

Prologue

There was no calming history's swelling tide. The blood-dimmed tide burst beyond the depths, its silent roar rolling off the foam-whitened sea. As the storm chastised the skies, a murderous turn of events took place. The storm-churned seas twisted, and the depths burned with war. Xerxes wished to build large straits to reach Europe and invade Greece, but the waves of the Hellespont foiled his attempt to bridge this divide. The king called for his servants to lash the Hellespont with whips before binding the treacherous river in fetters. Then he built a bridge of boats over the straits. The waves somehow hastened the construction of the boat straits rather than obstructed it. Like the tide, fate seemed to be turning. But it was not fate that was twisting, but the handle of a blade.

The king was about to be killed, and the only witness was a silent assassin. Lightning flashed, casting a whiteness that was akin to the foam-filled sea. King Xerxes sat in his royal bedchambers when he felt an icy sensation on his back. Artabanus, the king's royal bodyguard, twisted the blade deeper into the king's flesh. Xerxes screamed silently and felt his knees

sinking to the floor. Then he felt the warmth of his own blood as it came rushing out of his torn skin. Xerxes fell to the floor and grasped at the bottom of his royal bed. In mere moments, a king had been murdered, and it seemed a life of vainglorious delight had at last drawn to a close. But that would not be the end.

The might of the Persian empire had cast its ominous shade on the Hellespont. The king's royal bodyguards, the Immortals, would build large boat straits, which would hasten the mighty army's passage across perilous waves. Xerxes would attempt to kill democracy in the cradle, but he would fail miserably in this endeavor. Freedom could not be killed any more than the tide of the Hellespont could be tamed.

When the cities of Ionia fell under the yoke of the Persian empire, they knew at once they would rebel against the mighty Persian throne. King Darius had forced the will of Persia upon the helpless masses, and now cities such as Lydia would grit their teeth and defy Persian rule. But all of that would come to a premature and bloody end. The Ionian Revolt had pitted the conquered cities against the Persian crown, and Darius had bitterly attested to its unseemly treachery. Darius was so unsettled by it in fact, that on his deathbed he would tell young Xerxes to invade and conquer Greece.

Xerxes would share this tale on his deathbed, and the scribe would help prolong his final words into posterity. The world would know of his abiding admiration for Leonidas. Xerxes had been stabbed by one of his bodyguards, and darkness began to spread beyond the torchlight and weigh heavily on his eyelids. Artabanus had plunged his blade into him, and now the Persian

throne was elegantly smeared with royal blood. A scribe drifted through the angular antechamber and sat by the king's side, papyrus in hand. He watched as Xerxes redirected his gaze toward him. Xerxes knew that the eyes of the scribe were blameless orbs of exhaustion as he had deprived himself of nocturnal rest.

Xerxes had a tale to tell, and it began with fear. Fear was the enemy, and yet fear was a strength. From fear came courage, and from courage came freedom. The king was gripped by the fear of dying, feeling that fear and death had become one. But telling the tale of Leonidas allowed him to face the fear in the same way that the Spartans stood strong and faced the Persian hordes at the rocky mountain pass. In the telling of Leonidas' courage, Xerxes would find the strength to face his fear of dying before he could tell his tale. The king would fight off death's shadow until he had told Leonidas' tale in its entirety.

Phobos, intangible fear, is the place where all fears coexist. It is once again on the brink of an unseemly entrance. It enters an unsuspecting heart, and then instantly proceeds to fully dimming the mind. Phobos devours the intangible innards of the brave, gnawing away at some irresolute core until a sole victor emerges, one whose name is dread.

Fear unpeels the layers of every warrior code. In times of war, the body learns to translate fear into courage. The body hardens and lets the mind be focused on moving in the strategic unison of a phalanx. Fear knows this. It aims to reverse polarities, turning the heart against the mind until the body rebels against itself. Fear is an animal untamed, a dormant creature feasting

upon helpless silences. It rides the suppressed wave of such silences in order to emerge into skies once tremulously devoted to the sun but now utterly devoid of celestial rays. Now king Xerxes felt dread enter his heart, and he saw fear become manifest in the form of a man he had last seen at Thermopylae. A man who now became fear itself.

As Xerxes lay dying before me, history spread and unfolded intangibly before my eyes. I stood patiently beside him, letting his voice pour out a stream of words. Unadorned rivers of truth flowed from his tongue. The king's wavering voice spoke with the deadly eloquence of a battlefield. The words that emerged from his dying voice were the most truthful words he ever spoke. For a moment, Xerxes' withering gaze darted over my shoulder as a look of terror flashed in his eyes. Then I realized that he saw something. Xerxes' eyes rested on a sight that seemed to unfold over my shoulder. It dawned upon me that he was seeing someone. I looked behind me but saw no one. My gaze shifted back to him, and I saw the startled look in his eyes remain firm.

“What is it? What do you see?”

Xerxes' terrified eyes lingered on the phantasm that lurked behind me.

“Leonidas, he is here.”

I once again turned my gaze behind me but only saw an empty space. Then I held the papyrus and readied myself to write down whatever lofty words would spring from his dimming mind. Xerxes maintained his eyes rigidly on the ghost. Then his gaze returned to me. I could imagine what he was seeing. I envisioned Leonidas as he moved through a dark mass of the Immortals.

My mind could fashion the image of Leonidas as he towered above a pile of slain Immortals.

Xerxes' eyes remained transfixed by the sight of the fallen Leonidas holding a blade bloodied by the deaths of hundreds of Immortals.

“My words...let them speak. They must speak.”

Xerxes had chosen me as his scribe. He told me to let his words echo across history. Xerxes looked upon me with keen expectation. I saw oblivion dancing in the fading glimmer of his eyes. Dread filled him now more than ever. The fear of having his words silenced forever was greater than the fear of death. “If my words vanish, who will tell my story? Who will see Leonidas as I saw him?” That is what his eyes were saying. But then I heard the tide. History's blood-dimmed tide. It roared soundlessly in the blood that clogged his ears and blinded his eyes.

Xerxes' tired eyes peered into the void. I stood and waited for him to continue. Time fled him now more than ever.

“Why are you here, scribe? Ah, yes, I shall tell you the tale.”

I realized that I could choose not to write these words as the king spoke them while looking at fear itself. The king's greatest opponent, king Leonidas, had become fear itself, and whatever words the dying king spoke were tinged with dread. But then I realized that this fear had infused a raw immediacy into this moment, and I felt as though Leonidas was truly there. I readied myself to write, and I felt that I could see what he saw. The presence of Leonidas solidified, becoming tangible as they began to flow on the wordless

rhythms of the king's strained lips. "Write the words," he said. I felt as though his words became tangible before me, as tangible as the dread that stood embodied before the king.

Fear waited before him now, and it would tell his tale more readily than I. Leonidas was the embodiment of fear in the king's dying eyes. The king could see Leonidas' story become as tangible as the fear he felt toward him. The earliest moments of Leonidas' life took shape and form, and fear, unwelcome and unfettered as it was, somehow pierced the last of the oncoming darkness. The king faced his fear of dying and began his tale. As he neared his last breath, Xerxes could see how it all began. In his death, he saw Leonidas' beginning.

The warrior tries to feel the tide, but it has stopped moving long ago. So long that he feels that its standstill precedes his very existence. The tide was the only thing that kept his shadowy frame moving toward solidity. It was the thing that made his heart entirely solid and capable of sustaining each precious breath. The darkness enfolds him now. He wonders what has caused the tide to stop. Now, he is coming to a standstill. His vision is completely enshrouded by blackness. Then motion again. His heart regains a steady rhythm. He does not know if the darkness actually swallowed him or if it merely contrived the semblance of his sudden demise. The light shines through the dark depths. He is rising steadily, becoming more than a shadow.

He feels his beloved's ghostly touch on his face. Intangible tears swell and trickle down his bruised visage. Leonidas sees the beginning of freedom form. There is an empty void, which instantly becomes filled with an organic

flowering. Life unfolds before his eyes. He witnesses his own mortal start, feeling a muted thunder inside him. Then he feels it entirely. The birth of a free heart.

The boy had known fear, but he had never seen its face...until now. As he lay crouched with his head under his shoulders, he saw lines twitching malevolently in the unwholesome blackness. The boy shivered slightly as though a northern wind had frosted over his small limbs. He briefly looked up to gaze at the formless lines as they stretched with needle-like precision across the canopy of infinite night. The more he looked into the lines, the more the face of fear grew featureless. And so the boy felt his limbs loosen, no longer buckled by the impenetrable gaze of phobos. The more he looked into its face, the more he felt freedom of motion. Fear's cold, icy stare was in swift retreat as the boy held his head high and moved upwards.

When the boy rose to face the darkness, he glimpsed phobos, intangible fear, peering back at him. The fear looked at him teasingly, infuriatingly, on the verge of withdrawing itself into its own silent rage. The boy gazed fiercely into it. He saw the ghost of a wave in the sea of murk. He felt that it was his own disembodied dread making its untimely departure. Deep inside, the boy had already become a man. His eyes remained rigidly still on a sight

devoid of sound. He felt the fear wither away, and then waited for the silence to end.

All was blackness before him. Then he saw the frightened eyes of a girl. He saw her fully materialize before him in mere seconds. His hand instantly reached for hers, as if by doing so it would destroy the factory of fear, the place in which all fears exist. This place was woven into every element of bodily displeasure abiding beneath a layer of skin, ever desirous of encroaching upon the intangible realm of spiritual courage. The boy and the girl knew that they had to walk through the dark to cross the dreaded doorway of adolescence. But they knew that they had already done so, for they recognized what the darkness was. Phobos. Fear of death. War. These were as familiar to them as the faces that fed the earliest of their life's memories.

Leonidas glanced at Gorgo, who held on to his now-deepening gaze. With their hands entwined, they walked through the darkness. Then Gorgo saw a sea of scarlet spreading under a darkening sky. She saw an army of silver visages rushing through the blackness. Gorgo saw Leonidas fighting valiantly as his scarred limbs persisted. Time passed. She saw her husband's scarlet cloak waver in the breeze as he prepared to face death. The time for timeless self-sacrifice had arrived. The sea of scarlet was slowly devoured by the dark shapes of the Immortals. Gorgo was queen of Sparta, letting her gaze wander across vast stretches of land to glimpse Leonidas' bravery. Leonidas looked at the dark shapes of the Persian royal guards and remembered the darkness he faced as a boy. He remembered the fear that stood before him.

He felt that Gorgo was there beside him as he felt fear crumble and die inside him. Leonidas looked up and saw a cosmic radiance. For a brief moment, he wondered if it was intangible freedom itself becoming manifest to him in the bloodying dark sword storm. Gorgo could see it too.

The Spartan king watches spears raining down again, spears deflected by an ethereal bow-wielding arm, which is the fleeting mirage of life spared before instant death. Apollo, the Far Darter, dispenses with the thick rain of arrows. The god of light is nowhere to be seen. Leonidas peers through the murky distance and imagines seeing Xerxes seated beneath a truncated mass of burnished gold. He imagines seeing his empire-sized gaze through the dark, rendering motes of dust agleam under a brutal mortal sun.

Some of the Spartans raise their shields while others are impaled. The spears break through bodies hardened with hearts unwavering. Blood-dimmed bodies consumed by a blackness entire now waver in an indefatigable mortal breeze. Death comes sweetly upon the fallen, its soothing breath lifting memories that span their lives entire, memories glowing with Greece. The memories rise swiftly above the bloodshed and then move in rapid succession. The king sees the glowing memories take flight before his eyes, hovering above him and the scene of decay. He raises his hand and reaches through a space filled with an otherworldly light, a light searing through the cloak of defeat. His hand reaches toward the horizon and traces the Greek letter lambda: Λ . The letter shines through the all-conquering gloom, and then it burns fiercely in the horizon. The king watches the letter for a moment. Then he feels death's advance. Leonidas closes his

eyes.

Now, Gorgo stood before a different darkness. Her grief breathed before her, forcing her to drift undeterred through it in order to reach to the brighter side of who she was. Gorgo imagined that she strode a lightning-quick stride across the blackness. Then she marched on defiantly, still feeling the astute warmth of the hand that held hers so long ago. Her heart pulsed more gently, for she now fully fathomed her irreparable sense of loss. She knew that the only way to bend the blackness was to make it bleed light. She watched as the darkness bled. A light flickered through the insides of a blackness hemorrhaging before her heart's impenetrable gaze. She gazed at the light as it was colored scarlet. Somewhere, a scarlet cloak billowed in the breeze.

She always knew the fear would come. *The body remembers the pain, but not the soul*, she remembered a warm maternal voice telling her. *You can overcome this*, the voice said. The girl wrapped herself in a scarlet cloak. For a moment, she imagined that it was blood-spattered, but then she told herself that the cloak belonged to someone who faced the fear and won. Phobos, intangible fear, peered at her malevolently through the darkness, flashing momentary glimpses of courage in retreat.

Gorgo felt a gulf between her and the world beyond precious walls dissolved. The imperturbable blackness remained, an uninvited guest mocking the solidity of her presence. Gorgo remained utterly still, feeling her defiance quietly growing in strength. She felt a brave dawn shimmering through the mist of formless fear. And then a hand reached for hers. She

looked to her right and saw a boy whose eyes instantly locked onto hers. The sudden sensation of hands entwined surpassed the feeling of fearful flesh devouring her heart. The boy maintained his eyes on her as he held her hand tightly. Gorgo saw the look of courage in the boy's eyes. She knew that they both had to walk through the darkness and make it to the other side. As they held hands, they both saw an army rising and facing the darkness.

Warriors sprung from the unwholesome blackness and began to assault the fear. Cries of pain echoed loudly for a moment, submerging the two children. Gorgo and the boy felt the darkness being defeated, their hearts beating in near-unison. Gorgo looked at the boy and imagined seeing war scars on his body. Then she knew who the boy was: Leonidas. The darkness now began to dissolve, and bright dawn light came pouring through the dying mist. Gorgo and Leonidas realized that they had already walked through the darkness. They had both overcome fear. Gorgo held on to the scarlet cloak. The boy was gone. Gorgo stood before an ocean of brightness. She blinked her eyes in a near-disbelieving fashion, as though expecting herself to awake from a dream. She still felt the boy's touch on her hand.

The word Ελευθερία, “Freedom,” echoed deep inside him. The *agoge* was as he always imagined it, boys pummeling each other with fists of fury under a looming war's nightmarish grin. War already began to smile upon them darkly, a smile stretching from one scarred cheek to the other. There were no silver arrows or even the slightest semblance of fearful hearts bathing in Apollonian light. Leonidas became a man when a quiet sea began

to roar inside him, unleashing an ocean that remains untrammeled until now. Gorgo was by his side. He did not look at her, but he felt her presence. He felt Gorgo linger in a patch of semi-darkness. A doorway was approaching, devouring their innocence in moments. A sunless stream of cloud moved above them, ripples of ominous red seeping through a horizon that innocence once made sanctified and pure.

Their hands were entwined, his and Gorgo's. A passageway devoid of luster stood firmly before them, the doorway at the end glinting with impending doom. Adulthood, it waited for them regardless of how they were still children. Leonidas and Gorgo began to move toward it, their hearts already reaching the other side with matchless speed. They drift through the doorway, but their hearts have already moved through it to reach adulthood. Leonidas and Gorgo looked each other with their young, innocent eyes, not fully realizing that their innocence was now nothing more than a globe dimming away in their hardened and newly enlivened Spartan hearts. A timeless radiance began to burst in the entrails of their departing innocence, hurling their hearts across a war-torn field.

The waves crash one after the other as the sea continues to perform its restless, defiant dance. Decades pass. The sea's tapestry unfolds with the motion of air and sound, allowing the waves to travel long, imperceptible distances. The waves advance and retreat like the rhythms of the heart. Leonidas and Gorgo stood before a different doorway now. The queen looked at him as he moved toward the doorway. She maintained her tearless eyes on

him as he vanished through the doorway, never to return to the world of the living.

Aristagoras, the tyrant of Miletus, gazed into the eyes of the Persian messenger. He was well-aware that the cities of Ionia were embroiled in turmoil, and that the revolt against the rule of King Darius was gaining strength. The messenger had just delivered a message from the king: end the revolt and enjoy the riches of the empire or witness the death of your dreams. Aristagoras had laughed at these words, causing the messenger's neutral gaze to shift into dismay. "Tell your king that the Ionian Revolt will continue. I will have the Athenians by my side. Nothing will stop me from liberating Ionia from Persian rule. Take that message back to Darius." The messenger turned around and left without a word.

Aristagoras had recently devised a plan to visit Sparta and Athens in order to have the bravest men of Greece assist him in his open defiance of the Persian king. He had previously enjoyed the riches, but he wanted more than a role as a Persian-appointed tyrant. He had spoken his mind to various messengers, and the mere thought of rebellion was especially scathing to Darius. The king felt that the Ionian Revolt was beyond his ability to contain. He felt that his son Xerxes would have to face the threat that Greece posed. Darius knew that Aristagoras' greed was unquenchable, and that the tyrant of Miletus would organize a stronger rebellion in order to have more power. Aristagoras remembered hearing about Cyrus' act of conquering the city of Lydia, and how his unbridled lust for conquering extended to other cities in

Ionia. Cyrus had imposed higher taxes on the cities of Ionia and appointed tyrants to ensure that Persian rule prevailed.

Gorgo sat with other girls and began singing with them. The girls sang in unison. In Sparta, girls enjoyed privileges denied to Athenian girls. Spartan girls were allowed to move freely and enjoy a good education. Gorgo enjoyed the freedom to do many things and cultivate her mind. The undeniable gifts of Spartan society shone in her young mind, reminding her of great things to come for her and the other girls. Being the daughter of the Spartan king made her feel out of place at times, as though the other girls sensed the royal distance that separated her from them. Gorgo wanted to reassure her friends that she was just like them, and that more importantly she wanted to be like them. She learned that her father Cleomenes was exempt from the agoge due to how he was the firstborn son of king. His brothers had to train in the agoge, and they felt a distance between them and the firstborn.

Cleomenes acknowledged the rift that grew between him and his brothers. Dorieus, Cleomenes' younger brother, believed that Cleomenes was too unstable to inherit the throne. When Cleomenes was recognized as the new king before the Spartan council and assembly, Dorieus refused to abide in Sparta any longer and embarked on a colonial mission in Africa. Cleomenes quickly rose to political prominence as the two sieges of the Acropolis, the war with Argos, and the removal of Demaratus had allowed him to be a great king. Gorgo learned that Aristagoras was planning a visit to Sparta, and she believed her father would do the right thing. "Today is an

important for me, daughter,” he told her. “A powerful man from Miletus is coming here to make an offer, and one I am sure I cannot refuse.”

“And who exactly is this man?” Cleomenes smiled at her words, knowing how Gorgo proved to be wise beyond her years.

“This man is in the middle of a major rebellion. The cities of Ionia have fallen to Persia. This man can help us defeat Persia.”

Gorgo's eyes gleamed with curiosity. Gorgo wanted to watch events transpire.

“Come now, Gorgo. You have homework to do. Go on your way. Remember, don't worry about things that are not for you to worry about. Just enjoy learning. You have much to learn, my dear.”

Gorgo smiled and then went on her way. Cleomenes marveled at her intelligence. He envisioned a future in which Gorgo's voice rose loudly to assuage the deepest concerns of Spartan society. He knew that a bright future awaited her.

Early in the morning, Aristagoras arrived in Sparta. He rejoiced at the sight of bustling city streets. He believed that the military brawn of Sparta would help him succeed. He felt that Cleomenes had no other choice but to listen to reason. He knew that the king was controversial due to his relationship with the Peloponnesian League. Cleomenes' desire to limit the power of kingship also caused a stir in some parts of Greece. But Aristagoras trusted that the Spartan king would do the right thing. He decided to rest and swallow the sights of the streets. The merchants and people drifted with a

sense of detachment, as though they were utterly oblivious to the approaching threat of Persia. Aristagoras felt that he had to warn everyone that the Ionian Revolt was a golden opportunity to eliminate Persia once and for all.

In the palace, Cleomenes was readying himself for this important meeting. He knew that Gorgo did not have school today, and that she would be there when Aristagoras spoke to him. *You have much to learn*, he remembers telling her. He loved Gorgo deeply, and he wanted for her to prosper as the future queen of Sparta. He knew that Aristagoras was going to offer bribes to him in order to assuage the concerns of the rebellion. Moments later, Aristagoras arrived at the palace. Cleomenes stood waiting for him.

“Welcome, Aristagoras. Welcome to Sparta.”

“I thank you warmly, Cleomenes.”

“I have heard about the instability in Ionia.”

“Yes, the recent events are of grave concern not only to me, but to all Greeks. The Persian enslavement of Ionians is deeply shameful. We cannot let it continue. The Persians are weak. They can be defeated. Also, you must acknowledge that the inhabitants of Ionia have more good things than the rest put together-gold, silver, bronze, and ah, yes...slaves. Ionia is full of riches, and you must set your sights on the greatest riches: silver and gold. Lydia is full of wealth. Phrygia is rich with cattle and crops. Please join me, king of Sparta. Let us defeat Persia and enjoy the riches we deserve.”

Cleomenes nodded in silence. After a few moments, he said, “Please give me two days for me to consider your offer.”

“Of course, please take your time.”

Cleomenes thinks about how long the Spartans would need to take before reaching Susa. He worries that it might take more than weeks.

Two days later, Aristagoras stands before Cleomenes. The Spartan king expresses his concerns. “Aristagoras, how long would it take to reach Susa from the sea?”

Aristagoras was silent. He remained hesitant to reply for a moment, but then said, “Three months.”

Cleomenes looked at Aristagoras disapprovingly, his gaze becoming stern and uncompromising. “I’m afraid I cannot take your bribes, Aristagoras.”

“Listen to reason, Cleomenes. We need Sparta to defeat the Persians.”

Gorgo suddenly appeared. She looked at Aristagoras and then looked at her father. Deep inside, she felt words of wisdom slowly flowing to her lips. She believed that she needed to speak these words. She offered her counsel to her father in the presence of a tyrant who refused dismissal on the part of the Spartan king. “Take my advice, father,” she told Cleomenes. “This man is a tyrant, no good can come from taking his bribe. Father, you had better go away, or this stranger will corrupt you.” Aristagoras stood before Cleomenes and watched as that young girl provided counsel to her father. He felt angered by Gorgo's precocious nature. Cleomenes maintained his eyes on his daughter, but then looked at Aristagoras and said, “I must decline to offer you assistance.” Aristagoras swallowed these words with dismay. He turned around and vanished into the distance. Gorgo looked up at her father, who

looked down at her with a smile.

A week later, Gorgo stood beside her father, king Cleomenes, who stood up from his seat and addressed the Spartan assembly. The king saw the look of insufferable conviction in his opponents' eyes. He could almost hear their devious hearts clamoring for his downfall. Cleomenes regarded the near-ominous mass of elders. His words streamed out of his mouth unrelentingly. "We will not take part in the Ionian revolt. We will not join Athens in the invasion of Persia. That foolish Aristagoras offered me a bribe to join his rebellion. We may have helped Athens before, but now we will not intervene. The tyrant of Miletus is merely concerned with reclaiming his false glory and riches." The council looked on in mockery as Cleomenes voiced his disapproval. Gorgo saw the looks of derision in the faces of the council members.

One of the council members rose and said in a vigorous tone, "But Persia must be defeated. There is no other way to overcome this threat than to join the revolt. The cities of Lydia have successfully led their rebellion across vast regions. It is not too late to join them. You, masterful tactician, must listen to reason."

"No, reason dictates otherwise. The only logical course of action is to abstain from any involvement in the rebellion. I will not take part in an invasion. The Persians will quash the rebellion sooner or later. I will not let Sparta suffer for the vainglorious ambitions of a tyrant."

"No, my king, we must act now! We must help the Lydian cities. We can acquire vast resources that can..."

“You think of wealth and power, but our people are measured by our values. We must always think of our values. Do not let your thirst for glory and power cloud your judgment. We must be wise or suffer the consequences. I have finalized my decision before this assembly.”

His opponents rose and waved their fists in the air as a stream of dissent descended upon the king. Cleomenes saw their dark faces bathing in secret delight. They knew that they would orchestrate his downfall one way or the other. The king refused to relent to the voice of the dissenting mass. Gorgo had looked at her father proudly as he displayed a level of willpower that equaled the political courage of the wisest of rulers.

Years later, Cleomenes invaded Argos as he was deeply concerned about its looming alliance with Persia. One year later, the Persians ended the Ionian revolt and aimed to invade and enslave Greece. A number of city-states surrendered to the Persians, and Cleomenes tried to dissuade some of them to break away from the Persians' influence.

King Demaratos grew increasingly concerned about Cleomenes' efforts to undermine the Persians' growing influence and authority. After his plot to overthrow Demaratos became exposed, Cleomenes was exiled from Sparta. Years later, Cleomenes returned to Sparta, but had lost his sanity. The Spartans imprisoned him, and he spoke to himself in the confines of his cell. People looked at him strangely as he muttered to himself from time to time. “The enemy cannot be trusted,” he said over and over again. “Sweet daughter, do not listen to the council.” Cleomenes was later found dead in his cell. Some said that he had been slain by his own hand, that he had mutilated

himself in the hope of ending the hopeless silence. They said that he had lost his own mind and could no longer be understood by anyone. But Gorgo refused to believe these stories. Deep in her heart, she knew that her father had reached out to her in his final moments.

When Cyrus' son, Cambyses, was killed, Darius rose to the throne. Darius enshrined his royal ambitions as he desired to quash the rebellion once and for all. He envisioned his hand holding all of Ionia in an iron grasp. He had inherited Cyrus' hunger for conquest. Darius had decided to attack the Scythians in order to let his domineering presence be known and diminish the threat of the Greeks. The Athenians had sent a messenger to Darius to inform him that they did not wish to incur his displeasure in any way, and that they would do anything to stave off the slightest threat of animosity between the Greeks and Persians. When the Athenians met Darius in person, he showed no respect for them.

The Athenians had decided that an alliance with Persia would be the wrong course of action. Aristagoras was close to Darius, and he led a military invasion of Naxos. After failing to seize Naxos, Aristagoras and the Persians were forced to retreat. The Greeks became emboldened and were more determined than ever to rebel against Persia. The Ionian Revolt initially involved the capture and burning of Sardis. The tyrant of Miletus led the rebellion in order to preserve any power he had left. He sought the naval assistance of Athens in order to defeat the Persians at sea. Sparta's unassailable military might was unquestionably a major asset as well.

“The greatest glory of a woman is to be least talked about,” Pericles, the architect of Athenian democracy, once said. Athenian women had no public role as they remained ensconced in the private realm. Gorgo did not wish to drown in the silences of obscurity. She wanted her voice to be heard. She wanted to be more than a queen. She yearned to be the voice and heart of her people. Having king Leonidas as her husband made her feel that she lived and breathed the pulse of Sparta. Being the queen of Sparta made her reflect on the decision to stop her father from taking Aristagoras' bribe. Gorgo was a young girl who spoke at a meeting between two heads of state. She offered her counsel to her father in the presence of a tyrant who refused dismissal on the part of the Spartan king. “Take my advice, father,” she told Cleomenes. “This man is a tyrant, no good can come from taking his bribe. Father, you had better go away, or this stranger will corrupt you.” Aristagoras stood before Cleomenes and watched as that young girl provided counsel to her father. He felt angered by Gorgo's precocious nature.

Gorgo's words were well-founded as the Ionian revolt later triggered the Persian advance toward Athens. Darius desired revenge after the revolt. When his son Xerxes succeeded him to the throne, he envisioned the lustrous passageway across the Hellespont leading him to the precious cradle of democracy itself. Xerxes viewed democracy as a newly born child that needed to be slaughtered. Had the Athenian assembly heeded her words as Cleomenes did, then Gorgo would have never lost Leonidas at the hot gates.

Soon after Cleomenes refused to take his bribe, Aristagoras experienced a reversal of good fortune. His people once clamored for him to take drastic

action against the Persians, but now they only yearned for his absence. They had suffered under his tyranny, but they acknowledged that taking immediate action against the Persians was vital. Aristagoras was exiled by his people. He was forced to leave everything behind in disgrace, and the shadow of dishonor loomed over every horizon he looked upon. He knew that Cleomenes heeded the counsel of the young Gorgo, who was barely in her adolescence at the time. Gorgo had remembered how the events of the Ionian Revolt had escalated into Persia's unwavering resolve to invade Greece. She observed boys training in the agoge from day to day.

A boy's face hit the dirt. Then he rose and stood still. Blow after blow came his way, and he swallowed the impact of each fist. The boy fell, but then rose again. Voices seemed to jeer at him. "This is Leonidas, the third son of the king. You enjoy taking a beating, don't you?"

Leonidas' eye was nearly swollen shut. He could see the expressions of the boys around him.

"It's too bad you're not the firstborn son of the king. You could have been exempt from all this. Your brother must be enjoying his time as the successor to the throne." It started to rain, but Leonidas barely noticed.

"I came here to face my fear. I will fight my fear and become fear itself," the boy said, or at least that is what he thought he heard himself saying. The boys glanced at each other before focusing on him.

"I never wished to be king," Leonidas finally said. "I wish to be a warrior and only that." The other boys laughed. He felt fists on his face, and he stumbled

backward. "I can stand here all day," he imagined himself saying.

"Hey, boys, let's go. The son of the king has taken enough beating for one day. The *agoge* will resume tomorrow." The boys vanished into the distance. Another boy approached him and looked at him with concern. "Leonidas, why do you take a beating like that?"

"Each blow I receive makes me stronger. It helps me look forward to the next blow, and then I can turn the pain into relief. I make the pain my own until the pain becomes strength."

The boy nodded admiringly. "My name's Dienekes," the boy said, but without extending his hand.

"It's good to meet you," Leonidas said.

Years later, Leonidas was a strong young man who dominated all fights. The boys who jeered at him now became men who looked at him with fear. Leonidas hit each of his opponents until they fell headlong in the dirt. He heard voices around him, but he could feel the impact of his fist on his opponent's face. Then a man rushed toward him, interrupting the fight.

"Leonidas, I have urgent news to deliver. Your brother has perished. You are the only one left to succeed your father to the throne," he said.

Leonidas absorbed these words thoughtfully. He knew that his other brother had also died, and that now his other brother's death meant that he would have the privilege to become the king of Sparta. Dienekes looked at him through the crowd. He nodded to him, and Leonidas nodded. He knew that the day had finally come. It was the day he would prove that he was born to be a warrior, not a king. But then he realized that his destiny was to be a

warrior king. Years later, Leonidas learned of the Persian advance toward Greece.

Leonidas and the Spartans moved in a swirling sea of swords. They slaughtered the rushing hordes of the Persians. Days passed, and the Immortals fell in the shadows. One by one the Spartans fought with bare hands it seemed, plunging their sharpened fingers into the flesh of the enemy. They fought until only the desecrated corpse of Leonidas remained.

Xerxes' days were numbered high and few, for immortality had its own reckoning. That is how he framed his gilded existence. He could not fathom how an empire could be doomed by an eclipse, how broad expanses could suddenly be beyond the yoke of his sleepless enterprise. The future receded from him now, away from his burnished throne of gold, away from the myriad soldiers in their glimmering multitudes, away from his self-perceived globe-thick, glacier-rimmed empire.

Xerxes drank with merriment in some remote, obscure corner of Asia as he felt the earth sink and tremble beneath his feet. He felt that the endless march of armies caused the bowels of the earth to shake. But then the earth stilled itself, and he paused to notice his own absence from the world. A moment ago, he felt armies moving upon desolate soil, the endless march of men causing the earth's bowels to shake. Then the earth swallowed bodies broken beyond repair. He enjoyed the stillness now. He was still vital, alive, but all his kingly affairs and duties were a diminished port. Nothing reached him from across this gap, but his absence reached those waiting for him to

assume all command once more. How could a king be gone for so long? they asked. He contented himself with the now-rhetorical nature of the question. To him, the question to him remained unheard, unspoken. He imagined Mardonius' querying mind falling silent, thrust into the fury of seconds racing by with his curiosity unappeased.

The court at Persepolis was filled with political intrigue. He went to Persepolis to quell his voiceless anger, to look upon the world with soothing disregard. He came here to master the unexpected art of remote majesty, of royalty bereft of concern. He no longer had a sea of political unquiet before him, only the blue sea and its glittering reach. Xerxes' gaze traveled into the distance, scraping the upper reaches of sky and then hovering above the sun's reflected rims. His mind wandered in wild, lingering imaginings.

I continued to record his royalty's words, knowing that his dwindling vitality in no way dimmed his admiration for the Spartan king. Xerxes recalled the earliest stages of the Persian empire. He recalled how the Greeks unleashed a military force superior to the rebellions of the Egyptians and Babylonians. The king recollected his hedonistic youth. He remembered how his father's conquests forced him to enshrine royal ambitions:

And then came Babylon. Under the reign of his father, Darius the Great, Xerxes became governor of Babylon. He felt his hand suppress the weight of possible rebellion. Xerxes quashed the rebellions in Babylon and Egypt. He let his power speak. The empire remained. The Greeks marched in colossal steps across his empire's horizons. Xerxes' gaze swept the Hellespont. *Bridge the Hellespont*, the voice said. It was his own voice.

The Greeks rose from near-defenseless obscurity and fought the Persians. Xerxes felt the tide of history moving. He felt the need to prove himself a worthy king. Gone were the lavish displays of savage pleasure. Gone for were the rigidly undisciplined days. He was here to be part of

history's tide. The tide brought me here so that I can see how a once-mighty king falls. I feel the tide moving beneath my feet, and Xerxes feels it too. I know he does.

Bridge the Hellespont, the now-restrained imperious voice said. He felt ready to let himself sip the continent of wine he imagined before him, but it was a mere cup, and the cup was nowhere near the unyoked continent he desired. Three-hundred Spartans died and allowed the Greeks to prepare for his arrival. The Delian League arose and Athenian imperialism prevailed. Greece prevailed. It was then that he fathomed his own military end. It was then that he wished to remain ensconced in this corner of the world. It was then that the shadow of history had passed over him.

Then Xerxes remembers all the women who fell dumb-faced on his lap. He sees their oblivious smiles. Each face becomes erased. One woman after another falls on his lap, but they are women without a visage.

Why tell his tale? I ask myself. Why lend a voice to the ruler who was harbored beastly ambitions? Xerxes' voice is broken, tremulous. His life drains away before me, and I undertake the task of putting his life into words. But who will read these words? I ask myself. Perhaps no one will. History has already shifted its indifferent gaze from him. And once he dies, people's gaze will shift away.

Then I feel the words I have written may fade somehow, erasing themselves of their own volition. But for now the tale persists, moving against the tide of history. But in just a few moments, the tide will prevail. I will become one with it, like those who fought against the king and those

who fought with him. Xerxes will fade like some apparition in a thickening fog. He imagines holding Europe in his fist, but his empire slips through his iron grasp. Time flees him along with the empire he desperately yearned to expand. His empire remained static, but now it joined the rapid depletion of his own blood. For a moment, he looks upon me with dread, but then his features become calm. He feels the last of his tale coming, the words half-merging with oblivion before they reach me. And then he sees something. His eyes become wide. I can tell that he is seeing something or someone familiar. The ghost of Leonidas stands before him again.

Before the three-hundred Spartans fought to their death, Leonidas went to speak with the Persian king. Xerxes watched his silhouetted shape puncture the sunset's serene glow. He watched his scarred body become manifest in the crimson twilight. Leonidas looked back to see the strange miracle of bodies moving as an ocean as they waited to be swept by war's tumultuous tide. Xerxes looked at the Spartan king. Two kings faced each other. Sunset faced sunrise. And history lay in-between. The two lights moving shaped both kings' gaze. At that moment, Xerxes felt moved beyond words, seeing the king of Sparta before him. But he was moved in a way that tides move. Violently, unhinged. He knew very well that war dimmed the tides, the waves of bodies succumbing to bloody death's rippling roar.

“King of Sparta, it is a pleasure.”

Leonidas nodded slightly. “The time has come to dispense needless pleasantries. We, I and the other Spartans, are here to die. And we are not

afraid to die.”

“But you do not need to. We can forge an alliance, one unlike any other. I can rule the world and you can be my side. You will enjoy having everything you desire.”

“Death is preferable.”

Xerxes' gaze darkened. “You would rather die than have a portion of the world allotted to you? We may be different, but we can learn and appreciate each other's cultures.”

“I have watched your men die. I have watched my men die. That is the only similarity I can see and appreciate. Death waits for us all, and it waits for us more eagerly on the battlefield. I readily embrace it.”

The Battle of Salamis led the Persians to experience bone-crunching defeat. Xerxes withdrew himself back to Asia. He drank with merriment in some remote, obscure corner of Asia as he felt the earth sink and tremble beneath his feet. But then the earth stilled itself, and he paused to notice his own absence from the world. His future assassin, Artabanus, killed his father, and now he was eager for the Persian throne to be elegantly smeared with royal blood again.

Then Xerxes' mind returns to the moment of dying. I am standing beside him, feeling his story pouring out a stream of words. Then he sees something. Then I realize that he is seeing someone, someone from his past. Xerxes widens his eyes.

“What is it? What do you see?”

“Leonidas, he is here.”

I look behind me but only see an empty space. Xerxes maintains his eyes rigidly on the ghost.

“And what does he want? What is he telling you?”

Xerxes remains silent for a moment, but then he says, “He wants me to feel like as though I am my own empire withering away and dying.”

Leonidas appears before Xerxes. I do not see him, but can imagine him being there. The ghost of the Spartan king is bright white.

“Have you come to kill me at last?” Xerxes says.

Leonidas shakes his head. “You are already dead. And so is your precious empire.”

With these words, Xerxes writhes in a final surge of pain. He feels death approaching. The lofty silence within him finally moves. The king sees images of Artemisia flashing in his memory. He remembers the woman who allowed his empire to reach new heights. He remembers her bravery regardless of how she receded back into obscurity and died in the shadows of history.

Artabanus remembers killing Xerxes' father Darius. He knows that if Xerxes were to find out, he would seek revenge. He believes that killing Xerxes will allow him to spare the Persian empire from destruction. Taking control of the empire will enable him to rely on wisdom to exercise his authority. But he believes he needs someone to achieve this goal. Antaxerxes is the youngest son of Xerxes, but Artabanus believes he can use him to gain

control of the empire. Artabanus believes that he can kill Xerxes and allow Xerxes' eldest son, Darius, to be held responsible and accountable for the murder. Artabanus decides to wait a few days before enacting his plan. Then he decides to approach Antaxerxes. He tells him that once Xerxes is dead, he will succeed his father to the throne. Antaxerxes hears these words with dismay, but then a dark inevitability spreads itself over Artabanus words. "I am going to murder you father, so that you can be wiser ruler than he is," he tells Antaxerxes.

"But how will you accomplish all this?"

"After I kill Xerxes, your older brother Darius will be held responsible and be executed for killing his father."

"But must my father die?"

"He must. He has simply gone too far. You may be too young to understand this, but the fact remains that you must go along with my plan. That is what you must do, for yourself and for Persia. Many have deemed him a ruler unfit for an empire. Xerxes never fought on the battlefield. He preferred to remain isolated while his men plunge themselves into war's deadly embraces."

"My father may not have been a warrior, but he was a good king. He allowed the empire to spread and conquer Asia."

"I know, but now he wishes to go even farther than that. That is not wise of him. He should simply enjoy what he has already achieved rather keeping wanting more. Your father desires to conquer the world, but he is simply deluded. His power has blinded him. He can no longer think and act like a ruler.

He is driven by the madness of gaining more power. He must die for the good of the empire. Surely you must acknowledge this.”

“If he must die for the good of Persia, than I agree to help you achieve your goal.”

“Remember, Antaxerxes, the one who stands to benefit the most from this is you. You will become the new king. You be a better king than your father.”

Days pass. Artabanus sees Xerxes enter his bedchamber. He waits for a few moments and then observes the king carefully from the slightly-ajar door. Artabanus peers into the chambers for a moment. Then he silently draws his small blade. He feels anger swelling inside him. But then he feels reassured that once Antaxerxes becomes king, he will use him to gain control of the power. Artabanus knows that Antaxerxes is young and gullible, and that he can easily manipulate him to become the true ruler of the empire. He enters the bedchambers now. He moves with silent precision, moving on the lavish carpet with meticulous slowness. Xerxes remains seated, his eyes drifting upon the darkness outside the palace walls. After a few moments, Artabanus approaches him with a more brisk movement and plunges the blade into Xerxes' back. Blood spurts out. Xerxes falls voicelessly to the floor, and Artabanus aims to ensure that no one will hear him. Within moments, Artabanus withdraws himself from the chambers and waits for someone to come upon the ghastly sight of the murdered king.

At Thermopylae, Xerxes remains seated in lofty throne of gold while

the Immortals relentlessly surge toward the Spartans. The Persian king feels fire burning in Leonidas' eyes. He sees the Immortals encircle the Spartans within moments. The Spartans fight with a level of strength and endurance that surprises the Persian king. Then Xerxes narrows his gaze and feels as though the sea of Immortals parts to let the Spartan king make his deadly advance toward him. Xerxes' eyes widen as they absorb the sight of Leonidas shining brightly through the dimmed cloud of armored men. Leonidas leaps spectacularly into the air and holds his blade aloft as he descends on the Persian king. Xerxes screams but his voice is drowned out by the inaudible sound of the Spartan king thrusting his blade downward for the kill.

Then Xerxes opens his eyes. He is in bed. He casts wide-eyed glances at the darkness. He feels a presence. He believes that someone has been observing him throughout his sleep. In the darkness, he traces the faint outline of a man holding a blade.

“Spartan king, you are dead.”

“I am, and now so are you.”

The Spartan king appears to him in all his sublimity, the sight of him nearly blinding Xerxes with his radiance. The ghost of Leonidas marches before him and gazes into the Persian king's eyes. “You were always good at hiding behind the lavish walls of your palace, behind the false comfort of your empire. Your men died on the battlefield while you enjoyed the comfort of your throne. Now, feel death coming to you and conquering you.”

The Spartan king draws a blade and instantly proceeds with the act of killing

the king. Xerxes feels the blade enter his chest and instantly drain the life out of him. He grasps his chest and then falls out of the bed. He sees the radiance slowly evaporate from his vision as darkness begins to completely enfold him. The light vanishes completely from his sight. The next day, people in the empire talk ceaselessly about the king's mysterious demise.

“Who killed the king?” they asked.

“Did a shadow kill him?”

“Was the mighty Xerxes murdered by a shadow?”

“How did someone enter the bedchambers without being detected?”

People talk endlessly, but they remain aloof from the answers they yearn. They remain distant from the sublime radiance that preceded the Persian king's incessant drift toward the ultimate blackness.

The image of the radiant Spartan king now moves in the silences of the shadows. It traverses a nameless boundary that allows the glory of fallen men to live on forever.

Gorgo remembered how Herakles was the guardian of the hot gates, and how the Spartans, the children of Herakles, were the ones who had to fulfill the purpose of the gates. *Where there's fire, there's glory*, she remembered hearing her father say. Gorgo rose and felt a wave of unease wash over her despite being safely ensconced within the palace walls. Her mind once again drifted toward the guardian of the hot gates. Herakles was the founder of Sparta, and his role in protecting the hot springs has allowed Sparta to remain

strong. She remembered when she visited the hot springs as a child. She had fallen ill and her father was eager to let her see the healing power of the springs. It during the night that her father went to show her the springs. Cleomenes had guided her through the darkness of the rocky mountain pass and said, “Do you know why they are called the hot gates, sweet daughter? Because they are the key to our glory. Our great ancestor, Herakles, faced many threats here. The springs are so warm that they embody the unquenchable fire of the Spartan spirit. Now, Gorgo, feel the healing power of the springs.” Cleomenes had let his daughter bathe in the waters. He saw how her soothing relief washed over her face in mere moments. Gorgo felt her fever vanishing. She could almost feel the presence of the demigod. Gorgo peered into the darkness of the rocky mountain pass and saw the moonlight pouring down. Gorgo felt that she had emerged from the waters as someone else: a warrior-queen. She felt her bond to this place. She also felt that she was part of the workings of fate. Gorgo believed she bathed in the hot springs that night for a reason.

The hot gates, the East and West Gates called “Thermopylae,” were built for a purpose, a purpose made loftier by the demigod roar ripping destiny's skies, and made loftier still by the Spartan warriors laying down their lives in an act of timeless sacrifice. The men conjoining their labors have heard the echo of this roar.

During the day, the rocky mountain pass remains empty, lifeless. When night falls, the feet shuffle across the passageway, and the hands instantly resume their toil. The large gates are nearly complete. They were fashioned

by hands miraculously unscarred by endless labor. The site at Thermopylae breathed with unseen perspiration. Night after night, laborious rhythms followed the midnight dark. Vapors arose under the moonless dark. The hands moved in a silence unfathomed, for the labors of these shadowy men spoke in the near-voiceless rivers of the night. A stream of starry black hovered above, a mystery observing the mystery transpiring below.

The men worked tirelessly to complete the East and West Gates. The labors of these men come to an end. Years pass, the first visitor passes through the rocky mountain pass. It is a man who observes scalding rivulets moving on the hard surface. The rivulets converge and begin to form a small shimmering pool. But then the hands that built the gates reach out from the darkness and take hold of the man. The man instantly vanishes into the darkness. It is as if he has never been here. Years pass. Another man visits the mountain pass. He sees a pool of light in the near distance. Then he realizes that it is a body of water. He hears the hissing sound of water. After a few moments, he sees streams that converge. Then the hands reach out from the darkness again and erase the man's presence. All that remains is the seamless quiet punctuated by the sound of the thermal springs. Years later, a man visits the mountain pass. But this man comes with the knowledge that other people have died here. He believes that the darkness will swallow him and end his suffering.

He comes upon the hot springs, which have now reached the peak of their formation. Over the years, the springs have become larger, forming a spacious pool in which the streams converge. The man has come here to die.

He has heard of the stories of people who have mysteriously vanished here. The man waits for the darkness to seize him and swallow him, but nothing comes. He waits for death to relieve him of his suffering. But then he glances at the surface of the waters. He sees images. The images display a man with a shield emblazoned with a large Λ .

There was a quickening of dust under the roar of the sun. A hand reached for mine. I grasped it, but then released it. My small hand drifted away from the large, scarred hand. I was a child in the *agoge* again. I rose to my feet, and then the sun shone invisibly through my battle-bruised limbs to fill my heart with longing. I was born to be a warrior, not to be king. My brothers were the next to succeed my father to the throne. My oldest brother was exempt from the *agoge* as he was the first-born son of a king. I would have refused such “privileges” even had I been the first to be born as the immediate successor to the Spartan throne. I became king unexpectedly as my brothers perished, and I was the next to succeed my father to the throne. I became the Spartan king, but I was born for war. Being a warrior is who I am. I refused to let my mind bathe in palatial silence. The glory of war speaks to me. And then my most recent memory resurfaces like a long-forgotten sea that breaks its millennial silence. I remember Apollo. He was there with me and the other Spartans. He was at Thermopylae. He was there when my life's memories dimly reflected on the stream of Lethe before returning to the hot gates and ushering forth my final breath upon this earth.

I imagine the silver visages dissolving in the light of an unbroken dawn. A splendid ethereal sight suddenly adorned the scene of bloodshed. The god of light appeared, swift and soundless. I whisper a breath of longing under the sea of dispersing blades. Apollo moved silently through the dark mass of the Immortals, aiming his bright arrow at one Persian royal guard after another. The shining arrows penetrated the blackness. I feel the silent, rippling roar of bloodied bodies, and I harden my limbs against the large churning wave of shields and armors. My unspoken words remained unutterably whole for they traverse the blissful silence created by the unexpected divine presence. Apollo shoots one arrow after another. But I know that the time for glorious self-sacrifice had come. No one could delay the inevitable. I shout a battle cry that faded in the deafening clash of blades. Then I glimpse a fiery rose twirling before a vast darkness. I nearly feel as though the ghostly limbs of fallen warriors are keeping me aloft as a sea of dead bodies begins to consume my field of vision. The silver faces poured in, seemingly untrammelled as they advanced in deadly unison. Apollo was gone now. I feel the sacred springs flow beneath his feet. I feel the hot gates breathe all around me, reminding me that the death of instant defeat would precede my own death. I feel the mountain breathe fire, infusing my heart with the sublimely untouched radiance that has just departed from my vision. Death now advances. I was born to be a warrior. I was born to die at the hot gates.

Freedom is a great fire. The fire of this inferno is a freedom that history

has not yet unleashed on its limitless shores. History fears the power of this fire, but it has not yet realized that the fire will become freedom. The fire breathes a letter. A letter forming the name of the man who will give freedom that will no longer be restrained by history. There is only a letter, but freedom will write the rest. The defining feature of the warrior is the large Greek letter Λ . The Λ speaks of future glory and greatness, of men dying for the lives of others in order to save all of Greece. The shadow breathes greatness, its presence covering a vast distance beyond the demigod's gaze. But then Herakles feels the presence retreat back into the flaming gates. The time has not yet come for the man in front of the shadow to become one with history.

An impetuous gust of wind sweeps across the three hundred Spartans as they face gloriously impending doom. It sparks an image of the indecorous underworld god reclining on a throne of bones. But the image fades, blankly receding into its former irrelevance. The battlefield already becomes a memory. It rolls back the idle threat of unending obscurity. Shields glitter in golden unison. Warriors decode their fear, feeling phobos vacate the chambers of their hearts. They are on the verge of entering a room in the mind that should be left unseen, unknown. One by one they find themselves on the brink of an unseemly entrance, observing the door at the other side of which the heaviest loss soars above the sweetest pleasures of the world. Leonidas darts a glimpse at the Persian king, whose half-silhouetted frame unmask his vaulting ambition. The sequence of events in which warriors hurl themselves in a swirling sea of bloodshed now reverses itself. Everything unfolds backwards, and centuries succeed each other in reverse. I

have gazed upon the world's golden horizons, seeing sunrises and sunsets flow in the beauty of their endless harmony. A light ethereal illuminates the golden depth of the lower sky, and I realize that the unknown has conquered me before I could conquer it. That image no longer resides in my dreaming mind for it is a tangible reality that treads softly across my eyes. It is as real as the purest breath of air. The image of the world's end burns like ember. It slowly releases ripples of orange and red as the sun slowly dips beneath the horizon. I can feel my heart burning brightly at the sight of the bright-rimmed sea of sand. I feel as though the all the unknown of the world is bleeding out at its edge. The unknown slowly expires along with my every breath. But I am not dying, not while the glorious rim calls upon me to witness a mystery expiring. A millennial mystery that once bathed in the bosom of the world but is now fully uncovered before me. The world's crowning unknown lies before me as it did in my deepest of dreams.

The dreams were nearly the same, formless rhythms converging fleetingly in the darkness. The eyes of a lion appeared, and then the sun climbed the horizon. The lion continued to peer at him. The sound of the lion startled him into recognition of what his dreams really were: strange nightmares riding waves of rapid unease. The truth of what it all meant remained elusive to him. The dreams seemed only half-real. Leonidas feared that the other half would find him sooner or later. But the fear residing in his heart remained strangely comforting, a tongue of dread licking psychic wounds.

The following day, Leonidas went to go hunting. His mind swam in a meditative silence ocean-deep as he followed a trail of footprints. Footprints he imagined not being unlike his own. He saw himself following the trail, and then he saw a shape beyond the bushes. He went through the bushes and then he saw a lion. The scene before him was awash with blinding sunlight. The lion appeared to him as familiar, and then he remembered the dream. But then the sunlight pierced through his vision and his mind became rigidly focused once more. He was no longer lost in thought. Birds flew in a clear, majestic alignment under the sun, but then Leonidas' eyes remained intensely focused on the animal in his sights. His mind nearly coincided with the wind's soft murmuring, a rise and fall of muted noise upon silence. The wild boar remained oblivious to his presence. The hunter maintained a clear and focused silence as the boar's stillness slowly spurred him into action. He raised his bow and placed the arrow in a fixed, precise position. The boar shifted slightly, barely noticing his presence in its periphery vision. Suddenly, the young man heard the faint rustling of the leaves, and he felt the thick branches moving above him. The shadow of the branches swayed slightly in his line of vision, but he remained completely focused. His eyes remained fully sharpened, fixated on the mark. Then he heard the faint clatter of footsteps. The sound then became clearer. There was a scurrying of feet. He felt the need to look behind him and see who was coming his way. He glanced behind him and saw silhouetted shapes moving in the distance. Then he looked back to see that the boar was now a lion. His eyes narrowed in confusion. He wondered how it was possible for a wild boar to suddenly

transform into a lion. The lion remained silent, motionless. It observed him with its ferocious gaze, and the young man saw himself inside the animal. The sound of the marching feet increased in volume, and then he looked again to see that the lion had disappeared. *Conquer the fear*, a voice said. Then he realized that the voice was his own, but his future self. Leonidas slowly felt himself becoming a man, but deep inside he felt that he was already a man.

In the roaring of lions do warriors hear their life's music. In their glittering eyes do they fathom the depths of their own fear. In their movements do they feel the slowed palpitations of a fear-deprived heart. The lion moves when the heart of warriors leaps across a void, and then warriors climb out of the rib-cage of soulless fear. The heart must fill fear with something greater than it. Mortals know this, and demigods even more so. The lion dies and within a warrior another one comes rushing forth. It emerges in a swift-footed rhythm, and warriors find their dread totally eclipsed.