Spartans, enabling them to infiltrate the Persian camp and prepare for a Persian sneak attack. He is granted his liberty by Leonidas and, in gratitude, becomes a Spartan warrior himself, later sparing Gobartes' life.

Diomache – Diomache is Xeo's cousin, age 13 at the beginning of the story. After her hometown is attacked, she is raped by Argive soldiers. She eventually moves to Athens but lives a hellish life there, until the goddess Persephone leads her to a temple, where she finally lives at peace. When she and Xeo are briefly reunited, Xeo longs to run away with her, having always harbored feelings for her and feeling guilty for failing to protect her. However, she tells him that their respective gods have protected each of them thus far and will continue to determine the course of their lives.

Antaurus ("Suicide") – Suicide is a Scythian who served as Iatrokles's and Dienekes's squire and Xeo's instructor. He fled to Sparta after committing a crime and tried to get others to kill him, to no avail, then was taken on as a squire and proved himself a "holy terror" on the battlefield. In time, he becomes deeply loyal to the Spartans. Though a man of few words, on the eve of battle he speaks movingly of the love that motivates brothers-in-arms to die for one another, helping Dienekes resolve his nagging question about fear and its opposite.

Arete – Arete is Dienekes's wife. She was first married to Iatrokles. She has several daughters but is subsequently barren, never bearing a son. She is an audacious woman, shaping Spartan events behind the scenes and commanding men's respect. She intervenes to save her nephew Rooster's son's life, revealing that the baby is actually Dienekes's. She has a maternal fondness for Xeo.

Polynikes – Polynikes is a pitiless warrior, a knight, and a famed Olympic champion. He is a nephew of Leonidas. Polynikes has always had a grudge against Alexandros and treated him brutally while Alexandros was in training. He also resents Dienekes's beloved status in Sparta. Polynikes is arrogant and loves glory and warfare. After the horrors of Thermopylae's first day of battle, however, Polynikes is humbled. He even gains respect for Alexandros and asks his forgiveness. He dies at Thermopylae.

Bruxieus – Bruxieus is Xeo's family's household slave. He was initially enslaved and blinded by the Argives as a young man. He was acquired by Xeo's father past the age of 40. He is loved by the entire family, and he and Xeo have a special bond. Bruxieus lives with Xeo and Diomache in the hills after the destruction of Astakos. He forces the children to learn portions from Homer by heart, afraid they'll become uncivilized if they're not tutored in the virtues. Before he dies, he sends them to Athens so that they will once again have a city of their own.

Elephantinos – Elephantinos is a merchant (a blade-sharpener) from Miletus who follows the Spartan army to Thermopylae after they help him with his broken-down wagon along the way. He ends up becoming "a kind of mascot or talisman to the troops, embraced as a storyteller, jester, and companion at everyone's fireside." He dies with them on the battlefield.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Tenagros – Tenagros is Diomache's father and Xeo's uncle. He survives the attack on Astakos, but after sending the children to safety in the city, he is never seen again.

Teriander ("Tripod") – Tripod was a young Spartan-in-training who was whipped to death by his drill instructors, refusing to ask for mercy. He was Alexandros's close friend.

Iatrokles – Iatrokles was Dienekes's brother. He was married to Arete. He died a hero's death at 31 and was considered the noblest warrior of his generation.

Olympieus – Olympieus, a Spartan warrior, is Alexandros's father and Paraleia's wife. He dies at Thermopylae.

Gobartes the Historian – Gobartes is the Persian historian who transcribes Xeo's tale for the historical record at Xerxes's command, effectively making him the book's narrator. When Greece prevails at the end of the book, he is nearly killed by Spartans, but Rooster spares him when he hears of Gobartes' connection to Xeo.

Orontes – Orontes is King Xerxes's captain. He becomes a confidant of sorts to Xeo while Xeo is Xerxes's captive.

Demaratos – Demaratos is a deposed and exiled Spartan king who lives as a guest and trusted adviser in Xerxes's court; when Xeo becomes suicidal on hearing of Leonidas's desecration after Thermopylae, Demaratos assuages Xeo by appealing to his piety toward Apollo.

Paraleia – Paraleia is the wife of Dienekes and mother of Alexandros.

Idotychides – Arete's late brother and father of Rooster.

Mardonius – King Xerxes's field marshal and trusted adviser.

Artemisia – Warrioress and queen of Halicarnassus; King Xerxes's trusted adviser.

Gorgo – Gorgo is Leonidas's wife and queen of Sparta; her name means "Bright Eyes." Her son, Pleistarchus, will one day become King of Sparta.

Thereia – Thereia is Xeo's wife. She is Rooster's cousin, a Messenian, and has two children with him. Xeo regrets that he can't love her as she deserves.

Sphaireus, "Ball Player" – Ball Player, like Xeo, was an orphaned refugee after the attack on Astakos. Unlike Xeo, he seeks to profit from war and becomes a scout for the Spartan troops at Thermopylae. He also joins the raiders when they infiltrate the Persian camp.

Hound – A Spartan Skirite ranger, who's accompanied to Thermopylae by his hunting dog, Styx, and is nicknamed accordingly.

Ariston – Ariston is a young Spartan warrior. He is killed in the first day of battle at Thermopylae. He is Alexandros's brother-in-law, brother of Agathe.

Agathe – Agathe is Ariston's sister and becomes Alexandros's wife.

Meriones – Meriones is Olympieus's beloved, elderly squire, who is killed on the battlefield in Antirhion.

Messenieus – Messenieus is believed to be Rooster's and Harmonia's son, later found to be Dienekes's son.

Harmonia – Harmonia is Rooster's wife and mother, by Dienekes, of Messenieus.

Megistias – A seer who accompanies the Spartans to Thermopylae.

Tyrrhastiadas – A Persian noble and captain, husband of a Greek woman, who warns the Spartans that the Persian Immortals are on their way to encircle them. They dismiss his warnings.

Ptammitechus ("Tommie") – An Egyptian marine and ship captain whom the Spartan officers Olympieus, Aristodemos, Polynikes, and Dienekes meet on embassy. He later serves as a messenger for King Xerxes and begs the Greeks not to go to war with Persia, but they reject his plea.

Medon – A Spartan Peer who examines Dienekes's son, Messenieus, when he is an infant. He then deems Dienekes eligible to be chosen for the Three Hundred and Thermopylae.

Aristodemos – A Spartan officer alongside Olympieus, Polynikes, and Dienekes.

TERMS

Spartiates – The Spartiaes are full Spartans, or Peers—full citizens and warriors of Sparta, unlike helots such as **Xeo**.

Lakedaemonians – Citizens of the Greek city-state Sparta, which is also known in Greek as Lakedaemon.

Helot – Helots make up the class of serfs created by the Lakedaemonians from the inhabitants of Messenia and Helos they enslaved centuries earlier. **Rooster** is the best-known helot in the novel.

Agoge – The *agoge* is the program in which Spartan boys are brought up—what **Xeo** describes as the "notorious and pitiless thirteen-year training regimen which turned boys into Spartan warriors."

Polis – *Polis* is the general term for a Greek city-state, the center of culture and identity. **Xeo** suffers a loss of identity when his polis, Astakos, is destroyed at the beginning of the novel, and he seeks a new identity in the polis of Sparta.

Katalepsis – *Katalepsis*, or "madness," is "that yielding to fear or anger which robs an army of order and reduces it to a rabble." Throughout the book, **Dienekes** is concerned with the study of fear and self-composure as a means of counteracting *katalepsis*.

Andreia – *Andreia* is "manly valor," the highest Spartan virtue which all warriors seek to embody on the battlefield. Women, too, can display *andreia*; such characters as **Arete** are considered paragons of this virtue because of their willingness to send their beloved husbands, fathers, and brothers into battle for the sake of the higher good.

Krypteia – The *krypteia* are a secret force of Spartiates who eliminate troublemakers—especially potential traitors—by cover of night. **Rooster** is nearly killed by the *krypteia*, including **Polynikes**, before **Arete** bravely intervenes.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CITIES, IDENTITY, AND BELONGING

In the ancient Greek context of *Gates of Fire*, which centers on the Battle of Thermopylae between the Spartans and Persians in 480 B.C., cities were everything. A city was not just a geographic home, but the environment in which people forged relationships, learned their culture, and formed their sense of identity. To lose a city was really to lose one's self. This is what befalls the main

character, Xeo, who is a young refugee at the start of the book. Through Xeo's and other outcasts' experience of exile, and then of seeking and ultimately finding a home in Sparta, Pressfield argues that having a "city" is vital for identity, but that such identity need not be strictly tied to citizenship.

In the first part of the book, Xeo is cityless. When Xeo's hometown of Astakos is destroyed by the Argives—Greek allies who've betrayed his people—he also loses his sense of identity, lamenting, "Our city, my city. Now it was effaced utterly. We who called ourselves Astakiots were effaced with it. Without a city, who were we?" In the aftermath, as Xeo, his cousin Diomache, and their family's elderly former slave, Bruxieus, wander the hills struggling to survive, they try to recreate a sense of community with other refugees: "We would run into them at the springs and try to resume the fellow-feeling we had shared as Astakiots. But the extinction of our *polis* had severed those happy bonds forever. It was every man for himself now; every clan, every kin group." Without the familiar structures of the city, there is no built-in basis for relating; survival becomes a largely individual matter.

When Xeo admits his cowardice to Bruxieus, Bruxieus tells the boy that it's too difficult to summon courage in isolation. "Most piteous of all states under heaven is that of a man alone, bereft of the gods of his home and his *polis*. A man without a city is not a man. He is a shadow, a joke and a mockery. That is what you have become now, my poor Xeo. No one may expect valor from one cast out alone, cut off from the gods of his home." In this view, not only community, but even humanity is unattainable without the home and spiritual foundation that one's city provides. As they forage for survival, Bruxieus worries that Xeo and Diomache are becoming "wild, cityless," and tutors them in Homer and in compassion, making them recite the most moving scenes from the *Iliad*. He decides that they must have a city, or else "we were no better than the wild brutes we hunted and killed." He makes them go to Athens to rebuild a life for themselves.

By the end of the book, Xeo and other characters find an adoptive city—and newfound identities—in Sparta. When Spartan warrior Dienekes gives Xeo the opportunity to leave Thermopylae before the deciding battle, having never compelled his service, Xeo refuses. When fellow outcast Rooster protests that "theirs is not your city. You owe it nothing," Xeo can only reply that "the decision had been made years ago" when he decided to join Sparta as a homeless boy. He later explains to Persia's King Xerxes that "I and every man there were never more free than when we gave [...] obedience" to Spartan law, and that by surrendering himself to this law, he has been given new life. Xeo is not a Spartan citizen, yet he willingly claims it as his city, to the extent of being willing to die for it.

Rooster, who has hated Sparta all his life and chafed under his helot (slave) status, finally finds acceptance among the Spartans when he joins Xeo and several other Spartans on a raid into the Persian camp. He is even graciously encouraged by Sparta's King Leonidas to register his son with a foreign, Messenian name. Moved to tears, he gives his son a Spartan name instead, and after his emancipation, he is later revealed to have become a Spartan warrior himself. His resentful outcast status has been transformed into whole-hearted allegiance by these brotherly gestures.

Elephantinos, a wandering merchant in Thermopylae who's caught unawares by the arriving Spartan army, adopts the warriors as sons and spends his last days cheering and helping them, even dying for them in the end: "I have searched all my life for that which you have possessed from birth, a noble city to belong to [...] This will be my city. I will be her magistrate and her physician, her orphans' father and her fool." Though a minor character, Elephantinos, too, is a touching example of how belonging, however short-lived, can be discovered in unlikely situations.

At the last battle, Spartans and allies from other Greek nations exchange their shields with one another until "all distinction between the nations had been effaced." This symbolic action, on the eve of their deaths, is far from a throwaway gesture. In light of the importance Greeks attached to their cities, it's a significant gesture of brotherhood, based on the trust formed in the thick of battle. This reinforces Pressfield's argument that identification with cities is important, but that those "cities" may take an unconventional form.

FAITH AND DIVINE INTERVENTION

While it's hardly surprising that gods and divine activity are a significant theme in *Gates of Fire*, Pressfield's treatment of the human/divine relationship is far from simplistic. The gods are interested in human lives—even seemingly insignificant human lives—yet their intentions for those lives are not always clear from a human perspective. Through a range of personal and collective encounters between Greeks and their gods, Pressfield suggests that religious faith is a complex matter, at times motivating human beings to unexpected heights, sometimes reflecting their blind prejudices, and always reflecting the inscrutability of the divine.

The gods often intervene in the lives of ordinary people, even outcasts. When Xeo, maimed by a farmer who caught him stealing, wanders off in a snowstorm to die, he has a vision of Apollo, encouraging Xeo that he still has a purpose and should become an archer. "In a flash that was neither thunderbolt nor revelation but the plainest, least adorned apprehension in the world, I understood all that his words and presence implied." This "apprehension" saves Xeo from an untimely death and sets him on the course that will determine the rest of his life.

Even though Rooster, the helot for whom Xeo works as a field

hand, mocks Xeo's piety (did he think the great god Apollo "would piss away his valuable time swooping down to chat in the snow" with a cityless kid like him?), he at last finds reassurance from the lady Arete, his mentor Dienekes's wife. When he summons the courage to ask Arete whether a god would "condescend to speak to a boy without city or station, a penniless child who [...] did not even know the proper words of prayer," Arete assures him that he indeed saw a vision. She tells him to visit her again, because she wants to get to know this boy "who has sat and chatted with the Son of Heaven." Xeo, weeping at Arete's motherly reassurance, draws renewed courage from this exchange, committing himself to Apollo's service through the rest of the story.

However, even if they can be trusted to take a guiding hand in human affairs, the leading of the gods is not always transparent to humans. The gods' actions are complicated and hard for mortals to understand. Arete tells Xeo, "The gods make us love whom we will not [...] and disrequite whom we will. They slay those who should live and spare those who deserve to die. They give with one hand and take with the other, answerable only to their own unknowable laws [...] I have saved the life of this boy, my brother's bastard's son, and lost my husband's in the process." Arete felt compelled to intervene in the near execution of her nephew, Rooster, revealing that Rooster's son was actually her own husband, Dienekes', illegitimate son. Because of her intervention, not only are Rooster and his son spared, but Dienekes can now be assigned to the suicide mission at Thermopylae (only warriors with male offspring were selected), which will almost certainly leave Arete a widow. This is an example of how the gods "give with one hand and take with the other," and of how mercy is entwined with the apparent hardness of fate in the gods' doings.

When people take the apparent actions of the gods at face value, it can lead to misinterpretation and disaster. Near the end of the battle at Thermopylae, a monstrous lightning strike and a grisly avalanche of enemy corpses persuade the Spartan army that divine omens are on their side: "Yet such was the exaltation produced by that final prodigy that the allies would neither listen nor pay heed [to warnings of an imminent breach by the Persian army]. Men came forward in assembly, skeptics and agnostics, those who acknowledged their doubt and even disdain of the gods; these same men now swore mighty oaths and declared that this bolt of heaven and the unearthly bellow which had accompanied it had been none other than the war cry of Zeus himself." Xeo calls this a "*katalepsis*," or madness, that blinds people to reality. Clearly, faith in the gods and the use of reason are not meant to be mutually exclusive.

A Persian noble who comes to warn the Spartans points out "that if the hand of the gods was at all present in this day's events, it was not their benevolence seeking to preserve the Hellenic defenders but their perverse and unknowable will acting to detach them from their reason [...] upon the rock [were] the scores of lightning scars where over decades and centuries numerous other random bolts had in the natural course of coastal storms struck here upon this, the loftiest and most proximate promontory." In light of this appeal to logic, the man beseeches King Leonidas to temper valor with wisdom and retreat from their position, "or [valor] is merely recklessness." Leonidas refuses. Human beings are subject to take from prodigies what they wish to see, with potentially disastrous results.

Pressfield shows a whole range of religious belief among his characters—atheists, doubters, enthusiastic converts, priestesses, and seers. In doing so, he presents a realistic picture of religious faith and its many expressions in a diverse society like the Greek city-states. Most interesting in his portrayal, however, is that he generally keeps a veil over the gods' characters and intentions. It's never clear that the gods are simply pro-Greek in the war with the Persians, for instance. This sense of mystery adds to the joys and sorrows of the characters, whose fates never seem to be neatly preordained.

WARFARE AND BROTHERHOOD

After Xeo's hometown is destroyed by the Argives, he longs to join the Spartans because they are the only warriors who can defeat the Argives. "The Spartans became for [him] the equivalent of avenging gods. [He] couldn't learn enough about these warriors who had so devastatingly defeated the murderers" of his family. In Xeo's journeys with the Spartans, he encounters different views of what being a warrior and engaging in battle entail. These views are especially symbolized by Polynikes, who's focused on the pursuit of individual glory, and his more restrained counterpart, Dienekes, who focuses more on the needs of the whole. As Xeo ceases to idealize the Spartans and eventually finds them to be not gods but his own brothers, Pressfield rejects glorification of war for its own sake and argues that if there's any beauty to be found in warfare, it exists in brotherhood.

Polynikes serves as an example of a kind of brash, even bloodthirsty courage. Xeo reflects that Polynikes's courage is "that of a lion or an eagle, something in the blood and the marrow, which [...] gloried in its instinctual supremacy." This kind of courage leads Polynikes to cruelly berate those he sees falling short, as he does to the young Alexandros, Xeo's friend, on multiple occasions. After subjecting Alexandros to a brutal interrogation in front of the other Spartan Peers, he closes with a short lecture on the nature of warfare. "War, and preparation for war, call forth all that is noble and honorable in a man [...] There in the holy mill of murder the meanest of men may seek and find that part of himself, concealed beneath the corrupt, which shines forth brilliant and virtuous, worthy of honor before the gods. Do not despise war, my young friend, nor delude yourself that mercy and compassion are virtues superior to *andreia*, to manly valor." Polynikes sees war itself as

a sacred force that refines people to become their best selves.

Dienekes' courage, and King Leonides', by contrast, is marked by humble virtues and care for one's brothers before oneself—an ethic that prevails at Thermopylae. Xeo describes Dienekes' courage as "the virtue of a man, a fallible mortal, who brought valor forth out of the understanding of his heart, by the force of some inner integrity." Dienekes tries to teach his protegees that this kind of integrity is founded not on passionate heroics, but on "those homely acts of order" that are instilled on Spartans from boyhood. Such acts train warriors to put the unit first and their own interests, including ambition or fear, second.

At Thermopylae, King Leonidas, too, embodies this habit-driven approach to warfare. In his philosophy, "war is work, not mystery. The king confined his instructions to the practical, prescribing actions which could be taken physically, rather than seeking to produce a state of mind, which he knew would evaporate" as soon as his motivating speech ended. Training is not mere distraction or busywork, but the pattern that allows frightened warriors to undertake the critical tasks at hand.

Xeo later reflects on the effect of this deeply-instilled habit in the heat of battle: "Nothing fires the warrior's heart more with courage than to find himself and his comrades at the point of annihilation, at the brink of being routed and overrun, and then to dredge not merely from one's own bowels or guts but from one's own discipline and training the presence of mind not to panic, [...] but instead to complete those homely acts of order which Dienekes had ever declared the supreme accomplishment of the warrior: to perform the commonplace under far-from-commonplace conditions..." When well-trained warriors come together in such "homely acts," they effectively become "a beast of one blood and heart" on the battlefield. Habit doesn't just strengthen the individual soldier for battle—it unites individuals around a common purpose.

Dienekes later admonishes Polynikes that he hopes he will "survive as many battles in the flesh as you have already fought in your imagination. Perhaps then you will acquire the humility of a man and bear yourself no longer as the demigod you presume yourself to be." In saying this, Dienekes suggests that Polynikes' understanding of war is too consumed with self-importance and glory. In that respect, it's not a sufficiently Spartan approach to warfare. It turns out that Polynikes is humbled at Thermopylae; he finds that killing isn't a game, and that the only redeeming factor about war is the way it binds people together in mutual self-sacrifice.

FEAR, COURAGE, AND LOVE

Throughout *Gates of Fire*, fear is pervasive, from the destruction of Xeo's city to the hovering threat of the Persian invasion to the horrors of Thermopylae. Dienekes, seasoned mentor to the young Alexandros and the master whom Xeo serves as squire, is preoccupied with the study of fear and how it may be overcome. Through Dienekes' exploration of the question of fear at pivotal moments in the story, Pressfield argues that fear can't be overcome by any mere exertion of courage or loyalty to principle, but by love for one's brothers.

Dienekes, though a hardened warrior, struggles to articulate the nature of fear and how to combat it. At the beginning of the story, Dienekes insists that there is an indefinable "force beyond fear" that urges the warrior to fight for reasons other than simply his self-preservation. After Alexandros's friend Tripod is cruelly beaten to death in training, Dienekes sees in Tripod's refusal to surrender a certain admirable resistance to fear. He comforts his protégé Alexandros, explaining that fear originates in one's flesh: "Never forget, Alexandros, that this flesh, this body, does not belong to us [...] If I thought this stuff was mine, I could not advance a pace into the face of the enemy. But it is not ours, my friend. It belongs to the gods and to our children, our fathers and mothers and those of Lakedaemon a hundred, a thousand years yet unborn. It belongs to the city which gives us all we have and demands no less in requital." Despite this lofty appeal to the glory of Lakedaemon, however, Dienekes isn't able to explain precisely what this force beyond fear consists of.

Around the campfire on the eve of Thermopylae, Dienekes raises this question again with his fellow warriors: "All my life [...] one question has haunted me. What is the opposite of fear? [...] To call it *aphobia*, fearlessness, is without meaning. [...] I want to know its true obverse, as day of night and heaven of earth." He adds that veterans "cobble our courage together on the spot, of rags and remnants. The main we summon out of that which is base. Fear of disgracing the city, the king, the heroes of our lines [...] But [fear] is always there. The closest I've come is to act despite terror. But that's not it either." In other words, even hardened soldiers are haunted by fear, and must scrape together courage out of their fear of disgrace. But Dienekes is convinced that the opposite of fear must be something positive; it can't be just fortitude in the face of terror.

It isn't until the eve of the final battle that Dienekes gets his answer—and this comes, ironically, from a non-Spartan ally named Suicide. After being given his once-hated nickname, Suicide explains, he eventually came to see its wisdom: "to extinguish the selfish self within, that part which looks only to its own preservation, to save its own skin. That, I saw, was the victory you Spartans had gained over yourselves. [...] When a warrior fights not for himself, but for his brothers, [...] then his heart truly has achieved contempt for death, and with that he transcends himself and his actions touch the sublime." Fear is overcome not out of mere refusal to surrender, as for Tripod, or concern for one's reputation, but in truly being willing to give up everything for those one loves. This insight from a Scythian

outsider finally sheds conclusive light on Dienekes' question—perhaps because Suicide is under no compulsion to die alongside the Spartans, yet chooses to do so anyway. "The opposite of fear," Dienekes tells Xeo that night, "is love."

This insight about love and fear informs Dienekes' final speech to the Spartans and allies before battle: "Here is what you do, friends. Forget country. Forget king. Forget wife and children and freedom. Forget every concept, however noble, that you imagine you fight for here today. Act for this alone: for the man who stands at your shoulder. He is everything, and everything is contained within him. That's all I know. That's all I can tell you." Dienekes knows that at this crucial hour, no single personality, philosophy, or even personal tie will suffice to uphold his men. Each can only seek to love and protect the man next to him; only this will be a sufficient counterpoint to fear.

This insight is further illustrated by the actions of other characters. Despite the fact that Xeo joined the Spartans out of bloodlust toward those who destroyed his family and city, he remains with the doomed warriors even when he's given the chance to leave, having come to see them as his beloved brothers. And Rooster, who's despised the Spartans all his life as a slave, reappears at the end of the story as a Spartan warrior himself—in response to the merciful reprieve he'd been shown by his captors, he joins them and shows mercy to a captive Persian (Gobartes, the story's narrator) in turn. This final act solidifies that acting out of love and selflessness is the key to overcoming one's fears and being a courageous soldier.

KINGSHIP, LOYALTY, AND FREEDOM

Though Pressfield is not heavy-handed in his portrayal of Greece as the traditional birthplace of democracy, he does portray King Leonidas and the Spartans as fledgling freedom-fighters, in contrast to the enslaving Xerxes and the masses of soldiers Xerxes compels to dominate Asia and Europe on his behalf. More than a political or historical point, Pressfield uses the contrast between Leonidas and Xerxes to make a point about the nature of leadership itself. He argues that by struggling alongside them and even suffering on their behalf, true leaders earn their people's loyalty—a loyalty more enduring than that which is compelled through outward strength and dominance alone.

King Leonidas portrays Xerxes as his opposite—himself as a king who earns loyalty through his actions and Xerxes as a tyrant who commands his subjects' loyalty by force. Leonidas's devoted followers echo this characterization. In a speech to the Spartans, Leonidas tells his men that Xerxes is not a king like himself. "He does not take his place with shield and spear amid the manslaughter, but looks on, safe, from a distance, atop a hill, upon a golden throne [...] His comrades are not Peers and Equals, free to speak their minds before him without fear, but slaves and chattel [...] [Xerxes] seeks nothing more noble than to make all other men slaves." In other words, Xerxes rules from dominance, and Leonidas rules based on a foundation of camaraderie, as a brother-in-arms.

Near the end of the book, a dying Xeo, who has an audience with Xerxes himself, dares to utter a similar claim to the Persian king's face: "I will tell His Majesty what a king is. A king does not abide within his tent while his men bleed and die upon the field [...] A king does not command his men's loyalty through fear nor purchase it with gold; he earns their love by the sweat of his own back and the pains he endures for their sake. [...] He serves them, not they him." If Xerxes is really interested in what compelled the Spartans to put up their hopeless defense at Thermopylae, in other words, he must grasp this foreign philosophy of kingship.

The difference in King Leonidas and Xerxes's leadership styles reinforces the respective nations' philosophies of governance—the Spartans' based on burgeoning democracy and the Persians' on tyranny. Leonidas describes the coming battle at Thermopylae as a confrontation between altogether different kinds of nations. He predicts that the battle against the Persians will be a day "when we teach [them] once and for all what valor free men can bring to bear against slaves, no matter how vast their numbers or how fiercely they are driven on by their child-king's whip." Torrents of soldiers under compulsion, in other words, can't stand up to a valiant force who believe in their cause and willingly surrender their lives for it.

Remembering Leonidas, Xeo later tells Xerxes, "That is a king, Your Majesty. A king does not expend his substance to enslave men, but by his conduct and example makes them free. His Majesty may ask, as Rooster did [...] why one of such condition would die for those not of his kin and country. The answer is, they were my kin and country. I set down my life with gladness, and would do it again a hundred times, for Leonidas, for Dienekes and Alexandros [...] I and every man there were never more free" than when they gave up their freedom for the Spartan cause. Xeo's own story of giving himself to the Spartan cause illustrates the difference between a tyrant and a true leader. Only the latter can inspire authentic loyalty, because a true leader respects and elevates the humanity of his followers.

On the final day at Thermopylae, Leonidas tells his doomed men that their valiant deaths will give priceless hope to the rest of Greece: "in the face of these insuperable odds, we transform vanquishment into victory [...] Our role today is what we all knew it was when we embraced our wives and children and turned our feet upon the march-out: to stand and die." It's the King's willingness to suffer and die alongside his men that changes Xeo's view of the Spartans over the course of the book—from seeing them as mere killing machines to brothers for whom he is willing to die himself, even when he is granted the freedom to leave at the last moment.

FEMALE STRENGTH AND INFLUENCE

Though *Gates of Fire* is very much dominated by male characters, women play a surprisingly prominent role throughout. Speaking of what prompted the monumental battle at Thermopylae, Xeo readily acknowledges that "In the end it was their women who galvanized the Spartans into action." Though female characters are largely viewed through the eyes of male characters in the novel, Pressfield argues that women were the major inspiration for Spartan actions and character in war and beyond.

Women's decisions set the course of the war, on both governmental and personal levels. After the Spartans skulk home in shame from Tempe, having expected to clash with the Persians but never actually drawing blood, the wives of Sparta mock their husbands' inaction as disgraceful and even blasphemous. "A delegation of wives and mothers presented itself to the ephors [senior magistrates], insisting that they themselves be sent out next time, armed with hairpins and distaffs, since surely the women of Sparta could disgrace themselves no more egregiously nor accomplish less than the vaunted Ten Thousand." This savage insult finally prompts King Leonidas and his advisers to send 300 warriors on a suicidal mission against the Persians at Thermopylae. It also suggests an ambivalence in the Spartans' attitudes toward their women—both that they desire the women's respect and that being shown up by women (who were considered inferior to men) is a deep insult that can't go unanswered. The rulers answer it by initiating war, showing just how consequential women's voices could be.

When the *krypteia* (a secret squad that eliminates troublemakers) hunts down Rooster and is about to summarily execute him as a conspirator, the lady Arete intervenes at the last moment. She persuades the men to release her nephew Rooster and to recognize his son as her husband Dienekes's offspring, though this revelation brings shame on both Dienekes and herself. Because of Spartan laws about who was permitted to go into battle (in this case, only those with male offspring), "it was this infant whose life would mean Dienekes' death," and the deaths of others associated with his household. Though affronted by her intrusion, this squad of assassins listens to Arete, admires her principle, and follows her advice—showing women's courageous ability to influence the course of battle on a more personal level, too.

Women's character—or at least men's idealization of women's character—motivates the warriors' fighting and sets the tone for the nation as a whole. While contemplating the nature of courage on the eve of battle, the youth Ariston suggests, "What could be more contrary to female nature, to motherhood, than to stand unmoved and unmoving as her sons march off to death [...] [That] the women, from some source unknown to us, summon the will to conquer this their own deepest nature is, I believe, the reason we stand in awe of our mothers and sisters and wives." Alexandros, in turn, proposes that "What elevates such an act to the stature of nobility is, I believe, that it is performed in the service of a higher and more selfless cause [...] Is it not this element—the nobility of setting the whole above the part—that moves us about women's sacrifice?" Ariston and Alexandros both read the women's behavior as a female expression of Spartan selflessness. However much it is praised and held up as motivation, for the men there is a mystifying aspect to women's actions; they can only interpret their female counterparts at a distance and through the lens of their own experience.

Later, in an elaboration of Alexandros's insight, Xeo gives Leonidas's reasoning for the selection of the 300 Thermopylae warriors—Leonidas chose each of them because of the character of the women they would leave behind. Leonidas explains to Arete that "the Spartans will look to the wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of the fallen. If they behold your hearts riven and broken with grief, they, too, will break. And Greece will break with them. But if you bear up, dry-eyed, not alone enduring your loss but seizing it with contempt for its agony and embracing it as the honor that it is in truth, then Sparta will stand. And all Hellas will stand behind her [...] you and your sisters of the Three Hundred are the mothers now of all Greece, and of freedom itself." In other words, it's up to the grief-stricken survivors to ensure that Greece and its values stand firm after the 300 fall. While this affirms the high esteem with which Spartan men regarded their women, Leonidas's charge, too, puts women on a pedestal and places a great burden on them based on his idealization of them.

While, on one hand, Spartan men—everyone from lowly squire Xeo to King Leonidas—has a very high view of Spartan women, one could argue that, like the 300 themselves, the wives and mothers are conscripted for a cause they wouldn't have chosen for themselves. The feelings of female characters about the Persian Wars aren't explored at great depth in the novel. Nevertheless, even though women are mostly seen through the eyes of male characters, they clearly act with self-possession and bravery on many occasions. By portraying them in this way, Pressfield deliberately shines a light on the fact that, even if their names aren't as readily remembered, women were major actors in the events of history.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

FIRE

In the novel, fire symbolizes the transformative effects of war on human lives. At the beginning of the novel, Xeo is alerted to the imminent change in his life by

the sight of neighboring farms burning. The next day, in the aftermath of the destruction of his home city of Astakos, he learns that after battle, "there is always fire. An acrid haze hangs in the air night and day, and sulphurous smoke chokes the nostrils [...] The pitilessness of flame reinforces the sensation of the gods' anger, of fate, retribution, deeds done and hell to pay." Everything he's known has been changed forever, and the expected course of his own life has been irrevocably altered. The climactic event of the book is, of course, the battle at the "Gates of Fire," the hot water spas at Thermopylae. Pressfield interprets this battle, in accordance with traditional interpretations, as a civilizational showdown between Eastern (Persian) and Western (Greek) forces. Thus, the theme of fire symbolizes the horrors of battle making way for the renewed Hellenic culture that emerges from the ashes of war.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Bantam edition of *Gates of Fire* published in 1998.

Chapter 1 Quotes

What kind of men were these Spartans, who in three days had slain before His Majesty's eyes no fewer than twenty thousand of His most valiant warriors? Who were these foemen, who had taken with them to the house of the dead ten, or as some reports said, as many as twenty for every one of their own fallen? What were they like as men? Whom did they love? What made them laugh? His Majesty knew they feared death, as all men. By what philosophy did their minds embrace it? Most to the point, His Majesty said, He wished to acquire a sense of the individuals themselves, the real flesh-and-blood men whom He had observed from above the battlefield, but only indistinctly, from a distance, as indistinguishable identities concealed within the blood- and gore-begrimed carapaces of their helmets and armor.

Related Characters: Gobartes the Historian (speaker), Xeones, King Xerxes I

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

In *Gates of Fire*, author Steven Pressfield tells the story of the battle of Thermopylae through the framing device of Greek captive Xeo's interviews with Persian king Xerxes. In this quote, the speaker is Xerxes's historian, Gobartes, prefacing Xeo's first interview by relating Xerxes's inquiries into the life of the average Spartan infantryman. Xerxes has spent most of his time among the great; now he wants to understand what makes an ordinary Spartan fight so fearsomely. This preface allows Pressfield to anticipate many of the themes that will be brought out later in the novel—the love, humor, fear, and courage of such individual men as Alexandros, Dienekes, Polynikes, and many others. Because Xerxes is portrayed throughout the novel as a remote monarch who stays above the bloodshed, his interest in Xeo and the Spartan infantrymen is especially striking. Even though the Persians defeated the Spartans at Thermopylae, their courageous resistance has clearly made a significant impression on the King, piquing the reader's interest in the remarkable stand at Thermopylae, too.

Chapter 2 Quotes

This I learned then: there is always fire.

An acrid haze hangs in the air night and day, and sulphurous smoke chokes the nostrils [...] The pitilessness of flame reinforces the sensation of the gods' anger, of fate, retribution, deeds done and hell to pay.

All is the obverse of what it had been.

Things are fallen which had stood upright. Things are free which should be bound, and bound which should be free. Things which had been hoarded in secret now blow and tumble in the open, and those who had hoarded them watch with dull eyes and let them go.

Related Characters: Xeones (speaker), Diomache

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes ten-year-old Xeo's impressions at finding himself a newly orphaned refugee, after the Argives have destroyed his hometown of Astakos. He and his cousin, Diomache, wander through the devastated remains of their beloved home and find that nothing is as they have known it: children are forced to act as adults, slaves have become freedmen, citizens fear imminent enslavement by the enemy, and all the familiar structures of daily life have given way to chaos. In short, their city is gone, and their identity feels as though it has been wiped away with it. By describing the devastation of Astakos in this way, Pressfield conveys the sense of loss and dislocation that spark Xeo's desire for

revenge, which he seeks by ultimately joining the Spartans. As he learns that "fire" always marks the aftermath of battle, he also unknowingly anticipates the climax of his future life as a solider—the battle at the "Gates of Fire," Thermopylae. Fire symbolizes the destruction of the familiar in order to make way for the unknown—an upheaval so overwhelming, and so inescapable to the senses, that only the gods could be responsible.

Chapter 6 Quotes

"Listen to me, boy. Only gods and heroes can be brave in isolation. A man may call upon courage only one way, in the ranks with his brothers-in-arms, the line of his tribe and his city. Most piteous of all states under heaven is that of a man alone, bereft of the gods of his home and his *polis*. A man without a city is not a man. He is a shadow, a shell, a joke and a mockery. That is what you have become now, my poor Xeo. No one may expect valor from one cast out alone, cut off from the gods of his home."

Related Characters: Bruxieus (speaker), Xeones

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

After Xeo is cruelly maimed by a farmer for trying to steal, Xeo obsesses over his failure of courage. He feels he disgraced himself for crying out helplessly during the hours he spent in torment, and his cherished dream of joining the Spartans only makes him hate himself more; surely he'll never be like those men. When he admits all this to Bruxieus, the beloved family servant, Bruxieus admonishes him, explaining that individual courage is not possible for the average person. Courage can only be summoned in the company of one's kin, and now that Xeo has been irrevocably cut off from his fellow Astakiots by the destruction of his home, it's impossible for him to find true kinship. Xeo realizes that this "cut off" condition is what Bruxieus, a captured slave, has endured all his life. But what Bruxieus doesn't anticipate is that Xeo will be able to find a city elsewhere, and that the gods of his home will lead him there. This quote is a good summary of ancient Greek attitudes toward the importance of the *polis*, outside of which one's identity was lost. But the rest of the book will explore how Xeo, amid much hardship, finds an unconventional home among the Spartans, learning courage along the way.

Chapter 9 Quotes

We talked for hours in secret on the pursuit of *esoterike harmonia*, that state of self-composure which the exercises of the *phobologia* are designed to produce. As a string of the *kithera* vibrates purely, emitting only that note of the musical scale which is its alone, so must the individual warrior shed all which is superfluous in his spirit, until he himself vibrates at that sole pitch which his individual *daimon* dictates. The achievement of this ideal, in Lakedaemon, carries beyond courage on the battlefield; it is considered the supreme embodiment of virtue, *andreia*, of a citizen and a man.

Related Characters: Xeones (speaker), Dienekes , Alexandros

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the story, Xeo has been assigned to Alexandros as a sparring partner, and the two are becoming friends. The rather sensitive Alexandros longs to prove himself as a warrior and undertakes every Spartan discipline he can in hopes of becoming stronger. In particular, Alexandros's mentor, Dienekes, has been schooling him in the *phobologia*, the science of fear. Steven Pressfield admits in an interview that *phobologia* is "a religious-philosophical doctrine of warfare" which he completely invented, figuring that the Spartans, like other warlike cultures, had some sort of discipline to train body and mind to become impervious to the effects of fear. This discipline is intended to create a state of "inner harmony," much like the pure note emitted by a stringed instrument, which in turn is inspired by a person's unique *daemon*, or guiding spirit. When a man achieves this, he's considered to have attained the height of masculine courage, or *andreia*, which Spartans valued in battle. While these concepts all have some resonance in what we know of Spartan culture, it's important to note that Pressfield takes creative license with them. At the same time, Alexandros's eagerness to master *andreia* is probably a realistic portrayal of what a boy of his temperament might have faced in Spartan society.

Chapter 10 Quotes

Bruxieus began to fear for us. We were growing wild. Cityless. In evenings past, Bruxieus had recited Homer and made it a game how many verses we could repeat without a slip. Now this exercise took on a deadly earnestness for him. He was failing, we all knew it. He would not be with us much longer. Everything he knew, he must pass on.

Homer was our school, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* the texts of our curriculum [...] Bruxieus tutored us relentlessly in compassion, that virtue which he saw diminishing each day within our mountain-hardened hearts [...]

We must have a city, Bruxieus declared.

Without a city we were no better than the wild brutes we hunted and killed.

Related Characters: Xeones (speaker), Bruxieus, Diomache

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

As Xeo reminisces on the months he and his cousin, Diomache, spent as refugees, he particularly recalls the influence of Bruxieus, the family's elderly servant. Wilderness survival has required Xeo and Diomache to hunt and kill animals for meat, but their new "cityless" condition has hardened them in an interior sense, too. The loss of their city has disconnected them not only from a physical home, but from the culture that instilled a sense of identity, and its accompanying virtues, in them. This is why Bruxieus becomes insistent on teaching them *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*—memorizing the ancient epic poem is not just a memory exercise or an old man's whim, but a means of passing down those virtues (like compassion) that remind the children what it means to be Greek. Indeed, bits of Homer pop up in Xeo's speech throughout the rest of the novel, such as when he recites passages to Alexandros to keep their spirits up while they're thrown overboard and must swim for their lives. But as important as literature might be, it isn't enough, in Bruxieus' eyes; he makes up his mind that the children must find a new home in a literal city, not just the cultural memory of one. Though Bruxieus sends Xeo to Athens, he will ultimately find his new home in Sparta.

Chapter 11 Quotes

This, I realized now watching Dienekes rally and tend to his men, was the role of the officer—to prevent those under his command, at all stages of battle—before, during and after—from becoming "possessed." To fire their valor when it flagged and rein in their fury when it threatened to take them out of hand. That was Dienekes's job [...]

His was not, I could see now, the heroism of an Achilles. He was not a superman who waded invulnerably into the slaughter, single-handedly slaying the foe by myriads. He was just a man doing a job. A job whose primary attribute was self-restraint and self-composure, not for his own sake, but for those whom he led by his example. A job whose objective could be boiled down to the single understatement, as he did at the Hot Gates on the morning he died, of "performing the commonplace under uncommonplace conditions."

Related Characters: Xeones (speaker), Dienekes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, in the aftermath of the Spartans' battle with the Antirhionians, Xeo reflects on the qualities of Dienekes, the warrior whom he will later serve as squire. One of Dienekes's enduring concerns as an officer is *katalepsis*, or "possession," a state in which a warrior loses control of his well-trained faculties and gives free rein to fear or rage. This attitude of self-composure, Xeo sees, pervades everything about Dienekes's approach to warfare. He compares Dienekes to Achilles, the protagonist of *The Iliad* and a fearsome warrior of the Trojan War. Given Xeo's childhood education of Homer, it makes sense that this comparison would occur to him. He sees Dienekes as quite different from Achilles, and perhaps more admirable in his own way—there is no special mystique about Dienekes's demeanor in battle; he is workmanlike, simply doing what he has spent a lifetime training to do, and that steady attention to the "commonplace" conveys itself to his own, less seasoned men, pulling them back from the brink of *katalepsis* themselves. For Xeo, this is just a preview of Dienekes's character on the battlefield, which will be on even more notable display at Thermopylae.

Listen to me, brothers. The Persian is not a king as Kleomenes was to us or as I am to you now. He does not take his place with shield and spear amid the manslaughter, but looks on, safe, from a distance, atop a hill, upon a golden throne [...] His comrades are not Peers and Equals, free to speak their minds before him without fear, but slaves and chattel [...] The King has tasted defeat at the Hellenes' hands, and it is bitter to his vanity. He comes now to revenge himself, but he comes not as a man worthy of respect, but as a spoiled and petulant child, in its tantrum when a toy is snatched from it by a playmate. I spit on this King's crown. I wipe my ass on his throne, which is the seat of a slave and which seeks nothing more noble than to make all other men slaves.

Related Characters: King Leonidas (speaker), King Xerxes I

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes after the Spartans' defeat of Antirhion. The object of that battle was to persuade the Antirhionians to become Sparta's allies against the anticipated Persian invasion. With this in mind, King Leonidas makes a speech after the battle in which he compares the Persian Xerxes's kingship to that of the Spartans. Kleomenes, whom he names at the beginning, was Leonidas's predecessor as King of Sparta and in fact was both Leonidas's half-brother and father-in-law (Queen Gorgo's father), as well. To Leonidas, the most important things about Kleomenes and himself are that they don't shrink from getting bloody alongside their men and that their men are indeed their peers, permitted to speak their minds freely. Xerxes, by contrast, goes into battle with a sense of entitlement and overlooks the action safely from afar. In addition, he forces slaves to fight for him and seeks to enslave others as well. Thus, Leonidas's complaint about Xerxes is not only that his character compares unfavorably to his own, but that Xerxes's entire view of kingship comes from a philosophy of governance that rests on others' lack of freedom.

Chapter 12 Quotes

"Mankind as it is constituted," Polynikes said, "is a boil and a canker [...] Fortunately God in his mercy has provided a counterpoise to our species' innate depravity. That gift, my young friend, is war.

War, not peace, produces virtue. War, not peace, purges vice. War, and preparation for war, call forth all that is noble and honorable in a man. It unites him with his brothers and binds them in selfless love, eradicating in the crucible of necessity all which is base and ignoble. There in the holy mill of murder the meanest of men may seek and find that part of himself, concealed beneath the corrupt, which shines forth brilliant and virtuous, worthy of honor before the gods. Do not despise war, my young friend, nor delude yourself that mercy and compassion are virtues superior to *andreia*, to manly valor."

Related Characters: Polynikes (speaker), Alexandros

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

This quote from Polynikes, one of the greatest of Spartan warriors and an Olympic champion, occurs after he has subjected Alexandros to a brutal interrogation in front of the other Spartan Peers after Alexandros snuck off to watch a battle. Alexandros admits that he was sickened by what he witnessed of war, and Polynikes, who already has a personal dislike of the boy, fixates on this and tries to disabuse Alexandros of his preference for compassion and mercy. He argues that human beings are naturally depraved but that war itself brings out the best in them. This shining virtue, courage for the sake of one's brothers that comes through in warfare, is called *andreia*—it's the most prized virtue among the Spartans. In some ways, Polynikes' lecture accords with the traditional Spartan view of war. The emphasis on unity in brotherhood comes forth again and again in training and on the battlefield. At the same time, Polynikes believes that the horrifying reality of war is somehow holy in itself, producing love and virtue. This attitude will be called into question at Thermopylae. Dienekes later criticizes Polynikes as being too bent on glory, and his self-confident assertions about war will be called into question as he faces the decisive battle later on.

Chapter 15 Quotes

I had never seen the city in such a state as in the aftermath of that debacle. Heroes with prizes of valor skulked about, while their women snapped at them with scorn and held themselves aloof and disdainful [...] To marshal such a magnificent force, garland it before the gods, transport it all that way and not draw blood, even one's own, this was not merely disgraceful but, the wives declared, blasphemous.

The women's scorn excoriated the city. A delegation of wives and mothers presented itself to the ephors, insisting that they themselves be sent out next time, armed with hairpins and distaffs, since surely the women of Sparta could disgrace themselves no more egregiously nor accomplish less than the vaunted Ten Thousand.

Related Characters: Xeones (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

Earlier in the year 480 B.C., the Spartans gathered in a narrow area called the Vale of Tempe, on the border of Thessaly, not far from Thermopylae. The intention had been to have a climactic showdown with the approaching Persians. However, the campaign proved to be a bust. The massive force of 10,000 Spartans soon learned that the Persians could bypass Tempe and, anyway, their force was too formidable to be confronted at the time. The Spartans, who pride themselves so much on their valor, return home disgraced. This quote, of Xeo's observations of his adoptive city at the time, shows just how ingrained battlefield values are in the Spartan mindset; Spartans feel their identity to be compromised by their warriors' contemptible showing. It also illustrates the great influence of women in the city. The bitter wives' and mothers' delegation to the city ephors (magistrates) is probably not a serious proposal, but it no doubt has a serious aim—to shame the ephors into taking more decisive action. In fact, they do this, soon making plans to send 300 warriors on the suicide mission to Thermopylae. So, in a real sense, the battle at Thermopylae took place due to the initiative of women and the loss of esteem the men felt themselves to have suffered in their eyes.

Chapter 18 Quotes

Put this fatigue-spawned dream from your mind, Your Majesty. It is a false dream, a phantasm. Let the Greeks degrade themselves by resort to superstition. We must be men and commanders, exploiting oracles and portents when they suit the purposes of reason and dismissing them when they do not [...] If you retire now, Lord, the Greeks will say it was because you feared a dream and an oracle.

Related Characters: Artemisia (speaker), King Leonidas, Mardonius, King Xerxes I

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

After Thermpylae, the Persians press deep into Greece and even destroy Athens, seeming poised to sweep through the rest of the country. However, King Xerxes has been troubled by disturbing dreams about Leonidas, whose body he'd ordered to be mutilated after Thermopylae. In private council, the king's most trusted advisers, Artemisia (Queen of the Greek city-state of Halicarnassus) and Mardonius (the king's field marshal) give him conflicting advice about how best to react to these portents. Mardonius, eager to mop up the rest of Greece himself, urges Xerxes to return to his citadel in Persia. Artemisia, however, argues that trusting too much in dreams is "Greek," adding pointedly that real men and commanders create their own destinies. Xerxes can't risk humiliation by letting an oracle chase him home. While picking up on Artemisia's wry dig against Mardonius, Xerxes ultimately agrees to stay and oversee the rest of the battle. Artemisia turns out to be right, in a way—oracles and portents are ambiguous at best, and people tend to go astray when they put too much stock in their interpretation of such things—such as the Athenian resisters who've just been killed in a foolish last stand in the Acropolis. The gods' power is evident everywhere, but their ways are so different from humans' that they can't be clearly trusted. Artemisia is also another example of female influence on the Persian side.

Chapter 20 Quotes

"The gods make us love whom we will not," the lady declared, "and disrequite whom we will. They slay those who should live and spare those who deserve to die. They give with one hand and take with the other, answerable only to their own unknowable laws [...] Now, inspired by blind impulse," she spoke toward me, "I have saved the life of this boy, my brother's bastard's son, and lost my husband's in the process."

Related Characters: Arete (speaker), Dekton ("Rooster"), Xeones, Iatrokles, Idotychides, Dienekes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

On the eve of the departure for Thermopylae, Arete speaks in private to Xeo as they pack Dienekes's things. She reminds him of the story of her and Dienekes's passion for one another, only consummated after her first husband—Iatrokles, Dienekes's brother—was killed in battle. Though they had finally gotten what they wanted, they have also suffered the consequences in their lack of sons. Now, Arete has intervened to save her nephew Rooster from execution. But in the process, she has ensured that Dienekes will go to Thermopylae and die, since he swore that Rooster's infant son is actually his own, making him eligible for the all-sire unit. Arete explains to Xeo that the gods' ways are simply unknowable. In contrast to her boldness earlier in the story—on more than one occasion, she stepped outside the social boundaries drawn for her as a woman in order to get her way—she now takes a defeatist attitude about this. Since the gods are always several steps ahead of human beings, there's little point in trying to understand or outmaneuver them. In a last gesture of hope, she encourages Xeo to find Diomache and take a chance at escape and happiness. However, ever since his vision of Apollo in the snow, Xeo has long ago willingly resigned himself to living and dying alongside the Spartans, no matter where this conviction takes him.

Chapter 23 Quotes

"Now consider, friends, that which we call women's courage.

What could be more contrary to female nature, to motherhood, than to stand unmoved and unmoving as her sons march off to death? Must not every sinew of the mother's flesh call out in agony and affront at such an outrage? Must not her heart seek to cry in its passion, 'No! Not my son! Spare him!' That women, from some source unknown to use, summon the will to conquer this their own deepest nature is, I believe, the reason we stand in awe of our mothers and sisters and wives. This, I believe, Dienekes, is the essence of women's courage and why it, as you suggested, is superior to men's."

Related Characters: Ariston (speaker), Dienekes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

Before heading out for Thermopylae, Dienekes takes some of the younger Spartan warriors on a farewell hunting trip, and around the campfire they discuss courage—particularly *andreia*, the manly embodiment of courage toward which all Spartan warriors strive. Ariston, Alexandros's brother-in-law, weighs in with the suggestion that women, in fact, embody this virtue best. He explains that motherhood and nurture are natural to women in much the same way that fighting and warfare are natural to Spartan men. Because of this, women must strive against their very nature in order to relinquish their husbands, sons, and brothers for battle. Men, by contrast, find warfare more in keeping with their natural instincts. Women's ability to summon this sort of courage is mysterious and therefore strikes awe in men's hearts. This quote is interesting for its insight into Spartan female culture, which emphasized women's physical training alongside men's, and also called upon them to do everything for the sake of the city's success. Though it's not clear whether Spartan men of the time would have taken this attitude, Pressfield's characters readily praise women's *andreia*—their so-called "manly virtue"—as even surpassing that of men.

Chapter 24 Quotes

High above the armies, a man of between thirty and forty years could be descried plainly, in robes of purple fringed with gold, mounting the platform and assuming his station upon the throne [...] He looked like a man come to watch an entertainment. A pleasantly diverting show, one whose outcome was foreordained and yet which promised a certain level of amusement. He took his seat. A sunshade was adjusted by his servants. We could see a table of refreshments placed at his side and, upon his left, several writing desks set into place, each manned by a secretary.

Obscene gestures and shouted insults rose from four thousand Greek throats.

Related Characters: Xeones (speaker), King Xerxes I, King Leonidas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

Before the battle at Thermopylae begins, there is an agonizingly long delay of uncertain origin. Eventually the Spartans notice that before the battle starts, the Persians are taking the time to erect a platform and throne for their King, Xerxes, complete with refreshments and space for a historian to take notes on the battle proceedings. Soon Xerxes himself climbs onto the platform to sit and watch the day's events. This quote concisely captures the contrast that Pressfield wants to establish between Xerxes and the Spartan King, Leonidas. While Leonidas eagerly takes his place among his soldiers and expects to bleed and die alongside them, Xerxes expects to watch a show. The larger implication is that while Leonidas favors equality among his men, Xerxes exploits his men, expecting them to gain victory on his behalf—and presumably enslave others in the process. Pressfield suggests that this contrast even accounts for long-term Spartan victory; while the Spartans are inspired to keep fighting for their king and society, most of the Persians are conscripted and only driven on by compulsion.

❝ Nothing fires the warrior's heart more with courage than to find himself and his comrades at the point of annihilation, at the brink of being routed and overrun, and then to dredge not merely from one's own bowels or guts but from one's own discipline and training the presence of mind not to panic, but to yield to the possession of despair, but instead to complete those homely acts of order which Dienekes had ever declared the supreme accomplishment of the warrior: to perform the commonplace under far-from-commonplace conditions.

Related Characters: Xeones (speaker), Dienekes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

This quote sums up a point in the battle of Thermopylae when the Spartans, vastly outnumbered by the Persians, are at a point of being nearly overrun by the replacements constantly pouring through the narrow mountain pass. What compensates for their relatively small numbers is not just courage, but the source of that courage—long years of deeply instilled training and discipline. Each Spartan warrior knows his place in the army and the job he has to do, so that in moments where a less trained warrior might give way to panic, he is able to fall back on his training and perform the same acts he has always done at home, no matter how things are falling to pieces around him. These "homely acts of order" have the ability to turn around a catastrophic situation far more than heroic acts of valor can do. This philosophy, in Dienekes's mind, is the essence of Spartan warfare. In its absence, warriors fall into a state of "madness," or *katalepsis*, in which fear or rage overrun their reason, causing their discipline to collapse.

Chapter 27 Quotes

❝ "The goddess unbound her veil and let it fall. Will you understand, Xeo, if I say that what was revealed, the face beyond the veil, was nothing less than that reality which exists beneath the world of flesh? [...] I understood that our roles as humans was to embody here, upon this shadowed and sorrow-bound side of the Veil, those qualities which arise from beyond and are the same on both sides, ever-sustaining, eternal and divine. Do you understand, Xeo? Courage, selflessness, compassion and love."

She drew up and smiled.

"You think I'm loony, don't you? I've gone cracked with religion. Like a woman."

Related Characters: Diomache (speaker), Xeones

Related Themes:

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

Ever since he was a boy, Xeo has loved his older cousin, Diomache, but they were separated after the destruction of Astakos, and he went years without knowing what had become of her. Eventually, he finds out that she has entered the sanctuary of Persephone of the Veil, an order of priestesses in Athens. Persephone was a goddess, a daughter of Zeus and Demeter, who was abducted and taken into the underworld. She is allowed to return to the world during certain periods of the year. The earth's cycle of fertile and barren seasons is associated with her emergence and withdrawal from the underworld. In this quote, Diomache describes to Xeo her youthful vision of Persephone, who withdrew her veil to show Diomache the beauty that human beings, too, are meant to embody on this "shadowed and sorrow-bound" side of the world. Diomache herself has been through terrible suffering, enduring exile, sexual assault, and an implicitly unhappy marriage. It's little wonder that she's drawn to the sorrowing Persephone. However, her sense of humor is intact, as she teases Xeo about having "gone cracked," at the same time comforting

him in his wrongheaded desire to protect her and take her away from her suffering. This quote is also an example of the several strong female characters whose lives, though very different from the Spartan warriors', are defined by courage in the midst of great struggle.

Chapter 29 Quotes

"A most impressive testimony of faith, my lord," the prince spoke after some moments. "Such devout orations cannot fail to sustain your men's courage. For an hour. Until darkness and fatigue efface the passion of the moment, and fear for themselves and their families resurfaces, as it must, within their hearts."

The noble repeated with emphasis his report of the mountain track and the Ten Thousand. He declared that if the hand of the gods was at all present in this day's events, it was not their benevolence seeking to preserve the Hellenic defenders but their perverse and unknowable will acting to detach them from their reason. Surely a commander of Leonidas's sagacity perceived this, as clearly as he, lifting his glace to the cliff of Kallidromos, could behold there upon the rock the scores of lightning scars…

Related Characters: Tyrrhastiadas (speaker), King Leonidas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 313

Explanation and Analysis

Midway through the battle of Thermopylae, a Persian prince, who's married to a Greek wife and is sympathetic to the Spartan effort, crosses battle lines to convey a warning. He tells the Spartans that the Persians have discovered a route behind the Spartan lines and will surely overrun them within the coming days. However, a series of supernatural signs, such as a conveniently timed lightning strike, have filled the Greeks with passionate valor, convinced that the gods are setting them up for final victory. The Persian, Tyrrhastiadas, admires the Greeks' "devout orations," but warns that the courage they produce will only last for so long. He points out that the mountain cliff overlooking Thermopylae, Kallidromos, is covered with the signs of past strikes; there is no reason to suspect that today's "sign" was a message from Zeus. And if it was an omen, it might just as well have been a warning to retreat. This quote is another example of the novel's theme that though the gods are often present in human affairs, humans cannot reliably interpret the gods' intentions. The Greeks' enthusiasm is also an example of *katalepsis*, fear-inspired "madness" that leads warriors to act unreasonably. Though Leonidas seems to be caught up in such madness himself, it transpires that he'd long ago resigned himself to death at Thermopylae. He knows that regardless of the omens, the Spartans can only hope to put up a courageous final stand at Thermopylae, for the sake of inspiring the rest of Greece to resistance.

Chapter 30 Quotes

"When I first came to Lakedaemon and they called me 'Suicide,' I hated it. But in time I came to see its wisdom, unintentional as it was. For what can be more noble than to slay oneself? Not literally. Not with a blade in the guts. But to extinguish the selfish self within, that part which looks only to its own preservation, to save its own skin. That, I saw, was the victory you Spartans had gained over yourselves […] When a warrior fights not for himself, but for his brothers, when his most passionately sought goal is neither glory nor his own life's preservation, but to spend his substance for them, his comrades, not to abandon them, not to prove unworthy of them, then his heart truly has achieved contempt for death, and with that he transcends himself and his actions touch the sublime."

Related Characters: Antaurus ("Suicide") (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 332

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Suicide, a warrior who once served as Dienekes's squire, talks about his perception of the Spartans. When he first came to Sparta, he was fleeing a crime in his own home country of Scythia, a territory in Central Asia. He was so distraught over his actions that he begged many men to kill him, but failing at this goal, he soon settled for becoming a fearsome warrior on the battlefield. Drawing on the Scythian religion he recalls his priestess mother teaching him as a child, he describes the symbolic "suicide" to which every warrior is called. He came to see that the Spartans embody this in the way they protect one another and advance into battle as a unit, ever mindful of one's brothers and the goals of the body as a whole. Suicide is one of the examples in the novel, like Xeo, of a character from another city or culture who comes to appreciate and even adopt Spartan values as an outsider. Dienekes later says that Suicide's unaccustomed speech has helped him solve the puzzle of fear's opposite; it's not merely courage, but love.

Chapter 34 Quotes

"Why do we remain in this place? A man would have to be cracked not to ask that question. Is it for glory? If it were for that alone, believe me, brothers, I'd be the first to wheel my ass to the foe and trot like hell over that hill. [...] If we had withdrawn from these Gates today, brothers, no matter what prodigies of valor we had performed up till now, this battle would have been perceived as a defeat. A defeat which would have confirmed for all Greece that which the enemy most wishes her to believe: the futility of resistance to the Persian and his millions. If we had saved our skins today, one by one the separate cities would have caved in behind us, until the whole of Hellas had fallen."

Related Characters: King Leonidas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 353

Explanation and Analysis

On the last day of battle, King Leonidas explains to the small band of surviving Spartans and loyal allies why they are making a suicidal stand here today. He rejects any notion that the men are fighting for an abstract "glory." Rather, the point has little to do with the Spartans whatsoever. If they'd sought to withdraw and preserve their lives, he explains, the repercussions would have been catastrophic for Greece as a whole. It would basically have conveyed to the other city-states that there is no point in trying to resist the advancing Persian army. But by making this stand, he argues, the Spartans will wrest an ironic victory from sure defeat. The rest of Greece will see their courage and stand up against enslavement, too. This quote also sums up Leonidas's approach to kingship, as portrayed by Pressfield. He isn't willing to ask anything of his warriors that he wouldn't do himself, and he is honest with them about the stakes they face. Ultimately, he's portrayed as fighting for liberty over oppression.

"Brothers, I'm not a king or a general. I've never held rank beyond that of a platoon commander. So I say to you now only what I would say to my own men, knowing the fear that stands unspoken in each heart—not of death, but worse, of faltering or failing, of somehow proving unworthy in this, the ultimate hour [...] Here is what you do, friends. Forget country. Forget king. Forget wife and children and freedom. Forget every concept, however noble, that you imagine you fight for here today. Act for this alone: for the man who stands at your shoulder. He is everything, and everything is contained within him. That's all I know. That's all I can tell you."

Related Characters: Dienekes (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 355

Explanation and Analysis

After Leonidas and several other Spartans have given farewell speeches on the morning of the last stand at Thermopylae, Dienekes is urged to speak, too. The quote captures Dienekes's character and his outlook on the practice of war. Though he's been heroic in battle for decades, he's never accepted special promotions or honors, and he doesn't pretend to be eloquent, stirring up short-lived courage at the last moment. Instead, he encourages the warriors to overcome the fear in their hearts with love for the men around them. This is the only reason to fight and die today; no other philosophy or abstract idea is worth that. This represents the conclusion of Dienekes's search, throughout the book, for "the opposite of fear." While there are measures one can take to combat the fear that every warrior faces, the only thing that truly overcomes fear is the willingness to give everything for one's friends.

Chapter 35 Quotes

I will tell His Majesty what a king is. A king does not abide within his tent while his men bleed and die upon the field [...] A king does not command his men's loyalty through fear nor purchase it with gold; he earns their love by the sweat of his own back and the pains he endures for their sake. That which comprises the harshest burden, a king lifts first and sets down last. A king does not require service of those he leads but provides it to them. He serves them, not they him [...] That is a king, Your Majesty. A king does not expend his substance to enslave men, but by his conduct and example makes them free.

Related Characters: Xeones (speaker), King Xerxes I, King Leonidas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 360

Explanation and Analysis

Weeks after Thermopylae, Xeo is speaking to King Xerxes as the latter attempts to sweep through the rest of Greece. He is describing some of the poignant moments of the Spartans' last stand, and two moments in particular stand out in his memory—Leonidas's carefree nap on the brink of battle, and the Spartans' heroic attempts to rescue

Leonidas's body from the fray after he had been killed. The juxtaposition of these things—Leonidas's utter confidence in his army and his cause, and the incredible loyalty this confidence inspired in his men—prompts Xeo to describe Leonidas as the epitome of a king. In doing so, knowing he has nothing left to lose, Xeo also pointedly compares Leonidas to Xerxes, who has only paid or harshly compelled his allies; he has never won their love and allegiance. This difference in character and kingly philosophy, then, points to the book's main argument: that freedom ultimately prevails over tyranny, because treating people with dignity is the only thing that inspires enduring love and loyalty.

Chapter 38 Quotes

❝ That peculiar Hellenic form of government called *democratia*, rule of the people, had plunged its roots deep, nurtured by the blood of war [...] To the Greeks, victory was proof of the might and majesty of their gods. These deities, which to our more civilized understanding appear vain and passion-possessed, riddled with folly and so pretty to humanlike faults and foibles as to be unworthy of being called divine, to the Greeks embodied and personified their belief in that which was, if grander than human in scale, yet human in spirit and essence. The Greeks' sculpture and athletics celebrated the human form, their literature and music human passion, their discourse and philosophy human reason.

Related Characters: Gobartes the Historian

Related Themes:

Page Number: 381

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novel, Gobartes the historian reflects on the flowering of Greece, which he witnessed firsthand after being captured by the Spartans and employed for some years in the Greek's allied congress. He describes Greece's burgeoning democracy as something that sprang from the experience of war. While Sparta was not fully democratic in a modern sense, its emphasis on equality among the ranks of the army began to influence other areas of society, as well. Gobartes claims that some of these same egalitarian instincts can also be seen in Greek religion, with its emphasis on the gods' human qualities, and in the arts and philosophy, with their influential humanistic emphasis. While this cultural flowering did not occur quite as rapidly as the quote suggests, Gobartes' outsider observations reinforce Pressfield's overall point about Thermopylae as a cultural turning-point, allowing Greece as a whole to become a foundation for much of Western European civilization.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

King Xerxes's historian, Gobartes, records the king's exploits in the battle of Thermopylae. After His Majesty's glorious victory over the Spartans and allies, His Majesty wanted further intelligence, both as to the enemy's infantry tactics and as to the nature of the enemy himself, who chose to fight and die to the last man.

The novel begins after the battle of Thermopylae, between Persia and the Spartans, has already taken place; the Spartans made a brave stand but finally lost. Though victorious, the Persian Xerxes is intrigued by the Greeks and wants to understand how they put up such a daring resistance—what kind of people are they?

A grievously wounded Greek was discovered on the battlefield, and Xerxes ordered that the man be spared and nursed back to health. Within ten days, the man can speak. His appearance is puzzling; he wore a helot's cap yet carried the finest shield and armor and wore a Spartan helmet. His speech was also garbled: "a compound of the loftiest philosophical and literary language…intermingled with the coarsest and most crude gutter argot." The historian begs His Majesty's pardon for the "portions of the following transcription which will and must offend any civilized hearer."

The wounded Greek is Xeo, upon whose tale the novel will be based. Xeo is an odd mixture of helot (slave) and first-class Spartan warrior—an incongruity that will not be explained until the end of the book. Similarly, his mixture of educated and uncivilized speech (humorously described by the apologetic historian) owes to a variety of influences in Xeo's upbringing that the story will bring to light.

CHAPTER 1

The Persian army has continued its advance unopposed into central Greece. One evening the Greek is brought in before the King, eyes bound, and an incantation is spoken so that the Greek may speak in the King's presence. The Greek prisoner identifies himself as Xeones, son of Skamandridas of Astakos. He explains to Xerxes that his tale "would not be of generals or kings," but an "infantryman's tale," as he is merely a youth and squire of the heavy infantry. Xerxes replies that this is exactly the tale he wishes to hear.

The theatrics surrounding King Xerxes—with Xeo not even allowed to see or speak to him at first—give a sense of what kind of king he is, in contrast to the Spartan king who will be introduced later. Xeo is from a seaside town in western Greece. He will tell the kind of story that isn't typically recorded in history books—the everyday soldier's tale. This signals to the reader that Pressfield's novel is no mere retelling of Herodotus' Histories.

Xerxes wishes to know what kind of men these Spartans are, who slew 20,000 of his best warriors. He especially wishes to "acquire a sense of the individuals themselves," whom he only observed from a distance. After praying to his gods, Xeo agrees and asks for the King's patience, since he must begin with events long before the battle, in order to give the lives and actions of the warriors "their true meaning and significance."

This further sets up the kind of story Pressfield wishes to tell—one that will dwell on individuals, not just battlefield dynamics. Xeo's piety and reliance on his gods is evident; he is guided by them in everything he does. He will tell the story by providing context for the warriors' lives long before the war took place.

Xeo begins his story. He begins with what he believed would be his death. He was slain by an Egyptian spear through the ribcage. Xeo recalls being overwhelmed by emotion and the memory of all those he loved. He also felt a tremendous relief at not being separated from his beloved comrades in arms. Yet he also felt a keen grief at the thought that the story of Thermopylae would die with the men.

In the first of many flashbacks, Xeo explains how he got where he is—he very nearly died at Thermopylae, and his desire to die alongside his comrades was even stronger than the desire to be reunited with his family.

Xeo suddenly sees Apollo moving among the dead and dying men. His eye turns to Xeo, and Xeo knows he is the one who has been chosen to go back and speak. He feels himself being restored to consciousness as Egyptian marines drag his body from underneath a pile of corpses. Xeo prays to Apollo, asking him for help in telling the tale.

For the first time, the significance of Apollo to the story appears. Apollo isn't an abstract deity, but a personal god in whom Xeo strongly believes. He appointed Xeo to live and share the story of what happened—explaining Xeo's devotion to recounting the story to his enemy in what follows.

CHAPTER 2

Thermopylae is a spa, its name meaning "hot gates" after the thermal springs at the site. It can only be approached by means of steep and narrow passages. Visitors trek there every summer to enjoy the baths' curative powers. The earth there is very dry; Xeo reminds King Xerxes that even the clay was churned into deep mud by the blood and urine of the terrified warriors. When the Spartan rangers first arrived at Thermopylae, they scattered two parties of about 30 bathers. The colorful tents left up by the tourists and vendors were eventually torn up to bind Spartiates' wounds.

Xeo explains what Thermopylae is like—the great contrast between its popularity as a spa and the horrifying spectacle it turned into during the battle. Even up to the last moments before battle, it was being enjoyed by bathers.

Xeo explains that by "Spartiates," he refers to the full Spartans, or Peers, not the *periokoi* or Gentleman-Rankers, those secondary Spartans of less than full citizenship. By the end of the battle at Thermopylae, there were so few Spartans left that freed slaves, armor bearers, and squires like himself were permitted to fill the gaps.

Xeo explains something of the Spartan hierarchy. In the intensity of battle, though, even those who were not full Spartan warriors fought alongside citizens, which explains his own presence on the field.

Xeo's own presence at the battle will require a digression. He explains that he was captured at age 12 as a *heliokekaumenos*, "scorched by the sun"—a semi-feral youth sunburned by exposure to the elements, orphaned and wandering in the mountains in the aftermath of the First Persian War. Originally, he was placed among the helots, the serf or slave class, but was mistreated and ultimately rejected due to his ineptitude as a field hand. Then, "luck or a god's hand" delivered him into the service of the Spartan youth, Alexandros, and his mentor, Dienekes. This saved Xeo's life.

Xeo isn't Spartan at all. He was a refugee of the First Persian War, which hints at why fighting alongside the Spartans later meant so much to him. Xeo's story hints at the fact that he didn't have an easy boyhood, but that, in his view, the gods had special intentions for him, propelling him into the service of the warriors.

All Spartiate heavy infantrymen are attended by at least one helot, and platoon leaders have two. Xeo had the good fortune to be chosen by Dienekes as one of these. His duties were to tend and transport Dienekes' armor, prepare his meals and bedding, bind his wounds, and do whatever else is necessary so that he is free to train and fight.

Xeo is basically a warrior's servant, having been chosen as one of the greatest warriors, Dienekes, whose mentorship will prove so important to Xeo's story. Spartan warriors are to be primarily concerned at all times with readiness to fight.

Before all this, however, Xeo grew up in the city of Astakos in Akarnania. He always wanted to cross the straits to visit the island of Ithaka, the legendary home of Odysseus. He planned to do this on his tenth birthday, but three days before the planned trip, his city was overrun, all the males of his clan were slaughtered, and the females were sold into slavery. He and his cousin, Diomache, were left homeless orphans.

Xeo's boyhood was marked by the sudden upheaval and dislocation characteristic of warlike ancient Greece. The cultural significance of Homer's The Odyssey is apparent.

CHAPTER 3

On Xeo's family's farm lived a slave named Bruxieus, beloved and deferred to by the entire family. Bruxieus was captured and partially blinded by the Argives in his youth and was acquired by Xeo's father past age 40. Xeo believed Bruxieus knew everything and was deeply attached to him. Xeo recalls watching the citizen-soldiers' summer military drill, concluding with a glorious parade and feast, after which many well-fed, drunken warriors being carted home snoring.

Xeo grew up in a comfortable family, including a partially blinded elderly slave who was doted on by the family, and vice versa. Xeo enjoyed being a spectator of the citizen-soldiers' drill as a boy, in contrast to the much closer view of warfare he'll get as he grows up.

Very early the next morning, Xeo and his cousin 13-year-old Diomache head to town early. Xeo hopes to sell some precious ptarmigan eggs in the market in order to buy himself a flute. But no sooner do they reach the main road than they see **fire** blazing to the north. The two soon realize that numerous farms have been set on fire.

Xeo sets out on an innocuous boyhood errand, but the morning's happy anticipation is soon interrupted by ominous fire, which will be a symbol of transformation throughout the novel.

A platoon of cavalry thunders toward them, and Xeo realizes that their allies, the Argives, have betrayed their city, along with a coalition of allies. He and Diomache hurtle homeward. They suddenly come upon Xeo's uncle Tenagros, weeping, in his nightshirt. He tells them that Diomache's mother and Xeo's parents have all been killed. He angrily crushes Xeo's ptarmigan eggs and orders the children into town, to get behind the safety of the walls.

The Argives' betrayal shows that bitter rivalries between the Greek city-states were a common feature of life at this time, with shattering consequences for everyday Greeks. Xeo and his cousin learn that their family has been virtually wiped out. Xeo's eggs are crushed, symbolizing the destruction of his childish hopes and expectations.

CHAPTER 4

Xeo reflects on the horror of finding himself an orphaned refugee. He and Diomache do not, after all, go into the city. They reunite with Bruxieus the next day. Their city has been annihilated, and not just physically: "the very spirit of our nation, the polis itself, that ideal of mind called Astakos [...] Without a city, who were we?"

Xeo and Diomache don't know how to make sense of their identity without the city. It's more than just a place, but an "ideal of mind"—a culture and a sense of self.

When the threesome comes upon a grief-stricken man burying his infant, the man remarks that they needed the Spartans. The Spartans, he says, would never have drifted around in a daze in the aftermath of such a catastrophe; "they move through horrors with clear eyes and unshaken limbs."

Xeo hears about the Spartans for the first time—that there's something distinct about their ability to handle horror and betrayal. In his own grief and homelessness, this makes a deep impression on him.

When they return to the family farmhouse, the Argives encamped there permit them to retrieve and bury Xeo's parents. The Argives sing a hymn to Zeus. Right after that, the soldiers restrain Xeo and Bruxieus, take Diomache outside, and brutally rape her. Bruxieus has to carry her away. As they leave, one of the Argives gives them some wine and bread and urges them to flee to the mountains, or worse will happen to them.

This horrifying scene—the Argives' seeming kindnesses coupled with savage brutality and violation—is meant to shock the reader, giving a sense of what warfare does to ordinary people. This event will impact both Diomache and her cousin for the rest of their lives.

CHAPTER 5

Xeo, Diomache, and Bruxieus spend months drifting through the wilderness. Diomache is never quite the same. They occasionally run into other refugees in the hills, and they try to regain a sense of Astakiot fellow-feeling, "but the extinction of our polis had severed those happy bonds forever." It's everyone for himself.

Xeo and his family continue to live as refugees and can't regain a sense of identity, even when they reunite with others in the same situation. The destruction of their home shatters their self-conception.

As the year wears on and the refugees struggle to find food, Xeo has thoughts of vengeance against those who killed his family and shamed his cousin. He vows that he will live among the Spartans and someday slay the Argives. He also vows that he will someday marry Diomache, who's convinced that she is ruined, so that he can protect her. While begging at a farm, Xeo hears the story of a spectacular Spartan victory and thinks of them as "avenging gods."

Xeo continues to daydream about the Spartans as "avenging gods" who will set right everything that's gone wrong in his life. This perception will develop as he grows. He also loves his older cousin, which is unsurprising, as she's the only woman in his life and he feels responsible for failing to protect her.

One day, starving, Xeo gets caught stealing a goose. The farmers nail him to a board, driving tanning spikes through his palms. At this point in his story, Xeo stops speaking. At Xerxes' inquiry, Xeo explains that he's listing for the gods' direction as to how he should proceed; he's being prompted to change his tack.

Xeo comes to his own traumatic memory of torture. His attentiveness to the gods' prompting is apparent again; the story is being shaped and directed by them and through their eyes.

Xeo relates a story of something that happened in Sparta two years later—a Spartan boy, Teriander, or "Tripod," was beaten to death by his drill instructor. Ten other boys had been whipped that day, not for stealing (a skill in which the boys are encouraged), but for getting *caught* stealing. The boys are allowed to give in when they can no longer bear the pain, but Tripod refuses, having passed beyond reason and willing to die instead. The drill instructors knock him unconscious to preserve his life, but Tripod dies moments later.

It's not immediately clear what Xeo's digression relates to, and his skipping in time can be confusing to follow. He goes straight from his own fearful experience of pain to watching Spartan warriors-in-training facing similar trials two years later. This begins to convey something of the brutal Spartan training program and what it demands of young boys.

Later that evening, 12-year-old Alexandros, who was Tripod's close friend, takes a walk with his mentor, Dienekes. Since Xeo is in Alexandros's service by this time, he trails along behind. Dienekes speaks comforting words to his protégé and tutors him in the nature of fear. He tells Alexandros that the purpose of the beating was not to break Tripod's spirit, but to harden his mind against pain. He further explains that fear arises from one's flesh, and that the flesh belongs not to oneself, but to the gods, to one's family, and to the city.

Xeo serves a young spartan trainee, Alexandros, who in turn is mentored by the warrior Dienekes. These two men will be important throughout Xeo's life among the Spartans. Dienekes wants Alexandros to understand that the Spartan training isn't about cruelty; it has to do primarily with the mind. Spartans don't fundamentally belong to themselves alone. Their identity is their city.

Dienekes goes on the explain to Alexandros that what Tripod displayed that day was more reckless than brave; he cost the city his own life. Nevertheless, there was something noble about Tripod's contempt for suffering. Dienekes hugs the weeping Alexandros, then closes their talk with the reminder that "there is a force beyond fear. More powerful than self-preservation."

This reckless madness in the face of fear and suffering is something Dienekes will speak against in the future, but it's not without a certain nobility. For now, he doesn't identify this "force beyond fear" except to acknowledge that it's there. Dienekes' tenderness toward his protégé further contrasts with the brutality of the physical training.

Xeo returns to the story of what happened in the barn. He screams disgracefully, but the farmers take no pity, leaving him nailed there. Finally, after dark, Diomache sneaks in and releases him; his hands are mangled, and Bruxieus carries him off.

Xeo, in his ordeal in the barn, was unacquainted with this "force beyond fear"—at the time he knew only agony. His suffering parallels what Diomache went through and will be similarly formative in his life.

CHAPTER 6

That winter, Xeo, Diomache, and Bruxieus suffer through the cold in the mountains. Xeo refuses to go into the city for medical treatment. He hates himself for the cowardice he displayed under suffering. Bruxieus tries to reassure him: "Only gods and heroes can be brave in isolation [...] No one may expect valor from one cast out alone, cut off from the gods of his home."

Xeo feels disgraced by the way he reacted to suffering. Bruxieus, describing his own condition as an enslaved person alienated from his city, comforts him with what will become a recurrent theme: real courage is impossible outside of brotherhood, which isn't something Xeo can experience.

One night, despairing and racked with fever, Xeo sees his chance and climbs to the top of a mountain to die. He suddenly sees a man standing above him as he slumps at the base of a tree in the snow. The man speaks to Xeo with the majestic voice of a god, remarking that he has "always found the spear to be [...] a rather inelegant weapon." Xeo wonders at the significance of this and then notices the bow on the man's shoulder and realizes that he is Apollo. He apprehends that Apollo is telling him that while he will never be able to grasp a spear with his mangled hand, he can still shoot a bow and arrow. Then Xeo hears Diomache calling for him and assures his weeping cousin that he is all right.

Xeo sees no way out but suicide, but the intervention of the god Apollo saves his life and inaugurates a lifetime in the god's service for Xeo. He inspires Xeo to take up archery, and more than that, renews his desire for life and sense of purpose. Again, the supernatural is taken for granted as a real, prevalent force.

CHAPTER 7

Xeo tells Xerxes that his intent has been to convey "some poor measure of the soul terror and devastation which a vanquished population, any population, is forced to endure in the hour of its nation's extinction." Over the coming decade, there is much warfare between the various Greek city-states. But suddenly, Persia emerges as a terrifying threat known only as "The Fear."

Xeo tells Xerxes these details because the Persian King has only witnessed such devastation from a safe distance. He hasn't had to endure it firsthand, with consequences for his character that come through in his style of kingship. Persia is beginning to mobilize with the intention of overrunning Greece, a unifying threat for the warring states.

Xeo jumps ahead in his story to the age of 19. He is now in the service of Dienekes of Sparta and has been dispatched in attendance upon him and other Spartan allies to Rhodes, an island in Persian possession. He witnesses Persia's might for the first time. He is particularly in awe of the fast warships and the tall Egyptian marines. Dienekes talks, through a translator, with Ptammitechus, or "Tommie," who is a ship captain. The Greeks and Egyptians exchange jokes about each other's customs and weapons. The envoy, however, is unsuccessful in its mission to gain the Rhodians as allies.

Xeo jumps to near-adulthood; he's no longer Alexandros's servant but has been promoted to serve the Spartan Dienekes. Various Greek city-states are submitting to Persia, believing they'll be treated better as allies than if they must be vanquished by force. Xeo realizes firsthand what a fearsome threat the Persians are. Nevertheless, Persians and Greeks don't display hatred for one another, but have some basic mutual respect as fellow warriors.

Xeo accompanies Dienekes when he is urgently summoned to Olympia. Xeo suspects that this has to do with a map of Greece and the rest of the world, which Ptammitechus showed to the Spartan leaders. He wants to impress on Dienekes the vastness of Xerxes' territory and resources and to persuade him that there will be no dishonor in Sparta joining him voluntarily. Dienekes replies that Tommie has never tasted freedom, or he "would know that it is purchased not with gold, but steel."

Dienekes' reply to the Egyptian envoy—that they're motivated by freedom, something the Persians can't understand—sets up the traditional contrast between the democratic Greek West and the tyrannical East, a traditional read of the Greek-Persian conflict.

In Olympia, Dienekes shows Xeo the name of his dead brother, Iatrokles, recorded on the Avenue of the Champions. That night, in a disquieted mood, he leads Xeo to the Olympic stadium. As Xeo prepares warm oil for his master's many aches and pains, Dienekes tells him a story of one of his many battles. Once during a battle against the Corinthians, he and his brother Iatrokles fought side-by-side against a seemingly unkillable foe. All of a sudden, Iatrokles' squire, a Scythian named Suicide who was a "holy terror," threw several javelins through the opponent, felling him at last.

Dienekes is a hardened warrior with many memories of battle. Here he introduces Suicide, a character who will recur later. Having been through loss himself, Dienekes seems to sense the scale of the conflict that's coming and what it will ask of Sparta's citizens.

Dienekes goes on to tell Xeo the story of his marriage to his wife, Arete. Arete had first been married to Iatrokles, but when Iatrokles learned that Dienekes had always had feelings for her, he promised that Arete could become his wife when Iatrokles was slain in battle. Not long after, Iatrokles did die in battle. Dienekes was devastated and couldn't bear to marry Arete, until she boldly walked into the Spartan training grounds and demanded that Dienekes take her as his wife, so that her family would not be shamed. He did, but he and Arete have never been blessed with sons. Xeo wonders if this is the gods' curse for "the selfish love in my master's heart."

For the first time, Arete, the novel's most formidable female character, is introduced into the heavily male story. For a woman to enter the Spartan training ground would be an incredibly bold move. Yet it seems to have come with the price that their marriage hasn't been blessed by the gods. Xeo sees Dienekes' passion for Arete and fundamentally selfish and therefore displeasing to the gods.

CHAPTER 8

At the time that Xeo is giving his story to King Xerxes, the Persians are advancing unopposed into Greece. Despite the near-constant demands of war, Xerxes demands that interviews with the captive Greek continue to be recorded. Xeo is eager to continue, saying that the story seems to be "telling itself" at Apollo's direction.

Xerxes continues to be fascinated with Xeo's story, suggesting that Xeo's outlook is novel to him. And Xeo feels himself to be under the compulsion of Apollo, suggesting there's a higher purpose to the storytelling.

To relate something of the nature of the Spartan training of youth under the Lykurgan warrior code, Xeo tells a story that occurred six years before Thermopylae, when he was 14 years old and not yet employed as Dienekes' squire. He was working as the sparring partner of Alexandros, Dienekes' protégé and the son of a Spartan war leader, Olympieus.

The Lykurgan warrior code was the traditional set of laws that governed Sparta, particularly the training of all male citizens as warriors. Xeo moves back in time to when he was still serving Alexandros.

Alexandros, the son of a noble family, is an accomplished musician and a gentle spirit. Once, when both boys were 13, both were whipped for various infractions, and Xeo took the beating much better than Alexandros did. To rub his nose in this, the drill instructors assigned the two as sparring partners, with instructions that Alexandros fight Xeo until he was capable of "beating the hell out of" him. This arrangement suits Xeo just fine.

Xeo hopes to move up in the Spartan world by becoming Alexandros's squire in time. As a helot (slave), it's unlikely he could ever become a Spartan citizen, so this arrangement is probably the best possible path to advancement for him. Alexandros is introduced as a gentler spirit who takes the Spartan rigor harder than most.

The army was on a regimental exercise called an eight-nighter, with rigorous drills and mock assaults, and very limited rations. Though brutal, the exercise is marked by "relentless hilarity" among the men. Even King Leonidas was not exempt; his good humor and willingness to share the men's misery endeared him to them. The purpose of the eight-nighter, however, is to drive the entire unit beyond humor, to toughen their minds and teach them to "produce victory on will alone."

While Spartan life is far from unrelentingly dark, the toughest training is meant to push the army beyond themselves and muscle through victory regardless of difficulty and feeling.

Just before the last night of the drill, Alexandros gets in trouble with Polynikes, the 23-year-old Knight and Olympic champion. He has accidentally "defamed" his shield, leaving it facedown in the dirt. Polynikes orders Alexandros to urinate in his shield, since he's treating it like a chamber pot. But Alexandros is too frightened and dehydrated to obey. Polynikes orders the other boys to take up Alexandros's slack while he interrogates Alexandros about shield protocol. He ends up lashing Alexandros's face so badly that his nose is broken, then forces the entire unit to spend the night pushing a tree over with their shields, resuming their training on no sleep the next morning.

Polynikes appears in the story for the first time and shows that he has something personally against the young Alexandros, singling out the young boy's cruelly. This event will leave a psychological mark on Alexandros as well.

CHAPTER 9

That night, one of the strongest boys in the unit collapses and dies of dehydration and exhaustion. Alexandros blames himself for this, and when his unhealed nose leads to an asthmatic condition, he's certain it's the retribution of the gods for his "unwarrior-like conduct." If Alexandros can't find a way of managing this condition and becoming a warrior, he will lose Spartan citizenship and have to choose between a disgraced life and "honorable" suicide. His father, Olympieus, even asks for counsel from the Pythia at Delphi, to no avail.

Alexandros's sensitivity constantly works against him. He blames himself for his friend's death and interprets his physical weakness as divine retribution. The Pythia (an oracle) is even summoned by Alexandros's father, showing how life-and-death the situation is. The Spartan mindset is that death is better than failure as a warrior.


Alexandros's asthma attacks seem to be brought on by fear. Dienekes works with him on the discipline of *phobologia*, the science of fear. The science is based on the belief that fear originates in the flesh and must be combated there. If one can put the body into a state of fearlessness, the mind will follow. But Alexandros can't seem to master these exercises of muscle relaxation the way the other boys can; the only time he's truly fearless is when he sings at public festivals.

Alexandros's fear of failure is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Phobologia is not a real concept, but the basic idea is that fearlessness must be mastered both physically and mentally. As a musician, Alexandros only draws courage from singing.

Alexandros pushes himself all the harder in training, quietly supported by the other boys and by Xeo. He and Xeo talk for hours about the esoteric Spartans philosophies. One day, at the height of the tension before a war with the Antirhionians, Alexandros and Xeo get into an "all-in" brawl, the Peers watching eagerly. For the first time, Xeo perceives a "killer instinct" in his friend. When Alexandros's lungs spasm, Xeo instinctively pulls his punch, but Dienekes furiously goads him into finishing the boy off. Xeo punches Alexandros as hard as he can, knowing that the Peers aren't motivated by malice, but by the desire to teach Alexandros "the thousandth bitter lesson of the ten thousand more he would endure before they hardened him into the rock the city demanded." Alexandros falls, apparently unconscious, but isn't killed.

Alexandros desperately wants to fulfill the expectations of his city and become a Spartan warrior. He and Xeo are becoming friends by this time. However, it's Alexandros's job to beat Xeo senseless and Xeo's job not to let that happen. Dienekes' fury is actually motivated by love for Alexandros according to the Spartan outlook. It's Alexandros's mission in life to become a warrior, and if he fails at that, he really is better off dead.

The next morning the army marches out for Antirhion, a port on the gulf of Corinth which has not consented to ally with Sparta. If Leonidas's army succeeds in persuading the Antirhionians, they will succeed in bottling up the gulf to protect Greece from a Persian sea assault. That night, after watching the army and the battle train head out, Xeo is abruptly awakened by Agathe, a Spartan girl of whom Alexandros is fond. He follows her to a dark copse of trees where he finds Alexandros arguing with his mother. He intends to follow the army to battle. When he brandishes his sickle, his mother finally relents. It goes without saying that Xeo will accompany him.

Alexandros decides to prove his mettle by following the army into battle, despite his mother's protests. He and Xeo will get their first taste of warfare as the Spartans try to win over one more stubborn city-state to be their allies.

CHAPTER 10

Xeo and Alexandros push on in pursuit of the Spartan army, who are half a day ahead of them. As they go, they question passing helots as to the makeup of the Antirhionian army and their Syrakusan allies. Nobody knows much, but it doesn't matter—Spartans "are schooled to regard the foe, any foe, as nameless and faceless." The Spartan view of warfare is "demystified and depersonalized" in this way.

The spartan view of warfare isn't personal; they're required not to view their foes in a humanizing way, which enables warriors to focus simply on fighting.

Alexandros and Xeo arrive at the port of Rhion a little after midnight on the third day of their journey. They pay a captain and his two hulking brothers to take them across the strait in a little boat, but when a Spartan cutter stops them, the captain takes their money and casts the boys adrift in the widest part of the channel. They start swimming. When Alexandros has an asthmatic fit, Xeo recites bits from *The Iliad* to keep his spirits up. Alexandros tells Xeo that the mind has many "rooms," and they must not allow themselves to enter the room that is the anticipation of death. He thinks that the gods have dropped them there "to teach us about those rooms."

Alexandros and Xeo bond through the frightening ordeal of being dropped in the middle of the strait by an unscrupulous captain. Xeo draws on his boyhood memorization of Homer to encourage his friend. Alexandros is clearly mentally stronger than he used to be, refusing to give up and not allowing himself to cave to fear by dwelling on the likelihood of death.

Alexandros asks Xeo to tell him about his survival in the mountains with Diomache and Bruxieus. Xeo tells him that by the second summer in the hills, he and Diomache were accomplished hunters and were thriving. They rescued two abandoned puppies who teamed up with them and made them even better trackers. But Bruxieus began to worry about the two of them growing "cityless." He begins earnestly tutoring them in Homer and in virtues like compassion "which he saw diminishing each day within our mountain-hardened hearts."

To further distract them in their perilous swim, Alexandros has Xeo tell him another survival story. Promoted by the Homer recitation, Xeo remembers Bruxieus' attempts to rescue himself and Diomache from their "cityless" state. If they were isolated from a physical city, then he could at least instill in them cultural virtues like compassion, preserved in Homer.

But finally, Bruxieus decides that Xeo and Diomache must have a city. He wants them to go to Athens, the most civilized and welcoming city in Greece. One day they return from a hunt and discover that Bruxieus has died. After burning his body on a pyre, they undertake the ten-day journey to the crossroads before Athens. Diomache tries to make Xeo understand that she wants a husband, children, and a home. A passing gentlewoman, taken with her, has promised to see to Diomache's housing and employment. But Xeo parts ways with her before they enter Athens. He wants to go to Sparta. Diomache is 15, and Xeo only 12.

In obedience to Bruxieus' dying wish, the two cousins journey to the city. But Athens isn't to be for Xeo. He knows that Diomache doesn't love him as he desires, and she has adult yearnings for her own home and family by this time. Xeo only desires to become a Spartan. He seeks his new city there.

By the time Xeo finishes his story, it's not yet dawn, the Antirhion shoreline is still not visible, and they are beginning to succumb to hypothermia. Alexandros swears that he will not abandon Xeo, whatever happens. An hour later, they collapse on a beach and sleep half the day. After a breakfast of raw eggs, Alexandros quietly thanks his friend, Xeo. They get moving again.

Xeo and Alexandros finally attain the far shore. The adventure, a test of Alexandros's strength and determination especially, has cemented the two of them as friends and even as equals. They don't linger long, ready to get to the battle.

CHAPTER 11

When Alexandros and Xeo arrive late on battle site, finding a vantage point on a bluff, the Spartan rangers have just finished setting the Antirhion harbor ablaze, a measure intended to unnerve the enemy and "sear into their unseasoned senses the stink and scourge of coming slaughter." They watch as the Spartan troops go through the much-rehearsed ritual of arming for battle, taking great care to dress their long hair "while radiating an eerie presence of calm and nonchalance."

Later in the book, Xeo will be in the thick of the battlefield action, so this scene, with the boys overlook the action from a bluff, allows a view of a battle from outside. A surprising amount of the strategy is psychological. The Spartans know their foes aren't seasoned in battle, so they do everything they can to project calm and undermine the confidence of the other side.

The men also write their names or inscribe their symbols on "tickets," twig bracelets that will identify their bodies should they fall. As the men begin taking their place on the line, Dekton leads two ceremonial goats to King Leonidas. Alexandros points out that the Antirhionians are so frightened that the plumes on their helmets are quaking, and the shafts of their spears are chattering like teeth. The enemy begin banging their shields and uttering war cries, but the Spartans neither move nor make a sound.

The Spartans also reject pseudoandreia, last-minute courage drummed up through inspirational speeches or shouting. Instead, their matter-of-fact stillness injects yet more fear in the shaking enemies.

As the enemy continues to advance, Leonidas remains at the front of his troops and performs the ceremonial goat sacrifice. With the goat still braced between his knees and the blade dripping with blood, he extends his sword to the heavens and then toward the enemy. The Spartans advance, singing the hymn to Castor and snapping their spears into fighting position on the climactic beat. The Antirhion ranks begin to break before the Spartans even reach them, many abandoning the field in terror.

The goat sacrifice is a reminder of the centrality of the gods in Spartan minds. Though they are matter-of-fact in battle, they are very much beholden to their gods. This is also shown by the hymn to Castor, a Greek god, was the son of a mythical Spartan king, hence the hymn in his honor. The Spartans' presentation causes their enemies' courage to buckle when fighting has scarcely begun.

The Spartans' grim efficiency against the Antirhionians "wolves in a pack [taking] down the fleeing deer." The Spartans surge relentlessly against their enemies until the dam breaks, and the front ranks break forward to slaughter what men remain on the field. Finally, the Antirhionians clearly routed, a halt is called to the slaughter, and the Spartans begin searching among the dead for fallen friends. Xeo follows Alexandros down the slope onto the field as his friend searches for his loved ones. Both Olympieus and Dienekes emerge unscathed from the fray and embrace Alexandros in shock. His father quickly turns angry, but Alexandros is distracted by the sight of his father's beloved squire, Meriones, wounded on the ground. The dying squire comforts Alexandros, telling him, "No happier death than this." He asks to be buried on the battlefield, and Alexandros sings a farewell song.

Xeo gets a firsthand look at what the Spartans can do on the battlefield. It doesn't take long; the Antirhionians don't put up a notable fight. The death of Olympieus' squire, Meriones, underscores the loyalty of squires who, in Pressfield's account, often accompanied their masters into battle. It also foretells Xeo's own willing sacrifice of himself as a squire later on.

Xeo, meanwhile, is stunned by the appearance of familiar warriors in the aftermath of battle; they now seem like "heroes and demigods" to him. Even now, they maintain discipline, not gloating over the vanquished, but offering the humble thank-offering of a single rooster. He watches Dienekes re-forming the ranks and thinks about the state of mind that Spartans try to avoid at all costs—katalepsis, or possession, "that derangement of the senses that comes when terror or anger usurps dominion of the mind." Dienekes, Xeo realizes, is not a "superman," but "just a man doing a job" with self-composure.

It's the job of an officer like Dienekes to keep soldiers from falling into "possession." This will be a recurrent theme in battle, as Dienekes strives to keep men from falling prey to anger or fear and forgetting their training. Even though Dienekes is not a larger-than-life figure, his marked composure only reinforces his greatness in Xeo's mind. He begins to understand the Spartans as something more than mere avenging gods, as he'd thought as a boy.

The survivors collect their "tickets," which were broken in half before the battle, with one half kept in a basket. Those tickets unclaimed in the basket allow the slain to be identified and numbered. As the men come forward, their limbs quake, and some shudder and weep, overcome by the terror they've kept at bay until now—a condition called "fear-shedding." Twenty-eight men were killed this day.

The Spartans are not stoic machines; they still must release the terror and grief of war after the action has subsided.

King Leonidas moves among his men, "not declaiming like some proud monarch […] but speaking softly like a comrade," embracing some of the men and addressing them without condescension. The survivors begin to assemble around him. In a simple tribute, he reads aloud the names of the fallen. Then he gives a speech. He compares the experience of battle to the two-part "ticket." He sets aside the best part of himself—the loving and compassionate part. Into battle he carries "the baser measure, that half which knows slaughter and butchery," without which he couldn't fight.

Xeo gets his first glimpse of King Leonidas's presence on the battlefield. Leonidas shows none of the grandeur of a stereotypical ruler but walks and talks with his men and comforts them. This impression stays with Xeo for life and forever shapes his understanding of leadership. Leonidas's speech acknowledges that warfare requires a kind of separation between compassion and baser instincts.

Leonidas goes on to describe the "holy moment" when a surviving solider reclaims his ticket from the basket, wondering why the gods have mercifully spared him while beloved comrades have fallen. At this moment, as he rejoins the two pieces of his ticket, the renewed flow of love, mercy, and compassion "unstrings his knees." He rejoices in his inexplicable deliverance.

Leonidas's moving example explains why the aftermath of battle is so overpowering even for hardened warriors. Just as he connects the pieces of his identifying ticket, he also rejoins his humanity and is overwhelmed by the feelings that are reawakened.

Leonidas has ordered that pursuit of the Antirhionian foe should cease. He reminds the men that they have not fought today in order to conquer or enslave, but to make these men their allies against a greater foe—the Persian. Spurring laughter, he grants that some of the men think he's crazy for worrying about this invisible foe: "he takes chances with his life in an unkingly manner and prepares for war against an enemy he has never seen." But he assures the Spartans that the Persian will come, in greater numbers than those who were defeated at Marathon four years earlier.

More of Leonidas's kingly character is revealed. He isn't interested in slaughter merely for the sake of conquering. He's looking ahead to the growing Persian menace. He has foresight that others don't—the less prescient even think him "unkingly" for worrying about the Persians so much.

Leonidas goes on to explain that the Persian Xerxes is a different kind of king than he is. He doesn't join the men in battle, "but looks on, safe, from a distance"; his men aren't peers, but "slaves and chattel." Xerxes, he says, is coming to Greece in hopes of enslaving other men. When he arrives, he will find united allies, not "paid-for friends." That is why Leonidas is treating the defeated with generosity. He wants the men they've spared to stand alongside the Spartans to teach the Persians "what valor free men can bring to bear against slaves."

Leonidas forthrightly explains the difference between himself and Xerxes. Xerxes doesn't fight alongside his men or view them as equals. He's coming to Greece to collect more slaves, and many of his allies are paid off; they are not truly loyal to him. In contrast, the Greeks are true allies. That's why Leonidas has spared the Antirhionians they've just routed so thoroughly. If the vanquished aren't treated as free and willing allies, then the Spartans act no better than the Persians.

CHAPTER 12

At this point in Xeo's story, Gobartes records, Xeo learned of the "sacrilege" performed against the corpse of Leonidas by the Persians. He is so distraught that he asks to be put to death immediately. Xerxes' captain, Orontes, has become a confidant to Xeo and tries to placate him, explaining that Xerxes regretted the desecration as soon as he ordered it in the midst of his grief over the loss of 20,000 men, including brothers and kinsmen. Orontes also brings in Demaratos, a deposed king of Sparta and guest in the Persian court, who speaks alone with Xeo for a while. Afterward, he explains that the lesser rankers and outland captives like Xeo tend to be "more Spartan than the Spartans" in their great piety, so Demaratos appealed to Xeo's reverence for Apollo, who had assisted Xeo's tale thus far. Xeo apparently finds that Apollo does not wish him to stop the tale, for he resumes.

Leonidas's corpse was beheaded and crucified after he was killed at Thermpylae. Having just recounted Leonidas's virtues, Xeo is overwhelmed by this news. A Spartan exile is brought in to try to comfort Xeo. Demaratos redirects Xeo to prayer, and Apollo again directs Xeo to keep going with his story instead of collapsing with grief. Again, Apollo's mysterious purposes seem to be driving the story.

Polynikes, though only 24, is awarded the prize of valor for his actions at Antirhion, his second such prize, as well as being promoted to Captain of the Knights. This makes him a hero for all Greece, "a second Achilles." Dienekes, by contrast, had been honored as a Knight just once and had declined subsequent distinctions, preferring the obscurity of being a platoon commander. Xeo observes that Dienekes' greatest gift is teaching, and that like all teachers, he is primarily a student—particularly of "fear, and its opposite."

A contrast is set up between these two Spartans—Polynikes loves and revels in valor and its recognition, whereas Dienekes prefers to stay out of the limelight and mentor others according to what he's learned.

As punishment for joining Alexandros in pursuing the army, Xeo is removed from his friend's company and forced to march in the dusty rear of the army train, along with his friend Dekton, or Rooster. Dekton is half-helot, half-Spartiate, and hates his Spartan masters, so Xeo's allegiance to them galls him. Xeo had been assigned to Rooster on first arriving in Sparta, helping with the sacrificial goats and kids. Dekton scorns Xeo's piety, calling him a "mountain-mad yokel" to think that Apollo would deign to "[swoop] down to chat in the snow with a cityless" kid like Xeo. He looks for every opportunity to humiliate Xeo, feeling contempt for Xeo's allegiance to the Spartans.

Xeo and Rooster are both helots (slaves), but their attitudes about Sparta couldn't be more different. Rooster is filled with resentment and can't stand Xeo's piety and loyalty to those whom Rooster sees as their oppressors. He thinks Xeo's piety is naïve. It's not the last time that Rooster's and Xeo's views of their respective situations will clash.

Dekton is the first person Xeo has ever met who doesn't fear the gods. He doesn't hate them, or mock them like an Athenian freethinker, but simply doesn't think they exist. Awed, Xeo waits for heaven to strike Dekton down.

The genuineness of Xeo's piety shows through here. He's shocked by Rooster's cynicism, which is something he's never encountered before.

A couple of days after their return to Sparta, the grief of the losses in battle are still hanging heavily over the city. Late one evening, in the Peers' dining hall, Polynikes calls Alexandros forward and begins to interrogate him about his experience watching the battle. "How did you like it?" he asks. "It made me sick," Alexandros replies. He even admits that he found the violence "barbarous and unholy." Polynikes begins to get angry.

The Spartans call the practice of singling out a young man for verbal abuse arosis, or "harrowing." It's meant to harden him mentally, much as the beatings are meant to do. But Alexandros is different from most Spartan boys in his matter-of-fact honesty. He can't pretend that he loves what he saw on the battlefield. Polynikes takes this personally.

An interrogation like this is intended to harden a boy's will and is best deflected by humor, "but Alexandros possessed no gift for the wisecrack." He answers each question with "excruciating candor" and is too proud to stop the interrogation, even though that's his right. Polynikes relentlessly questions Alexandros on the types of wounds that can be inflicted by various weapons and forces him to concisely define the various virtues of war. There is something hateful and personal about Polynikes' grilling, perhaps because Alexandros is the only Spartan male whose beauty rivals Polynikes', and Polynikes resents that Alexandros prefers singing to athletics—a failure of manly virtue in his eyes.

This "harrowing" is somewhat reminiscent of the ordeal of Alexandros's friend, tripod, who could have called a halt to his torment but proudly refused. But unlike the Spartan mindset about training, Polynikes' teardown of Alexandros feels bitterly personal; he doesn't think the young man measures up, and his quiet endurance affronts him somehow.

Xeo also suspects that Polynikes resents Dienekes' fondness for Alexandros. He can tell that Polynikes has always envied the city's respect for Dienekes, even though Polynikes has collected more external accolades. Dienekes wears "the respect of the city so lightly and with such self-effacing wit" that Polynikes is baffled and embittered.

There's other resentment behind Polynikes' attitude, too. He's taking his resentment for Alexandros's mentor's fame out on the student. There seems to be a certain fundamental insecurity in Polynikes.

Xeo observes that Polynikes' courage is "something in the blood and marrow," an "instinctual supremacy," whereas Dienekes' is the courage of "a fallible mortal" whose valor emerges from "the force of some inner integrity which was unknown to Polynikes." Perhaps this is why he longs to break Alexandros's spirit the way he'd broken the boy's face in training. After he has interrogated Alexandros for an hour, he begins making crude sexual comparisons to the violence of battle—such that even the other Spartan Peers begin rapping on the table in protest, which Polynikes ignores.

Even a young Xeo can discern the difference between the two Spartan warriors. There is a lack of self-consciousness in Dienekes which Polynikes doesn't understand and feels threatened by. His public humiliation of Alexandros begins to cross a line, but Alexandros still stands up under the onslaught.

Finally, Dienekes interjects. He gently asks his protégé why he doesn't lie like every other boy under questioning. Alexandros replies that the company would see right through him. Polynikes defers to the other Peers, but, with an altered, almost kind tone concludes the "instruction." He tells Alexandros that war is the gods' merciful gift, a counterpoint to mankind's innate depravity. Only war, he argues, not peace, produces virtue. He argues that it purges everything that's base and selfish in a man, and therefore Alexandros shouldn't despise it or suppose that mercy and compassion are superior to andreia (manly valor).

Alexandros's fortitude under pressure is a form of courage, too, although it's not one that is as readily recognized by Spartans like Polynikes. Polynikes tries to convey to Alexandros that war is a good, purifying force for which mankind should be grateful. Andreia, valor, is the utmost in virtue, and every other virtue pales in comparison to it. Alexandros must be hardened to this truth. It remains to be seen whether he'll accept this teaching.

Outside the mess hall, Dienekes speaks to Polynikes, demanding to know why he hates Alexandros. Polynikes replies that Alexandros does not love glory, which is the supreme virtue of a warrior. Dienekes tells Polynikes that he hopes Polynikes will "survive as many battles in the flesh as you have already fought in your imagination. Perhaps then you will acquire the humility of a man and bear yourself no longer as the demigod you presume yourself to be."

Dienekes confronts Polynikes personally. Polynikes indeed resents the young boy's failure to share his own virtues. But Dienekes calls Polynikes' love of glory into question. He accuses him of vainglory and thinking much more highly of himself than he ought to do.

After this, Dienekes takes a walk with Alexandros and comforts him, reminding him that Polynikes really would die for him, and that Spartan boys have endured these "harrowings" for centuries: "We spend tears now that we may conserve blood later … He was trying to teach you that discipline of mind that will block out fear" in battle." Habit is the warrior's champion.

Polynikes again comforts Alexandros and reminds the boy that he isn't going through anything unusual for a Spartan. The discipline of mind learned here will only benefit him under the pressures of the battlefield.

CHAPTER 13

Before everyone can disperse for the night, a helot boy brings a message from Dienekes' house. To Xeo's shock, the summons is for him. He follows the servant boy to Dienekes' peaceful cottage on the outskirts of an adjacent village, finding Dienekes' wife, the lady Arete, awake, along with her four daughters. With them is Alexandros's mother, Paraleia. She immediately begins questioning Xeo about her son's interrogation.

This is surprising because no one is supposed to know what's discussed within the precincts of the Peers' mess hall, but clearly Arete has her ways of finding out what's going on. This is another hint as to how powerful she is behind the scenes.

Paraleia begins by asking Xeo who governs Sparta. Xeo quickly replies that the King, the ephors, and the Laws are in charge. Paraleia casts a fleeting smile at Arete and says, "Surely this must be so." Xeo gets the message, "that if I didn't want to find myself permanently back in the farmers' shitfields, I'd better start coughing up a satisfactory dose of information." He accordingly does. He tells Paraleia everything about his and Alexandros's journey to Antirhion and how Alexandros behaved there. Xeo stands up under an hour of this interrogation, discomfited by Paraleia's understated Spartan beauty as much as by the grilling. He also finds that it takes all his self-composure not to drift back in his mind to memories of Diomache and his mother.

Xeo gives the textbook answer to Paraleia's questioning, but clearly he's meant to know that the women are really in charge of Sparta. His interrogation parallels that of Alexandros hours before, and it seems to be nearly as harrowing. He has to draw on the kind of mental discipline Dienekes enjoins in order to resist being weakened mentally by the emotional pressure.

Finally, Paraleia concludes the interrogation by asking Xeo to evaluate her son's andreia. Xeo points out that Alexandros was the only Spartan boy to dare follow the army, fully knowing that he'd face his mother's wrath, as well as the Spartans' punishment, upon his return. Paraleia accepts this "politic" response.

As Alexandros's companion, he is able to speak to the boy's strengths and weaknesses like few can. Paraleia is clearly concerned for Alexandros's ability to survive in the harsh Spartan society. She is satisfied that he can pass muster, even if not in the most conventional way. This whole scene further shows how aware Spartan women are and how much they're moving behind the scenes.

After Paraleia departs, Arete invites Xeo to stay for some bread and wine. As he eats, she asks him if he's ever heard of Idotychides. Xeo says that he's heard that Dekton, or Rooster, is the bastard son of this man, by a Messenian woman. He believes it because Rooster hates the Spartans. Arete reflects that, in contrast to the meanest of slaves, those slaves who are on the brink of freedom "chafe most bitterly" under their lot. Xeo realizes this is a perfect description of Rooster.

Arete befriends Xeo. It turns out that Rooster is Dienekes' illegitimate nephew (Idotychides was Arete's brother). Arete believes that Rooster's sullenness is due to the fact that he's half Spartan but relegated to helot status because of the circumstances of his birth. This again highlights the difference between him and Xeo, also an outsider, who deliberately sought out relationships with the Spartans.

Arete then asks Xeo if he knows what the krypteia is. It's a secret society among the Peers—the youngest and strongest who make treasonous helots disappear. Xeo acknowledges that, given the kinds of treasonous statements he has heard Rooster make, the *krypteia* would be justified in going after him. Arete suggests that if Xeo were Rooster's friend, he might warn Rooster to speak no more of such things.

Arete again shows how much Spartan women have their finger on the pulse of what's happening in Sparta and are active behind the scenes. Rooster's comments don't go unnoticed and will likely get him killed; Arete clearly wants Xeo to keep an eye on her nephew.

Arete gives Xeo more wine and asks him about his past. Xeo talks about his own mother and the sacking of Astakos. He is unexpectedly moved when Arete remarks that he has had an unhappy life. She asks him why he chose to join Sparta, of all cities, and Xeo explains that while "other cities produce monuments and poetry, Sparta produces men." The lady is moved by this.

Few have taken such a personal interest in Xeo, and he finds Arete's motherly concern comforting after so many years of hardship and fending for himself. Arete'a failure to ever bear a son probably accounts for some of her emotional response to Xeo.

Arete then surprises Xeo by admitting that the Spartan Idotychides was not only Rooster's father, but her brother; thus, Rooster is her nephew. This means that, as a bastard son of Sparta, he would be eligible for enrollment in agoge training and even to eventually become citizens, but Rooster has refused this when she has offered. He prefers to associate himself with the "meaner," Messenian half of his lineage.

Arete confides in Xeo that she is related to Rooster; she no doubt takes a maternal concern for him as well. Entrance in Spartan training would be a lifeline for Rooster, sparing him scrutiny for his treasonous remarks, but he is proud of his non-Spartan lineage and refuses to align himself with the Spartan half.

Arete tells Xeo that the krypteia knows about Rooster's identity and his allegiance. The watch Xeo, too, since he is well-spoken, courageous, and resourceful. She also tells him that Polynikes is one of the *krypteia*. She knows that war with Persia is coming. This war will be "a field upon which a man may display by his deeds the nobility denied him by his birth." She wants Rooster alive when that war comes, and for Xeo to keep an eye on him. Xeo swears by the gods that he will do this.

Arete's motivation appears to be that the coming war will give Rooster the chance to distinguish himself above and beyond the opportunities afforded by his background, and she wants Xeo to make sure her nephew gets that chance. It's likely the only such distinction available to a male offspring of Arete's family.

Before he goes, Xeo has a question, too, "for a friend." He tells Arete about having been spoken to by Apollo. He wants to know if such a thing is really possible: "would a being of divinity condescend to speak to a boy without city or station?" He braces himself for mockery, but Arete responds from the heart, though she is no priestess: the vision of Xeo's "friend," she tells him, "indeed was of the god." Immediately, Xeo is overwhelmed by sobs. Arete comforts him and will hear no apology for his "holy" tears. As Xeo leaves, she tells him that his "friend" must visit in person next time—she wants "to look upon the face of this boy who has sat and chatted with the Son of Heaven."

Arete's confidence as gained Xeo's trust. He trusts her with the story of his vision and encourages him that he has indeed been sought out by Apollo. Xeo is overwhelmed both by Arete's kindness and the assurance of the god's care for him. This exchange strengthens him, and Arete becomes a confidant and mentor in something of the same way that her husband Dienekes has been for Alexandros. Arete's words also confirm that the gods do not simply align themselves with the already powerful; they defy human rank and expectation.

CHAPTER 14

The following evening, both Alexandros and Xeo are whipped for having gone to Antirhion—Alexandros by his father before the peers, and Xeo, unceremoniously, by a helot. Rooster helps Xeo away and bathes and dresses his wounds. He is well acquainted with such discipline and the doctoring it requires, and he cares for Xeo effectively, with unusual kindness. Suddenly they are startled by Alexandros sneaking through the trees. He's stolen some wax of myrrh, the medicine of the Peers and much superior to Rooster's homespun ointment. Rooster gains newfound respect for Alexandros's courage, knowing he'd be beaten half to death if discovered.

The contrast between the two boys' relative stations in life is highlighted by the way they're each disciplined. Rooster shows a kinder side as he cares for Xeo, and Alexandros shows surprising courage when he brings them the illicit ointment. Alexandros has a great deal of courage, even if it isn't always displayed in the most societally celebrated ways.

The next morning, Suicide, Dienekes' squire, summons Rooster and Xeo. They're filled with dread, but Suicide tells them they must be under a lucky star. Dienekes tells Xeo that he's useless as a field hand, and furthermore, he's a troublemaker and a bad influence on Alexandros. Rooster, too, is pathetic and loose-lipped. For some reason, Olympieus wants Rooster as his new squire, replacing Meriones. Blinking at this strange turn of events, Rooster runs off to his new duties.

Rooster and Xeo are sure they're in trouble for the stolen ointment, but it turns out that the fortunes of each are about to change for the better. Dienekes, perhaps prompted by his wife Arete, sees Xeo's promise, and Rooster is maneuvered into a position where he might be better connected.

Next Dienekes turns to Xeo. He tells Xeo that a good squire must be "dumb as a mule, numb as a post and obedient as an imbecile"—and Xeo's credentials are "impeccable." Then Suicide pulls out Xeo's old bow, taken from him when he'd first entered Sparta. Dienekes tells him that if he manages not to screw up, he might make a decent second squire. He'll pack, hunt, and cook for Dienekes. He looks at Xeo with wry amusement and adds, "with luck, you might even get in a potshot at the enemy."

Xeo is finally reunited with his old bow and elevated to a position that will put his old wilderness skills to good use. Dienekes' wry words turn out to be predictive, as well.

CHAPTER 15

Over the next five years, the Spartan army went on 21 different campaigns against other Greeks, especially those who seem traitorously inclined, like Thebes, Argos, and Macedonia. Even Sparta has a deposed king, Demaratos, who became Xerxes' sycophant. In Persia, after King Darius' death, there was some hope that the mobilization to invade Greece would stop, but then Xerxes ascended the throne. The mobilization redoubled.

The Spartans continue gathering as many allies as they can, going to war as necessary. Many decide that siding with Persia is the safer bet. (Demaratos was an earlier Spartan king who'd defied Leonidas's predecessor, Kleomenes.) The threat grows ever grimmer as Xerxes follows his father Darius onto the throne.

Over the years, Xeo wonders often about his cousin Diomache, but even when his service for Dienekes brings him to Athens, he is unable to learn her whereabouts. He decides he must uproot his heart's longing by marrying. Rooster finds him a bride, Rooster's cousin Thereia, who soon bears Xeo a son and a daughter. Xeo vows to think no more of Diomache, as it would be impious. Alexandros, too, now a Peer of the army himself, marries Agathe and soon fathers twins.

Now adults, Xeo and Rooster both start families of their own. Xeo has always harbored feelings for Diomache but resolves to let them go so he doesn't provoke the gods—perhaps thinking of Dienekes' long pining for Arete and its consequences (a lack of sons).

Rooster's wife, Harmonia, bears a son named Messenieus. Arete assists at the delivery of her grand-nephew. Xeo escorts her home, noticing the mixture of joy and sorrow on the lady's face.

Rooster names his son after his Messenian homeland. Xeo thinks that Arete is just thinking about the fact that a male has been born at last from her family line, but there's more to it, as he soon learns.

The Persians enter Europe. A force of 10,000 Spartans goes to Tempe in Thessaly to make a stand against the Persians, but the find the site to be undefendable; the men pull out and disperse. Greece seems paralyzed in the face of the threat. But "in the end it was their women who galvanized the Spartans into action."

The long-expected Persian threat materializes at last. But the Spartans' first attempt to fend them off goes poorly, as they abort an intended defense.

As refugee women with babies flood into Sparta, Spartan wives become increasingly angry. They confront their husbands, disdainful of what occurred at Tempe. The failure to even draw blood there "was not merely disgraceful … but blasphemous." Soon a delegation of wives and mothers goes to the ephors, asking that they be sent into battle the next time, "armed with hairpins and distaffs, since surely the women of Sparta could disgrace themselves no more egregiously."

Soon women start fleeing into Sparta in advance of the Persians. Spartan women are furious at their men's failure to stop this and mockingly demand the right to go into battle the next time. Despite the dark humor, this delegation to the city magistrates has an effect, as the city makes a decision about how best to respond. The wrath of Spartan women is not to be trifled with.

At last, the declaration of war comes. Dienekes' men get the word from another platoon commander, and the word quickly passes down the line: "It's the Gates, lads." The regiment is given the day off—a rarity. The news is that a force of 20,000 men will be called up, along with a naval force sealing up the straits at Artemisium. The men are immediately suspicious, knowing the Gates wouldn't hold 5,000 men. Finally a senior counselor is prevailed upon, and he admits that only 300 peers—"all sires"—are being sent to take possession of Thermopylae. An all-sire unit is a suicide unit.

The "Gates" (Thermopylae means "Hot Gates") had a long history of battles, as its narrow cliffside passages make it readily defendable. But it turns out that Sparta is only sending enough men to make a credible stand against the Persian advance. "All sires" refers to men with male offspring—those who are viewed as dispensable in battle because the continuation of their line is established.

Dienekes sends Xeo to his house, with a message requesting Arete and their daughters to join him for a walk. Xeo watches them from a distance. He sees Dienekes and Arete embracing tenderly. Xeo knows that no main force is going to be dispatched to Thermopylae at all. Only the Three Hundred are being sent, and they are expected to stand and die. Dienekes will not be one of them.

The story of the massive military call-up is only for public consumption. Dienekes has no male issue, and while there may be some relief in his embrace with his wife, there's also shame. This is a picture of the inflexible demands of the Spartan code.

CHAPTER 16

Xeo backtracks to an event that occurred several years earlier, about a year after the battle at Antirhion. In a battle between the Spartans and Thebans, Rooster, as Olympieus' squire, displayed great heroism. During a moment of chaos on the battlefield, Olympieus received a crippling foot wound. Three Theban cavalryman go after him. Rooster, unarmored, grabbed a spear and raced to his master's aid, taking on the horsemen single-handedly, even capturing one of their horses in the process. Back in Sparta, Rooster is the talk of the city and is even offered "stepbrother" warrior status—but he turns it down.

Earlier, Rooster had displayed impressive Spartan battle in the field and is offered a place among the Spartans, an honor rarely bestowed on helots. But he pridefully persists in rejecting this, an affront to the Spartan Peers.

Though Rooster cites his age as the reason (he's already 15), the Peers are furious, seizing upon the fact that he's an "ungrateful" Messenian slave. Similar events happen on subsequent campaigns. Rooster keeps proving himself, repeatedly raising the question in Spartan minds as to whether this "treasonous" youth is trustworthy, especially now that Persia is on Greece's frontier.

Because Rooster is proving himself to be such an amazing warrior, he's beginning to attract a following of Messenians, helots, and other "outcasts." This is why the situation is so pressing to the Spartans—he could mount a serious treasonous force, right on the eve of the showdown with the Persians.

On the eve of the proclamation of the Three Hundred, Rooster is again offered the chance to become a Spartan, and again he turns it down. Later that night, Xeo finds Alexandros arguing with Rooster. Rooster has decided to flee that night to the Temple of Poseidon, where he'll be granted sanctuary. In Rooster's hut, his wife, Harmonia, and two children are packed and ready to go. Alexandros gives him a handful of money, telling him, "It is the gods' injustice that makes you a slave and me free." Rooster is disarmed by Alexandros's candor and integrity.

Rooster knows he's a target and is getting ready to flee with his family to a temple where he knows he'll be granted a pardon on religious grounds—ironic for someone as impious as he, and a sign of his desperation. Alexandros admits that Rooster is a far better fighter than he will ever be, and Rooster, already somewhat softened toward Alexandros, is profoundly moved by this.

Suddenly four krypteia assassins burst into the hut and bind Rooster. Polynikes is one of them. In outrage, he tells Alexandros that his presence there constitutes treason. Alexandros refuses to leave. He and Xeo are bound, too, and taken away along with Rooster's wife and children.

As Arete had predicted, the assassins are on to Rooster, and it looks like he will come to a bad end. Alexandros and Xeo might even be implicated with him.

CHAPTER 17

A rump court gathers under cover of darkness, near the mess hall butchery. Olympieus and Dienekes join the other Peers. It quickly becomes clear that Alexandros had tried to persuade Rooster to accept the honor of becoming a Spartan, but, treasonously, had taken no action against him when he refused. Dienekes speaks to clear Alexandros's name. He explains that Alexandros has been doing nothing other than what his father has been trying to do (persuade Rooster), even though he had nothing personally to gain from it.

It looks as though Rooster will be quickly executed by night, and possibly Alexandros with him. Dienekes intervenes, pointing out that Alexandros was only trying to do what Olympieus had been trying to do all along when he made Rooster his squire.

Suddenly, to everyone's shock, Arete appears in the grove. Ignoring the men's protests, she seizes Rooster's infant son and wants to know which hero is going to murder the boy. A Peer speaks up, arguing that Arete just wants to preserve the bastard issue of her brother's line. Arete retorts that her brother has already achieved imperishable fame; she is here only for justice's sake. The boy, she says, is not Rooster's at all; he is the son of Arete's husband, Dienekes.

As she had done when she demanded that Dienekes marry her, Arete again bursts into a traditionally male space to demand justice. Her claim about Rooster's son's parentage is incendiary—potentially bringing shame on both herself and her husband.

Arete gets the sobbing Harmonia to admit that Dienekes is the infant's father. The Peers refuse to believe this or even to ask Dienekes directly, since that would sully his honor. But Arete steps forward and addresses the senior Peer "like a commander" and tells the men that they must recognize the baby as her husband's and duly enroll him in the agoge. If they refuse to believe her, then they should slit the child's throat now, in accordance with the laws of Lykurgus. She even grabs Polynikes' sickle and, before the horrified eyes of the onlookers, offers to do it herself, with "such a fierceness [...] as must have informed Medea herself."

Arete, perhaps because she is not bound by the warrior code in quite the same way, is able to ask questions that the Peers won't. In doing so, she's commanding her own right. Seeing her transgress these bounds, even going so far as to make a move toward executing the baby herself, seems to shock the Peers into action.

Arete stops short and, seeing the Peers frozen in consternation, quietly implores her husband. Staring into her wife's eyes, Dienekes at last swears that the child is his. He accepts the baby from her, and the Peers agree to enroll him in the agoge the following day. But before they can drag Rooster off to be executed, Alexandros asks to speak. He points out that, given Rooster's hero status among the helots, he will be revered as a martyr upon his execution. It would be better, he proposes, to turn Rooster loose on the frontier and let him go over to the Persians. Olympieus' eyes "[glisten] with pride" at his son's speech. The other Peers agree.

Dienekes finally admits that the child is his, which brings dishonor on himself and defames Arete. It is never entirely clear what the whole story is here, but it allows Rooster, and hence Arete's family line, to be spared. Alexandros also shows himself to be brave once again, as well as wise under pressure.Turning Rooster loose in this way would let him prove himself the ingrate the Spartans already think he is. Alexandros seems to suspect that there is more to Rooster than meets the eye.

As Dienekes helps his trembling wife away (she was "beginning to experience that quaking of the limbs which all warriors know in the aftermath of battle"), he looks at her with awe. She tells him, "Whatever deeds of virtue you have performed [...] none will exceed that which you have done this night." Dienekes doesn't look convinced. The elder Peer, Medon, examines the strong baby boy with approval and then tells Dienekes that, because he has a son now, he can be chosen for the Three Hundred and Thermopylae.

Arete is portrayed as a warrior in her own way, complete with post-battle shaking as Xeo had seen on the battlefield before. Whether she has intended it or not, her action tonight means that Dienekes will now be eligible to go to war, too.

CHAPTER 18

Xerxes continues to read the transcribed reports from Xeo even as the Persians advance deep into Greece, reaching the Three-Cornered Way, the famous waypoint two hours from Athens. Xerxes has been having troubling dreams, which he attributes to his desecration of Leonidas's corpse. The king's advisors worry that he is becoming emotionally disturbed. Meanwhile, Athens offers no resistance to the invaders, except for a small band who occupy the Acropolis, trusting in an oracle of Apollo which said, "the wooden wall alone shall not fail you." They believe the oracle refers to wooden palisade that had once bounded the site. The resisters were quickly slain.

Xerxes continues to be captivated by what Xeo has to say, even in the midst of trying to capture Greece as a whole. But he's also having bad dreams which he attributes to his own poor actions. The slaying of the small band of resisters, trusting in an apparently misunderstood oracle, suggests that humans' understanding of the supernatural is limited at best.

After making their reports, Xerxes' advisers leave, except for the two most trusted: Mardonius, his field marshal, and Artemisia, warrior-queen of Halicarnassus. He relays his dream to them in detail. In the dream, when he approached the spike on which Leonidas's decapitated head was placed, he realized with horror that the head was actually his own. Artemisia encourages the King that this dream signifies nothing; it only means that Xerxes recognizes the mortality of all kings. Mardonius encourages Xerxes to sail home to Susa and allow him to mop up the rest of Greece.

Xerxes shows his own vulnerability in the presence of his trusted advisers. He has his doubts about the way he's conducted the war. Mardonius seems to have some designs to get Xerxes out of the way and act in his stead.

Artemisia warns that the still-intact, highly motivated Spartan army and allies will pose a great threat; it would be disgraceful for Xerxes to leave now. Let the Greeks rely on superstition, she says: "We must be men and commanders, exploiting oracles and portents when they suit the purposes of reason and dismissing them when they do not." Xerxes considers this and finally says, without rancor, "It seems my women have become men, and my men women." He declares that they will burn Athens to the ground tomorrow and then grind the Spartans into dust.

Artemisia rejects the idea that oracles are inherently trustworthy. It's up to rulers to exploit them as suits their purposes best. Mardonius continues to press the king to retreat. Xerxes jokes that there's been a role reversal between his advisers. He sides with Artemisia, aligning himself with a more honorable display regardless of its dangers.

CHAPTER 19

Unable to sleep and obsessed with the thought of the Spartans, Xerxes summons Xeo. Artemisia and Mardonius both scorn this move, urging the King to "trouble [himself] no more with this whimsy woven by a savage." Xerxes replies that, on the contrary, he thinks Xeo's account is "very much to the point of matters with which we now grapple." He goes on to explain that he thinks only this captured Greek speaks before him with absolutely nothing to gain.

Xeo continues to make an impression on Xerxes. Xerxes senses that Xeo has nothing to lose and, therefore, may give him insights he can't get from his advisers, as long as he's willing to listen.

When Xeo is brought in, he is allowed for the first time to have his eyes uncovered and to behold Xerxes' face. Xeo says that he has seen Xerxes' face before, on the night raid into the Persian camp. He points out the axehead, embedded in the ridgepole of the tent, which nearly struck him that night. He explains that Alexandros, Dienekes, and Polynikes were there, too. Xerxes examines the axehead and then tells Mardonius, "Tell me now … that no god's hand is at work here." He welcomes Xeo to continue his tale.

Xerxes' esteem for Xeo's perspective is shown by the fact that Xeo is actually allowed to look the king in the face. Xeo proves that he has actually seen the king before, in a raid that hasn't been mentioned before. Seeing the evidence, Xerxes is confirmed in his belief that portents should, in fact, be heeded. He wants to hear more.

CHAPTER 20

Xeo recalls watching the marshaling of the tiny force of Three Hundred on the Spartan plain. As expected, Dienekes is among them. More surprisingly, Alexandros, only 20 years old, was also picked. The Spartans believe that a mix of green, unseasoned warriors and battle-tested veterans yields the best fighting. The good-byes to loved ones, especially husbands to wives and small children, are poignant.

The eve of Thermopylae is finally here. The long buildup has given the reader a much better appreciation of what has brought Dienekes, Alexandros, and others to this moment than if Xeo had plunged directly into an account of the battle. There is actually more behind the selection of these specific 300 warriors than meets the eye, but Leonidas will only reveal it much later.

Two days before the march-out, Arete had summoned Xeo in private, on a "county day," or festival during which the Peers are allowed to spend a carefree day on their estates with their families. While Dienekes is occupied with settling farm business, Xeo joins Arete in the farm kitchen. She tells him, "The gods remain always a jump ahead of us, don't they, Xeo?" Xeo helps her pack Dienekes' kit, including surgical supplies, money, sweets, and mementoes from his daughters.

From her comment, Xeo realizes that Arete hadn't fully realized the consequences of saving Rooster's baby's life. She'd just summoned her courage to do what she felt to be right in the moment, out of the instinctive spiritual sense she displayed in past conversation with Xeo. Xeo continues to enjoy a special bond with Arete as he helps her prepare for Dienekes to go off to battle.

Arete asks Xeo what happened when he accompanied Dienekes on embassy to Athens last month—did he locate Diomache? When Xeo is hesitant to speak, Arete sadly remarks that Xeo wouldn't be the first man to love someone other than his wife: "the gods played the same trick on my husband and me." She invites Xeo on a walk, reminding him that she was once married to Dienekes' brother, Iatrokles. She loved Dienekes from the first time she saw him as a girl, she tells Xeo, but she was promised to his older brother instead. When at last she and Dienekes married, after Iatrokles' death, Arete feared that they were cursed for their selfish passion by the fact that they were only given daughters, and then Arete was barren.

Arete confides in Xeo further, observing that the gods often play with human passions, causing things to turn out far differently than humans intend. She reminds him of the whole story between herself, Dienekes, and Iatrokles' brother. She believes that the gods punish human passion, particularly when it seems to be at odds with the gods' larger purposes for people and for society.

When the Three Hundred were summoned to Thermopylae, Arete says, she finally saw "the true perversity of the gods' plan." If her husband had remained without a son, he would have been denied the honor of going to Thermopylae. But now, "inspired by blind impulse […] I have saved the life of this boy, my brother's bastard's son, and lost my husband's in the process."

Arete spells out the full "perversity" of what the gods apparently have intended—she will lose Dienekes after all, though her impulse was only to rescue Rooster's son. The gods see much farther than humans do, and their purposes aren't transparent.

Arete goes on, musing that women of other cities think that Spartan women are made of "stauncher stuff" than they, able to lose their husbands without tears. But, she says, their grief is no less "because we choke it down in our guts."

Arete rejects the stereotypical view of Spartan women. Just because their grief isn't on full display doesn't mean it isn't every bit as bitter as that of other women. This runs somewhat counter to the idealized Spartan male perception of their women.

Arete turns to Xeo and tells him that it isn't too late for him. He isn't Spartan, and he needn't bind himself by Spartan laws, or by the seeming cruelty of the gods. She's given him a pouch of money; he could run away, or have Diomache, whom he loves, brought to Sparta for him. Xeo says this would be dishonorable, and Arete is disgusted. Xeo appreciates Arete's kindness, but he points out that the gods would indeed be "one jump ahead." Arete says nothing more, only promising that Diomache will learn of Xeo's death and burial.

Arete wants to see a chance for a different outcome for Xeo where there is no longer a chance for herself. Xeo refuses because she is sick of the Spartan obsession with "honor." Xeo just points out what Arete has already said—that no matter what he does, he can't outwit the gods. And anyway, he is completely devoted to Sparta. There's no going back.

On the morning of the march-out, Xeo watches Arete solemnly bid Dienekes goodbye. King Leonidas does the same with his wife, Gorgo. Xeo bids his wife, Thereia, a warm goodbye, knowing she won't be a widow for long. He jokes, "Wait at least until I'm out of sight." He hardly knows his children and wishes he could have loved Thereia as she deserved.

With all his duties, Xeo has not had much opportunity to get to know his own family, in contrast to the longstanding marriages of Dienekes and Leonidas. All the couples know they won't likely meet again.

After the final sacrifices, Leonidas prepares to lead the army toward Thermopylae. He makes a speech, saying that it's from Sparta's women that he finds the courage to face death. He explains that while men's pain is of the flesh, quickly over, women's pain is unending sorrow. He tells his men to learn from the women, who bear painful childbirth knowing that nothing good comes without a price. The warriors, he says, choose to pay this price for liberty. The army drinks a ceremonial libation, and Leonidas swears by the gods that the women of Sparta will not "behold the smoke of the enemy's fires."

Leonidas speaks in praise of Spartan women. He acknowledges their unending sorrow and encourages the men to take a cue from their wives—their warfare is something akin to childbirth, pain in exchange for something far more lasting and worthwhile. Leonidas promises that the women of Sparta will be protected no matter what, reflecting the deep valuation Spartan men hold of the women in their lives.

CHAPTER 21

When the Three Hundred reached Opountian Lokris, ten miles from Thermopylae, having been joined by various allied fighting units along the way, they find a deserted countryside. Most of the populace have taken refuge in the hills, and local chieftains have gone over to the Persians. It's determined that the Lokrians and neighboring Phokians had reckoned the date wrong, thinking the Spartans weren't coming. They encounter many other desperate refugees, many of whom weep with relief at the sight of the Spartans. The Spartans' sense of urgency mounts, and they quicken their pace.

All of Greece is in an uproar over the anticipated Persian invasion. The pressure is on the Spartans to rescue all of Greece from the foreign onslaught—in order to do so, they will be forced to unite as soldiers and confront the intimidating onslaught.

On the outskirts of Thermopylae, in the village of Alpenoi, the army discovers that residents have set up makeshift shops—a bakery, a tavern, and even a brothel. The Persians haven't been seen yet. Leonidas sends out raiding parties to destroy or seize anything that the enemy could use. He also sends out reconnaissance units to map the area. In the meantime, a frightening prodigy occurs. A Theban soldier steps on a nest of venomous baby snakes and dies in agony. The seer, Megistias, interprets the prodigy: the man, whose name is Perses, symbolizes the Persians, who are soon to be brought low by the Spartans.

The Spartans begin making camp and preparing for the Persians to appear. Once again, an apparent sign from heaven gives mixed messages. The snakebite would seem to be a terrible omen at first, but the seer interprets things with a more encouraging spin. It's easy to see how such small signs could set the tone for the entire army.

While various engineers wrangle over how best to construct a protective fortification, Leonidas simply begins hauling boulders into place himself. Soon the men are eagerly working alongside him, cheered by their king's encouraging words. Later that night, an outlaw is brought in. Xeo knows him—a fellow named "Ball Player" who'd wandered the hills outside Astakos after their town was destroyed. He's eager to profit from the war in any way he can, including scouting for pay. Leonidas sends him and Hound, a Spartan ranger, to climb Kallidromos, the 3,000-foot mountain that towers above Thermopylae. Soon the Phokian and Lokrian allies show up and join the camp.

This is another example of Leonidas's approach to kingship—taking the lead in accomplishing what needs to be done and thereby encouraging his men. There is a marked contrast between Xeo's and Ball Player's paths in life. His experience as a refugee prompted Xeo to join the Spartans and do whatever he could to help protect people as vulnerable as he once was. Ball Player just wants to benefit from the war in some way. But Ball Player is quickly conscripted By Leonidas anyway.

A local merchant and sailor who's hanging around the camp begins telling stories about the Persians he's seen while briefly taken captive. He describes massive stores of weapons, supplies, and even sky-high mountains of paper for inventory. Soon Dienekes shows up and begins listening to the story. The merchant, warming to his story and his audience's fear, describes Persian archery practice: "so numerous were the multitudes of bowmen that when they fired their volleys, the mass of arrows blocked out the sun!" To this, Dienekes responds with apparent boredom: "Good. Then we'll have our battle in the shade." Later that night, rangers return with news that the Persians are advancing.

This Dienekes quote was originally recorded by Herodotus in his Histories. It's impossible to know if the historical Dienekes actually did say anything like ths, but it seems to be characteristic of the Spartan fondness for concise quips. More to the point, Dienekes won't let fearmongering put him aside from the larger purpose and hopes his men will follow his lead.

CHAPTER 22

Within minutes, the Spartans and allies are on their feet and armed. They spend the night in final battle preparations, setting menacing bonfires across the plain. In the morning, they exchange shouted insults with the Persian scouts and archers who are visible across the river. By the following day, the plain is filled with enemy units. Leonidas speaks to his officers. He reminds them that they must show courage if they expect the same from their men. He urges them to be attentive to "the little things"—training schedules, sacrifices, drills, even dressing their hair. He also reminds the Spartans that their allies are mostly citizen-soldiers.

For Leonidas and his men, the key to battle, even at such a crucial moment as this, is doing things the way they're customarily done, in training and in any other battle engagement. This Spartan ethos enables calm to reign instead of giving a foothold to fear. The same can't be expected of Spartan allies, however, who likely haven't been drilled accordingly.

As the non-Spartan officers join the gathering, Leonidas reminds all the men that they should set an example for their men by being unafraid, doing whatever work needs doing, and sleeping in the open. He reminds them that idle talk turns to fear, but action "produces the appetite for more action." They should also remember that the terrain is to the Greeks' advantage—no more than a dozen of the enemy at a time can squeeze through the narrow cliffs.

Leonidas gives all the men some final encouragement. They must simply do what needs to be done and focus more on action than on talk that fuels fear. They should also remember that Thermopylae has historically been a very defensible site, an intentional choice for encountering the Persians.

Leonidas's whole demeanor calms the men, focusing on the practical, rather than trying to produce a state of mind that will quickly fade. His attitude is that "war is work, not mystery." He also mentions an oracle that the men have heard about—saying that Sparta will either lose a king in battle, or the city will be destroyed. Leonidas himself has taken an omen and determined that he will be that king. But he will do everything possible to spare his men. He also assures the non-Spartans that Spartans have no monopoly on courage, which is the thing most needed in battle.

Leonidas is the epitome of a Spartan king, not trying to give a meaningless pep talk, but reminding the men of what they already know how to do. He also calmly faces the likelihood of his own death, promising it doesn't mean his men will face the same. He also shows respect to the non-Spartan allies, not seeing them as mere fodder for the Persians, but true partners with a contribution to make.

CHAPTER 23

That night, Dienekes is restless. Xeo watches his master give up sleep and join the king's fireside. Xeo looks across the slumbering camp and thinks about Thermopylae. The "hot gates" have hosted battles for centuries, everything from clashes between hill tribes to barbarian invaders: "The tides of war and peace had alternated in this site for centuries, bathers and warriors, one come for the waters, the other for blood."

The "hot gates," or "gates of fire," have been a site of civilizational strife for many years. Xeo is struck by the contrast between the peaceful retreat some have found here and the mayhem the warriors are about to face.

As Alexandros stirs awake, he gazes toward the king's fireside as well and wonders aloud, "How will we do? […] Will we find the answer to Dienekes' question? Will we discover within ourselves 'the opposite of fear?'"

Alexandros's natural transparency comes through as he speaks what Xeo and others are no doubt thinking. As a good lifelong student of Dienekes, he hopes he'll leave up to the warrior's ideal and not succumb to fear.

Three days before the march to Sparta, Dienekes had taken his platoon on a hunt. As the warriors gather around the campfire that night, Dienekes raises the subject of fear. All his life, he has been preoccupied with fear's opposite. But this "opposite," he says, cannot simply be fearlessness, or playing off fear of death against fear of disgrace. And the gods cannot help, because they do not have flesh, "the factory of fear."

Xeo backtracks to an event several days ago in order to provide context for Alexandros's question. Dienekes gives an impromptu lecture to some of the younger warriors, explaining what fearlessness is not.

Dienekes tells the youthful warriors that veterans are not exempt from fear; in fact, they feel it more keenly, because they have more experience of it. Although he always manages to cobble together courage in battle, the best he can do is to act despite his terror.

Dienekes doesn't pretend to the younger warriors that he's free from fear. In fact, knowing more of the realities of war than they do, he's more vulnerable to it than they are.

Achilles, Dienekes says, was mostly invulnerable. Therefore, he cannot be said to have possessed true andreia. Polynikes, too, though the bravest of the Spartans, fights out of "greed for glory," which also isn't true *andreia*. In fact, the person who possesses pure *andreia*, more than any other he has known, is his wife, Arete, and Alexandros's mother, Paraleia. Dienekes suspects that the women's "higher valor" holds the key to his question about fear.

The famed hero of the Iliad, Dienekes argues, didn't have to face such fear and so cannot be said to have possessed real courage, either. And courage seems also to require the proper goal, which cannot be something like Polynikes' vainglory. Surprisingly, Dienekes attributes the greatest of "manly valor" to women.

At this, the youthful warrior Ariston speaks up. He argues that men, from the time they are boys, instinctually fight. In the same way, he says, women naturally bear and nurture children. What, then, "could be more contrary to female nature, to motherhood, than to stand unmoved and unmoving as her sons march off to death?" By somehow summoning the will to act against their natures in this way, the women demonstrate that their courage is, in fact, superior to men's.

Ariston argues that motherhood and nurture are natural to women in the same way that fighting is natural to men, so sending their men off to death demands far greater valor from women.

Then Alexandros speaks up. He argues that there's more to women's courage than Ariston has said. It's not just that women send their sons and husbands off to war without weeping, but that they do this in service of a higher cause: donating their men's lives for the sake of the nation. This willingness to set the whole above the part, Alexandros argues, is what's so admirable about women's sacrifice. Dienekes promises to later tell them a story about Leonidas that will give them insight both into women's courage and into the question of fear overall.

Alexandros perceives something lacking in Ariston's claim. He argues that it's the goal of women's sacrifice that makes it truly courageous. They display the essentially Spartan ability to suffer for the sake of the larger whole.

Back in the present, a Persian messenger suddenly approaches the camp. He requests an audience with four Spartan officers: Olympieus, Aristodemos, Polynikes, and Dienekes. It turns out that the messenger is Ptammitechus, "Tommie," the Egyptian marine the Spartan officers had met on embassy a few years ago. Tommie is accompanied by his young son, who speaks Attic Greek and interprets the exchange. Tommie has a message from King Xerxes for the Spartans alone. Olympieus tells him that his message must be delivered to the Greeks as a whole.

After this digression on fear and courage, it appears that war is finally getting underway with the arrival of the Egyptian envoy. The Spartans refuse to do any business with him without letting all their Greek allies be party to it as well, highlighting the sense of unity they share.

With a friendly manner, Tommie begs the Greeks not to resort to bloodshed, in light of the Persians' evident superiority. He warns them that "death alone awaits [them] here." If they surrender to the Persians, they will be ruled with respect; more than that, Xerxes will grant the Spartans dominion over Greece and grant them whatever they ask. The allies hold their breaths as they listen to this exchange.

If the Spartans surrender to the Persians with a promise of being able to rule Greece, they will betray their Greek allies—an act that will diminish the deep sense of brotherhood and community they hold with their kinfolk.

Tommie continues to beg the Spartans not to act out of pride. He describes Xerxes' ambitions for Persia. Greece is merely the beginning; having conquered Asia, he now has his gaze fixed on Europe. If the Spartans join forces with the Persians, he promises, they will be fellow world-conquerors. At this, an elderly Spartan in a homespun cloak steps forward. He suggests that, instead, Xerxes surrender to the Greeks, as they will not fail to match Xerxes' generosity. Tommie asks that he be taken to the King instead of wasting further time in this discussion. The old man explains that it's no use, as the King is a crusty old drunk. Tommie realizes with amusement that the elderly speaker is Leonidas himself.

Leonidas, in disguise, is speaking up on the basis of the Spartan law that all are considered peers and equals. Doing this, while humorous, also highlights the Spartan emphasis on freedom, which is the very reason they can't surrender to the Persians. No matter what promises are made, they would effectively be servants of the Persians. Leonidas's common disguise is also in keeping with his view of kingship.

Accepting the outcome of the exchange, Ptammitechus offers Leonidas a gift before he leaves: a heavy golden goblet that had belonged to an ancestor of the Spartans. He exchanges sorrowful glances with the unyielding Spartans, and the men take their leave, until they meet again in battle.

There is no inherent enmity between the Spartans and those of other nations; the gift appears to be a genuine, meaningful gesture. But the higher value of freedom trumps the kind gesture.

CHAPTER 24

The Medes, the vanguard of the Persian army, wear bright purple trousers, embroidered tunics, and plumed helmets. They also wear rouge and jewelry. This unusual costume actually strikes terror in Greek hearts: "one felt as if he were facing men from the underworld." The Greeks, in their turn, put forward the warriors of Thespiae as their vanguard. These take their place in "the Narrows" between the mountain wall and the cliff that drops to the sea. The Spartans and other allies stay atop the rebuilt Phokian Wall, armed and ready.

The two sides take their places for battle. While the Persians are numerically superior by far, they face the challenge of squeezing into the battlefield through the narrow passage, meaning that only small numbers of their men can be sent into the engagement at a time. This makes the prospect of battle all the more terrifying, as they will have to face the enemy without the support of a full army.

The day crawls onward, with no advance on either side. Eventually the Greeks see that the delay has been caused by the erection of a platform and throne for Xerxes on the ridgeline high above. Soon they see purple-robed Xerxes himself, looking "like a man come to watch an entertainment." As jeers and insults erupt from the Greeks, Xerxes even bows elegantly to the crowd.

This scene epitomizes Xerxes' view of kingship—he is literally above the fray, there just to watch and enjoy, without having to bloody his own hands. The contrast between himself and Leonidas couldn't be greater.

Xeo, atop the wall, watches in awe as the Medians advance with a contemptuous demeanor. However, the Greeks, with their highly polished shields, crested helmets, and ghastly, hollow-eyed helmets, present "a theater of terror," too. More unbearably tense time passes. Then, all of a sudden, a hare darts into the space between the two armies, and Hound's dog, Styx, takes off in pursuit. Every Greek's "eye seized upon the event at once as a sign from heaven."

The tense chase between the hare and the dog is a picture of the larger conflict in miniature. Primed to see the supernatural in these events, the Greek onlookers assume that the result will tell them something about their own fate.

Eventually, the rabbit finds itself in Styx's jaws, to the triumphant cheering of the Greeks. However, two Persian archers step forward and shoot arrows into the dog, and Styx writhes and dies, to Hound's anguish. At once, the Medes begin launching arrows toward the Greeks, and the Thespaians charge toward the Medians with their spears. The orderly ranks and files instantly transform into "a roiling mass of manslaughter."

The result of the chase is ambiguous; both hare and dog come to a sad end, and the Persians use this diversion to wade at once into battle. The tension has broken, and the bloodshed begins.

Before his men enter the fray, Dienekes addresses them. He repeatedly recalls the men's eyes to him, away from the fighting. He tells them that the Persian forces are already cracking and will soon cave. Soon, the Spartans wade into the melee, relieving the exhausted Thespaians. Dienekes' prediction is correct—the Persians' light shields can't stand up to the Spartans' heavy ones. The Medians are skirmishers; the Spartans' heavy phalanx formation takes a brutal toll on them. Soon, the Medians are flinging themselves suicidally at the Spartans. And as their ranks repeatedly replenish themselves, the tide begins to turn in their favor. Only the narrow passage onto the battlefield stops them from overrunning the Spartans. Xeo loses track of Dienekes' whereabouts and steps in to help where he can.

Dienekes constantly fights to keep his men from giving in to fear. The Spartans, though numerically inferior, have many advantages over the Persians, such as their weapons and relentless phalanx tactics—pushing as a massive unit into the more lightly armed, less unified enemy. However, the Persian forces are so massive that they continually replace their fallen men with new ones and are able to effectively resist the Spartan advance.

Out of sheer discipline, the Spartan ranks manage to re-form. Though they are at the brink of annihilation, they yield to "those homely acts of order which Dienekes had ever declared the supreme accomplishment of the warrior," not just individually but as a unit, each warrior knowing and fulfilling his role.

The Spartans have been so relentlessly drilled in various scenarios that even when their ranks are broken, they remember their roles and what ordinary steps to take in order to keep pushing forward. This is key to their ability to resist succumbing to fear.

Dienekes has always sought to de-mystify war by regarding it as "work." As brave as the Medes are, and as well-suited to warfare on the open plains of Asia, they are ill-prepared to face the endlessly drilled cohesion of the Spartans. As Xeo searches the field for Dienekes, he is nearly overcome by the horror surrounding him. Finally, he manages to rejoin his master's platoon. As the Spartans continue to heave toward the enemy, Xeo presses into the back of one of the men. They advance "not in a mobbed disordered charge shouting like savages, but dead silent [...] with a dread deliberateness in time to the pipers' keening wail." Meanwhile, the desperate Median arrows block the sight of the sky and make the air seem to vibrate. But the Persian forces are getting pressed back so effectively that many are toppling off the narrow mountain path and into the sea below. Even Xerxes is horrified as he watches.

The Spartans continue to do what they have trained over and over, hoping to overpower the Persians by sheer discipline and power. Though his job is to tend to Dienekes in the fighting, he makes himself useful wherever he can and finds himself in the midst of the fray, too. It seems indeed that the Persians are beginning to crack, as they can't maintain their steady pouring of men into the battlefield and begin to be forced into the sea.

Xeo eventually finds Dienekes and Alexandros, collapsed in exhaustion on the ground, as the platoon is relieved by allied units. Dienekes has lost his left eye. As Xeo tends to his injured master, he watches Polynikes shouting in triumph at the fleeing enemy, "Not today!"

The war has an immense cost; Dienekes is already gravely wounded. Polynikes, however, seems to be in his element, taunting the enemy. His brazen attitude in the face of danger demonstrates the courage that soldiers must embody in order to fight successfully.

CHAPTER 25

As the Spartan army takes stock on the evening of the first day of battle, it's found that both Alexandros's father, Olympieus, and his brother-in-law, Ariston, have been killed in battle. At first, in the immediate aftermath of the fighting, although they know it's just a temporary reprieve, survivors frolic with joy, while others weep and sing hymns of thanksgiving. Seven hours later, however, men are hollow-eyed, unable to absorb the scale of the carnage. Warriors' senses are overwhelmed.

Survival brings different reactions as the battle wears on. There's an initial euphoria, but as the devastation mounts, it becomes more than people can take in.

The enemy's final attack that day is brought by Xerxes' guard, known as the Immortals. These foes wear masses of gold ornament, tiaras, and kohl around their eyes. There are 10,000 of them, to the Greeks' fewer than three thousand. But Leonidas encourages his men by saying that these Immortals, for the first time, are of Persian blood, some of them kinsmen of the King. They are not mere "spear fodder," more valuable to him by far. Leonidas assures the Greeks that Xerxes will be frugal with these men's lives, and that if they can only kill 10,000, the Persians will crack.

The Immortals are Xerxes' finest personal guards, always kept at 10,000, with the fallen quickly replaced. They are known to be the fiercest of warriors. But Leonidas, ever encouraging of his men, heartens his men that the so-called Immortals are considered to be much dearer to Xerxes and that he won't spare them so readily.

CHAPTER 26

The Immortals were indeed forced to retreat. That night, the camp is a horrifying spectacle. In the meantime, the army has picked up a mascot of sorts—Elephantinos, a merchant with a disabled wagon who trailed the army all the way to Thermopylae. He becomes a sought-after storyteller, friend, and jester among veterans and youths alike. After the horrors of the first day of battle, he becomes a kind of chaplain as well, tending and consoling the wounded and distracting them with stories of his travels. As Leonidas circulates among his men that night, he dispatches young messengers to the cities with appeals for reinforcement. Many men send scribbled notes or amulets home to loved ones.

The Spartans succeed in holding off even the fearsome Immortals. But it's come at a terrible cost. Elephantinos, as an elder and outsider, has a unique ability to comfort and cheer the young, shocked warriors and begins making himself at home among them. Even though the first day of battle has concluded well, Leonidas knows that there's worse yet to come and sends for reinforcements.

Polynikes joins Dienekes' fireside, looking grim. Dienekes asks him if he's had enough of glory. Polynikes doesn't reply, but he holds Alexandros's hand while the latter is having his broken jaw set, instructing him to squeeze until he breaks Polynikes' fingers. Afterward, he looks at Alexandros sorrowfully and asks his forgiveness for breaking his nose years ago. He also admits to Alexandros that he had argued against his inclusion in the Three Hundred. He had believed that Alexandros would not fight. "I was wrong," he tells Alexandros, and moves on.

Polynikes has clearly been changed by that day's carnage. In contrast to his brashness in training and his lofty words about the purifying beauties of war, he appears chastened and even repentant. With characteristically spartan terseness, he humbles himself before Alexandros, whom he'd so brutally tormented all through the latter's boyhood. It's a shocking example of how war changes people.

Dienekes watches Alexandros with a bitter expression as his injured protégé volunteers to take the place of Suicide, who's injured worse, in retrieving corpses. He watches some ants grappling in the dirt and wonders if the gods look no more sorrowfully upon mortals' deaths than humans do upon the deaths of ants. Alexandros gently encourages Dienekes to get some sleep. Dienekes looks at Alexandros with his remaining good eye and recalls being assigned as Alexandros's mentor by Olympieus. Then Xeo assists his limping master toward Leonidas's command post.

Dienekes feels somewhat embittered as he watches his beloved Alexandros suffering the results of battle and still willingly continuing to serve. He can't help reminiscing about Alexandros's boyhood and even wondering if all the toil and struggle they're going through is worthless in the sight of the gods, as the ants' struggle seems so insignificant to humans.

CHAPTER 27

When Xeo and Dienekes reach the command post, Xeo sees that the clean nearby spring is now gushing sulphurous water. Men are trembling at this supposed "prodigy" and singing hymns to the goddesses Demeter and Persephone. Dienekes comments that they need Diomache to intercede with the goddess. Xeo has never heard him speak of Diomache before.

This natural phenomenon is taken as another ominous sign for the Spartans. Dienekes would have heard about Diomache through Alexandros and Arete, though Xeo has seldom spoken of her.

Dienekes says it's too late for him and Xeo to keep secrets from one another. He asks why Xeo didn't run away in Athens, when Xeo accompanied him there on an embassy—he'd wanted him to. Xeo says that he'd tried, but "she wouldn't let me." He offers to tell the story. On the third evening in Athens, Dienekes had sent Xeo on an urgent errand to the seaport town of Phaleron, giving no details, just an address and a servant boy as guide. They are to deliver a letter to Diomache.

Dienekes reveals that he'd wanted to spare Xeo from the war. Xeo finally tells the full story of what happened with his cousin Diomache, who hasn't appeared in the story since they reached the Athens crossroads as children.

Xeo and the boy locate the address, an apartment building in a seedy section of town. Diomache's husband is reported to be at sea, and Diomache is not there. Neighbors direct them to a temple along the shore. As they go, the servant boy tells Xeo that many of these temples are asylums for cast-out wives. At last they locate the sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone of the Veil. The priestess who opens the gate finally admits them to a courtyard. The priestess takes the boy away to feed him, and finally Diomache enters, with two small daughters.

When Xeo last saw Diomache, she'd been promised shelter and employment by a wealthy gentlewoman. The surroundings suggest that her dreams haven't turned out the way she expected. Demeter and Persephone are a pair of Greek goddesses, mother and daughter. Persephone was captured and taken to the underworld, and Demeter, in her grief, caused plants to wither and die. In response Zeus allows Persephone to return to earth for a part of which year, causing rejoicing, but each time she returns to Hades, Demeter mourns again and causes everything to fade and die.

Xeo had often imagined an emotional reunion between himself and his beautiful young cousin. Now, he is shocked by the sight of Diomache's short hair and her overall appearance, which looks more like "a hard-used forty" than that of a 24-year-old. Xeo is further disheartened by the contrast between Diomache's familiar, teasing tone and her haggard appearance. He tells Diomache he regrets not being there to protect her.

The long-awaited reunion isn't anything like Xeo had imagined. Though Diomache acts much the same, Xeo mourns at the toll the years have taken on her.

Diomache sits beside Xeo. She reminds him of that morning long ago, when he'd set out for the market with his ptarmigan eggs. "The gods set our lives upon their courses that day," she tells him, "from which neither of us has had the option to stray." She opens the letter Xeo brought her, which is written in Arete's hand, but she tucks it out of sight. Xeo studies his cousin, now noting the compassion in her eyes and her bearing, which is "spartan beyond spartan."

Diomache believes that the gods have determined what has happened to them both. Ironically, though Xeo is the one who went to Sparta, Diomache looks the most "spartan."

Xeo begs Diomache to tell him how she truly is. She laughs at her youthful foolishness and remarks that it isn't a woman's world. Xeo bursts out that he wants to run away with her and marry her. She tenderly reminds him that they're both married. Xeo is upset by his cousin's passivity, retorting that the gods want us to act and use our will, "not to buckle beneath necessity's yoke like dumb beasts." Smiling, she tells him that "this is Lord Apollo talking."

Xeo still wants to fix Diomache's plight, but Diomache has a more realistic outlook on their situation. She sees the influence of Xeo's piety toward Apollo, which is more action-driven, while hers is more accepting of grief and struggle.

Diomache then tells Xeo a story that she's only told her temple sisters and Bruxieus. After she was raped by the Argive soldiers, she had had an abortion, followed by a hemorrhage that nearly killed her. Bruxieus saved her life, and she made him promise never to tell. She'd wanted to die, but then she had a dream in which a veiled, compassionate goddess appeared to her. The goddess allowed Diomache to see her face, which was "beauty beyond beauty," yet ever-present in the world. Diomache came to understand that it's the job of human beings to embody that beauty in the world.

It turns out that Xeo isn't the only one who'd had an encounter with a divine figure that determined the course of his life. The veiled goddess can be implicitly interpreted as Persephone. Though different, the two visions brought comfort to both cousins when they were on the brink of death and made them believe that each had a purpose to live out.

Xeo tells Diomache about his own boyhood vision. Diomache tells him that she forgot her own vision, living a hellish life in Athens, until the goddess led her to this temple. Now she serves the Veiled Persephone, who has protected her as Apollo has protected Xeo. She assures Xeo that everything he has done has, in fact, protected her. She tells him that Arete's letter is a promise that Xeo's death will be honored. As they take their leave of one another, Diomache tells him that they mustn't pity each other; "we are where we must be, and we will do what we must."

Diomache describes Persephone as the goddess who "passes from life to death and back again," which describes Diomache's life, having alternated between terrible suffering and peace. The goddess has finally led her to the place she's meant to be, and she assures Xeo that he, too, is on the right path.

CHAPTER 28

Back in the Spartan camp, Suicide wakes Xeo before dawn. Rooster has been captured and interrogated as a deserter; he wants to speak to Xeo before he's executed. He gives Xeo an ancient Messenian coin to be given to his wife. Then he tells Xeo and Alexandros that the Persians are going to find a way through the Spartan rear and will envelop the Greeks in no more than a day; there are no reinforcements coming, and Leonidas will never pull them out. He also tells them exactly where Xerxes' tent is located, and it's lightly guarded, at a spot thought impassible. Rooster begs Xeo and Alexandros to relay this news to someone in authority.

Xeo returns from his memory of seeing Diomache to recounting the situation after the first day of battle. Rooster, previously turned loose on the Greek frontier, has unexpectedly returned to relay vital information to the Spartans, despite his longstanding hatred of them. It seems that Rooster, knowing that he will soon die, has had a change of heart and no longer views the Spartan as worthy of his ire.

Meanwhile, forty Theban allies have deserted overnight. Most were killed or escaped, but three terrified captives are brought before the Spartans. While allies yell for the deserters' blood, Dienekes decides to intervene. He walks forward and cuts the prisoners loose. To the outraged onlookers, he says that he despises the men's cowardice, but hates even more "that passion, comrades, which deranges you now." He points out that these men fought valiantly the day before, and that everyone on the battlefield felt tempted to desert as well.

Dienekes has always hated "katalepsis," or battle, that seizes soldiers when they give way to hatred or fear. This scene shows both—the deserters allowed their fear to get the best of them, and the soldiers have ceased to view the deserters as their brothers and only want their blood.

Dienekes says that these captives must live out their days cursed by the knowledge of their cowardice, a kind of "living death" from shame. The men beg, but Dienekes relentlessly drives them out of the camp. The men slouch pitifully through the ranks of their former comrades. The other men give up their self-righteous rage and turn their energies to resolution for the coming battle. Dienekes returns to Xeo and Rooster and says that he'll slit his "bastard nephew's" throat himself.

From the Spartan point of view, living out their days in shame really is a worse fate for the deserters than immediately execution. The rest of the army snaps out of their anger and focuses on the coming renewal of battle.

CHAPTER 29

A Persian prince had crossed over to the Greeks the previous evening, reporting that the strengthened Immortals are on their way to the Spartan rear. But the Spartans do not believe this. They believe it's a trick. This "irrational and self-deluding response," Xeo explains, must be understood not just in light of exhaustion, despair, or euphoria, but in the light of "marvels and prodigies." After having survived 48 gruesome hours, the men are coming undone: "Existence had become a tunnel whose walls were death and within which prevailed no hope of rescue or deliverance."

The Spartans have been under the pressures of battle for so long that they are no longer thinking clearly, beginning to see miraculous signs in everything—a clear sign of Dienekes' dreaded katalepsis. This blindness will be disastrous for the battle as a whole.

On the evening of that day's battle, the Persians cause the Spartans to fall back and even manage to pour beyond the Phokian Wall. Yet the Persians are stopped by inexplicable terror from pressing home their victory. Just then, "a bellow of unearthly power"—a lightning strike—hits Kallidromos, the mountain overlooking the sea. At this, King Leonidas calls out in praise of "Zeus Savior" and freedom. With fresh courage, the Spartans rush at the foe, causing them to tumble back in panic at this "prodigy of heaven." There is a mayhem of retreating and advancing Persians, resulting in a grisly wall of bodies which eventually gives way in a horrifying avalanche.

The Spartans aren't the only ones who are being overwhelmed by fear. The Persians almost overcome them, but a timely lightning strike causes the Spartans to recollect themselves and push back the advance. Even Leonidas interprets the strike as divine intervention.

Later that night, these events are "cited as evidence of the intercession of the gods." Even as the benevolent Persian nobleman urges them to withdraw while there's still time, the Spartans and allies are so exultant over the "prodigies" that they won't stand down. What's more, a storm has wrecked 200 Persian warships—surely the work of God as well. A Theban commander "[inflames] the derangement" by pointing out that the Persians' conscripted army must be filled with disaffection by this time.

All these factors persuade the Spartans that they're on a path to victory and shouldn't withdraw, despite the Persian defector's warnings. The "madness" keeps building on itself and pushing the Spartans into a situation from which they can't recover.

The Greeks accordingly respond harshly to the Persian informer, telling him it's Xerxes who's in peril. Xeo knows what he's seeing is *katalepsis*, "grief- and horror-spawned rage." The Persian noble stays and talks with Leonidas, insisting that if the gods have a hand in all this, it's "their perverse and unknowable will acting to detach [the Spartans] from their reason." Surely Leonidas must be able to perceive this.

It's the nature of katalepsis *that it blinds people, even those as wise as Leonidas, from interpreting circumstances as they should. The circumstances could just as easily be interpreted as the gods' attempt to trick the Spartans and lead them astray, but the Spartans are determined to see otherwise.*

The Persian noble continues to appeal to Leonidas. He warns him that Thermopylae won't be the decisive battle. Greece needs Leonidas, he says. While Leonidas claims a Spartan king never retreats, his "valor must be tempered with wisdom or it is merely recklessness." He and his men have already won great fame by holding out for six days. Surely it's not worth holding out to fulfill a prophecy, but to press on toward final victory. He sums up, "You have proved your valor, my lord. Now, I beseech you, demonstrate your wisdom."

The Persian points out that the Persians are likely to win here and to overrun all of Greece. What will Greece do without Spartan leadership? He argues that the Spartans have done enough and now a wise retreat is necessary. At the time, it isn't clear whether Leonidas heeds this or not.

CHAPTER 30

Leonidas grudgingly spares a party of 11 soldiers to raid Xerxes' tent. It includes Dienekes, Rooster, Suicide, Alexandros, and Xeo. Rooster, after all, has only been detained, not executed. They're divided into two squads, receiving a final charge from Leonidas.

Leonidas does heed Rooster's advice and sends some of his best men to try to kill Xerxes and demoralize the Persians. Ironically, Rooster will now take an integral part in trying to save the Spartans he's always hated.

Leonidas has special words for Rooster, whose family will be emancipated if he dies, including his infant son. Leonidas tells Rooster that if he wishes, he can change his son's name to a Messenian one instead of "Idotychides." Rooster's eyes fill with tears. He tells Leonidas that he's shamed by this kindness, and that his son will be proud to bear the Spartan name instead.

This scene exemplifies Leonidas's wisdom in his care for individual men. He respects Rooster's background and grants him the freedom he's longed for. This mercy moves Rooster to accept a Spartan identity for his son.

The squad starts out in a driving rain, most of them laboring under scarcely healed wounds. After a few hours, they take shelter in a warm thicket recently vacated by deer. Dienekes says they'll come back next fall for a good hunt in this spot, inviting even Rooster. Soon they meet up with the second squad and discover the track that the Immortals must be using to attack the Spartans from the rear. They send their fastest runner back to warn Leonidas. Rooster guides them down a numbingly cold stream, and before long they're within the Persian camp, mere paces from Xerxes' tent.

Rooster continues to find greater acceptance among the group. They all daydream about a life after the war, likely knowing it's not to be.

CHAPTER 31

Xeo reflects at this moment at the great advantage the Spartans possess over other men, which is warriors' surpassing love for their brothers-in-arms. He wonders if the face of Suicide, his mentor, is the last face he'll ever see. He thinks also of Elephantinos, who refuses to leave the Spartan camp when he has the chance. He said that he'd searched all his life for a noble city to belong to and has found it at last. At the end of his life, he will be "her magistrate and her physician, her orphans' father and her fool."

Suicide, previously Dienekes' squire, had taught Xeo to occupy that role. Both Suicide and Elephantinos are outsiders who exemplify the ability to find belonging in an unexpected "city" in Sparta, much as Xeo himself has done. None of them are compelled to be loyal to Sparta, but all of them have chosen to die with it.

Xeo also recalls a conversation that had taken place a few nights ago at the fireside. Suicide had abruptly begun speaking of his Scythian upbringing. His mother was a priestess of the Scythian religion. She had taught Suicide that nothing on earth is real—it's merely the embodiment of a "more profound reality" that lies behind. Only imperceptible things like the soul, love, and courage are real, because they're the same on both sides of death.

Xeo continues to think about Suicide's outsider status. Suicide comes from a different culture, but his religious upbringing echoes some of the same heavenly realities that Diomache has pursued in Persephone's temple.

When Suicide first arrived in Sparta, he explains, he thought at first that the phalanx formation was a joke; he came from a country where everyone fought on horseback. But in time he came to understand "the unseen glue" which holds the phalanx together, produced by all the endless drill and discipline. He adds that at first, he'd hated his nickname, "Suicide." But he came to realize that the extinction of self for the sake of one's brother warriors allows "himself and his actions [to] touch the sublime." He tells Alexandros that he thinks this is the reason Alexandros was chosen for the Three Hundred; he will sing in that "sublime register" of the heart and not merely the voice.

As an outsider, Suicide at first found Spartan methods foolish, but in time he came to see them as exemplifying his own spiritual beliefs. The Spartan emphasis on brotherhood in battle accords with the Scythian emphasis on giving up the physical for the sake of the sublime.

Later, Dienekes speaks to Xeo, reminding him of the earlier conversation with Alexandros and Ariston about fear and its opposite. He says that Elephantinos and Suicide have given him the answer. Looking out over the camp, he tells Xeo, "The opposite of fear [...] is love."

After hearing the Scythian's story and watching Elephantinos acting as a father to the warriors, Dienekes at last finds the answer to the question he's long been seeking about fear and its opposite.

CHAPTER 32

Suicide and Polynikes quickly kill two Egyptian marines who are guarding Xerxes' tent. The rest of the party pours into the interior of the tent, fighting through a crowd of prostitutes and some eunuchs and setting things aflame. Finally, they reach Xerxes' vast chamber; he and his advisors are in council. As the Spartans charge, exotic birds somehow spill out of cages and fly amidst the confusion. The chaos created by the birds throws off the attackers just enough and gives his guards just enough recovery time to protect Xerxes.

The story jumps from Dienekes' discovery about love to some of the climactic action of the entire battle, as the raiding squad successfully infiltrates Xerxes' tent and goes after the king himself. Having been profoundly impacted by the lesson that love is the opposite of fear, it is implied that Dienekes is motivated by a deep affinity to people.

The Persians fight ferociously. Xeo is nearly felled by a battle-axe hurled in his direction, but it gets stuck in the ridgepole of the tent. Then a mass of Egyptian marines pours into the tent. Alexandros is one of the few who's still fighting at the fore, and Xeo watches as a scimitar takes off his friend's hand as he's preparing to hurl his spear. Dienekes is there instantly, hauling Alexandros to his feet and ordering them out of the tent. Xeo and Suicide cover their fellows' desperate escape, but soon run out of weapons.

After a lifetime of struggling to establish himself, Alexandros has proven himself beyond question to be one of the bravest. The squad doesn't succeed in killing Xerxes; their mission appears to be headed for disaster.

CHAPTER 33

The injured Spartans manage to make their escape from the Persian camp among men who haven't yet been alerted to the emergency in Xerxes' tent. In any case, the Persian draftees don't seem to care a bit about whatever may be happening in their king's tent. Taking the Spartans for allies, they even offer bandages and other supplies for Alexandros. Alexandros is clearly in shock. He asks Dienekes in a childlike voice, "Am I dying?" "You'll die when I say you can," his mentor replies.

In the rain and chaos, most of the Persians don't realize that an assassination attempt was just made on their king, and they even help the retreating raiders. Dienekes tenderly cares for his dying protégé.

Even though the wound on his severed hand has been clamped, Alexandros is still spurting blood. He's also been wounded in the lungs, but nobody realizes this at the time. Eventually, the group, most of them badly wounded, reach the deer shelter once again, where the messenger they'd sent back to Leonidas reports that the Immortals haven't yet arrived, but that the allies are being dismissed. Dienekes yells at everyone to be quiet and listens carefully for Alexandros's breathing. Then he gives a cry of grief such as Xeo has never heard before and embraces the young man's limp body, sobbing. Neither Xeo nor anyone else has ever seen Dienekes lose his self-composure in such a way. At last he sets down Alexandros's body and tells him, "You forgot about our hunt, Alexandros…We would have had such a grand hunt here next fall." Morning is beginning to break.

Alexandros has died fearlessly in one of the bravest actions of the battle, dispelling any doubts about his courage once for all. Dienekes, normally so composed, is stricken by Alexandros's death.

CHAPTER 34

The preceding account was given to Xerxes prior to the burning of Athens. That was six weeks after the victory at Thermopylae. At this time, Xeo's health suffers a reverse. Seeing the fate of Athens has distressed him badly. He inquires after Diomache and her temple, but no one can tell him anything. Meanwhile, Xerxes is anticipating a climactic sea battle with the Greeks the following day. Gobartes, the historian, is summoned to prepare to record events at Xerxes' side. However, he stays with Xeo until the last moment. Xeo relaxes when he hears that the priestesses of Persephone had evacuated across the bay. He knows he's fading, and he wishes to dictate as much as he possibly can before he dies.

Xeo finishes giving his account about six weeks after the battle at Thermopylae has taken place. The Persians have since destroyed Athens, and Xeo takes a turn for the worse, seeing the heart of Greek culture under attack. He also fears for his cousin. Xeo has endeared himself to Xerxes' staff through the whole ordeal and he also wants to finish the task he believes Apollo has set for him.

Xeo returns to the action of the morning at the last morning at Thermopylae. The dead and injured raiders have to be let down the cliff on ropes. Barely a hundred Spartan Peers are still alive, and they are arming themselves and "dressing their hair, preparing to die." When they bury Alexandros, Polynikes comments that Alexandros was "the best of us all."

Even though they now they're dying, the Spartans still uphold their code, taking care to look as well-groomed as possible before the end. Polynikes has complete reversed his position on Alexandros after seeing him fight, also suggesting how much he's grown as a character.


The Ten Thousand have now been spotted. They have encircled the Spartans and now stand six miles to their rear. Leonidas has dismissed the allies to safety. Rooster, too, is pulling out, eagerly accepting the liberty that Leonidas has granted him. He promises to report on Alexandros's bravery. He also reports that Leonidas has released all squires from service as well. Dienekes has never compelled Xeo's service. But Xeo refuses to leave. Rooster points out that Rooster owes Sparta nothing, and he has a wife and children. But Xeo tells him that the decision had been made long before. Dienekes tells Rooster, "He never had good sense."

Leonidas doesn't hold the allies and squires to the same expectations as the Spartan warriors—they're free to go rather than making a last stand that will certainly result in their deaths. While some take advantage of this, some, like Xeo, refuse to leave. Sparta is truly his city now, even though he has a family elsewhere.



The Thespaians, many freed Spartans squires and helots, and some other allies have also refused to pull out. Even Suicide stays, determined to keep fighting even though he's gravely wounded. The army reconfigures and begins to assemble. A Persian herald arrives, including Ptammitechus. He calls that Xerxes doesn't want their lives, only their arms. Leonidas calls back, "Tell him to come and get them." That ends the exchange.

Xerxes gives the Spartans a last chance to change their minds, but in a characteristically "Spartan" quip, Leonidas refuses. Everyone who's still there fully expects to die.

Leonidas addresses his men. He tells them that if they had withdrawn today, it would have been seen as a defeat. It would have sent Greece the message that resisting the Persians is futile. While it might have saved Spartan lives, it would have caused one Greek city after another to fall. But, he says, by dying here with honor, "in the face of these insuperable odds, we transform vanquishment into victory." Their role is to stand and die; it's up to the rest of Greece to create the final victory.

Leonidas has likely known all along that the battle would come to this. The deaths of the Spartans won't result in actual victory, but it will be a symbolic one. It's meant to give the rest of Greece the courage to follow the Spartan example of resistance.

Leonidas then invites anyone else to speak who wishes. Several men step forward to give short speeches ranging from moving to humorous. When Polynikes gets up to speak, he cries. He holds up the shield that has been passed down through his family. He has sworn, he said, to die before another man takes this shield from his hand. But now he walks to an obscure Thespaian warrior and hands over his shield. Soon, more and more men are exchanging shields and helmets. Different arms and cloaks "[intermingle] until all distinction between the nations had been effaced."

The allies, squires, and helots don't have to die here—they are free to go, but many have chosen to die alongside the Spartans. This so moves Polynikes that he hands over his beloved shield. Many others follow his example, symbolically demonstrating that they're not just a Spartan army, but a Greek army. This also explains Xeo's mixed-up variety of gear when he's later discovered by the Persians.

The men call upon Dienekes to speak, expecting something witty. But instead he tells the men, "Forget every concept, however noble, that you imagine you fight for here today. Act for this alone: for the man who stands at your shoulder."

After his discovery about fearlessness and love, Dienekes no longer tries to motivate the men with anything besides loyalty to one another.

Leonidas speaks final words to the Spartans alone. He tells them that, many years from now, people will come to examine the Spartan landscape for some clue to its inhabitants. They won't find great structures or art; what they do here today is all that will remain of the Spartans. Then they hear Persian trumpets in the distance. Leonidas encourages his men to eat a good breakfast, "for we'll all be sharing dinner in hell."

The Spartans are different from other Greek city-states; they don't boast the visible achievements one would find in, for instance, Athens. But by dying here today, the Spartans will enable Greece as a whole to carry on and flourish.

CHAPTER 35

Xeo knows that Xerxes has no need for Xeo to recount the details of the final battle. However, he will recount some of the things which His Majesty might not have noticed. Because the Persians didn't actually begin their assault until midday, Leonidas began by taking a relaxed and comfortable nap. He juxtaposes this with the memory of a corps of Spartans hurling themselves into the fray, later, to retrieve the fallen body of their commander. These images prompt Xeo to wonder, "of what does the nature of kingship consist?"

Leonidas is the perfect image of Spartan self-composure before the battle. He has such love for his men and such confidence in their training that he is perfectly at rest, even knowing they're all about to die. His men's corresponding love for him is shown by their determination to rescue his body.

Xeo tells Xerxes that a king doesn't stay in his tent while his men bleed on the battlefield. He doesn't eat while his men go hungry or command their loyalty through fear. He should command it through love and his willingness to sweat alongside them and even bear the harshest burdens. A king should serve his men, not they him.

Xeo's words to King Xerxes' are quite bold, a clear critique of what, in his eyes, is Xerxes' failure to be a proper king. But Xeo doesn't have anything to lose at this point as he describes the traits that made Leonidas so great.

Xeo recalls that in the moments before the final battle, Leonidas chatted with each of his generals. As he talked with Dienekes about their shared respect for the distant Persians, he expressed his sorrow for them: "What wouldn't they give, the noblest among them, to stand here with us now?" Xeo tells Xerxes that this is a king—not one who enslaves men, "but by his conduct and example makes them free." If Xerxes wonders why Xeo was willing to lay down his life for a country not his own, the answer is that they *were* his kin and country, and he and his fellow warriors were never freer than when they obeyed Sparta's harsh laws.

Even on the brink of killing and being killed by Persians, Leonidas has compassion for them, observing that they would much prefer to enjoy the liberty for which the Spartans are fighting. This attitude exemplifies what makes Leonidas great. Xeo also refers to the laws of Sparta as those which "which take life and give it back again"—perhaps a reference to the Diomache's goddess, Persephone.

Like Leonidas, Xeo dozes before the final battle, dreaming of his loved ones, especially Diomache, whom he can never overtake no matter how avidly he pursues her up a mountain slope leading heavenward. When he awakes, the Persians are a bowshot away. Xeo takes his place in the file, for the first time not carrying his bow but a fallen man's spear, Alexandros's shield, and the helmet and cap of other fallen Spartans. He fights alongside Suicide and Dienekes.

Xeo's dream of Diomache suggests that she is not only out of his reach romantically, but that she's even more profoundly beyond him spiritually. When Xeo wakes up, he finds himself taking the place of a Spartan warrior—something even beyond what he'd dreamed of as a boy.

Xeo recalls the timeless, inexorable tide of the fight, watching Leonidas's corpse being heroically dragged from the fray. He killed an Egyptian warrior with his spear just as that man drove his own weapon into Xeo's guts, Suicide hauling his injured body out of the fighting. As they go, Suicide's foot is struck off, and he tells Xeo to carry him on his back, using Suicide's body to shield himself. The battered, spent Spartans are being pushed back by the enemy.

Xeo recounts his own nearly mortal injury and Suicide's selfless attempt to shield him from further harm, in keeping with his philosophy. The Spartans' stand was clearly hopeless, but they are willing to resist to the very last.

About sixty defenders retreat to a knoll where there's a weapons cache. Xeo finds a strap and cinches in his spilling guts. He marvels at the beauty of the day. Cavalry and the Persian Immortals are beginning to pour over the wall. Dienekes and another general goes down, not like a Homeric hero, but "like commanders completing their last and dirtiest job." The remaining Spartans continue going after the enemy even when they have no more weapons; Polynikes grabs a Persian's throat before he is shot down. A burning wagon rolls over Xeo's legs. A seeming "hailstorm" of Persian arrows comes down ceaselessly on the few living Spartans.

Each of the Spartan heroes literally goes down fighting, in a way that matches his personality. Dienekes just does his job; Polynikes is fierce to the last. Xeo is completely disabled by his injuries, but he continues observing and marking everything that happens for posterity.

CHAPTER 36

The day Xeo finished relating his tale, as transcribed by Gobartes, "in the bitter irony of God Ahura Mazda," was the day that the Persian naval forces were defeated by the Greek fleet, which, "by its consequences for the supply and support of the army, doomed the entire campaign to disaster." When the oracle of Apollo told the Athenians, "The wooden wall alone shall not fail you," it had not referred to the palisade of the Acropolis, as they'd thought, but to the wall of ships' hulls that stood fast against the Persian enemy.

As Xeo finishes his tale, the Persians suffer a devastating defeat. It turns out that the oracle, which the Athenians had misunderstood, was in their favor after all. This goes to show, once again, how tricky such supernatural phenomena can be; the gods indeed seem to be one step ahead of human understanding.

After the defeat, Xerxes is on a rampage, putting to the sword many officers of his own court. Mardonius instructs Gobartes to kill Xeo and destroy the transcripts of his story. When Gobartes finds Orontes to carry out this order, Orontes tells him that if he wants to live, he must disregard that order. Xerxes will eventually prevail and will ask to see Xeo and hear his story again. Later that evening, they speak to the feeble Xeo, hoping to sneak him out of His Majesty's quarters. Xeo laughs at the thought that any of his friends remain alive to receive him.

Xerxes flies into a self-destructive rage in the face of defeat. His field marshal wants to kill Xeo, too, but Xeo's newfound friends in Xerxes' court don't want that to happen and suspect Xerxes would later regret it, too. But Xeo also suspects he doesn't have much left to live for.

Clearly wanting to delay the moment of execution, Orontes asks Xeo to tell the last bit of the story that remains untold—what Leonidas had to say about women's courage. Xeo does so, as the story was originally told to Dienekes by Paraleia. This occurred a few evenings before the march to Thermopylae. Several wives and mothers of the Three Hundred had been asked to come to Dienekes' and Arete's house. When they had gathered, Paraleia began telling the group of a conversation she'd had earlier that day with Queen Gorgo, Leonidas's wife, in secret.

There is still a last part of the tale to tell—the story of women's courage which Dienekes had just hinted at earlier. Its origin is a bit convoluted. The story was originally told to Dienekes by Alexandros's mother, Paraleia, who'd been summoned to meet with the king and queen at Dienekes' house.

Gorgo tells Paraleia that Leonidas wants to speak to her about the double grief she bears, as wife and mother of warriors being sent to Thermopylae. But first Gorgo speaks to Paraleia from her own heart. She, herself, is daughter of one king and now wife to another. She says that few women understand the burdens of her station. She possesses her loved ones only in stewardship to Greece. The trial of all women, ordained by God, is "to abide with pain, to endure grief, to bear up beneath sorrow's yoke and thus to endow others with courage."

Queen Gorgo seeks out Paraleia, who, as wife to Olympieus and mother to Alexandros, bears perhaps the keenest grief of any Spartan woman before Thermopylae. Gorgo can sympathize with this. Spartan women, she tells Paraleia, can't claim their loved ones for themselves. That's because their job is fundamentally to give courage to others, not to indulge their own grief.

Paraleia is about to cry out in rage at this injustice when Leonidas himself comes in. He sits down with the two and asks Paraleia if she hates him; he would do so if the roles were reversed. The city is speculating, he explains, why Leonidas chose the Three Hundred—was it for their prowess, or due to bribery or some "subtle alchemy?" He will never tell them, but now he will tell Paraleia, "I chose them not for their own value, lady, but for that of their women."

Leonidas honors Paraleia with a personal conversation, showing her his characteristic concern for equality as well as his deep empathy. He confides in her that he actually didn't choose the Three Hundred warriors for themselves, as everyone has assumed. Again, women are shown to have tremendous influence in Sparta, even if it isn't formally apparent.

Comforting Paraleia, Leonidas explains that if Greece saves herself at this hour, it won't be at Thermopylae, but in later land and sea battles. Then Greece will preserve herself. This will happen because, after the Three Hundred have died, the Spartans will look to her and to the other wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of the fallen. If they see heartbreak, they will break, too. But if they see endurance and honor, all of Greece will stand up behind them.

Leonidas reveals that even before marching out to Thermopylae, he already knew that destruction awaited them there. He prepares Paraleia for the heavy responsibility that awaits her and the other Spartan woman—it will actually fall upon them to save Greece through their character, much as they've already galvanized the Spartans for war already.

Leonidas tells Paraleia that she is now a mother of all of Greece, a task to which he appointed her because he believed she could bear it. At this, Paraleia loses her self-command and weeps bitterly. Leonidas comforts her like a loving father, and at last her grief spends itself. "Prompted by some unseen goddess," she tells Leonidas, "Those were the last tears of mine, my lord, that the sun will ever see."

Paraleia demonstrates the andreia *for which she's been celebrated earlier in the story—she has great self-composure and valor for the sake of those around her.*

CHAPTER 37

These were Xeo's last words. Gobartes records that Xeo's "god has used him up and restored him at last" to his comrades. Outside Xerxes' tent, Athens is descending into chaos. Orontes apprehends some street rabble and shows them Xeo's scarlet garment, asking if they know what it is. One of them replies that it's a Spartan wrap. They also know where the sanctuary of Persephone of the Veil is located. Orontes gives the street urchins three months' pay with instructions to bear Xeo's body there and wait with it until the priestesses return from their evacuation. He asks them if they love their country, and their defiant expressions make clear their response. Orontes tells them that his man has preserved it and thus deserves to be borne with honor.

The gods allow Xeo to die as soon as he's finished telling the story of Paraleia's valor, suggesting divine approval of her as well. Orontes quickly finds a way to protect and restore Xeo's remains to Diomache, relying on the defiant patriotism of the Athenians. These young Athenians are reminiscent of Xeo in his own youth.

CHAPTER 38

Soon Xerxes and his army depart for Asia with the intention of resuming their campaign in the spring. Then, they suffered a "calamitous defeat" against 100,000 free Greeks. Gobartes believes that no earthly force could have stood up against the valor and discipline of the Spartan-led forces that day. In the aftermath, the historian's station was overtaken by armed helots. Just before Gobartes is slaughtered, he finds himself crying out the names of Xeones and the other Spartans. Immediately he's taken to a Spartiate officer. It's one of the Spartans, in fact, whose names he'd just cried out: Rooster, or Dekton, son of Idotychides.

It's the beginning of the end for Xerxes—the Persians fail to rally themselves in order to prevail the following spring. Gobartes almost dies, but Xeo's story has made such an impression on him that he instinctively calls out his name and those of his beloved comrades—one of whom just happens to be there. The defiant helot Rooster, in response to the respect and mercy King Leonidas showed him, has become a Spartan himself.

Rooster listens as Gobartes pours out his story, explaining that Xeo's body was at last carried to the sanctuary of Persephone of the Veil. This convinces Rooster that Gobartes speaks truly, and he commands that the historian be released. Gobartes is held captive by the Greeks for the next month, then employed as an interpreter of the Allied Congress. It turns out that Xeo's story saved Gobartes' life.

Knowing Xeo's story and no doubt spurred by his own experience as a captive, Rooster is quickly persuaded to spare Gobartes. This means that Xeo's story will survive, too.


Gobartes' two years of employment in Athens allow him to witness its dazzling resurrection from the war. In fact, it undergoes "a second conflagration […] of boldness and self-assurance." The Greeks' defeat of the Persians seems to have propelled their destiny. Trade, the arts, and democracy flourish.

The aftermath of the Second Persian War is transformative for Greece. In particular, the Spartan emphasis on democracy spreads across the land, in concert with other cultural advances.

Some time later, Gobartes is repatriated in Persia and resumes his duties to Xerxes. While assisting in the interrogation of a Greek captain, whose ship had borne a party of Spartan officers and envoys to Thermopylae, where a monument to the Three Hundred was being unveiled. An urn of Spartan ashes was also interred on the site. The captain reports that a single woman lingered long at the site, until he was compelled to urge her back to the ship. Gobartes asks for a description of the woman, but the captain can tell him nothing. The woman, he explains, was veiled.

Later Gobartes hears more of the Spartans and the famed Three Hundred. The veiled woman is clearly meant to be Diomache, who's survived, is still a priestess of Persephone of the Veil, and lovingly honors her fallen cousin's memory.

Gobartes asks about the epitaph on the monument. It's easy for the captain to remember, because the words, Spartan style, were terse, wasting no words. He recites them from memory: "Tell the Spartans, stranger passing by, / that here obedient to their laws we lie."

The novel fittingly ends with the famous epitaph which still stands on a monument that can be seen near Thermopylae, honoring those who willingly fought to the death for the survival of Greece.


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