

By DAVID SELF (M. Mann - DIC)

DARKNESS. MUTED, DEEP, LIKE FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA:

A SOUND. A single, muted thump-thump of a heartbeat.

SUPER: CENTRAL GREECE. 480 B.C. THE PHOKIAN BORDER.

It fades. Thump Thump.

SUPER: THERMOPYLAE.

It too fades. THUMP THUMP.

AND FINALLY SUPER: ALSO CALLED THE GATES OF FIRE.

With that, the BLACK SCREEN SHIMMERS, becoming reflective, wet. Human FIGURES flicker past, upside-down. At the edge of hearing, the rhythm of Human VOICES, unintelligible, ancient, as if welling up from the depths of history.

Slowly, the screen seems to turn, the fleeting images righting themselves as we PULL BACK TO REVEAL:

THEY ARE REFLECTIONS IN A HUMAN EYE. The eye stares, dilated, frozen. Only the parade of reflected figures moving past. None stopping. None noticing this silent witness.

In cross-section the eye seems to stare OC. Seems to see something.

A FLY lands on the eye. Covers the pupil. Turns in place. Not the slightest reaction, not the slightest reflex. A beat, and it flits away. Standing there, reflected in the blackness, is a figure unlike any other.

A CLOAKED MAN. Featureless in his hood. Staring back.

With a sudden, SHOCKING INTAKE OF AIR all SOUND becomes crystalline, the IRIS CONTRACTS. A beat. And a DEAFENING SCREAM SPLITS THE THEATER. The CAMERA sweeps back, REVEALING:

EXT. BASE OF KNOLL, THERMOPYLAE - DAY

ZEONES. Young, hard, strong, he blisters the air in soul-splitting agony.

Face down in the dirt, one hand gropes out, finds a tangle of rigor-stiff limbs. He is walled in by a pile of bodies in a blood-crusted hell.

ZEO (cont'd)

NO! NO!

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DOWN HIS BACK, splintered wooden shafts protrude from his bronze breastplate, pinning him to the earth.

They are spokes in the shattered wheel of a chariot which is lying atop him.

And now we PULL BACK INTO THE FULL SHOT: of Zeo screaming from the bottom of a hellish sea of corpses. Staring frozen at him: the black faces of a line of **EGYPTIAN MARINES**, big hard men injured by war, stunned to silence by the sight before them.

ZEO (cont'd)
DON'T MAKE ME LIVE! Please don't make
me live...!

A beat. Then in a fit of Egyptian oaths, two of the Marines drop their packed scale armor and weapons, stumble over the bodies toward Zeo.

ZEO (cont'd)
Please. No. I don't want to go...

Zeo's howls turn to weeping, his plea not understood by his rescuers, but not intended for them either. As they drop to Zeo's side, Zeo looks past them. There is no Cloaked Man, just shock on the faces of the grim Marines.

INT./EXT. PERSIAN COMMAND PAVILION - DAY

Hard wind ripples the tented ceiling of an immense pavilion. Through one open side, green scrabbled hillside rolls down to whitecapped sea. **FUNCTIONARIES** come and go, converse in hushed tones. A **SUBALTERN** steps into frame, searching, spots what he's looking for.

He makes his way past a **SCRIBE** at a table laboring over a dispatch. Then another scribe. And another. And another. And another, on and on, down what we now see is an IMPOSSIBLY LONG AISLE, the scribes on one side, **SEALERS** clattering through trays of stone seals with **SERVANT BOYS** ladling trays of hot wax, on the other. All is done in silence and efficiency.

The methods are ancient. But familiar. We feel what this place is more than we understand it.

And then we see the paper. Vast bundles of papyrus, towering to the roof, row upon row. Paper for lists. Paper for orders. Each piece is priceless in its rarity.

And now we understand. This is the bureaucratic heart of some unimaginably vast machine. A headquarters.

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The Subaltern makes his way up behind two men standing at a corner of the tent and stops several steps away, head bowed, waiting to be noticed.

The men are: **MARDONIUS**, heavy set, oiled, tough, commander of the Persian Army, and **ORONTES**, bearded, athletic, in the unique, black dress armor of the Great King's bodyguard, the Immortals. Past them a lonely armed **PICKET** stands guard between them and empty sea.

Their conversation, in ANCIENT FARSEE, is ruffled in the wind. We follow in SUBTITLES.

MARDONIUS

A Helot. One of their slaves. Not even a real Spartan.

ORONTES

Two days under that chariot.
Unimaginable.

Mardonius notices the Subaltern who simply bows deeper.

MARDONIUS

This is a waste of time.

He turns from Orontes, and the Subaltern leads him off. Orontes lingers a beat, then follows.

INT. XERXES' TENT, AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY

A host of EXOTIC BIRDS peer from gilded cages, from open perches, feet TETHERED.

Zeo stares back at them from a litter on the floor. The birds loom above him. We are in his world, and slow, feeling his breath, he lifts his head.

Braziers flicker among a forest of tent-poles. **GUARDS** and **SERVANTS** hover in the dim recesses of this massive, ornate chamber. Passages lead off left and right.

At the center sits a dais carpeted in silk and brocade magnificence. On pillows lounge Mardonius, Orontes, a **MAGUS** in priestly robes, and a woman in polished leather armor, the general **ARTEMESIA**.

And at the center of the dais, a fine, translucent purple curtain hangs ceiling to floor. Within, upon a half-throne sits a silhouetted figure: **XERXES**, Great King of Persia, ruler of half the known world.

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Zeo can't hold up his head any longer. He stares at the fluttering tent ceiling, unaware he's the subject of conversation. It's in Farsee, with English subtitles:

MARDONIUS (OC)

He's useless. His master served in the line. He has as much political intelligence as my dog.

ARTEMESIA

If your dog could speak, what tales might he tell, Mardonius?

There's a chuckle from beyond the veil. They all laugh.

ORONTES

The barbarian does not profess to know anything about the Spartan strategic situation or that of the Greek alliance. He does, however, have certain... insights... which may have relevance to His Majesty's concerns regarding our victory at Thermopylae --

MAGUS

-- a glorious victory, Lord God Ahura Mazda be praised --

A beat. Embarrassed silence. Orontes looks at the floor.

ORONTES

-- insights into the current state of affairs among our troops. I find the barbarian to be... an honest man.

Orontes lifts his gaze discreetly to the Veil. Within, Xerxes simply opens his hand.

A look from Orontes, and Zeo is hoisted up on his litter by two Bodyguards. They bring him to the foot of the dais, set him down. On the lower steps of the dais are ROWS upon ROWS of priceless ceramic bowls FILLED WITH DIRT. Beside each one, a vessel of water. Earth and water. Tokens of submission. Each, a conquered nation.

Zeo's gaze swivels around, finally finds Orontes'. Recognition. A faint smile twists from Zeo's swollen face. A flicker of acknowledgment from Orontes. And then Orontes speaks in accented ENGLISH.

ORONTES (cont'd)

His Majesty wishes to hear the story you have told me.

(MORE)

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ORONTES (cont'd)

He has had ample opportunity to study Spartan military tactics. He has no wish to hear of such things. Rather, he wishes to hear of the nature of the men whom you stood with. You may begin with how you came to know them.

Zeo's voice is cracked, hurt, but alive.

ZEO

Yes.

Mardonius speaks for a moment in Farsee.

ORONTES

Before you begin my Lord Mardonius asks why you would betray your countrymen, for surely you must know we will use what we learn on the field of battle.

Zeo stares, not seeing Orontes. Emotion wells up.

ZEO

...I want to remember them. I want you to remember them.

Orontes translates. Artemesia watches Zeo carefully. Then she asks a question.

ORONTES

His Majesty's general, Artemesia, thinks you are lying. She wants to know your real reason.

Zeo is trapped. He struggles. And then, in awe, a single word comes out:

ZEO

Loxias...

Orontes turns to the others. The conversation returns to Farsee with English subtitles.

ORONTES

He says his god commands him to.

MAGUS

God Ahura Mazda?

The Magus glances back in reverence to Xerxes. Silence.

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ORONTES

No. A barbarian god. He believes he has seen this god, and this god has restored him to life for just this purpose. Loxias, also called Apollo. Variously, god of the sun, of archers... and storytellers.

The Persians laugh.

MARDONIUS

We should capture this god, then maybe we'd get some real intelligence!

ZEO doesn't understand the words, but he feels the disbelief. His gaze falls upon a BIRD stirring in its cage. The laughter mounts, agitating it. Zeo watches. The bird turns helplessly. THE MUSIC MOUNTS.

And then it EXPLODES IN A BLUR OF FEATHERS, trying to take flight. IT BECOMES:

EXT. FOREST, AKARNANIA - DAY

A BEAUTIFUL PTARMIGAN, thrashing in golden-brown glory, trapped by the foot in a snare of twigs.

MAIN TITLES BEGIN AND THE MUSIC SOARS AS:

Zeo, four years younger - a boy in the body of a man - leans INTO FRAME, reaching for the ptarmigan far out on a branch high in a whispering pine tree.

He opens the snare, cradles the wild, pheasant-like mountain bird in his hands. He smooths its feathers. And for a moment, the branches of the gently blowing pine part, and he looks out upon:

The wild mountains of Akarnania. Where the gods live. Where the myths are born in crag and stream. It takes the breath away. Zeo holds onto that bird and that moment. It is innocence. It is more precious than gold.

BRUXIEUS, 60s, yet still in his gnarled forearms, powerfully built, wanders up beneath the tree.

BRUXIEUS (cont'd)

Zeones! Where are you? Zeo!

Zeo holds the ptarmigan out over Bruxieus and gently squeezes. It drips a runny white turd, hitting Bruxieus all over the shoulders and head.

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BRUXIEUS (cont'd)

Shit.

He turns his gaze up, straining. Zeo is RIGHT THERE in plain sight, twisting in silent agony not to laugh. But Bruxieus is BLIND. He wipes the mess off his forehead, revealing a SLAVE BRAND, then marches on, grumbling.

EXT. PASTURE - DAY

Bruxieus trudges across a field of tall green millet, great forested cliffs sweeping up around this pocket-valley in splendor. Zeo, laughing, races up behind him with the ptarmigan.

ZEO

Bruxieus! Bruxieus!

BRUXIEUS

I promised your father you would be able to recite book eight before midsummer.

ZEO

Look! Look. It's a cock!

He pushes the bird into Bruxieus' face. Bruxieus feels it, deftly takes the bird, holds it within a few inches of his face. He can see it past his cataracts there.

BRUXIEUS

Well well. I believe you have just become a rich young man.

Zeo's laughter fills the air, and there, spreading out below them, the curling hearth fires and whitewashed walls of a SMALL FARM at the foot of the mountain.

EXT. BIRD COOP - DAY

Zeo anxiously watches his ptarmigan cock strut his way among a gaggle of ptarmigan hens. A DONKEY BRAYS.

A sweat-stained, exhausted man leads the animal up a path toward the farmhouse. The donkey carries a bundle of armor and a shield. A long spear sways from its back. It is Zeo's FATHER. Zeo goes running.

EXT. FARM HOUSE - DAY

Zeo removes the massive round hoplon shield from the donkey. His Father slaps a heavy farmer's hand on Zeo's shoulder, feels hard muscle with a proud smile.

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FATHER

Not long now and you're going to be sweating your ass off on the parade ground with the rest of us.

Zeo tries to conceal his joy with talk.

ZEO

Has the council decided who we will fight this year, Father?

FATHER

Don't worry. There's always somebody. The day the cities of Greece stop fighting each other Bruxieus will see, and old Stumblefoot will dance a jig.

He slaps the donkey on the flank, smiles at Zeo, and walks into the house.

INT. FARM HOUSE - NIGHT

Zeo's family: Father, **MOTHER, TEENAGE SISTERS, INFANT** sit on the floor around the hearth, pick at the remains of dinner. Zeo fills his Father's cup with wine, sneaks hostile looks at his sister, waging some sort of private war while Father expounds to Bruxieus.

FATHER

It's a good thing we're a small city, and across the gulf at that. The Spartans have bigger fish to fry.

Zeo breaks off from his sister at the word Spartan.

BRUXIEUS

What of the Argive losses, Master?

FATHER

Six hundred men killed. The Spartans drove them back into the citadel. The town lay defenseless before them... and then they just left.

BRUXIEUS

They didn't sack the city?

FATHER

No. Rumor is the whole thing was just a Spartan training exercise.

He laughs, uneasy at the potential truth of it. It lights Zeo's imagination. The fire crackles.

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BRUXIEUS

When I was a boy the Argives made war upon my home of Elis. We, like your Astakos, were a small city. We stood no chance against them. Our leaders appealed to Sparta for help. The Spartans agreed. The day of their army's arrival was set, and the city turned out to meet our saviors. The day came. We watched. And watched. And finally, up the dusty track from Olympia he came. A single man. The Spartans had sent us a single man.

Zeo listens, rapt.

BRUXIEUS (cont'd)

We felt betrayed. The man said nothing. Made no excuse, no apology. That night he refused all hospitality, and slept on the ground in front of the city gates. The next night a half dozen of our men joined him. All they did was talk. By the end of the month our entire army slept outside the gates, and when the enemy came, we sent them packing back to Argos.

Zeo's eyes are lit with jealousy. Father sips his wine, strokes the head of the Infant in his wife's lap.

FATHER

Well, I as soon would till the land and take joy in its bounty as spend all my days tramping battlefields flat with the great men of Lakedaemon.

Father laughs gently. Bruxieus inclines his head in respect. Zeo looks away, caught between admiration for his Father and shame for his Father's small life.

INT. BIRD COOP - NIGHT

Zeo lies in the straw watching over the ptarmigan. Gently he reaches under one of the sleeping hens and draws out its speckled egg. He holds it for a long moment, seized by its simple wonder, the magic of incipient life. He unfolds a piece of cloth, adds it to other eggs within, and lowers his head.

THROUGH A PROPPED OPEN SHUTTER Zeo stares out at the mountain night, only the faintest lines of whitewashed walls visible in the utter darkness. He closes his eyes.

EXT. FARM HOUSE - NIGHT

The farm sleeps under a dome of unblinking stars. WIND stirs in the pine trees. Then it gusts. And with the gust of wind a black SHAPE hurtles across the farm in the darkness and is gone.

INT. BIRD COOP - NIGHT

Zeo opens his eyes, listens to the WIND. A FAINT DRUMMING, and then the wind GUSTS and THREE MORE BLACK SHAPES fly across Zeo's view. Zeo sits up.

EXT. FARM HOUSE - NIGHT

The WIND gusts in fits and starts, each blowing before it a cluster of dark forms: **MOUNTED RAIDERS**. Zeo stands there outside the coop, unable to move. Unable to speak. Able to witness.

At first the Raiders just vanish, hoofbeats barely audible in the booming wind. Zeo's Father opens the door. Several raiders pass him in succession, not even pausing. The last goes by. Father is no longer there.

A **SLAVE** comes out of an outbuilding and is cut down. Fences splinter and are swept away before the streams of horsemen. Doors, shutters, animals vanish into the darkness.

The Raiders and wind tear the farm away, piece by piece. Without a scream, without a sound except for the awful **HOWLING WIND**. And it is as if Zeo, **PARALYZED WITH FEAR**, a mere hundred feet away, didn't exist.

Then the wind **ROARS** and the darkness disgorges a wave of horsemen over the house.

Horses leap the low courtyard wall. Horses clatter over tile roof. Horses come out of the far side of the house which opens like a fruit blasted by worms.

His mother and sisters, naked and white, vanish behind a hail of hooves, dragged by their heels.

CLOSE ON ZEO, IN SHOCK. THE WIND ROARS LOUDER AND LOUDER, killing his mind, killing his soul as his life is torn away...

EXT. FARM, AKARNANIA - DAY

IT BECOMES A HUMAN HOWL. CLOSE ON BRUXIEUS' BLIND EYES. Terrifying in their madness, terrifying like death.

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ARGIVE SOLDIER

Come on, old man! Last one!

Bruxieus, a massive Thessalian cavalry BOW in hand, stands in the middle of the farm yard. Young **ARGIVE SOLDIERS** drift around him, occasionally flipping a stone or clod of dirt at his face. **ARROWS** stick out of the masonry, broken shutters, stable door behind them. Bruxieus is holding his last arrow.

ARGIVE SOLDIER (cont'd)

Get him! Not me!

They laugh. With a **BELLOW OF RAGE**, Bruxieus **DRAWS**, the Argive dodges, and Bruxieus spins 180 degrees, surprising the man directly behind him. He fires. Misses.

The surprised man's comrades laugh. One of them strikes Bruxieus across the head with the butt of a spear. Bruxieus goes down. A tense moment, and Bruxieus steels himself... but the Argives are busy paying off bets.

Bruxieus finds his bow, and gropes around for a spent arrow. The Argives mount their horses.

ARGIVE SOLDIER (cont'd)

Don't go far, uncle. I'm going to need some help running my new farm.

The Argives gallop off.

Breath labored, Bruxieus stands... and SNAP! Somebody steps on an arrow. Bruxieus roars, swings back his bow like a club and --

ZE0

Bruxieus...

-- it's Zeo. Voice broken, helpless.

EXT. FARM, AKARNANIA - DAY

Bruxieus carries the naked corpse of Zeo's mother and lays it among the tangle of white limbs and wood of a communal pyre.

BRUXIEUS

Fire.

Zeo holds a brand, but can't bring himself to light the monstrous sight before him. Bruxieus feels his way back to Zeo and takes the torch. The fire smolders under the wood. Flames crackle forth.

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BRUXIEUS (cont'd)

We must go to the city. Come.

He turns Zeo around, and they head out across the field, leaving the ruined farm and the ghastly funeral pyre filling the sky with reeking smoke.

EXT. HILL ABOVE ASTAKOS - DAY

The SMOKE BECOMES a black pall over a small seaport nestled in a narrow mountain valley. Zeo and Bruxieus look down from a hilltop above it.

BRUXIEUS

The Argives have betrayed us. The Spartans beat them, and so they must turn upon someone else.

As if he could see, Bruxieus takes a final, fated look at the city, turns, and leads Zeo away.

EXT. MOUNTAINS (AERIAL) - DAY

Bruxieus and Zeo climb into the awesome mountain solitude. They dwindle, and then, like shades of men, they are gone.

END MAIN TITLE SEQUENCE

EXT. FOREST, AKARNANIA - DAY

Summer has given way to winter.. Driving sleet patters off bare trees. Zeo and Bruxieus' breath fogs as they hunt under a dead tree for grubs. They are emaciated, reduced to rags. Bruxieus sits down heavily, exhausted.

ZEO

Go back. I'll bring something.

EXT. FARM, AKARNANIA - DAY

From forest's edge, Zeo looks down on his farm. The damage has been repaired. Only a few missing roof tiles and a partial coat of fresh whitewash hint at its violent past. A **NEW FAMILY**, not that much different from Zeo's, now lives here. They come and go about the yard.

EXT. BEHIND BIRD COOP - DAY

Zeo wrings the neck of a chicken. He's about to steal away when he spots HIS PTARMIGAN through the window of the coop. He hesitates. Through the slats he can see people on the far side of the outbuilding.

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They'd see him if he went around to the entrance of the coup. Instead, he tries to reach the bird through the window -- AND BAM! He's hit on the head HARD with a threshing flail.

EXT. FARM HOUSE - DAY

SCREAMING outrage. Zeo lolls in semi-consciousness at the foot of a tanning board. **WOMEN** spit in his face and **TEENAGE BOYS** punch his head like a bag against the wood. A man pulls the boys off Zeo. He is one of the Argive Soldiers, now the owner of the farm.

ARGIVE SOLDIER

Hold him.

The boys heft Zeo up against the tanning board, pin his arms wide. Zeo comes to, realizing he's in real danger.

ARGIVE SOLDIER (cont'd)

Little thief. See how you like this.

The man jams A TANNING SPIKE into Zeo's open palm and hammers it into the board. Zeo SCREAMS in agony, thrashes, wide-eyed in terror, urinating himself. The Women point and laugh.

EXT. FARM HOUSE - DUSK (LATER)

Beaten to a pulp, Zeo hangs nailed to the tanning board. He sobs uncontrollably. His shameless, child-like, SCREAMS tear the mountain air. Only his most dogged persecutors remain, two seven year-old **BOYS** off a little ways, poking at something in the dust with a stick.

ZEO

Please let me down, I'll do anything
please just let me down...

Sounds of dinner come from within the farmhouse itself. Zeo sees what the boys are playing with: his Ptarmigan's head. A DOG comes out of nowhere, snatches it. Another DOG appears and tries to take it. They start fighting.

The boys shout in excitement, and follow the dogfight out around the corner of an outbuilding and out of sight.

ZEO (cont'd)

No! Don't leave me! DON'T LEAVE ME
BY MYSELF!

A DEEP, KEENING terror fills his soul... and suddenly at his side is Bruxieus.

INT. CAVE - NIGHT

Bruxieus wraps Zeo's smashed hands by the light of a wet, smoldering fire. More an earthen burrow than a cave, water drips on them from exposed roots above. Zeo WEEPS, unrecognizable in the swollen flesh that is his face.

ZEO

I couldn't stop screaming. I want to die.

BRUXIEUS

You will not die. When they put out my eyes with pitch I wanted to die, but it is not our choice.

ZEO

(crying)

I was so afraid. They killed them, and I couldn't do anything. They didn't even notice me. I'll never be able to hold a spear. I'll never be able to pay them back...

Bruxieus is silent. It is true. Zeo's hands are ruined.

BRUXIEUS

Zeo, you must listen. You could not protect your family. Only heroes and the gods have courage by themselves. Men need other men to stand among.

(beat)

You cannot stay up here to take care of me any longer.

Zeo stares through the eightball-hemorrhaged slits that are his eyes. And it is only now that he sees through his grief and pain how deathly haggard Bruxieus is. It was all he could do to save Zeo.

BRUXIEUS (cont'd)

You must have a city. It is in the life of his city that a man finds his greater self. You must leave me and go find a city. A great city like Athens. Where a stranger is welcome and may contribute to its life.

ZEO

I will not leave here.

BRUXIEUS

Yes. You will.

INT. CAVE - MORNING

Zeo awakens, almost immobile in his stiffness and pain.

ZEO

Bruxieus.

His breath fogs in the air. The huddled form of Bruxieus lies beside him. His breath cannot be seen. Zeo looks at the back of Bruxieus' head. Bruxieus is dead.

EXT. FOREST, AKARNANIA - DAY

Zeo, blind with tears, stiff, trudges through the still-falling snow. He heads uphill. Climbs and climbs, higher and higher.

He finds a clearing surrounded by tall trees. He shuffles around and around it, unsure. And at last he stops at the base of a towering pine. The snow is deep.

His beaten face is rigid in determination. He takes off his clothes. He sits down against the tree to die.

The forest hangs in gray silence. It is a place where one could hear a god.

Zeo's breath slows. Ice falls from a tree. The snow draws the life out of him.

HIS BLOODSHOT EYES focus into the infinite distance. And SOMETHING wells up like a tear, REFLECTING IN THEM. Zeo turns his numb gaze up. He breaths. In. Out. In. And he stops.

Above him stands the Cloaked Man. Only the lower half of his face is visible under his hood.

Zeo's mouth opens in question, but his dying brain is too slow to articulate anything.

And at last the Cloaked Man speaks.

CLOAKED MAN

I always thought the spear... a rather
inelegant weapon.

It is as if something has taken Zeo's voice and filled it with tones of impossible power, impossible layers of meaning. The Cloaked Man is leaning on a BOW.

Zeo EXHALES. The Cloaked Man is gone.

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Dully, with infinite strain, Zeo draws himself up from the snow, lifting himself back to life. He stands there naked, the clearing before him beaten with tracks, impossible to tell if they're all his own.

EXT. CAVE - DAY

Zeo pulls the last few rocks and branches over the mouth of the little cave. Now it is Bruxieus' tomb. He straightens, wet, shivering. But he takes up Bruxieus' bow, ITS GRIP FILLING THE FRAME, MOTION MATCH CUTTING TO:

EXT. SPARTAN FRONTIER - DAY

THE BOW PUMPING in Zeo's SCARRED HAND as he sprints ahead, out of the close shot and we discover him healed, sunburnt, lean, flying across a dry plain.

Hot sun bakes the dirt track which winds into the hills up ahead. It is a hard land dotted with olive trees, brush and burr grass. It is not Akarnania. It is a land the gods have forgotten. It belongs to men.

EXT. NEAR BORDER FORT - SUNSET

Zeo squats behind a thicket. The track ahead leads up a rise, and two hundred yards away, above the road, stands an austere hill fort, its coarse stone hard to see in the landscape.

On its highest battlement, silhouetted against the setting sun, stands a lone **SPARTAN SENTRY**. Crested helmet back on its head. Spear in hand. Shield resting against the thighs. Air shimmers, hot, distorting the iconic figure like something from a mirage.

Or a dream. Zeo is transfixed. Awed. Then the sentry seems to turn and look **DIRECTLY AT HIM**.

Zeo almost doesn't hear the **JANGLE** of metal behind, but does, turns in time to get a flash of two **SPARTANS** in full bronze armor, hitting him at a run with their overlapped shields. They bash Zeo into the thicket.

A shocked beat, and then one of them hauls Zeo out by the heel. The butt spike of a spear hovers over Zeo's heart. The two Spartans stand over him, faces hidden in the grim recesses of their helmets.

Others emerge from the landscape around him. They have been here all this time watching him watch them. While the first Spartan holds the spear over Zeo, the other pulls his helmet off, revealing himself as:

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ALEXANDROS, no older than Zeo. Their eyes meet. One look and it's clear he wasn't built for war. Sweat and dust do nothing to conceal his delicate beauty.

The Spartan beside him, on the other hand, is a youth called **TRIPOD**, solid, if not as bright as, his name.

EXT. BORDER FORT MARSHALING YARD - SUNSET

Zeo lays face down in the dust just inside the open gate to the small fort. The two-dozen odd members of a Spartan **AGOGÉ BOUA**, press around him. They are an adolescent training platoon, the sons of Spartan *Homoioi*, full-blooded Peers.

EIRENE (OC)

And what were you going to do with this?

WAR DOGS, chained to a nearby stone wall **HOWL** in fury to get at Zeo. Zeo tries to look up at the **EIRENE** drill-sergeant. The Eirene jams the BOW in front of his nose.

EIRENE (cont'd)

I DIDN'T SAY YOU COULD TAKE YOUR EYES OFF THAT DIRT!

Tripod, kneeling on Zeo's shoulders, shoves Zeo's head back down, not particularly enjoying the job but not particularly minding it either. Alexandros watches from the sidelines, trying to appear severe.

EIRENE (cont'd)

You were gonna take a potshot at me, weren't you, boy?

ZEO

No!

EIRENE

That's what you were gonna do.

ZEO

NO!

EIRENE

Oh, so you just heard how good our hunting is here in Lakedaemon. You're a poacher. A thief.

ZEO

NO!

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CONTINUED:

EIRENE

You don't say much do you? Well, you're a lucky sonofabitch. Know why? I've been here with these idiots all summer. We go home tomorrow, so I'm in a good mood. Look out there.

The Eirene points through the open gates at a stone stele maybe a hundred yards away, by the road.

EIRENE (cont'd)

See that stone? I'm gonna let you go now. But I hope you're fast, because when you get to that stone, I'm gonna let them go.

He gestures to the ferocious dogs. Zeo eyes them.

ZEO

No. I won't leave.

The Eirene is caught off guard. A beat.

EIRENE

Fine. Then I'll just let 'em go now.

ZEO

I don't care.

The Eirene turns for the dogs. Alexandros steps up.

ALEXANDROS

What did you come here for?

Zeo lifts his face off the ground, despite Tripod struggling to keep it down.

ZEO

Courage.

(beat)

They say other cities make temples and palaces. They say Sparta makes men.

The boys howl in sarcastic LAUGHTER. A long beat. The Eirene is at the dogs, undoing their collars... when a tired voice calls out over the racket:

DIENEKES (OC)

Alexandros --

Alexandros looks up. A man - dirty, sweat-plastered - swings a well bucket on a dipping arm into his grasp. He is late 30s, heavily scarred. He is **DIENEKES**.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

The Eirene has stopped to look at him. Everyone has. Silence. Even the dogs stop barking. Dienekes drinks water from a ladle, not bothering to look at the instant audience he has. Doesn't notice the gazes of RESPECT on their faces. Dienekes wipes his mouth.

DIENEKES (cont'd)
-- what do you think of such
philosophical preoccupations?

Alexandros feels the heat of the question. It is more personal than we know. Dienekes passes the ladle to his chuckling comrades, two Spartan Peers, hulking twins, **ALPHEUS** and **MARON**, then a short, savage man in white Helot's tunic, **SUICIDE**. All eyes are on Alexandros.

ALEXANDROS
If sincere... they can be of value.

In his deferential response, we realize Dienekes is Alexandros' mentor.

DIENEKES
Then find something for this
philosopher to do.

Tripod eases off Zeo. The Eirene straightens, leaves the dogs on the chain. Zeo is reprieved. He rolls over, watches Dienekes and the other warriors pick up their kits and disappear into the recesses of the fort.

Alexandros stares at Zeo, cold.

EXT. BORDER FORT - NIGHT

Zeo sleeps on the ground outside the gate to the fort. He awakens as QUIET VOICES draw closer.

EIRENE (OC)
...and what news of the Persian?

DIENEKES (OC)
The revolt is out of hand in Egypt.
Darius marches there with the 500,000
men he had meant for us.

Dienekes, Suicide, Alpheus and Maron are cinching their packs, gathering weapons in the threshold to the fort. The Eirene helps. Zeo listens, not really understanding.

DIENEKES (cont'd)
Don't worry. He's got more.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The Spartans emerge. Dienekes notes Zeo like he would a dog in front of a store, and the Spartans set out into the night. Zeo watches them go.

EXT. TOP OF THE GRINDER - DAY

The Agoge platoon reaches the summit of the long hill out of Sparta known as the Grinder. Zeo, under a 150-pound pack of water skins, totters along at the rear of the column. They top the rise, and the view makes Zeo pause:

The Eurotas Valley sprawls away before them, Parnon Mountains on the left, the great snow-capped peaks of Taygetos on the right.

Peaceful curls of smoke rise from small farms across the land. At the heart of the vale a modest knot of buildings sits astride the gleam of river. There is no city wall.

This is Sparta.

EIRENE

Who's stealing us dinner?

A SHOUT goes up, and the platoon shoves Tripod out to the front. They CHEER, begin taking his armor and weapons.

PLATOON

TRIPOD TRIPOD TRIPOD TRIPOD!

The grinning Tripod, stripped to his undergarments for speed, throws his arms up for his fans, and then takes off running for town, ahead of the marching platoon.

EXT. SIDE OF ROAD, SPARTA - DAY

The Agoge platoon rests, grumbles for food in the shade of a couple of trees by the side of the main dirt road through Sparta. Zeo, exhausted, alone, sits in the sun beyond the ring of Spartans who have forgotten him.

EIRENE

Where in hell is Tripod!

A **YOUNG BOY** comes running up to the Eirene. Zeo can't hear, but he can see the solemn REACTIONS.

EXT. THE RUNWAY - DAY

A silent **CROWD** lines an alley of plane trees before the temple of Artemis Orthia. A line of shirtless **YOUNG MEN** stand on each side of the alley.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The grove resounds with a steady, repetitive wooden WHACK WHACK WHACK. WE MOVE PAST pale faces doing their best to master fear TO:

A tree with a waist-high IRON BAR protruding from it. A young man grips the bar as a pair of powerfully-built **FLOGGERS** with frayed birch rods BEAT his back. Two companions kneel on either side at his shoulders. With a cry the young man pitches into the dust. His companions drag him out from under as the next boy steps forward.

Yet the terrible, metronomic WHACK WHACK WHACK continues unabated from the opposite side of the grove where an identical scene is being played out upon TRIPOD.

His back lays open like a torn shirt. The Floggers wear aprons of blood. Alexandros kneels at Tripod's shoulder with another boy from the Agoge platoon.

AT THE FRINGE OF THE CROWD, with the rest of the platoon:

Zeo watches the ceremony in silence as the beating of the next boy in line on the left begins. Grim face on the Eirene. Dienekes is there.

EIRENE

He won't stop it. It was his lamb.

Zeo follows the Eirene's gaze out to the man presiding over the horrifying spectacle:

POLYNIKES, 30, a bronzed god of a man who paces up and down the alley between the lines of boys. His eyes rove over the upcoming victims with an arrogance matched by lethal competence. Two-time Olympic victor, peerless athlete, he is the greatest warrior in Sparta.

As he paces past Tripod one of the Floggers tries to catch Polynikes' eye, looking for some sort of signal. Polynikes ignores him, moves on.

Alexandros, face speckled in Tripod's blood, stares in hate after him. With a muffled cry, the boy across the grove goes down. Polynikes gestures to the next in line.

Alexandros into Tripod's face, but Tripod doesn't see him. He is in another place. Alexandros feels something: a pool of blood spreading beneath them. Alexandros, in fear for his friend's life, hisses to him.

ALEXANDROS

Let go. Tri, let go.

The other companion begins to whisper it too.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ZEO watches, horrified, as a tragic awe at what is happening begins to sweep through the Crowd. He dares a glance at Dienekes who observes, unblinking, solemn, with a gaze which has witnessed sights a thousand times worse. But it is only Zeo who, for a second, sees under that gaze a look. A look, almost, of religious wonder.

The boy in the left line falls. Yet Tripod hangs on to that bar. Flaps of trapezius muscle hang over his open back. Vertebrae show. Blood and gore over everything.

Polynikes seems to notice Tripod for the first time. The scared Flogger looks for the signal to put an end to it. Polynikes holds his gaze for a beat, then turns away.

FLOGGER

(to Tripod, sotto)

Damn it, pitch! We can't stop til you pitch!

But Tripod can't hear him. Neither can he hear Alexandros, voice shaking.

ALEXANDROS

Please. Please, Tri, let go.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Tripod turns his simple face to Alexandros. WHACK. WHACK. WHACK.

Polynikes suddenly stops pacing, wheels. He gives the Flogger a barely perceptible nod. The Flogger nods to his mate, and with a sudden rush of power they heft their rods simultaneously in both hands --

-- and Tripod looks into Alexandros' eyes. Beyond pain. Not madness. But beyond self.

And WHAM! The Floggers strike Tripod on the back with all their might, in tandem, to knock him out and end it. Tripod goes down. Alexandros and the other boy catch him. There is no reaction from the Crowd.

Polynikes casually gestures to the next boy to take Tripod's place.

Zeo watches from a distance as they drag Tripod away.

Tripod doesn't get up. THE CROWD blocks our view for a beat. When they clear Tripod is still down. Alexandros is trying to talk to him, wake him. Their companion slowly stands. Then THE CROWD blocks our view again. And when they clear a final time:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

Tripod is dead. Alexandros stands, shaky, turns back, looking at the crowd. He spots Dienekes. His legs try to give as he makes his way out of the alley toward him.

Awkward, Zeo bows his head as Alexandros comes up to Dienekes. Alexandros wheezes, at the edge of an asthmatic fit, seeing the blood on himself. The beatings continue below as if nothing had happened.

ALEXANDROS (cont'd)

All Tri did was take his lamb.

Dienekes appears unmoved by Alexandros' distress.

DIENEKES

Answer me this, Alexandros. Did Polynikes order your friend scourged for stealing?

Alexandros REACTS to the formal structure of Dienekes' speech. It is the beginning of a DIALECTIC, the question-answer method of Spartan instruction.

ALEXANDROS

No, Dienekes. He was punished for being caught.

DIENEKES

And why was he not punished for stealing?

Alexandros gets control of his breath, the mental exercise averting the impending asthma attack.

ALEXANDROS

Because we in the Agoge are not given sufficient food. We are thus encouraged to steal so that we may learn resourcefulness in war.

DIENEKES

Now answer again, Alexandros. Did you observe in the manner of Polynikes or the eirenes delivering the beating any sign or indication of malice?

Alexandros hesitates, but must truthfully answer:

ALEXANDROS

No.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

DIENEKES

Was their intention to crush his will
or break his spirit?

ALEXANDROS

No.

DIENEKES

What was their intention?

ALEXANDROS

To harden his mind against pain.

DIENEKES

What do you think war will be like?

It is a rhetorical question. It hangs there. Dienekes
lowers his voice. Softer, human now, compassionate.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

Could Tripod have stopped the ordeal
at any time?

Tears fill Alexandros' eyes.

ALEXANDROS

All he had to do was let go... Why?

It is a hopeless, unanswerable question.

DIENEKES

Describe to me what it is that defeats
our enemies.

Alexandros, through his tears, answers despairingly:

ALEXANDROS

Our steel and our skill.

DIENEKES

These, yes. But there is something
more. The god we Spartans call our
own. Phobos. The god of fear. It is
fear which defeats our enemies. And
from what place does fear arise?

ALEXANDROS

The flesh.

DIENEKES

Tripod was foolish. He cost the city
his life.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (5)

DIENEKES (cont'd)

Yet he showed us what it is to pass
beyond pain, beyond fear of death.
You were horrified to behold his
agony, but it was awe that struck you
truly, wasn't it?

(beat)

Remember this, my young friend. There
is a force beyond fear. More powerful
than self-preservation.

The words strike Zeo to the heart. He dares to look up.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

You have just witnessed it in a crude,
unself-aware form. Let us remember
and honor your friend Tripod. For
what we saw today... was victory.

EXT. BARNYARD - DAY

A ROCK hits Zeo in the head. He flinches, glares at
ROOSTER, 20s, who paces along the barnyard fence. He is
coarse, big and muscular, ever-angry. He wears the white
tunic of a Helot. A slave. Like Zeo is now. They tend
a flock of sacrificial GOATS.

ROOSTER

What'd you think they'd do? Enroll
you in the Agoge? 'Oh thank you,
Zeones, for coming to Sparta! We'll
make a hero out of you!'

(cackling, then angry)

Do it right! Use your hand, mighty
warrior! Mustn't offend the gods with
a shit-caked sacrifice.

Other **HERD BOYS** watch as Zeo, standing over a goat,
begins picking at the goat's backside with his fingers.
Rooster shoves one of the Herd Boys out of his way as he
paces, looking at Zeo.

ROOSTER (cont'd)

No, you don't get Dienekes for a
mentor. You get me. This is your
academy. And for today's lesson...
oh, guess what! It's the same as
YESTERDAY'S lesson! In what does the
life of a slave consist? It is in
being debased and degraded and having
no option but to endure it. How do
you like it so far?

Zeo finishes with the one goat, goes on to the next,
ignoring Rooster. Rooster slaps Zeo hard in the head.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ROOSTER (cont'd)
Answer me!

Zeo won't give him the satisfaction, so Rooster knocks him down into the shit. Rooster waits for him to attack, but Zeo just picks himself up and goes back to his job.

ROOSTER (cont'd)
You're a fool for coming here. Made yourself a slave.

INT. BARN - MORNING

Zeo sleeps in a corner among a dirty pile of goatskins. Morning filters in. A Herd Boy shakes him awake.

HERD BOY
Better get up before he finds you.

EXT. LANE, SPARTA - DAY

Zeo and the Herd Boy, both in Helot's white, drive a knot of goats down a shaded lane. **HELOT FAMILIES** stir among the dry white-washed walls of their homes.

HERD BOY
Why did they send you to Rooster?

Goats stop to nibble fallen olives. Zeo taps them with his long, light switch.

ZEO
Couldn't keep the plough straight.
Tried for a month.

The Herd Boy is about to ask why, but then sees the SCARS on Zeo's hands, the crippled way he plies the switch.

EXT. PASTURE, SPARTA - DAY

White flecks on green pasture graze under the heights of Taygetos. The tiny figure of Zeo wanders among them.

EXT. STONE WALL, EDGE OF PASTURE, SPARTA - DAY

Zeo sits atop a stone wall beneath a tree. His flock is scattered in the pasture before him, but he's not watching the goats.

Across the field, in the far distance, a platoon of scarlet-cloaked **SPARTANS** mills about. These are not Agoge trainees. These are the real deal.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

They massage aching calves, joke and laugh in small groups, and spar with spear and shield.

Without warning a HAND grabs Zeo by the throat and pulls him back over the wall. Zeo crashes into the dust, scrambles up, ready to fight:

ROOSTER. Rooster just laughs. Zeo freezes.

ROOSTER

Sorry, didn't mean to wake you.

ZEO

I wasn't asleep.

ROOSTER

Yes you are, you just don't realize it. I know what you're thinking. You want to kill me, don't you? You lay awake every night, dreaming about it. You'd use that big Thessalian bow... if your masters would let you near it.

Zeo's face is a confession.

ROOSTER (cont'd)

But you won't lay a finger on me. It's not cause you're afraid. No. You won't touch me no matter what I do to you because I'm *their* property.

He flings a rock at a cluster of goats, sending them scrambling. Zeo stands there, despising him.

ROOSTER (cont'd)

What are they to you? So your city was sacked. You hate the Argives and think these heroes are their enemies. Wake up! Do you know why they didn't kill you the second you stepped foot across their border? Because killing you, a stranger, would make them dirty in the eyes of their gods.

Zeo reacts, distressed.

ROOSTER (cont'd)

But they kill us. We who live in their homes, take care of their brats, feed them, tend their fields. And are they afraid of what their gods will think? No. Because every year they declare war on us Helots.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ROOSTER (cont'd)

Declare war on a nation that doesn't exist anymore. And that allows any one of them to kill any one of us at any time for any reason. With their gods' blessing.

ZEO

How come I hear you're always hopping like a flea during battle to get into the fight yourself? If you hate them so much, that is?

ROOSTER

I'm better than any two of them. I want them to know it.

(beat)

Have fun beating the dog. There's better scenery if you know where to look.

That piques Zeo's interest. Rooster turns and stalks off down the road. Zeo glances at his flock.

ROOSTER (cont'd)

The goats aren't going anywhere. They're as stupid as you.

Skeptical, Zeo tosses his switch down and follows.

EXT. BRUSH NEAR WOMEN'S TRAINING FIELD - DAY

Zeo belly-crawls behind Rooster through thick underbrush down a steep hill. Rooster stops. Zeo rustles up beside him. He looks out from the brush. And REACTS.

The hill slopes down to an athletic field - track, jumping pit, javelin range - filled with hundreds of **SPARTAN WOMEN** in various states of undress.

Lithe 18-year-olds with the shaved heads of newlyweds take shotput instruction from tan, fit, 50-year old matrons. Female Helots tend groups of playing children.

A heat of 20 and 30-year olds fly down the track as pregnant friends cheer them from the sidelines. The field is filled with laughter, the buzz of gossip, camaraderie. Rooster leers at the astonished Zeo.

ZEO

We're not supposed to be here.

ROOSTER

Then go.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

But Zeo just gives him a look, then looks back out. A group of 20-something women are coming off the field right below, shining with sweat, throw dust on themselves, scrape the mud off.

Naked, athletic back TO CAMERA, one of them takes a bowl of water from one of the Helots, and arms quivering with delicious exhaustion, hefts it over her head. She pours, and the CAMERA TRACKS AROUND HER, REVEALING:

DIOMACHE. She slings her wet black hair from her face. She is the center of the chatting group of friends.

She takes Zeo's breath away. He edges forward, and suddenly the mat of leaves he's lying on SLIDES.

Rooster curses, vanishes. Zeo tries to push himself back but it only makes the situation worse, and with a thrash of leaves and brush, he slides out onto the hillside in plain view. Diomache and the women look up RIGHT AT HIM.

EXT. THE RUNWAY - DAY

CLOSE ON ZEO'S HANDS as he tries to close them around the rusted iron bar.

POLYNIKES (OC)

At least your meat-head friend was
hard to catch.

Zeo looks up. But Polynikes is NOT talking to him. Instead, he's lecturing the young man gripping the other bar across the flogging grove. We're assuming it's Rooster, and then Polynikes paces out of the way, REVEALING Alexandros.

POLYNIKES (cont'd)

Tripod must've robbed me blind before
I ever got him. But you...

Polynikes just laughs. Small groups of Spartans and the boys of Alexandros' Agoge platoon watch. It is the crowd for an ad hoc flogging, not the mass ritual punishment we saw before. Zeo spots Rooster out there smirking at him.

POLYNIKES (cont'd)

...I bet it was your first time. The
question is, can you handle the pain
like he could, pretty boy? I bet you
pitch before five. I bet you do.

We see Alexandros, pale and thin, stripped to his loincloth for the first time. Zeo has 50 pounds on him.

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CONTINUED:

POLYNIKES (cont'd)

What do you say, Dienekes? Do you think your handsome protege can take five strokes?

Dienekes is sitting under a tree whittling a toy. Suicide hovers behind him.

DIENEKES

Alexandros will outlast the Helot.

Dienekes casually gestures with his knife to Zeo. Zeo REACTS as if Dienekes had stabbed him instead. Polynikes laughs, goes over to Zeo, takes one look at his scars and LOVES IT.

POLYNIKES

My new xiphos for that rosewood spear of yours.

Dienekes nods his agreement. Alexandros and Zeo make EYE CONTACT. Alexandros is afraid. Polynikes nods to the Eirenes with the flogging canes. Zeo looks away and... WHACK! Pain sears Zeo's body. WHACK! Alexandros muffles a cry. WHACK! Zeo flinches. WHACK! Alexandros gasps. WHACK! Zeo's turn. WHACK! Alexandros'.

Rooster watches from above, silently rooting for Zeo. Another blow to Zeo. Alexandros lets out a terrible cry.

WHACK! Zeo's hands knot around the bar, almost slip. WHACK! Alexandros goes down. The fifth stroke. The Spartans look away from Alexandros in shame. Zeo continues to take it: WHACK. WHACK. WHACK.

Alexandros, hauled out from under the bar by his friends, swims up out of the pain. He glances at Dienekes. Dienekes won't look at him. WHACK. WHACK. WHACK. Zeo is still enduring it in silence. It's going on so long it's not just embarrassing, it's humiliating.

Rooster's face is a mask. But he is beaming inside.

Zeo's grip is what fails him. With a final blow he hits the dirt. Polynikes goes over to Dienekes, who stands.

POLYNIKES (cont'd)

Keep your spear. You'll need it to defend Sparta from her future.

Zeo lies under the bar, Alexandros on his stomach not ten feet away. Zeo masters his pain, opens his eyes. Alexandros is staring at him.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

A LOWER LEG suddenly blocks their view of each other. There is not the slightest look of recognition in Dienekes' eye as he bends down to Zeo's face.

DIENEKES

You. You will be at the agoge tomorrow and you will teach Alexandros about pain.

EXT. STREAM, SPARTA - DAY

Rooster splashes water on Zeo's back at the edge of a stream. Zeo can't help grinning through his pain.

ROOSTER

What are you smiling about, you moron? Sparring partner...

ZEO

Least I won't have to look at your face anymore.

ROOSTER

So you think if you do a good job they'll make you a squire, eh? Don't you get it? That's what they do. Promote one of us a fraction over the others, get us fighting over station. You're still a slave.

Rooster splashes water on Zeo's stripes to remind him of the fact. Zeo's face contorts in pain.

ROOSTER (cont'd)

You think you're so lucky, here's what's gonna happen. Every time you beat that shit-nosed little snot, he's gonna have his friends pay you a visit after dark. And every time you try to let him beat you, the Eirenes will know it, and they'll really knock the crap out of you.

Zeo tries to gauge the truth but can't turn far enough to look at him. Rooster continues to tend his wounds.

ROOSTER (cont'd)

Then again, maybe you don't have anything to worry about. The way those hands of yours work, the only place you're gonna out-spar him is a slapping contest...

EXT. AGOGE BARRACKS - DAY

A long lane of BARRACKS stretches to a cross road in the distance. Boy **SENTRIES**, ages 7-19, in full armor, shield at their knees, stand on the covered porticos of each wood and mud-brick building. Shouted **COMMANDS** carry from exercise yards behind the barracks. This is the Agoge, the compulsory military school for every Spartan male.

Zeo steps INTO FRAME, back bandaged, uncomfortable.

EXT. AGOGE EXERCISE YARD - DAY

ZEO cringes behind a body-length wicker shield, someone else's jammed against his back. He's in the front row of a packed mass of other young **HELOT SPARRING PARTNERS**. We barely have time to register the setup when:

CRASH! The bronze hoplon shields of the Agoge platoon slam into the Helot wicker, knocking them back en masse.

Zeo slips and goes down, trying to cover himself with the shield as the column of Spartan boys literally WALKS OVER HIM, jabbing down with the wooden butts of their practice spears, grinding him into the dirt.

EIRENE (OC)

Keep those lines of force straight!
All right, all right, now SCRAMBLE!

Now we see they're in a long, narrow exercise yard behind the barracks.

Zeo pushes himself off the ground, breathless, a little mad. The two teams break up what remains of their formations, start pairing off, Spartan vs. Helot. Zeo looks into the flustered face of another Helot.

ZEO

Who uses wicker shields?

The Helot shakes his head: nobody. Zeo searches the faceless helmets of the Spartans for Alexandros. And then he spots Dienekes, sitting on the rear portico, whittling whatever damn thing it is he keeps working on.

A PRACTICE SPEAR is suddenly planted in front of him. Alexandros stares at Zeo from within the T-shaped recesses of his helmet.

ALEXANDROS

Take it.

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CONTINUED:

Zeo hesitates, then grips the spear. Alexandros backs away, hefts his own spear overhand, over his shoulder.

Zeo raises his shield and spear like Alexandros, and with the rest of the platoon similarly engaged, they begin to fight. They circle, feint. Alexandros jabs at Zeo's unprotected face. Zeo barely blocks it, lashes back out.

With a BONG he connects with Alexandros' shield, and his hand fails him. The spear falls to the ground. Alexandros hits Zeo hard in the throat with his spear, finishing the mock kill.

ALEXANDROS (cont'd)

Pick it up.

Zeo, choking, sees Dienekes glance up at the duel, note Zeo's distress. Zeo lifts his spear, turns back to Alexandros, but as he does, his hand knots up in a palsy, and he can't get it to his shoulder.

ALEXANDROS (cont'd)

What's wrong with you?

ZEO

Nothing, sir. Beg your pardon, sir.

But before Alexandros can respond, Zeo tears a bandage from his back and BEGINS BINDING THE SPEAR INTO HIS HAND. Dienekes watches. And returns to his whittling with the faintest of smiles.

Now the fight resumes. Alexandros attacks. Their spears clatter in a sustained frenzy of blows. Alexandros throws his weight behind his shield, SLAMS into Zeo... and goes down as if he's hit a brick wall. Zeo stands over him, spear poised in his quivering fist.

EXT. THE GYMNASION - DAY

THE CAMERA PUSHES through a tall stone gateway into a walled athletic precinct, the inner sanctum of male Sparta, the GYMNASION. Calisthenic fields, throwing ranges, jumping boxes, wrestling and boxing pits lie within the concentric rings of running tracks.

Scores of Spartan **PEERS** and Agoge **TRAINEES** compete naked except for the dust and chalk on their bodies.

Zeo kneels next to Alexandros at the edge of a sunken dirt boxing pit. The rest of the platoon makes a SHOUTING, fist-pumping circle for two **PUGILISTS** within.

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CONTINUED:

One of the bloody contenders goes down, and the boua lets out a collective ROAR. A group of heavily-scarred older warriors watches from the cheap seats at the top of the pit. The Eirene, pacing behind the boys, suddenly catches Dienekes' eye up there. Dienekes nods.

EIRENE

Alexandros!

Alexandros and Zeo jump up, dart into the ring, take up their stances. The fight might as well be over. Zeo is just far too big. The Eirene gives the signal, and they go at it. The onlookers CHEER.

Zeo doesn't need a strong grip for this. In fact, his dead hands hit like lead saps. He comes out, fists flying onetwothreefourfivesix... and Alexandros drops. The Platoon SHOUTS. Zeo is surprised at his own prowess.

He gives Alexandros a breath, and Alexandros gets up, cut on the mouth and ear. Alexandros lets loose, but Zeo can't even feel the blows on his arms and shoulders.

He aims a single, almost tentative punch, and knocks Alexandros flat again. The onlookers ROAR in disgust. Alexandros gets up, but Zeo realizes this isn't a real contest. He weaves to avoid Alexandros.

It makes DIENEKES angry. Dienekes turns away, looking for something. A beat, and he comes back to the pit.

Zeo jabs at Alexandros, letting Alexandros block him. He fires a half-hearted shot at Alexandros' head which Alexandros easily ducks, and SMACK!

A switch opens up the back of Zeo's neck. Zeo flinches, turns to see Dienekes behind him, barely in control.

DIENEKES

You ever baby him again, I'll break
your neck, you little shit! KILL HIM!

Zeo whirls, stung to rage, attacks Alexandros like a beast. Alexandros reels backward, and now it is FEAR, fear of Zeo that breaks him, not Zeo's fists. Zeo's wild swings barely connect, but they knock Alexandros into the ring of his companions. The companions throw him back at Zeo, wild with BLOODTHIRST.

It gives Alexandros a full-blown asthma attack. His breath seizes on him as Zeo batters him with bodyblows into the dirt. Zeo kneels on him to finish him, but a terrible RASP escapes Alexandros' lungs. Zeo pauses.

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CONTINUED: (2)

DIENEKES (cont'd)

Hit him!

Zeo punches Alexandros in the face, knocking him out.

EXT. ALEXANDROS' BARRACKS, PORTICO - NIGHT

Helots and dogs lie asleep on the barracks portico. Zeo, head propped up, sews something in the near darkness. He holds it up to his face to see better. It is a HALF-GLOVE with straps to tighten his grip and a loop in the palm big enough to accommodate the haft of a spear.

A RUSTLE from the grass nearby. A SHADOW goes by the portico. Then three or four more. Zeo feigns sleep.

ALEXANDROS

You.

Zeo opens his eyes. Alexandros, bruised but alive looms over him. With a jerk, he gestures for Zeo to follow. Zeo sits up and sees a half dozen of Alexandros' friends waiting for him. Slowly, Zeo gets up.

EXT. AGOGE EXERCISE YARD - NIGHT

Zeo stands in the middle of the exercise yard surrounded by the dark figures. He braces himself. They begin whispering to each other.

ALEXANDROS

My mother made a cheese ball today.
It will be in the black jar.

The shadows depart. Zeo stands there with Alexandros.

ALEXANDROS (cont'd)

Why do you look so nervous?

ZEO

What are we doing, sir?

ALEXANDROS

We're going to pay Dienekes a little visit.

EXT. FIELD, SPARTA - NIGHT

Alexandros and Zeo sit against a tree, sated on the platoon's plunder. The last of their companions staggers off to bed. Then Alexandros pulls a pair of sweetcakes out of his cloak, hands Zeo one. They begin eating.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEXANDROS

Lady Arete makes the best sweetcakes.
(beat, thoughtful)
You know he did it on purpose.

ZEO

Did what, sir?

ALEXANDROS

You. And me. Put us together. He
decided it months ago. It wasn't an
accident we were flogged the same day.

ZEO

Why did he...

Alexandros shakes his head in ignorance. They eat.

ALEXANDROS

What is your name?

ZEO

Zeones, sir.

ALEXANDROS

Only call me sir around our betters.

In the moonlight Zeo can see Alexandros' battered face.
He looks away, guilty.

ALEXANDROS (cont'd)

How do you do it?

Zeo tilts his head, questioning.

ALEXANDROS (cont'd)

The pain. It doesn't hurt you.

Zeo looks down at his hands.

ZEO

You just remember things that hurt
worse. And then it doesn't matter so
much.

Alexandros sighs, tips his head back, looks at the moon.

ALEXANDROS

Do you have a girl?

Zeones hesitates. Pushes the image of Diomache away.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ZEO

No.

ALEXANDROS

I have a girl. Her name is Agathe.
Her face is like a goddess'. Her body
is like a vale beyond Taygetos. I
could hunt all my life and forget the
world. She sings with me. I will
marry her.

He looks at Alexandros as if daring him to challenge the
statement. But Zeo just nods his respect. He hesitates,
then looks full in Alexandros' face.

ZEO

I thought you and your friends would
beat me for what I did today. I'm
sorry I believed you capable of such a
thing.

Alexandros considers a long beat.

ALEXANDROS

Well... the option did cross my mind.

He snorts. Then Zeo does. Then they laugh. And their
laughter builds on each other til it silences the
crickets, and a dog somewhere, startled from sleep, howls
in annoyance.

EXT. THE BIG RING - DAY

Men and women, Spartan and Helot, mob a track. Zeo
shoves his way in, BACK LONG HEALED, blocking for
Alexandros. On the track, settling themselves over stone
starting blocks, are a heat of Peers in full kit with
shield and armor. One of them is Polynikes.

ZEO

Dienekes could beat him.

ALEXANDROS

You're joking. Nobody's ever beaten
Polynikes at anything. Even the King
comes to watch him run, and it's got
nothing to do with being his uncle.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Alexandros gestures to the other side of the track. There, a knot of laughing **OLD WARRIORS**, 50s, with scars that make Dienekes' skin look like a baby's, surrounds **KING LEONIDAS**, 50s, graying, eyes sparkling, the perpetrator of some raunchy joke. On foot with the rest of the crowd, he jostles for a better view.

Polynikes, helmet down, digs in... and with a shout from the judge, he and the other **RUNNERS** leap from the blocks.

They erupt in a pack, heavy in armor and shield, but accelerating. The **CROWD** goes crazy. At first it looks like Polynikes has some competition. And then he launches out of the mass of fellow runners as if hurled by the hand of some glorious god.

He is blazing, invincible. He finishes the 300-yard sprint before the others are two-thirds done. He flings off his helmet to the **ROAR** of the crowd. Even Zeo and Alexandros are smiling.

ALEXANDROS (cont'd)

That bastard. Look at him. My father says he's never seen anything like him on the battlefield. The greatest warrior in Sparta...

From the crowd Diomache brings Polynikes water.

ALEXANDROS (cont'd)

And that's his wife, Diomache.

Zeo goes still in recognition. Polynikes grabs the water, douses himself, then seizes Diomache in a **KISS**. Zeo tries to mask his emotion, but Alexandros sees it. Zeo looks at him, guilty, but Alexandros says nothing.

EXT. GROVE - DAY

A **PINE BOUGH** taps Alexandros on the side of the face. Alexandros blinks. Dienekes stands across from him.

DIENEKES

There. Feel it? Phobos.

Dienekes taps him again. Again Alexandros blinks.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

Fear spawns in the flesh. In your hams.

He **SWINGS** the bough back as if to strike suddenly. Alexandros starts to cringe-duck reflexively.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DIENEKES (cont'd)
In your back. The turtle muscles.

Instead of striking, Dienekes gently taps his face.

DIENEKES (cont'd)
In your eyes. The owl muscles.

Zeo glances up. He's sitting on a carpet of pine needles, cleaning and sharpening spears. Nearby Suicide dresses a small wild boar, throwing slices of bacon on a flat bronze skillet in the cooking fire.

DIENEKES (cont'd)
It feeds upon itself. It quickens.
It grows in your body. And then it
possesses you. We are masters of this
monster. In ourselves, we chain it,
lock it in a dark room which we never
enter.

Dienekes turns away. He walks to the edge of the grove, to what we now realize is the brink of a terrifying cliff. Under the tips of his toes there is only air. Alexandros follows him, but remains several steps from the precipitous drop. Zeo stops sharpening the spear.

They are high up in the stony wilds of Taygetos. Sparta seems tiny, no more than a cow town in the valley below.

DIENEKES (cont'd)
In our enemy, we set it free to
consume him. All of this discipline,
all of Phobologika is to this end: to
make this god-monster, Phobos, serve
us. Relax your eyes.

It is as if Dienekes has eyes in the back of his head seeing Alexandros' fear of the cliff. A beat. Zeo watches, spellbound. Alexandros' face goes slack. He steps to the brink beside Dienekes, FEARLESS.

DIENEKES (cont'd)
We are only 8000 Peers. Three times
as many freedmen. We would fit within
Athens a dozen times. We have no
great wall, no magnificent temple. No
wonder to marvel at. Yet we are known
throughout the world. Why? Because
in 600 years no Spartan woman has seen
the campfire of the enemy. And this
is an achievement the world cannot
imagine.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Zeo stares, moved to the depths of his soul.

DIENEKES (cont'd)
That smells good.

The spell is broken. Dienekes turns back to the fire. Alexandros lingers a moment as the wind stirs his hair. He turns, and Dienekes is rummaging through his pack.

DIENEKES
Not again, damn it. Where are the
cakes my wife packed?

EXT. DIENEKES' HOUSE - DAY

Zeo and Suicide carry the boar on a spit. Hunting dogs race past. Dienekes and Alexandros, with net and spear, turn off the country lane.

A tiny whitewashed cottage sits among old olive trees. Flowers spill from clay pots. Low white walls surround a brick-paved courtyard, and jasmine sprawls over an axe-hewn pergola. In its rustic charm it reminds us of Zeo's old home. Zeo feels the resemblance.

A small gate in the walled garden opens, and out charge Dienekes' two **LITTLE GIRLS**.

LITTLE GIRLS
Papa papa!

DIENEKES
Nymphs! I'm being attacked by nymphs!
Or are you centaurs of the forest?

Dienekes grins and gathers them both up in his shield arm. He sticks his free hand in his pack, and pulls out the objects he's been whittling: two wooden toy horses.

An **OLDER DAUGHTER** emerges from the house, and after her, a woman: Dienekes' wife **ARETE**, late 30s, her seasoned beauty a hint of looks which once must have been legendary. One look at Arete and Dienekes together... their love story must have been one for the ages.

ARETE
I sent Mykos with the news. Did he
find you?

DIENEKES
No.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ARETE
Darius is dead.

Alexandros looks in surprise at Suicide and Zeo.
Dienekes doesn't seem to react.

DIENEKES
Who succeeds him?

ARETE
One of his sons. Xerxes.

Dienekes still doesn't react.

ARETE (cont'd)
They are saying in the market that the
Persians will not come now.

DIENEKES
Leonidas has sent for me?

Only the slightest of hesitations marks her surprise at
his foreknowledge.

ARETE
Yes.

Dienekes plays thoughtfully with his daughter's hair.

DIENEKES
The problem with sons is that they
must always out-do their fathers.

EXT. HILLS OUTSIDE SPARTA - DAY

Zeo huffs up a hill. He's packing a hundred pounds of
water in a dozen skins. He crests the hill, REVEALING A
MASSIVE MILITARY EXERCISE underway. A column of Spartans
shoves a mass of wicker-shielded Helots three times its
size, UP THE HILL toward Zeo. Zeo angles around it.

Zeo finds a tree, settles his load beneath it and sits
down. An entire **SPARTAN REGIMENT**, 2400 men in all,
occupies the hillside below him.

Groups of grime-covered, dehydrated men strap on armor,
braid hair, lance blisters, bitch among themselves.
Other groups are actively drilling.

Polynikes stands in serious discussion with a group of
Peers, one of whom draws figures in the dust.

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Further down the hill Dienekes, with his transverse-crest platoon-leader's helmet tipped back, bangs shields in fun with Alpheus as the rest of Dienekes' platoon straps up.

ROOSTER (OC)

Give me that.

Suddenly Rooster drops down beside Zeo. Looks like hell. He points at the water, voice cracked. Zeo just smiles.

ZEO

I don't believe it's been 2 days yet.

ROOSTER

Give it to me.

ZEO

I don't see any of them begging for water. What was it you were saying about being better than any... how many was it, exactly?

Rooster swats one of his sacrificial goats as it comes up behind him. He stares along the ridge of the hill.

ROOSTER

Humping our asses out here all week while you and your cherry boy get to watch. Least I'm gonna be seeing some real action soon.

Zeo follows Rooster's gaze. Higher up the hill Leonidas confers with his cluster of old warriors. Even at a hundred yards they can make out the serious demeanors. Zeo is jealous, pretends to misunderstand.

ZEO

That's all you need, another pregnant girl. Hey, that one's cute.

He points to a goat, but Rooster ignores him, intent on Leonidas and his advisors.

ROOSTER

There's something big happening. I'll tell you what it is if you give me some of that water.

Zeo looks at him for a long moment, then curiosity gets the better of him. He gives Rooster a water skin. Rooster slakes his thirst, takes his time. And just as Zeo thinks he's not going to tell him anything, Rooster stares into his face.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ROOSTER (cont'd)
The Argives. Your old friends.
They've sent an embassy to Xerxes to
feel him out, offer alliance.

Zeo goes cold. Burns with envy at Rooster and hate for
the Argives.

ROOSTER (cont'd)
I'll kill some for you.

Suddenly out of the corner of his eye, Zeo sees Polynikes
STARING AT SOMETHING in the valley below. A beat, an
unbelieving half-step, and Polynikes is in motion.

ROOSTER
Uh oh.

Half the regiment turns. The other half turns upon that.

Polynikes storms down the hill, aiming for an eight-man
stick, the basic subdivision of the platoon. It is off
to one side, like an afterthought. They are trainees,
here merely to observe, in the process of arming.

Down the line, hoplon SHIELDS stand upright, supported by
wooden tripods. EXCEPT THE LAST. It lies face down in
the dirt, unattended.

POLYNIKES
Whose shield is this!?

PULL BACK TO REVEAL: ALEXANDROS. The shield is his.
Without further ado, Polynikes smashes him in the face.

EXT. OAK TREE - NIGHT

Alexandros grinds his shield against the tree. His
rankmates, lined up behind him in single file, shields
planted in the hollows of backs, shove him into the tree.
Their straining feet have made a deep rut in the dirt.
The army is no longer there. Only Polynikes pacing.

POLYNIKES
Not even the dumbest shit-worm of a
plebe would defame his shield, leave
it where it couldn't be snatched up in
an instant!

He throws a fistful of dirt in their faces. Alexandros'
shield loses purchase against the bark and he's shot out.
He crashes to the ground in exhaustion. Polynikes looms
over him as the next boy in line takes Alexandros' place.

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POLYNIKES (cont'd)

Why is it that the man who loses his helmet or breastplate suffers no punishment, but the man who loses his shield is stripped of his citizenship?

ALEXANDROS

My helmet and armor are for my protection, but the shield is for my brother's.

Alexandros, nose caked with blood, rises, and goes to the end of the line. Polynikes shouts at the others:

POLYNIKES

Why is this tree STILL STANDING!? I'm disgusted. Disgusted!

And he huffs off into the night. Zeo steals in from the darkness with water for Alexandros and the others.

EXT. HILLTOP, OUTSIDE SPARTA - DAWN

Zeo awakens. He sits up. And as the rising sun streams down into the valley below, IT REVEALS:

Alexandros and his companions still toiling against the towering, invincible oak. It is futility itself. And yet, like Sisyphus, they do not yield. They have gone beyond human limits. Zeo's heart SOARS.

EXT. FIELD, SPARTA - DAY

Dienekes and Alexandros, in full armor, shield and spear in hand, train at fighting in the deion, or two-man unit. They circle, side-by-side, left shoulder to left shoulder, facing opposite directions, covering each other, defending themselves from imaginary foes. Zeo watches from the shade of a tree.

DIENEKES

In the deion, the hurt man follows the uninjured, the fatigued man follows the fresh, the junior man follows the senior. And he never leaves his side.

Dienekes darts left, right, dodges, turns. Alexandros tries to match his moves, keep his station, but can't. He's a half-second too slow, his footwork clumsy and he keeps having to glance at Dienekes.

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DIENEKES (cont'd)

Don't look at me! Feel where we are.
In the deion, there must be truth.
You must know me. You must know how
hurt I am. There can be no lie. Now
lead! I'm hit!

Alexandros takes over, and now Dienekes follows his moves. Now they spin and turn in unison, Dienekes a mirror image of Alexandros. Every thrust, every block with the shield, every stutter-step Alexandros makes. Dienekes never looks up. It is almost superhuman.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

Do you hear it? That tone. That
music. In you, Alexandros. In you.

ALEXANDROS

Yes. Yes...

And as the SCORE WELLS UP they spin like a whirlwind. Zeo watches, awed.

DIENEKES

That note is you, Alexandros. Find
that note, in everything you do, in
everything you are. You're hit! I
lead!

And the dance shifts again to Dienekes. Alexandros tries to follow. At first he's still hesitant, a half-beat behind...

DIENEKES (cont'd)

Now, hear my note.

And with that, Dienekes whirls, jab-jab-jab, a ballet of spear strikes, beautiful and terrifying, the MUSIC faster MOUNTING, and Alexandros, at last, hears him. Zeo rises from the ground in awe as Alexandros catches speed, finds the rhythm, sensing Dienekes' every move, responding, fast, lithe, in perfect harmony.

EXT. POLYNIKES' HOUSE - PREDAWN

Cricket-song fills the pre-dawn air outside a spare, flat-roofed house. The lightening sky promises dawn. Zeo lies in the brush. Just beyond, a vegetable garden run riot over its staked boundaries. Zeo rises, steals to the garden and hops the fence:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

RIGHT NEXT TO DIOMACHE on her hands and knees picking breakfast. She spooks. Zeo freezes, even more spooked than she is. Too spooked to jump back over the fence.

For a breathless beat they look at each other, Zeo unable to move, Diomache unable to scream. And then she seems to register he's a Helot, realizes what he's doing. Zeo's eyes flick from her to the still-sleeping house.

DIOMACHE

Why don't you run, slave? You know
whose house this is.

But Zeo can't run. She kneels there before him, white shift hiked up on her hip. Her body dark and glorious as the earth, garden hanging heavy over her with its stinging scent of vine, a plant still in her hand, some secret goddess about her rounds, breathing life into the world.

He and she alone. At the birth of time. He stares, mute, like an animal, wanting her. A beat.

DIOMACHE (cont'd)

How dare you look at me.

Zeo ducks his head, averting his eyes.

But then he looks up again. Her savage glare vanishes. A beat. A blink.

Eyes lock. Bold. Daring her to dare him to take her now, right here. She reads him. Understands. In that heartbeat she looks at him with infinite wisdom. And she doesn't cry out.

Zeo's courage fails him. He jumps the fence and is gone into the darkness. And still she doesn't cry out.

INT. DIENEKES' BARRACKS - DAY

Zeo, shaken still by the encounter, pretends to listen as Dienekes checks the warp of his spear, tutoring Alexandros. OC the CLAMOR of hundreds of men, the braying of pack animals, the SINGING of women.

DIENEKES

Answer me this. For what reason does
Leonidas break the armistice and lead
us once more against our old enemy,
Argos?

The question gets Zeo's attention.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEXANDROS

They treat with the Persian and refuse
our offer of alliance.

Beyond the portico two Spartan regiments throng the road,
flowing by. Suicide checks Dienekes' campaign pack,
ready to go.

DIENEKES

Do you approve of Leonidas' decision
to kill other Greeks because they
engage in diplomacy with a foreign
power? A foreign power with which we
are not, at this moment, at war?

Zeo's feelings are clear. He glances out at the soldiers
in the road. Envious. Suddenly his heart stops as:
POLYNIKES IS THERE, maybe 20 feet away. He glances right
through Zeo - and goes on. Zeo REACTS to the knowledge
Diomache has said nothing.

ALEXANDROS

Some say that Leonidas acts out of
anger or wounded pride. Some say that
it would be wiser to counter diplomacy
with diplomacy. How can we win the
Argives to our cause by killing them?

Zeo looks at Alexandros. Dienekes notices, takes up his
shield and weapons. Suicide lifts his campaign pack.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

I believe our friend here sees no
problem in it.

Zeo, embarrassed to be the subject of conversation, looks
down. But his hate of the Argives burns through it.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

I have known the King since I was a
child. I have slept in the ditch next
to his on fifty campaigns. I have
never seen him act out of anger or
pride. But I have seen the strength
of gratitude earned by mercy given.

The twins Alpheus and Maron appear on the portico.

ALPHEUS

Hey, windbag! Get out here before you
make the kid throw himself on his
sword!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

DIENEKES

There is a perfect example of disrespectful youth. I'm sure you will not talk to your enomotarch that way when you become a Peer.

Grinning, Dienekes puts a hand on Alexandros' shoulder and heads out of the barracks. Suicide follows him.

EXT. GOING AWAY STREET, SPARTA - DAY

The city ROARS its farewells to the two Spartan regiments filling the dirt avenue. Husbands and wives kiss goodbye, SONGS fill the air, as soldiers and their squires leave town in a jostling, chaotic river of scarlet cloaks, bronze armor, packs, and Helot tunics.

Zeo watches from the portico with Alexandros.

ZEO

Your father.

He points to **OLYMPIEUS**, 50s, swept along the road. Alexandros rushes out to embrace him.

A beat, then Rooster is right there in front of him, marching his sacrificial herd at the rear of the column. He waggles his tongue between his fingers at Zeo. Zeo just nods back, "yeah, you're an asshole."

The army and its train are past. Zeo spots Diomache in the crowd, turning away for home, looking over her shoulder, watching Polynikes go.

EXT. ALEXANDROS' BARRACKS, PORTICO - NIGHT

Zeo lies awake, listening to the night, thinking of Diomache. Suddenly Alexandros hisses at him from the shadows. Zeo sits up.

EXT. GOING AWAY STREET, SPARTA - NIGHT

Alexandros and Zeo jog down the lane. Zeo sees Alexandros is wearing a pack, is dressed for travel.

ZEO

Where are we going?

ALEXANDROS

After them. Don't you want to?

And Zeo's eyes burn.

EXT. HILL ABOVE ROAD, PELOPONNESE - DAY

In the far distance, through waves of heat like a mirage, dust rises from the Spartan column as it winds its way on the road north.

Zeo, carrying Alexandros' pack now, tops a hill as Alexandros, panting, catches up. Following the army.

EXT. FOREST ABOVE ARGOS - DAY

Alexandros follows Zeo up a stout tree, spiraling upward, hand over hand, clearing the surrounding forest until they look down upon: A PLAIN OUTSIDE THE WALLED CITY OF ARGOS. In the far distance the plain ends at the shore and the azure waters of the Argolikos Gulf.

ON THE LEFT, the two Spartan regiments form enormous rectangles, perpendicular to the water. The warriors are spaced evenly, giving battle squires room to arm their masters. Streams of Helots in white flow through the formation bearing water.

On the wings of the main body, lines of Spartan **SKIRITAI RANGERS** sweep along the edge of the forest, driving enemy skirmishers before them in retreat. Scouts on horseback jump a small stream meandering down the center of the plain, returning to their lines --

-- ON THE RIGHT. Three dense phalanx squares of Argive **HOPLITES**, at least twice the Spartans' number, array themselves on the opposite side of the plain. The stone walls of Argos rise behind them. **CITIZENRY** jams the ramparts to watch.

IN THE TREE:

Zeo and Alexandros watch in awe.

ALEXANDROS

Those are Syrakusans in the middle.
They've decided to intervene. They're
supposed to be crack troops.

ZEO

Have you ever seen a battle before?

ALEXANDROS

Of course.
(beat, admitting)
No.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD, ARGOS - DAY

The clamoring masses of Argive Hoplites shake their spears, their painted heraldic shields, and roar across the field at the Spartans. Angry enomotarchs (platoon sergeants) rage, wheedle and shove their men into ranks.

The center body of Syrakusan troops is in better order. They bang their spears inside the bowl of their shields, the cacophony echoing against the walls behind them, a rolling, unending thunder.

A cluster of worried **OFFICERS** confers. One gestures to a **RUNNER** who takes off. The Officers head for their units.

The Runner reaches a group of **TORCHBEARERS** maybe a quarter mile out into no-man's land. The Torchbearers then fan out down the line, lighting stacked carts filled with grass. **SMOKE** begins pouring out.

THE SPARTAN SIDE OF THE FIELD

silently goes about its preparations, each man two arms' lengths from the other to make room for the squires to work. **MOVE DOWN THE LINE:**

Past men drinking water, braiding their hair, binding up their loins under the protective leather flaps at their waists. They almost look bored. Certainly unimpressed by the display across the field... but shields **REST AGAINST KNEES**, ready.

Dienekes stands in the front rank, Suicide behind him tightening Dienekes' breastplate, checking the greaves on his shins. Dienekes watches bemused, as:

THE REEKING **SMOKE** of the enemy bonfires begins blowing **BACK** on the Argives and Syrakusans.

Alpheus, next to him, looks over.

DIENEKES

I wonder what else they're going to throw at us.

EXT. FOREST ABOVE ARGOS - DAY

From Zeo's and Alexandros' perch the smoke from the bonfires casts a pall over the enemy lines. The Citizens watching from the walls cover their faces, but the cacophony of cheering and clashing shields crescendoes.

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ALEXANDROS

Pseudo-andreia. False courage.
That's what Dienekes calls it.

A tiny figure walks out from the Spartan lines, alone.
He stops, listens to the enemy, kicks at the ground.

ALEXANDROS

He's going to outwait them. Make them
cross that stream.

That tiny figure is:

EXT. BATTLEFIELD, ARGOS - DAY

LEONIDAS. The King stops 50 yards from the lines. It is
the first time we get a close look at him. He is
scarred, grizzled, but his eyes... his eyes look young.
He sees the field with a half-century of understanding.

The banging fury of the foe begins to build. It doubles.
Leonidas listens, feeling its rhythm. It triples. It
increases five-fold. He turns and beckons with one hand.

Rooster comes running in from the flank with a pair of
sacrificial goats. The Squires within the lines quickly
finish their duties and dash for the rear.

The Spartan lines are clear, and then as one, SHIELDS
RISE TO PORT, HELMETS DROP OVER FACES. And no longer is
this a league of men, but a faceless metal machine.

THE ARGIVE SIDE OF THE FIELD

The Officers thrust their spears to the sky, the banging
ceases, and a deafening ROAR goes up. The Syrakusan
phalanx STEPS OFF.

EXT. FOREST OUTSIDE ARGOS - DAY

ALEXANDROS

May they kill the ones who murdered
your family.

From the treetop Zeo and Alexandros watch the two Argive
phalanxes on the wings lurch forward, trying to keep up
with the Syrakusans, but clearly the instant they've
begun to move, their formation is falling apart.

ZEO

May they kill them all.

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CONTINUED:

On the opposite side of the field the Spartans wait. And then their RANKS CLOSE from wing to center, each in perfect unison, shortening the frontage of the two rectangles by more than half. Then the FILES step forward, leaving only inches between the man in front and the man behind. They are in the same eight-deep deployment we've seen them use throughout the movie, only now on a vast, army-wide scale.

The two loose rectangles which were the regiments are now compact masses of glittering bronze, dense forests of iron-tipped spears. Behind the line a loose mob of Helot battle squires fans out in support.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD, ARGOS - DAY

The oncoming Syrakusans emerge from the line of bonfires in good order. A beat, and then the Argives on either side appear from the smoke, doing their best to keep up. Leonidas watches them, a quarter mile away now.

They descend into the depression made by the stream bed, and COME UP IN DISARRAY, even part of the Syrakusan front line getting out too far in front of the rest.

Leonidas now takes one of the goats from Rooster, pins it between his knees. Rooster waits behind him with the backup goat, eyeing the oncoming enemy. They're getting close. Too close. The approaching Argive phalanxes break into a trot, then a run.

And at last, with the enemy a hundred yards out, Leonidas draws his xiphos short sword, bellows against the ROARING Syrakusan phalanx:

LEONIDAS
ZEUS, GOD AND SAVIOR!

He cuts the sacrificial goat's throat. Blood sprays out on the ground before him.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)
LAKEDAEMON!

He stabs his sword at the sky, and with a blare of a sarpinx HORN, the entire Spartan army steps off, the percussion rocking the earth. It becomes the first beat in a choral song, THE PAEAN.

The song RISES in five thousand Spartan voices, unintelligible, hair-raising. The line comes at us.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Rooster runs like hell with the spare goat. Leonidas stands his ground, and the advancing Spartan line sweeps him up in its ranks. Polynikes hands him a shield. Leonidas vanishes in the faceless Spartan machine.

HOPLONS UP: rows upon rows of the identical upside-down V of the Greek letter lambda. Helmets and metal shins are all that show behind the wall of overlapping shields.

And with the climactic high note of the Paeon, the upright forest of spears SNAPS into the horizontal plane of attack. The whole Syrakusan phalanx takes a stutter-step at the pure mastery of the maneuver. And then --

THE SPARTAN CENTER

-- IMPACTS. The first rank of Syrakusans simply disappears in the SHOCK, vanishing underfoot. The second and third ranks are crushed against the wall of Spartan hoplons and swept back.

ON THE SPARTAN RIGHT

The Spartan spears snap down in the face of the disordered Argives, and with a deep cry, the terror-struck men in the front ranks slam to a stop ten yards from the Spartans, unable to press home the charge. The rear ranks don't realize it and keep advancing.

Dienekes and his line stride right up to them, and then the weight of the Argive phalanx shoves the hapless victims in the front ranks onto the Spartan spears.

ON THE SPARTAN LEFT

The Argives there crash into the Spartan lines. Spears on shoulders, the first three ranks of Spartans jab over the shield wall at enemy faces, necks, arms. They plow over rank after rank of Argives, and the spears of the rear rankers pump up and down, finishing those trampled underfoot with their lizard-stickers.

EXT. FOREST ABOVE ARGOS - DAY

Alexandros goes pale in horror at the sound that now rises from the field. It is a deep, moaning WAIL, unearthly. Terrible. The soul of some great giant dying. The two lines grind against each other.

ALEXANDROS

Oh God. The mill of Ares...

Zeo SHUDDERS at the sheer horror of his answered prayer.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD, ARGOS - DAY

Helots STREAM out past the Spartan right wing in pursuit of the broken and fleeing Argives. Dienekes sees Suicide flash by, stinging javelins at an isolated knot of enemies trying to retreat in order. Clusters of dead, weapons, groups of Argives too small to worry about, litter the field in the wake of the routed phalanx.

DIENEKES
WHEEL LEFT ON ME!

He begins to turn the line against the Syrakusans' flank.

NOW ABOVE THE FRAY IN THE CENTER

We see the perfect lines of force driving the mowing edge of the Spartan machine forward, the rear ranks doing the real killing. The Syrakusan files, while fifteen men deep, are RAGGED, unable to hold their front ranks up against the Spartans.

And now from the right comes the Spartan flank attack. IMPACT. The outermost Syrakusans try to face left and form a shield wall, but the files are too busy pushing forward to back the men trying to protect their side, and file after file topples over as the Spartan flankers grind into the heart of the Syrakusan body. The lines of force supporting the men in the front WARP under the flank attack, the entire enemy phalanx TWISTS and --

BREAKS. Men drop their shields and spears and run for it. A CRY OF AWE goes up from the Spartans.

EXT. FOREST ABOVE ARGOS - DAY

Zeo and Alexandros watch the enemy army flee the field. With a blow of the HORN, the first three ranks of Spartans break into pursuit.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD, ARGOS - DAY

Polynikes, helmet gone, flies past Dienekes' unit in pursuit of the fleeing Syrakusans. He spears one in the back, and then with the rim of his shield dispatches another who turns to fight. He takes down enemy after enemy, unstoppable.

DIENEKES
Rear rankers form up on me! Let the
kids have their fun!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Alexandros' father, Olympieus, falls out of his line at the very end of the right wing.

OLYMPIEUS

Goddamn it!

He pulls his helmet off. A slice above the bridge of his nose blinds him with blood. He tries to clear his eyes, when TWO ARGIVES spot him. They link shields, and unseen by Olympieus, charge.

EXT. FOREST ABOVE ARGOS - DAY

Alexandros suddenly can see his father out there alone at this edge of the field nearest him.

ALEXANDROS

NO! FATHER!

In a frenzy, he starts dropping out of the tree.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD, ARGOS - DAY

The two Argives are almost on him when ROOSTER SLAMS INTO THEM FROM OUT OF NOWHERE. Olympieus jerks back. Rooster kills the one he knocked over with a knife, and just before the other impales him with a spear, he grabs the shaft and kicks him. The two crash to the ground.

Olympieus gets an eye clear, and sword out, tries to kill the Argive, but Rooster beats him to it, breaking his neck with his bare hands.

ALEXANDROS AND ZEO

race across the battlefield. Helots stream across their path bearing injured warriors by the corners of their cloaks, now serving as stretchers.

They leap shattered spears, clusters of armor, weave around the knots of dead and dying enemies. The battle is all but over. A few holdouts get back to the city gates in some semblance of order, and a terrible WEEPING rises from the onlookers on the city wall.

And there is Olympieus, Rooster supporting him, hobbling him off the field.

ALEXANDROS

Father!

Rooster and Olympieus turn, and in utter surprise, Olympieus grasps his son. Rooster eyes Zeo.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Alexandros and Olympieus embrace fiercely, then Olympieus turns angry.

OLYMPIEUS

Alexandros! What are you doing here!?

He cuffs him on the head.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD OF ARGOS - DAY (LATER)

Alexandros and Zeo stand behind Olympieus who is having his wound stitched by a Helot surgeon. The regiments have been recalled, the enemy driven from the field.

All around them men weep, hold each other, tend wounds, try to braid their hair with hands shaking so badly they can't do it, and laugh awkwardly with their companions. A group is beginning to form nearby. Men drifting to it.

Alexandros flinches at the horror of the sights around him. All Zeo can do is stare, mute, at the edge of shock himself.

Suddenly Dienekes is there. Stern. Disgusted with Zeo.

DIENEKES

Will this do?

Zeo can't reply. He looks away in shame. Then Leonidas, at the center of the assembling group, shouts:

LEONIDAS

When a man seats his helmet before his eyes and steps off the line he divides himself in two. One part he leaves behind. That part which takes delight in his children, which lifts his voice in song, which clasps his wife to him in the sweet darkness of his bed. He marches into battle bearing only the second portion of himself, the baser measure, that half that knows butchery and turns a blind eye to mercy. He could not fight if he did not do this.

Leonidas paces down the line. The men listen, attentive.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

Then this man returns, and reclaims that part of himself he had set aside. This is a holy moment.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

He feels the better part of him, the part which knows love and mercy and compassion come flooding back. It is that which unstrings his knees.

He puts an arm on the shoulder of a tear-stained comrade.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

I have ordered the pursuit of the enemy ceased. I have commanded an end to the slaughter of those whom today we called enemies. Let them return home. Let them embrace their wives and children. Let them, like us, weep tears of salvation. I have dispatched messengers to offer them truce.

(beat)

Let no one here misapprehend the reason we fought other Greeks today. Not to conquer or enslave them, our brothers, but to make them allies against a greater enemy --

And suddenly his voice BOOMS OUT:

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

-- THE PERSIAN! The Persian is why we fought here. Why 28 of the noblest men of our city died today.

Somber faces on the men. Leonidas looks them up and down.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

I know many of you think I'm half-cracked.

The men LAUGH. Leonidas grins at them good-naturedly.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

I hear the whispers, and sometimes they're not just whispers: Leonidas hears voices the rest of us don't. He takes chances with his life in battles which seem to have no purpose and prepares for war with an enemy he has never seen and will never come.

There's even more LAUGHTER. The men love this guy, their king. And as the CAMERA DRAWS IN on him, he lowers his voice, making the warriors silent, straining to listen.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

But hear this and never forget it: the Persian will come.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

He will come in numbers dwarfing those
his father sent four years ago which
we defeated upon the plains of
Marathon. And he will come soon.

Leonidas paces the line once more, at ease.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

Now this Great King is not a king as I
am to you. He does not take his place
in the line of battle. He watches
safe from his throne upon a hilltop.

The men JEER and call out.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

His comrades are not his Peers and
Equals. They are slaves. Driven into
battle not by love of nation or
liberty but by the lash of the whip
and threat of retribution against
their wives and children. I spit on
this Great King's crown. I wipe my
ass on his throne which is the seat of
a slave who seeks nothing more noble
than to make all other men slaves.

(beat)

But when Xerxes finally comes to
enslave us he will find in Argos not a
ready harbor guarded by paid-for
friends, but a forbidding strongpoint
held by an implacable enemy.
Everything I have done as king, every
enemy courted, every confederation
forged, every weak-kneed ally brought
to heel has been for this single
event: the day when the Great King
returns to Hellas to pay us out.

EXT. STREAM, SPARTA - NIGHT

ON ZEO'S BACK, newly striped by the birch rod. Zeo
argues through his pain as Rooster washes his hands.

ZEO

What's wrong with you? A mothax!

ROOSTER

You're a fool. You got to see these
sons of Hercules kill your enemies.
You should've run while you were out.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ZEO

We're not talking about me. They're going to give you your freedom!

ROOSTER

You know how I know there are no gods? Because if there were, they'd burn this city to the ground, its hypocrisy stinks so high to heaven.

ZEO

They're not going to understand if you don't accept it. It's an honor.

ROOSTER

So what? I didn't mean to save that old jackass. I don't want to be their mothax, their "stepbrother." For every Peer on that field there was a Helot standing behind him. A man. A slave. And that sonofabitch Leonidas had the gall to serve us the "we must fight for our freedom" shit.

(beat, dangerous)

He better watch what he asks for.

Zeo stares at Rooster.

ZEO

They'd kill you if they heard you say that.

ROOSTER

Then they'd be killing me for speaking the truth. At least Xerxes doesn't insult his slaves' intelligence.

ALEXANDROS (OC)

Then maybe you should enter the Great King's service.

Alexandros emerges from the darkness, stiff, his own back bearing the marks of a flogging. Zeo and Rooster go stock still. Rooster glares at him in silence.

ALEXANDROS (cont'd)

You saved my father's life, and I could do nothing. Thank you.

Rooster doesn't respond, but the tension bleeds out of him and Zeo. Alexandros won't tell. Alexandros lurches down to Zeo's side. He opens a leather pouch, revealing a block of a wax-like substance. Rooster sees it.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ROOSTER

Myrrh. Shit. They use that on battle wounds. Know how much it's worth?

ALEXANDROS

Polynikes won't miss it.

He begins applying it to Zeo's back.

ALEXANDROS (cont'd)

It was lying right out there. Like he left it for us.

Zeo REACTS. Diomache.

INT. DIENEKES' BARRACKS - NIGHT

Alexandros stands at attention by the hearth in the center of Dienekes' barracks, eyes on the floor. Around him, arranged in a circle on their rough couches, the members of Dienekes' syssita, his mess, sip at wine.

POLYNIKES

Did I hear you right? Barbarous and unholy? You wanted to see war. What did you think it would be?

ALEXANDROS

I did not know, lord.

(beat, voice cracking)

I cannot sleep. I see a face without its jaw. Just tongue and throat. I see the dead and dying.

POLYNIKES

And it grieves your tender heart... You will soon leave the Agoge and enroll in this mess, and I don't think you know what a spear is for! What do you think a spear is for?

Zeo stands discreetly in the shadows, wine jar in hand. He scans the faces about the room. These are not the members of Dienekes' platoon. The barracks are arranged not by unit, but as social clubs. This is an elite one.

ALEXANDROS

For killing the enemy, lord.

POLYNIKES

And you don't like killing.

(expansive, laughing)

Killing is like fucking, boy!

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

POLYNIKES (cont'd)

Only instead of giving life... you take it.

(turning hellishly scary)

The ecstasy of the spearhead entering the foe's belly, shaft sliding in behind it. The whites of his eyes rolling in his helmet. His knees going out from under him. Are you picturing this?

Alexandros is sick, eyelids flickering.

ALEXANDROS

Yes, lord.

POLYNIKES

Is it making your dick hard?

ALEXANDROS

No, lord.

POLYNIKES

You've got your spear in a man's gut, you smell his shit and your dog isn't stiff? What are you a woman?

The other members of the mess rap on their boards with their knuckles in disapproval. Polynikes glimpses at them, ignores them. Dienekes draws upon every ounce of composure to remain silent. But the fury is right there behind the eyes.

POLYNIKES

Are you going to weep now?

ALEXANDROS

No, lord.

DIENEKES

Why do you tell the truth, Alexandros? Why don't you lie like all the other boys and proclaim your love of battle.

ALEXANDROS

Your lordships would see through me.

POLYNIKES

Would you like to stop?

ALEXANDROS

No, lord.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

POLYNIKES

Why not? You look like you're going to cry.

ALEXANDROS

Your lordships are instructing me. It is the purpose of this harrowing to harden the mind.

The answer throws Polynikes off his stride. And suddenly HIS TONE SOFTENS. Impossible, but for a moment, there is in Polynikes' voice, a sadness, almost... compassion.

POLYNIKES (cont'd)

Is there an evil you can imagine which man has not committed against man?

(beat)

Man is a boil and a canker. He is weak, greedy, craven, lustful, author of every species of vice and depravity. He will lie, cheat, steal, murder, melt down the very statues of the gods and coin their gold for whores. This is his nature, as all the poets attest. Thus we are condemned. Condemned to the sack, to rape, to war. And no table, in time, is passed by.

Zeo listens, having lived the truth Polynikes professes.

POLYNIKES (cont'd)

And so, my young friend, it is of no use to fear war. It is, rather, the part of a man to stand in the line and hold Fate on the far side of his shield for one more day...

EXT. DIENEKES' BARRACKS - NIGHT

The members of the syssita disperse into the night. Zeo washes down the portico. Polynikes and Dienekes remain.

DIENEKES

Why do you hate him so much?

POLYNIKES

Because he is weak. And his weakness will kill one of us. You know it too, Dienekes.

Polynikes disappears into the night. Zeo tries to pretend he didn't hear anything.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DIENEKES (cont'd)

Boy. You know my home. My wife summons you.

Zeo REACTS, not knowing what to make of the command, but then drops what he's doing and sprints away.

INT. DIENEKES' HOUSE - NIGHT

HOLD ON ZEO, awkward, standing in the warm firelight of the comfortable hearth room. The Lady Arete sits in a corner chair nursing an infant. Dienekes' Little Girl lies asleep in a bed while the two older daughters card wool. But it is not Arete who's really summoned him for:

Facing Zeo, in her own chair is Alexandros' mother, **PARALEIA**, 40s, severe, beautiful. At last she speaks -- slow, deliberate, daunting -- a master interrogator.

PARALEIA

I am aware of my son's harrowing this evening. And I am aware of the law against revealing anything spoken within the precincts of the Peers' mess. Yet, it is possible, without violating the sanctity of the law, to indicate, if not in precise words, then in tone, in general flavor, how Alexandros performed.

Zeo stands there in deep trouble. For a long moment he stares like a deer. Eyes flick to Arete. She pays him no attention. Eyes flick to the girls carding wool. No reaction there either. Surrounded by women. Oh shit.

PARALEIA (cont'd)

Answer me this, Zeones. Who governs the city of Sparta?

ZEO

The Kings and the Ephors, and the laws, of course.

Paraleia smiles, does a slow, even glance at Arete. Arete doesn't bother to look up, but there, too, is that damn SMILE on her face.

PARALEIA

Yes. Surely this must be so.

Then Paraleia locks Zeo in her gaze. Smile gone. And for the first time Zeo perceives he's standing among the real rulers of Sparta. His survival instincts kick in:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ZEO

The Peers questioned him for two hours in the dialectic. Polynikes led most of it. He asked him to describe the horrors of the battlefield, on the employment of various weapons to cause various wounds, and on tactics.

PARALEIA

How would you characterize Polynikes' method of questioning?

ZEO

Brutal.

PARALEIA

And my son's responses?

Zeo hesitates.

ZEO

Honest.

PARALEIA

You know that soon I must determine if he is worthy of his shield, worthy of taking his place among the Peers. Now tell me this, and do not lie for I will know and punish you if you do. How would you evaluate his courage?

And this, Zeo, is almost at a loss to answer. Finally:

ZEO

There are 1400 others in the training bouas of the agoge. Of all those, only one chose to follow the army. He did it knowing of the dangers and knowing the punishment he would receive when he returned home.

Paraleia looks at him with the mildest nod of respect.

PARALEIA

A politic answer and a good one. I will accept it.

EXT. DIENEKES' HOUSE - NIGHT

Zeo stands under the wisteria-covered pergola. Suddenly the door to the house opens and Paraleia leaves, not even bothering to look at Zeo. Arete, in the doorway, signals Zeo to come in.

INT. DIENEKES' HOUSE - NIGHT

The girls are all asleep now in a bed at the far end of the room. Arete sits in her chair, rocking the infant in a sling. Zeo stands before her.

ARETE

Don't worry, this harrowing of yours will soon be over and you can go back to the safety of men. Tell me, Zeones, have you ever heard the name Idotychides?

ZEO

He was a Peer slain at Mantinea. It is said that the Helot boy, Dekton, whom many call Rooster, is his bastard son by a Messinian mother.

ARETE

And do you believe this?

ZEO

Yes, Lady. I do.

ARETE

Why? Is it because this boy hates the Spartans so much?

Zeo GOES COLD at Arete's knowledge. Afraid for Rooster.

ARETE (cont'd)

Have you noticed the more one feels worthy of honor, yet is denied the means to achieve it, the more excruciating is subjection? Your friend Rooster talks too much. In this city a mouse can't sneeze without every cat saying God bless you.

She stares at the infant in the sling beside her. And her voice drops.

ARETE (cont'd)

Do you know what the Krypteia is?

Zeo feels a chill at the word. He stammers:

ZEO

It is a secret society among the Peers. No one knows who its members are, just that they do their work at night.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ARETE

And what work is that?

ZEO

They make Helots disappear.

(beat)

It's just bluster. He doesn't mean what he says, everyone knows that!

ARETE

Is this boy lying?

OLDER DAUGHTER

Yes, Mother!

Zeo spins around. Both girls, awake in the bed, have been listening all this time, part of their training.

ARETE

You care for Rooster. Though he beats you, I have seen the friendship you share. It would be wise for you to tell him to keep his treasonous feelings to himself. He's your friend. But he is something else as well.

(beat)

He is the son of Idotychides. Idotychides was my brother. And that makes him something of a nephew to me.

Arete's eyes water, and she blinks it away. Zeo REACTS, can't respond. At last, she masters the emotions.

ARETE (cont'd)

There is one among the Krypteia whom you know. The Captain of the King's Knights, Polynikes. Will you watch over Rooster, Zeo? Will you protect him? Will you do this for me?

EXT. DIENEKES' HOUSE - NIGHT

Arete is showing Zeo out. He turns back, awkward.

ZEO

May I ask a question before I go? It's for a friend. I can't answer it myself. Perhaps you with your wisdom might be able to. But you must promise not to laugh or take offense.

She nods. The wind blows through the wisteria.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ZEO (cont'd)

My friend... he believes once when he was young, alone, in the cold, at the point of death... he was spoken to by a god.

He searches her face, waiting for her to laugh. Instead, Arete looks into his eyes, solemn.

ZEO (cont'd)

My friend... he wishes to know if such a thing is possible. Could... would a god speak to a boy without city or station or a sacrifice to give, not even knowing how to pray. Or was my friend seeing... hearing things... a trick of his mind, so close to death.

ARETE

Which god?

ZEO

Apollo, the Archer God.

A long beat. Arete studies him.

ARETE

You are an archer yourself, far advanced for your years, I understand. I am no priestess. I can only respond out of a woman's heart, which discerns truth directly, from within.

(beat)

Tell your friend this. That which he saw, which he heard, was truth.

Zeo breathes hard. His eyes well up, he twists, trying to wrestle the emotion, and breaks into sobs, overcome.

ZEO

I'm sorry... I'm sorry...

ARETE

Next time you come, bring your friend. I would look upon this boy who has spoken with a son of heaven.

EXT. STREAM BELOW TAYGETOS - DAY

Taygetos towers green, cold, snow-capped, disgorging a RUSHING STREAM. On a hillside below it, Zeo stands in attendance on Dienekes.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The Peers of his mess wait in silence. Olympieus gazes, stern, upon the line of trees and glitter of water among them below. Waiting.

Then out of the grove, BRONZE HOPLON on his arm, strides Alexandros. Paraleia and the **WOMEN** of his family follow him. He comes up the hill, now a Spartiate Peer, and the men waiting in solemn silence CLOSE RANKS around him, turn, and take him from the women back to the city.

EXT. TEMPLE OF ARTEMIS ORTHIA - NIGHT

WILD MUSIC. ALEXANDROS, grinning, laurel on his head, shouting to the music, sidesteps left, then right in a huddle with a group of his Agoge companions. Their opponents:

A MATCHING BATTLE SCRUM of **GIRLS**, teens and early 20s. The two sides circle on a paved plaza, counter-march each other, belting out a raucous SEX SONG. At the center of the group of girls is a pregnant **AGATHE**.

The flowers in her hair, the way she looks right across at Alexandros, and it's all so obvious that this is their wedding. Braziers burn on the temple steps behind them. Guests mill about, enjoying the music and antics.

Arete rubs against Dienekes, playful, both turned on by the song and dance. Olympieus and Paraleia converse with older couples. Helot **MUSICIANS** hammer on drums and horns.

And someone with questionable judgment has left Zeo and Rooster in charge of the big urns of wine. Zeo ladles some to a guest, then helps himself as the guest turns away. Rooster takes the ladle from him, toasts:

ROOSTER

Knocks the tramp up, so he marries her. Here's to the noble Spartan.

ZEO

You should talk, Dad.

Rooster sticks a drunk, angry finger at him.

ROOSTER

I didn't marry Harmonia cause she was pregnant!

(beat, thinking hard)

Yes I did.

He laughs and stumbles off into the darkness. Zeo shakes his head, and then, out of the corner of his eye, spots:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

A CLOAKED FIGURE move among the shadowed pillars of the temple. A chill goes through Zeo as he watches the figure move, substantial-looking, real, into the dark precincts of the shrine. None of the wedding party has noticed the figure. And none of them seem to notice Zeo now as he moves for the temple.

INT. TEMPLE OF ARTEMIS ORTHIA - NIGHT

Flaming braziers flicker on Zeo as he makes his way deeper into the temple, into the sanctuary WHERE:

THE CLOAKED FIGURE stands, back to Zeo, before the painted, brightly-colored marble statue of Artemis, Goddess of the Hunt. Around the statue, at the feet of the figure, lie sacrifices of game and sheaves of grain.

Zeo stares in awe... and the Figure suddenly senses him. It turns around. It is Diomache. Zeo is struck mute. For a long beat all they do is stare at each other.

DIOMACHE

My husband would kill you if he saw
you look at me like that.

Zeo just stares, overwhelmed by her fierce beauty, like an avatar of the goddess looming over her.

DIOMACHE (cont'd)

Do you talk?

ZEO

Yes.

DIOMACHE

What is your name?

ZEO

Zeones.

DIOMACHE

Zeones. Why do you want me? Why are
you not afraid?

Zeo gazes, tongue-tied, searching... and finally manages:

ZEO

My master says the Spartans do not
fault Helen of Troy for her beauty.
Such a thing, he says, is...

(beat, awed, stammering)

... a prodigy of the gods. Such a
thing is its own necessity.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Diomache smiles faintly, half-mocking.

DIOMACHE

So I'm Helen of Troy and you're my
tongue-tied Homer.

(beat)

Or are you my Paris?

She goes serious, looks up at the statue of Artemis.

DIOMACHE (cont'd)

Do you believe in the gods?

ZEO

Yes.

DIOMACHE

My husband is a god.

The musing statement lingers there, a shroud over a lost
life. She looks at Zeo.

DIOMACHE (cont'd)

Men do not understand why Helen would
leave Menelaus, her husband, a king,
for the simple Paris. And so they
blame it on a trick of the gods.

(beat)

But Helen ran away with Paris because
all he was... was a man.

A SCREAM of delight makes both of them look out. The
wedding troop cheers Alexandros as he snatches Agathe up
into the air and carries her away.

Zeo looks at Diomache. She stares, daring him to take
her too. Zeo takes a half-step closer -- then hesitates.
And in that moment of hesitation, she reads him. She
turns and drifts off into the night.

EXT. GYMNASION - DAY

Alexandros and Zeo race down the track, desperately
trying to beat each other. Dust flies. There is an ease
about Alexandros as he edges ahead. Onlookers watch them
fly by. They belong here.

Suddenly Dienekes flags them down from the sideline.
They pull off, lungs heaving. Suicide stands there
behind Dienekes. Dienekes begins walking. They follow.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DIENEKES (cont'd)

Leonidas is sending us on envoy to Rhodes. I'm giving you Suicide as your squire. He'll keep you out of trouble.

(beat, to Zeo)

Alexandros will no longer need your services.

Zeo reels inside. Dienekes lets him suffer a beat, then musing, stops, looks back at him.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

Let me see your back. If there were an Olympic event in flogging you'd be the betting man's favorite. The requirements for a battle squire are simple. He has to be dumb as a mule, numb as a post and obedient as an imbecile. In these qualifications, Zeones of Astakos, I declare your credentials impeccable.

Suicide chuckles as Zeo realizes what Dienekes is saying. Suicide is holding Zeo's BOW. He hands it to Zeo.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

You will carry my pack. You will hunt for my pot here and on campaign. You will cook, take care of my armor. You may hunt rabbits and keep them, but don't go around bragging about your good fortune.

ZEO

I won't, lord!

DIENEKES

And who knows? If you're lucky you might get in a shot at the enemy...

Zeo tentatively hefts the bow, fits his fingers, and DRAWS IT, as expertly and comfortably as if it had never left his side. He aims it AT THE SKY WHICH BECOMES:

EXT. PALACE, RHODES - DAY

The SKY above THE CITY OF RHODES. The CAMERA TILTS DOWN to reveal Zeo and Alexandros looking out from a battlement over the whitewashed city and the startling blue of the Mediterranean.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

A hard wind blows in their faces off the sea. They turn, and Dienekes and Olympieus, cloaks whipping about them, approach across the courtyard of the Tyrant's Palace.

OLYMPIEUS

It's true. Xerxes assembled his army at Susa last fall. He's decreed that the fleets of all his subject nations will assemble at the Hellespont to bring the army over to Greece.

ALEXANDROS

Will the Rhodians come over to our side?

Dienekes smiles, gestures to the horizon, distant mountains in the haze across the sea.

DIENEKES

If you were this close to the Great King, would you?

Driven by the wind from that distant shore, a squadron of black SHIPS, sails billowing, heads for Rhodes.

EXT. CLIFF ABOVE SHORELINE, RHODES - DAY

Wary, Zeo and Alexandros stand behind Dienekes and Olympieus at the edge of a cliff. Below them a long beach is lined with the BLACK SHIPS, hauled out on the sand, canted on their sides. **EGYPTIAN MARINES** wax the hulls, eat, practice with weapons.

DIENEKES

Let's see what we can find out.

ALEXANDROS

I think Zeo and I can get down to those rocks without them seeing us...

Dienekes and Olympieus just look at him. CUT TO:

EXT. BEACH - DAY

Dienekes and Olympieus LAUGHING hysterically with a gang of giant Egyptians at the ring mail underwear one of the Marines is exposing. The Egyptians ramble on and on in their tongue, laughing themselves to tears at the length of Dienekes' short sword. Zeo and Alexandros sit on a log by a fire and watch this spectacle.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DIENEKES

So where the hell are you from?
Where... are... you... from?

One of the Marines, their captain, Ptammitechus, aka **TOMMIE**, seems to half understand and shouts for something from within the nearest ship. A **BOY** appears a moment later with a **SCROLL**, and gives it to him. He unrolls a portion of it. It is a **MAP**. He points.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

I see. Egypt.

Dienekes points to the northern end of the Aegean sea, to the strait between Europe and Asia, the Hellespont.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

So you're going here, huh? To ferry
the army across. To Greece.

He traces his finger from the bulge of Turkey to the mess that is Greece. Tommie begins shaking his head violently. And then the Boy speaks up.

BOY

My father says no. Not ferry.

Tommie draws a line in the sand, moves twigs like ships to show how they will be lashed together. He points to a distant rock, implying the scale, the number of ships necessary beyond imagining.

BOY (cont'd)

To become a bridge.

Dienekes doesn't REACT, but Zeo and Alexandros do. And then Tommie continues rolling out the map, as he does:

THE CAMERA ZOOMS IN, moving over the unscrolling vellum, past the knot of Greece and its islands, over Turkey and Syria, the map going on and on and on and on past land after unknown land as the Boy translates for his father:

BOY (cont'd) (OC)

My father says a man could walk a year
and not reach the heart of the Great
King's Empire. The men and resources
of a hundred nations he now bends to
one purpose: to grind your cities to
dust and receive the earth and water
of all Europe. Do not try to stand
against the Great King. Treat with
him. Seek his mercy.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

BOY (cont'd)

Our people, Egypt, is an old one. And we have come to know that life is a wheel. In the end there is only one thing you can do. You must turn...

The MAP KEEPS ROLLING, and we match motion as now we're:

INT. GEROUSIA - DAY

PANNING ACROSS A simple SLATE with a chalk map of Greece.

THEBAN AMBASSADOR (OC)

Don't blame us! Xerxes' fleet could've come down the coast behind us. If your ships had been there we wouldn't have been forced to withdraw!

The **EPHORS** of Sparta and **AMBASSADORS** of the Pan-Hellenic Alliance occupy the simple stone benches beneath the rough-hewn roof of the council building. It is anything but grand. It's just a group of guys sitting around in dusty cloaks. Grit blows through its open sides.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

My ships! Where was Thebes when we attacked their bridge over the Hellespont? Now, in a month's march, he can be at the walls of my city. In another month he could be here in Sparta. We've lost the only opportunity we had to take on their army while it was divided.

ARGIVE AMBASSADOR

They say Xerxes brings two million men. We can no more stop a million than we can stop this damn wind.

Zeo, standing behind Dienekes with a pitcher of water, looks at the Argive Ambassador. But in place of hate, there is now only disdain. Zeo and Dienekes are at the rear of the building behind Olympieus and the Spartan host delegation, mostly Leonidas' old mess-mates.

Leonidas sits there in front of them, head bowed, elbows on knees, maybe listening, maybe asleep.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

So what will the Argives do? Hole up down here in the Peloponnese behind the Isthmus? Leave the rest of us to the sack? Is that what you've been planning all along?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He glares at the Argive, over other Peloponnesian ambassadors, and then stares at the Spartans.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR (cont'd)
Is that why you do not call up your
army? Let the Persian do what none of
you could? Destroy an old enemy?

At last, Leonidas looks up, not asleep after all.

LEONIDAS
Sparta will not leave you, my friend.

The Athenian goes silent, nods in respect to Leonidas.

THESPIAN AMBASSADOR
Xerxes uses his army and navy in
combination, the strengths of each
eliminating the weaknesses of the
other. We have never seen an enemy
who fights like this.

LEONIDAS
Make no mistake. The Persian is
master of a hundred nations with good
reason. He has experience in war, and
his armies are the best his hostage
nations have to offer. And each of
these peoples has its own art of war.
Weapons we have never seen, ways of
fighting we have never faced.

(beat)
But all his strategy must end with man
standing against man in the line. And
that, we know how to do.

There are nods among the old warriors.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR
Yet the question remains: when do we
fight? And where? He marches while
we try to make up our minds!

LEONIDAS
This war will not be decided by a
single battle. We will fight again
and again. We will prevail because
the cost to him will become too high.

Leonidas rises, goes to the slate, points.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

The plains of Boeotia is where we will win. He may take the walls of our cities. He may burn the buildings which our cities inhabit. But he will not be able to destroy our cities, because our cities are not places. They are people, and people can be evacuated. We will make Xerxes bleed here, in the plains of Boeotia. That is where he will die.

THESPIAN AMBASSADOR

Then we must first fight him north of there, in Phokis or Lokris, delay him, or he will occupy Boeotia before we can put our armies in the field.

ARGIVE AMBASSADOR

This is... foolishness. I cannot recommend this course to my city.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

The reason we don't have an army in the field already is because of foolish disagreement like this --

ARGIVE AMBASSADOR

-- it is right to disagree with insanity! We should treat with the Persian, find terms we can live with --

Ambassadors hiss at the Argive. Others don't react so strongly. The Spartans do not react visibly at all. Grim, Leonidas returns to his stone seat.

LEONIDAS

-- do you truly understand what will happen to us if we succumb to Xerxes?

He looks down at the dirt floor of the Gerousia, prophetic, as if reading the future in the blowing dust.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

Our people may live. At Xerxes' whim. But who we are... will die as surely as if he had killed us, every one.

The Ambassadors stare at him. He looks at the Thespian.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

What will become of your arts? Your dream of making Truth known to mortals in the poem? In the drama? Xerxes will not allow Truth to be spoken.

He turns to the Athenian.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

What will become of your philosophy? This insane idea, Democracy as you call it.

There are laughs among the Spartans and others. He then goes serious.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

Or your science, your questioning of the world, your understanding of its wonders? Do you think Xerxes will allow such things?

He glances at his Spartan companions.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

Or our dream. A dream of true and selfless brotherhood? Do you think a slave-King can permit such dreams?

(beat)

I tell you, our dreams will be wiped away in our subjugation, for slaves cannot be allowed such dreams. We will be no more than a satrapy, an entry in Xerxes' endless ledger. Barren. Asleep and undreaming.

The council listens, deeply moved.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

What future will our children not have if Xerxes kills our dreams?

(beat)

It is no secret that I have sent to the Oracle for guidance. I can't really say I like what she told me.

This gets a dark LAUGH from the entire group.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

Sparta will fall or she will lose a king in battle. I have a feeling I know which one it's going to be.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

More laughter. As it clears Leonidas goes serious again.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

I promise you this: I will stand in the line first. I will fight this first battle against the Great King though we all know how it must turn out. Will you fight the others?

And quietly, gravely, throughout the Gerousia, heads nod in agreement.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

Then I will buy you the time you need to prepare.

EXT. MARSHALLING YARD, SPARTA - DAY

Hundreds of men train in the wide marshalling yard in the center of Sparta, below the Temple of Athena of the Brazen House. There is silence across the field as Spartan **OFFICERS** make their way among the units. Olympeius comes over to Dienekes' platoon.

OLYMPIEUS

It's the Gates, lads. Thermopylae. For those of you who haven't been there, it's a mountain pass on the coast. The Athenian navy will close off the Malian Gulf for as long as they can so Xerxes can't land troops in our rear. Leonidas will take an advance guard and grab the pass. 4000 allies. 300 of us. All volunteers. Only those with male children.

Alexandros and the rest of the platoon go still at the final condition. It is a suicide unit. A long beat.

ALEXANDROS

I'll go.

The other platoon members begin chiming in too. Except Dienekes whose jaw flexes as he turns away, dying inside.

EXT. DIENEKES' HOUSE - DAY

The sun shines through the heavy blooms of the pergola. Whittling, Dienekes sits on a stool, the sounds of **PLAYING GIRLS** in the b.g. Alexandros stands before him. Zeo and Suicide sit on the low wall nearby.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEXANDROS

Everyone with a son has volunteered. He's picked 100 so far, including my father and Polynikes. Nobody knows what his basis is. It seems random.

Dienekes doesn't look up, just cuts the toy he's making harder with the knife. He cuts too hard and breaks off the delicate head he's making for the doll. He puts it down and looks up at Alexandros.

DIENEKES

Do you understand what it means to give up your life? Do you understand what you will be asked to do? Do you understand how bad this will be?

Alexandros doesn't dare answer that.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

No, of course you don't. I don't. But if you think you're safe to volunteer because Leonidas won't pick you, you're wrong.

ALEXANDROS

You think I lack courage? You think I don't mean this?

DIENEKES

No, I don't think you lack courage. I think you haven't killed hope. One goes into battle knowing one has a chance to survive. Large or small, it doesn't matter. One has a chance. But this... Leonidas is giving his life. He is giving your father's life, yours maybe, to buy time. He has no magic up his sleeve. This is no trick. It's a simple trade. In the end you will kill your hope. Will you still stand when it's gone?

ALEXANDROS

If the time I buy with my life gives you, gives the others a chance to win, then... it is the greatest thing I could ever do for my wife and son.

Alexandros looks up at Dienekes who can barely meet his gaze. Dienekes glances at Suicide.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

DIENEKES

I suppose you'll go with him.

Suicide nods. Dienekes lets out a grunt, expecting as much. And when he speaks, it is with flat resignation.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

Then you should get your things ready.
Because he *will* choose you.

He looks off into the distance. DUST rises from the lane. A **HELOT MESSENGER** is running this way.

INT. ROOSTER'S HUT - NIGHT

An **INFANT** squalls in the arms of **HARMONIA**, Rooster's wife, as Zeo and Rooster shout at each other in the dark, bare-dirt hut.

ZEO

Go back and tell them you're sorry,
that you've changed your mind!

ROOSTER

No!

ZEO

You have to. They don't understand
how you can refuse them again. It's
your freedom.

ROOSTER

I don't want to be one of them!

ZEO

They're saying you're going to try to
start a revolt.

(off Rooster's look)

They could tolerate your big mouth
before. But now the Persians are
coming. They need you with them. If
not...

(beat)

Do you know what I would do to have
what they are offering you?

Rooster just looks at him. Suddenly the deerskin flap
over the door lifts. Alexandros stands there.

ALEXANDROS

The Krypteia. You don't have much
time.

EXT. ROOSTER'S HUT - NIGHT

Alexandros leads Zeo, Rooster, Harmonia and the baby out of the house... and there, waiting in the darkness for them is the **KRYPTeia**. Polynikes steps into the flicker of light from the hut, his face painted with blood.

EXT. ABATTOIR, SPARTA - NIGHT

Bones glint in piles among blood-sticky chopping blocks in what by day is a slaughtering yard. By night, the place is out of a nightmare. Rooster, bound and beaten, sits on the ground. Harmonia, holding the baby, weeps in the b.g. Zeo and Alexandros, unharmed, watch as Polynikes circles Rooster.

POLYNIKES

My lords, you can go home. Only the dogs will know what became of them.

And now we see he is talking to a cluster of shadows standing in the edge of the torch light: Olympieus, Dienekes, and the others of the syssita.

OLYMPIEUS

Alexandros, what were you doing with Rooster?

ROOSTER

He came to arrest me. Him and Zeo.

But before Polynikes can challenge the statement, a VOICE rings out of the darkness.

ARETE (OC)

What is this? A skull court beneath the oaks? What august verdict will you brave, brave warriors pronounce tonight? Murder a woman and slit an infant's throat?

Arete appears, disheveled. The men exclaim in outrage.

DIENEKES

Go home, Arete. Get out of here.

She just glares at him and takes the baby from Harmonia.

ARETE

Which of you is going to do it? Here, I'll tilt his head back for you.

She proffers the infant to them. Nobody will touch it.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

POLYNIKES

Lady, you're just trying to save your brother's bloodline.

ARETE

No. I'm trying to see justice served in this joke of a trial. This isn't Rooster's son. He is my husband's.

Dienekes looks at her: what the hell? Olympieus and the others just LAUGH at her bad lie.

OLYMPIEUS

Arete, we have known your husband since he was a child. There is no one in the city who surpasses him in honor and fidelity. I have been with him on many a campaign where he has had ample and tempting opportunity to dishonor you. Never has he so much as wavered.

ARETE

If you don't believe me, ask this girl. Ask her!

ROOSTER

He is my child!

ARETE

Let the mother speak. Whose is he?

Harmonia just sobs more uncontrollably, unable to answer.

ARETE (cont'd)

Speak, girl! Did my husband lie with you? Is this his child!

HARMONIA

No... yes... I don't...

ARETE

Speak!

OLYMPIEUS

Lady, you terrorize the girl.

HARMONIA

Yes! He is your husband's!

POLYNIKES

Lady, it is clear she is lying.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ARETE

Before the gods, tell them my husband,
is this child yours?

Dienekes stares deep into her eyes. She stares, back
ferocious... yet pleading. A beat. And then he lies...

DIENEKES

Yes.

Arete's eyes fill. Thank you. A terrible silence.

OLYMPIEUS

Dienekes. Consider what you are
saying. You dishonor your wife with
this oath. The gods --

DIENEKES

I've considered, my friend. He's mine.

ARETE

Take him then.

She hands the baby to Dienekes. He holds it, awkward.

ARETE (cont'd)

The mother will nurse him in my house.
You will enroll him before the Ephors,
Olympieus. You may do with that
traitor what you will.

ALEXANDROS

There is another way to dispose of
Rooster which may be of use to the
city. The Helots see him as something
of a hero. Kill him and he becomes a
martyr. Instead, send him over to the
Persian. He will look like a coward
who has spurned his home and sided
with the foreigner. And if we meet
him on the battlefield, I promise you
this: I will slay him myself.

The Peers stare at him. Polynikes looks to Olympieus.

OLYMPIEUS

See to it.

Polynikes doesn't want to, but hoists Rooster up.

OLYMPIEUS (cont'd)

Well, Dienekes, congratulations. Now
you have a son.

EXT. DIENEKES' HOUSE - PRE-DAWN

THE SOFT SOUNDS OF WEEPING come from the dimly-lit windows of Dienekes' house. His daughters. His wife. Zeo steps INTO FRAME, waiting beyond the courtyard wall, BOW AND PACK on his shoulders. So much like his home. He stands there, outside, apart, not belonging, yet...

The door opens and Dienekes, at last, comes out. He embraces Arete, can't pull himself away.

DIENEKES

I will see you again on the Going-Away Street.

Dienekes then notices Zeo, and masters his emotions. A long moment as he looks at Zeo who stands there ready to go. Zeo approaches, mustering his determination, his steps firmer as he comes up to Dienekes. A long beat.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

Zeones of Astakos. Have you found what you came to Sparta for?

Zeo nods, mute with emotion for a long moment.

ZEO

I let my family die. I was so afraid.

Dienekes listens. Arete too. The tears pour out of Zeo:

ZEO (cont'd)

You are my family now. And I will never let anyone hurt my family again.

Arete kisses Zeo on the head, wipes his face. And then Dienekes puts a hand on his shoulder and they turn away.

EXT. GOING AWAY STREET, SPARTA - DAWN

LONG LINES of silent **SPARTAN WOMEN**. Faces set in ritual sternness. Arete. Paraleia. Agathe. It is a public facade. And yet, there is something about it... an undefinable power. Something... awesome.

They stare out at the Three Hundred filling the Going-Away street. Fathers, husbands, sons, stony, impenetrable. Behind each Peer stands a grim squire.

Before the barracks lining the other side of the road, in full armor, the entire SPARTAN ARMY is drawn up, silent, at attention. Leonidas stands at the stone altar by the roadside. A long, long silence. The sun is rising.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

LEONIDAS

Can you feel it, brothers? Are you afraid? I am. But I look out now upon the sight which will be before my eyes, the sight which will fortify my heart when Death comes to fetch me down. There.

(he points to the women)

Our pain is but of the flesh. Over. In an instant gone. They, our women, are where courage lies. Grandfathers. Fathers. Husbands. Sons. Grandsons. All of their lives they sacrifice us. They have made this nation. They have kept us free. In 600 years no Spartan woman has seen the campfires of the enemy. I swear by all the gods no Spartan woman will see them now.

He lifts his arm in farewell. The Sarpinx horn BLARES, and the 300 step off on their march. Eyes turned to the lines of women. Eyes meet eyes. Faces and faces. Olympieus and Paraleia. Dienekes and Arete. Alexandros and Agathe. Zeo --

-- and Diomache. For she is there, staring AT HIM.

Polynikes looks at his wife and sees her LOOKING BACK somewhere in the column. He tries to fix who her gaze is upon, but can't, and is swept along with the rest of the column. Understanding. For a beat there is a flicker of pain in his eyes. And then he turns instead to:

The rest of the army as it suddenly raises its spears in silent salute. OFF THE MARCHING TREAD the sound becomes:

EXT. TEGEA - DAY

CHEERING. The Spartan column passes the city gates of Tegea. A STREAM of **TEGATE HOPLITES**, several hundred strong, pours out of the city, falling in alongside the Spartans. Friendly shouts, arms over shoulders, old friends from two long-allied cities greeting each other.

EXT. THREE-CORNER WAY - DAY

Leonidas leads the swelling army, its head of Spartan scarlet and bronze. The CAMERA RISES, REVEALING:

The trailing 2000-man force, marching by city. PANNING as they go by, we see the hoplon shields and heraldry of the sundry cities of the Peloponnese on their backs. Side-by-side with the lambdas of Sparta.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

And in the distance the famous crossroads of the Three-Corner Way. Coming down each of the adjoining roads, two more columns of men. The black and white of Thespia, the green of Thebes.

In the intersection Leonidas takes the Thespian Ambassador's grip. As the CAMERA CONTINUES TO RISE, higher and higher, the columns begin to merge, discovering on this dusty plain... a nation being born.

EXT. PHOKIS, PLAIN BELOW THE KALLIDROMOS MOUNTAINS - DAY

GRAY SKY hangs in the tops of the towering green mountain range of the Kallidromos. Deep in its side, like a knife wound, gapes a narrow PASS. The dirt road we're on leads right to it. A steady stream of **REFUGEES** issues forth.

Dienekes, with Zeo in attendance, confers with Leonidas and Olympieus as the other **ALLIED LEADERS** listen.

LEONIDAS

Six miles in is the east gate. Get up there and take it.

Dienekes starts to go, but Leonidas stays him. Polynikes comes running up. He gestures to the refugees.

POLYNIKES

They're mostly locals. They say they've seen Persian scouts on the Plain of Trachis, a couple miles past the Gates. Reports of lots of ships heading north and west.

LEONIDAS

Well, either Xerxes' fleet is going in the wrong direction or it's the Athenians. Either way good news.

THEBAN LEADER

I hope this is the only way through. I'd hate to get trapped in that pass.

He gestures to the wall of forbidding, rising ridge lines before them. It goes in both directions to the horizon, many miles away, only ragged pines clinging to stone. It looks impassible. But impossible for anyone to have truly explored every way through it.

LEONIDAS

Round up some locals. I want to know if so much as a goat path comes out on this side.

EXT. EAST GATE, THERMOPYLAE - DAY

Hair plastered and wet, Zeo jogs next to Suicide at the front of the group of squires. Ahead, the armed Peers of Dienekes' platoon double-time through the winding ravine. The dirt track is no more than 30 feet wide, almost flat, following the staggering line of some geological rift.

Zeo glances up. The walls of the ravine rise hundreds of feet into the drizzling fog above. A glimpse of distant ridges beyond these walls, stepping up higher and higher.

The jangling column comes around a final bend, and there before them are the ruins of an ancient gatehouse. Just upright stone lintels covered in moss. The EAST GATE.

Dienekes raises his hand, and the column stops. He walks up to the gate. A distant boom echoes off the mountains on the left. It is the surf. The CAMERA TURNS AROUND HIM, RISING, REVEALING:

EXT. THERMOPYLAE - DAY (CONTINUOUS)

THERMOPYLAE. The pass broadens out into a field maybe 150 yards wide at its widest, and a mile across to the far side. On the left, the mountains rise as high and as ragged as in the pass. But on the right, they vanish. Instead, CLIFFS drop down into the heaving gray SEA.

Dienekes gestures to Alpheus, points him left. He points Maron right, toward the dome of a low, grassy knoll. Zeo and the other squires shed their kit and spare weapons.

The platoon's sticks move independently -- all fast and all wary.

ON THE LEFT Alpheus races along the mountainside with his stick, one eye on the sheer cliffs rising above them.

ON THE RIGHT Alexandros follows Maron's stick up the knoll, giving us a good view of a full mile of shoreline, with its 60 to 80-foot drop to the rocks and surf.

DOWN THE MIDDLE Zeo hustles after Dienekes' two files along the dirt track. Ahead of them, at the widest part, the rubble of a long-destroyed stone defensive work, the PHOKIAN WALL, bisects the field. The track goes straight through a gap in it called THE MIDDLE GATE.

Dienekes' sticks go to ground behind the waist-high line of rubble. They're half way across the field, the East Gate visible a half mile behind them. Dienekes peers over the wall.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

There is another 200 yards of open ground, then a cluster of BATH HOUSES surrounded by steaming water: HOT SPRINGS.

Beyond the bath houses the mountain wall on the left curves in, and the pass narrows once again to a mere 20 feet clinging to the cliffside above the sea.

HUMAN LAUGHTER suddenly floats across the distance from the bath house. Dienekes glimpses the hindquarters of a HORSE behind one of the buildings. The Spartans shift their spears. Zeo, adrenalized, tries to string his bow.

DIENEKES

How thick do you think those walls are?

EXT. BATH HOUSES - DAY

Dienekes' two files sprint across the open ground for the nearest bath house. Alexandros' and Alpheus' bear down from the wings. Now we see a half-dozen horses tied up outside the bath house. Zeo, among the following screen of Helot squires, pulls up, DRAWS HIS BOW AS:

Dienekes' files SMASH into the bath house wall, BURSTING through in a cloud of dust. A SCREAM goes up from within, and out of the other entrances of the building fly a small, very naked group of **MALE AND FEMALE BATHERS**.

Thermopylae, after all, is a resort.

EXT. KNOLL, THERMOPYLAE - DAY

Dienekes points out across the field from the vantage of the 40-foot high knoll. Leonidas, Olympieus, Polynikes, and the senior Peers listen.

DIENEKES

On the far side the track narrows down again, runs along the side of the cliff back to Trachis. Two miles, most of it wide enough for a single wagon. Uphill, no water on the way.

Zeo, waiting on the periphery of the group with Alexandros, watches the full 4000 men of the allied force dropping out of march column, divvying up the field into camps between the East Gate and remains of the Phokian Wall. The Spartans take the area right behind the wall. Polynikes points up at the sheer mountain cliffs.

POLYNIKES

How about up there?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DIENEKES

If Xerxes has a brigade of monkeys we might have to worry, but I don't see how he can get any closer than that third ridge line back there. Even his archers can't shoot that far. If they try to swim, then they've got to climb the cliff. My daughters could beat 'em back. Nope. There's only one way they can come, and that's straight down that road.

And that road is only 20 feet wide. Leonidas and the others look at each other. Xerxes may have two million men, but that damn road is still only 20 feet wide.

EXT. SPARTAN CAMP, THERMOPYLAE - DAY

Zeo weaves his way through the cooking fires of the Spartan camp. He brings the mess bowl he's carrying up to Dienekes. Dienekes turns from conversation with Leonidas, who's sitting at a fire and eating, and takes the bowl of black porridge from Zeo. Nearby the Allied Leaders grill a tired **FLEET MESSENGER**.

THEBAN LEADER

You're sure your ships hold both straits...

MESSENGER

Yes, I'm sure the Gulf is ours!

THEBAN LEADER

We could bring down some rocks, block the pass.

THESPIAN AMBASSADOR

How long do you think a landslide would hold him? Besides, we want to fight him, not hide from him.

Leonidas finishes his meal. As the Theban Leader goes on, he fishes around him, picks up a stone. One by one the other Allied Leaders notice what he's doing.

THEBAN LEADER

Then what're we going to do? We could build a gate back there...

He trails off, turns to see what everyone is looking at. Leonidas, stone in his arms, advances to the Phokian Wall and sets the stone firmly in place among the rubble. Dienekes hands his bowl back to Zeo, picks up a stone.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

One by one the other soldiers see Leonidas carrying stones to the wall. One by one they rise and join him.

EXT. PHOKIAN WALL - DAY

Half the army toils at the ancient wall. Spartans stand beside Argives. Thespians beside Thebans. From the line of ruins rises the wall. Massive stones are wrestled up ramps. Water-bearers make their way down the lines.

Zeo HEAVES a stone into place. Alexandros slams one down beside it. The outlines of towers are forming, and on the RAMPART WALKWAY above Zeo and Alexandros, Leonidas takes a breather. Dienekes and Olympieus stop too.

LEONIDAS

See that stone down there? The one
that looks like a lizard?

Zeo and Alexandros, overhearing, follow Leonidas' finger across the field in front of the wall. Jutting from the mountainside is a stone that looks vaguely like a lizard. It is almost all the way down to the end of the field.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

How many men do you think he can cram
between that stone and the pass?

DIENEKES

Two thousand maybe.

Attentive now, they all follow the King's gaze as it tracks along the side of the mountain. He points to a CLOSER ROCK half way from the distant gate to the wall.

LEONIDAS

How many can we get onto the field
between there... and there?

He points to a third rock, fifty yards beyond the wall.

DIENEKES

I'd say all 4000 of us if we had to.

From the widest point here at the Phokian Wall, the field narrows like a funnel or TRIANGLE to the distant mouth of the pass. The sea is one side. The mountain the other.

LEONIDAS

From there... to there... to there.
This is where we invite them to dance.

They stare out at this placid field, THE DANCE FLOOR.

EXT. SEA CLIFFS, THERMOPYLAE - DAWN

Zeo climbs the cliff, bow and string of fish on his back. He hefts himself over the top, and there, in the light of dawn stands the REBUILT PHOKIAN WALL.

There is no gate. Men race up and down the lower 15 feet of wall, a steep 30-degree revetment, and then roll over the waist-high rampart between battlements at the top. A pitched wooden roof atop the wall shields against arrows. The Spartans are out in front of the wall, exercising. Zeo breaks into a jog with breakfast.

EXT. PHOKIAN WALL - DAY

Zeo starts to climb the wall with his fish and doesn't see Polynikes coming over the rampart. They collide. Polynikes glares at him. Zeo ducks his eyes.

POLYNIKES

Watch where you're going, butt clot...

He trails off. Zeo thinks he's going to hit him.

POLYNIKES (cont'd)

...well bend me over and root me senseless.

The change in Polynikes' tone dares Zeo to lift his eyes. But Polynikes isn't looking at him. He gazes out across the field. Zeo turns, following out over the Spartans exercising below --

-- to the distant West Gate. There, in profile, lit by the morning sun, is a **PERSIAN SCOUT**. His horse stands motionless. The man stares back at them, face wrapped in silk scarf, lance in hand.

One by one the Spartans notice their observer. Men appear in the battlements next to Zeo and Polynikes.

The Scout stands there alone. Unafraid. The lone rider. Ominous. Like the first army ant in the garden. Like the first hailstone.

ON LEONIDAS. Everything he has predicted has come true. Dienekes and Olympieus step up behind him, silent. Leonidas stares, and then, for an instant, his face clouds with GRIEF. He can no longer bear the sight and everything that it means. He turns away.

The Scout, as if dismissed, urges his mount around, and with a final look back, gallops away, up the track.

EXT. KALLIDROMOS MOUNTAINS - DAY

Dienekes grabbing from pine trunk to pine trunk, sways himself up the steep side of the mountain. Alexandros, Zeo and Suicide follow him.

EXT. OBSERVATION SPOT, KALLIDROMOS MOUNTAINS - DAY

They emerge from the trees and drop from exhaustion just below a ridge line. The day is endlessly clear. From 2000 feet up the Aegean coastline glitters in peaceful silence. Euboea rises in the haze across the narrow gulf.

Thermopylae, several ridge lines below seems so still, the trace of figures moving about so distant, so slow.

DIENEKES

It would be something to hunt here.
Sometime.

The others nod. Dienekes' face clouds over. He turns away, climbs the last few feet to look over the ridge. And now we see they are on the shoulder of one of the mountains. To the right, Thermopylae. To the left:

THE PLAIN OF TRACHIS. Surrounded by mountains on three sides, the wide beaches of a soft shoreline on the fourth. Two shining rivers slither across the dozen square miles of its green and gold expanse.

And in slow, wavering ribbons of color - bright reds and blues and blacks - **TROOPS OF PERSIAN CAVALRY**. Alexandros and Zeo watch in sudden anxiety, but Dienekes simply sighs and rolls onto his back, stretching out.

ALEXANDROS

Should I go back down to Leonidas?

DIENEKES

If you're ready to try that mountain again, suit yourself. I need a nap.

Suicide chuckles, assumes the napping position as Zeo and Alexandros blanch at the enemy below.

EXT. SPARTAN CAMP, THERMOPYLAE - NIGHT

Zeo and Alexandros whet spearheads for the senior Peers around the campfire. Dienekes and Olympieus watch Polynikes with a party of returning Spartans coming over the wall. He catches Olympieus' eye, comes over.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

POLYNIKES

They went for it. Should've seen 'em scamper. We must've lit five hundred bonfires. Big ones. If they don't spend all day probing the smoke at that end of the plain I'll bugger a goat for Cherry-Boy's enjoyment.

He gives Alexandros a nasty grin before he goes off.

ALEXANDROS

How long will it be before they attack?

OLYMPIEUS

Leonidas thinks two days. I think so too. Dienekes thinks three days. These are just scouts. He'll wait til his main-force units come up. We'll play it safe just in case, though.

ALEXANDROS

Why have you never been a polemarch, master?

Dienekes glances at him, uncomfortable.

OLYMPIEUS

Leonidas has tried to make Dienekes a general many times. Have you noticed how he likes him around to talk shop?

DIENEKES

Your father's a good general. It's not for me. I can't count past 32.

(lets their laughter fade)

Since you seem to be in the mood for questions tonight, answer me this, Alexandros. Do you sense the presence of Phobos in the camp?

There are the sounds of laughter, the murmur of conversation reverberating in the confines of the pass.

ALEXANDROS

Yes. One hears it in the strain of laughter. Sees it within the man's face who is alone. There, in the posture of the sentry upon the wall. Among the allies I have seen men eyeing the rear-guard, men weighing their chances. When the enemy comes they will attempt to desert.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

DIENEKES

And do you also sense... Something greater than fear?

Alexandros considers, doubtful, searching for an answer.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

Who, in your opinion, most possesses the opposite of fear?

ALEXANDROS

Polynikes. There is nothing which he will not dare. There is nothing he cannot do. He has courage.

DIENEKES

Yes. Polynikes. But Polynikes' courage is like that of the lion or the eagle. Natural, instinctual, glorying in its own supremacy. Most of us are not made that way.

He grins at Olympieus and Suicide who grin back, sharing a wisdom that yet eludes Alexandros and Zeo.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

No. Mere men cobble courage together on the spot, from the scraps around them, but mostly from each other. But is courage the true opposite of fear? I speak of something else. Something I do not possess. Neither does your father.

Olympieus tilts his head in acceptance.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

Leonidas sometimes does. I have seen it in your mother and my wife. Phobos flees before it. To call it love in the ordinary sense is not correct. To witness it overwhelms the soul, that mortals can be vessels of such a thing. To call it a god is incorrect also, for its character is not that of possession.

(beat)

Rather, it is that of revealed essence. It is that of Truth. A glimpse of ourselves as we should be.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

ALEXANDROS

Then, master, I cannot say I have sensed such a presence in the camp.

DIENEKES

Maybe you will. When the Persians come.

They contemplate this. Olympieus begins, serious:

OLYMPIEUS

The real reason Leonidas doesn't force our friend here to be a polemarch is because he's too effective in the front rank talking the foe to death.

They BURST OUT LAUGHING at Dienekes' expense.

EXT. OBSERVATION SPOT, KALLIDROMOS MOUNTAINS - DAY

Dienekes, Zeo, Alexandros and Suicide make their way along their observational ridge line, silhouettes against the red sun behind them.

EXT. OBSERVATION SPOT, KALLIDROMOS MOUNTAINS - DUSK

Smoke and maritime fog shroud the Plain of Trachis below, muffling a thousand fluttering lights. Campfires.

DIENEKES

(to Suicide and Alexandros)
Sleep. We will watch first.

EXT. OBSERVATION SPOT, KALLIDROMOS MOUNTAINS - DAY

Zeo stirs. Morning light. He awakens. Alexandros, pale, stares out over the ridge. Zeo rolls over, stands up, but Suicide pulls him down. Dienekes looks out, jaw set. And as Zeo lifts his head to see over the ridge, the CAMERA CRANES UP TO REVEAL:

The PLAIN OF TRACHIS. There is only one word to describe it now: a city.

A city of two million men. In the abstract it is daunting enough. But the sight of it... the sight of it makes the hair stand on the back of the neck.

From end to end, mountain to shore, the nations of the Persian Empire stand encamped upon the plain. It is so far away that the scale of the army is almost inconceivable.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Masses of men at double-time seem to creep down arrow-straight grids of streets. The earth blossoms in a mushroom-forest of tents. Cavalry divisions so vast they look like African herds.

A marshalling yard two miles across has been left at the center of the city. At first it looks as if clouds are moving across the sun the way the shadows shift upon it. But then a METALLIC GLITTERING seems to race along their edges. The shadows are units of a hundred thousand men ABOUT-FACING.

Over it all, in the design of the grid, in the orderly movement, there is the feeling of vast, capable organization and vast, guiding intelligence.

Then Zeo sees the wide shallow ravines. Devoid of brush, soil still dark. At first he can't tell what they are.

There are the rivers. The rivers which have been drunk dry.

Zeo glimpses movement. Just below them, a ridge line away, a **PERSIAN PATROL** winds its way up the mountain. Dienekes signals: it's time to withdraw.

EXT. SPARTAN CAMP, THERMOPYLAE - DAY

Dienekes leads his group into camp, right up to Leonidas.

DIENEKES

We'll hear from them before dark.
They'll attack tomorrow.

EXT. THE DANCE FLOOR - SUNSET

CLIP-CLOP, CLIP-CLOP. Polynikes, fully armed, walks slowly across the field. From the Phokian wall in front of him, as many men as can cram its 150-yard length watch from the battlements. Zeo is one of them.

A HORSE walks into frame, following Polynikes. A DONKEY at the horse's side. Polynikes stops a dozen yards from the wall. Dienekes, Olympieus, and a cluster of gray-beard Spartan Peers waits at the base. REVEAL:

Ptammitechus on the horse. His son, the Boy, on the donkey. ZEO REACTS. Dienekes and Olympieus roar in surprise and pleasure as Tommie dismounts.

DIENEKES

Tommie! Still wearing iron
underpants?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

They embrace and laugh, and the group of Peers close in, surround him with friendly punches and cheers. Tommie begins speaking, the Boy translating.

BOY

My father says he is happy to see you so well and in such good spirits. He bears a message from Xerxes himself. It is for the Spartans only.

The Spartans look at each other. On the wall above the Allied Leaders push to the forefront, LISTENING.

OLYMPIEUS

Friend, we do not treat with the Great King on a city-by-city basis.

Tommie's smile never wavers as the Boy translates.

BOY

My apologies. Then with your permission, may we speak with King Leonidas in private. As commander of your allied forces.

CONCERN on the faces of the Allies on the wall above. It is clearly an attempt to fracture the alliance. Dienekes considers.

DIENEKES

Well, you see, the King is a crusty old bugger.

The Boy begins translating rapidly into Egyptian.

OLYMPIEUS

Yes. He's usually drunk by noon these days... and with his hemorrhoids...

LEONIDAS

You never know what sort of response you'll get. Best let us decide if we should carry your message to him.

As the Boy finishes the translation, Tommie looks about, baffled, slowly realizing he's being put-upon. With a knowing smile, he looks hard at Leonidas. And replies.

BOY

Very well then. Please convey to your king his Majesty's fondest regards and this token of his respect.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Tommie proffers Leonidas a JEWELLED CHALICE. From the reactions on the wall, it must be worth the treasury of an entire city. Dienekes looks at Leonidas: *sucker!* And with a shrug, takes it.

BOY (cont'd)

His Majesty wishes to convey his deepest admiration for your city, with whom he shares an old enemy: the Athenians and the other Hellenes who opposed his father at Marathon.

ON THE WALL - LOOKS OF FEAR among the Allies. It is eerie - grown warriors, scarred, strong - terrorized by the words from the mouth of this little Boy:

BOY (cont'd)

You have his Majesty's word upon it: if the Spartans will yield now and surrender their arms, none will exceed them in honor under the King's banner. No Persian foot will tread the soil of Lakedaemon now, or forever, this His Majesty swears. Your country will be granted dominion over all Greece. Your forces will take their place as the foremost unit in His Majesty's army with all the fortune and glory such prominence commands. Your nation has but to name its desires. His Majesty will grant them. He will shower upon you gifts and honors in scale and costliness beyond imagining. Together we will make all Europe ours.

Paralyzing SILENCE. The entire Greek army hangs on the Spartans' response.

LEONIDAS

Let Xerxes surrender to us. We will not fail to match his generosity.

LOOKS OF RELIEF among the Allied Leaders on the wall. TEARS in the eyes of the Thespian Ambassador. The Boy finishes translating to his father, and Ptammitechus BURSTS OUT LAUGHING. But the Spartans do not laugh.

Ptammitechus sees their resolve, and his FACE FALLS. He nods, and lowers his voice so only the ones around him can hear. The Boy imitates the effect.

(CONTINUED)

BOY

My friends, when morning comes you
will not last even an hour. When you
are taken, call out my name,
Ptammitechus. It will preserve you.

And with that, he remounts his horse and wheels away into
the dusk. The Boy's donkey scampers after him.

EXT. THERMOPYLAE - DAWN

The SUN rises from the sea, driving hot through the haze,
discovering lines of men descending the Phokian Wall to
the Dance Floor.

EXT. DANCE FLOOR - DAY

A RHYTHMIC CHANTING echoes off the walls of the pass.
Zeo tries to drink water from a skin, but his hands shake
so badly he spills most of it. Suicide takes it from
him. Spare spears and shields on their backs, they wait
with the rest of the Squires behind the Spartan rear-
rankers. The entire force is drawn up, on line, silent.
Water-bearers come down from the wall behind them.

The men of Dienekes' platoon stand, helmets back, hoplons
resting against knees, the sun high in the sky, hammering
on them. Dienekes, like the other officers down the
line, paces out in front. Alpheus stands next to his
twin in the front rank, two of the file leaders.

ALPHEUS

What're they waiting for?

Dienekes shoots him a look but doesn't answer. They are
being held in immediate reserve, fifty yards in front of
the wall, in line with the nearest of the three stones
Leonidas had pointed to earlier: LION'S STONE.

CROWN STONE

A hundred and fifty yards in front of the Spartans is the
rear of the allied **THEBAN PHALANX**, the source of the
CHANTING. But despite the apparent bravado, men are
falling out of ranks to the rear, getting sick, emptying
their bowels in fear --

LIZARD STONE

-- for **MASSING** at the far end of the field between the
West Gate and the Lizard Stone are long lines of **MEDES**.
They wear brilliant blue and purple silk pantaloons and
shirts under leather cuirasses and open-faced helms.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

They scream back at the Thebans. They are light infantry, armed with long, thin lances, scimitars, and --

LION STONE:

-- ZEO REACTS, glimpsing the enemy through a momentary gap in the Spartan ranks.

ZEO
Wicker shields...

Suicide grins at him darkly. For indeed, the Medes are armed with wicker shields like the ones the Spartans have trained against all their lives.

SUICIDE
Medes. Xerxes gives them the honor of first blood to avenge themselves for Marathon.

NO MAN'S LAND:

Between the two sides **GREEK SKIRMISHERS** harry their Persian counterparts with arrows and javelins, keeping the main body of Median troops back behind the Lizard Stone. Jockeying for position, neither side is engaged in any meaningful way.

LION STONE:

POLYNIKES stands in front of his platoon, the **KING'S BODYGUARD**, the toughest of the Spartan troops. Leonidas nods to him. Polynikes shouts over the chanting.

POLYNIKES
Lizard Stone is the limit! We will not allow him to bring more men onto the field than will fit between Lizard Stone and the West Gate!

PICK UP DIENEKES haranguing his platoon, pointing:

DIENEKES
Crown Stone. That is the line of departure. Our line! They do not cross it. Ever! Lion Stone, here, is our rally point. The next group to rotate in will assemble here.

He stares straight into Alexandros' pale face, moves on.

DIENEKES (cont'd)
Remember, there are more units behind the wall.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

DIENEKES (cont'd)
Keep clear of them when cycling back
off the line. Do not disorder them.

Something catches Zeo's eye. He looks up into the
mountains above the pass. Suicide spots it too.

SUICIDE
Well I'll be damned.

On one of the distant ridge lines a troop of bare-chested
EUNUCHS set down a golden litter carrying Xerxes himself.

Leonidas sees his nemesis up there on the hill. He spits
on the ground. And as the Greek army begins to notice, a
terrific **JEER** goes up.

EXT. PHOKIAN WALL - DAY

Troops on the wall cat-call the coward king. Behind the
wall, the remaining 3000 Greek Hoplites, in the process
of arming, drop what they're doing and lend their voices.

EXT. DANCE FLOOR - DAY

LIZARD STONE: The **MEDIAN GENERAL** looks nervously to the
cliffs above. All he can see of Xerxes is the gold and
purple robe. A **SIGNAL FLAG** dips up and down. The
General turns to his troops, fear in his eyes, unsheathes
his scimitar, and lets out a **BATTLE CRY**.

The **CRY** goes up in 2000 Median voices, and the lines of
soldiers **SWEEP FORWARD** at a dead run.

Greek Skirmishers head for the hills. The Theban Phalanx
serries its hoplon shields and **ADVANCES**. Spears up, the
two sides **CLOSE**, and **WHAM!**

The loose waves of Median infantry, lances and scimitars
flashing, **CRASH** into the stolid shoulder-to-shoulder mass
of the Theban Phalanx. The Phalanx plows the first two
ranks over. It slows in the tide of Medes, compacting.

LION STONE:

Alexandros, in the second rank watches as a **CLOUD OF DUST**
RISES at the center of the battlefield. A terrible sound
rises from the chaos. It is a **WAIL**, a **MOAN** beyond
description. It is the voice of Death in the throats of
thousands of men.

Zeo finally gets sick with two of his Squire companions.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The eyes of the Spartans are glued to the battle in front of them. Dienekes paces, ignoring it. A couple of Peers grab up their hoplons in reflex.

DIENEKES

Set those cheeseplates down! EYES ON ME! Put your goddamn lamps here!

Shields return to resting position. The men of his platoon force themselves to turn from the carnage. Dienekes walks the line, calm.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

I don't need to look to know what's happening. I can hear it. The Medes are under-armored and their shields are too light. The Thebans are hacking them to pieces. The Medes are mad, they want blood for their brothers who we killed at Marathon, so they don't realize they're dead yet.

(beat)

We'll be going in there in a second. The Thebans' arms are getting tired from all the killing. I don't want any heroes. Nobody dies. We are in and out for the knockout blow.

He looks down the line to Leonidas who lowers his helmet.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

Ready? Cheeseplates up!

As the Spartans hoist their shields, he assumes his place in the front rank. Alexandros is right behind him.

Suicide draws two javelins from his quiver. Zeo clutches a spare spear at the ready. And the SARPINX HORN SOUNDS.

The Spartans step off, Squires in open order behind them with spare shields and spears for their Peers.

Zeo tries to follow in line behind Dienekes and Alexandros. He glances over his shoulder. Over the Phokian Wall come the Thespians, taking the Spartans' place at Lion Stone.

CROWN STONE

The Spartans stride across the open ground, the terrible WAIL OF DEATH building and building, now punctuated with the ringing of metal and piercing cries.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Ahead the Theban Phalanx wallows in the dust over a muck-churned field of dead Medes.

Now stray JAVELINS, flung over the Thebans' heads fall among the Spartans, banging harmlessly off shields. Without so much as a hesitation, the Spartans walk right over the dead Medes.

But Zeo, appalled, SLIPS on one. Lucky for him, because a javelin punches through the air where he was a beat before. In terror he shoves himself off a smear of blood that was a face and tries to find Dienekes JUST AS --

-- the glittering bronze shields of Sparta LOCK together, SPEARS SNAP over rims, and the Spartan lines RAM the unengaged Persian left.

Zeo has time to glimpse Dienekes and Alexandros punch over a row of Persians and then VANISH in the dust and hell of the front ranks.

Thebans suddenly come backpedaling out of the fray, passing through the Helot lines, exhausted, as the Spartans take over the attack. A retreating Theban knocks over Zeo. Zeo gets up again. And now he is lost. No one around him is familiar. He struggles forward and finds himself again behind the shoving Spartan lines.

Medes MOUNT a pile of bodies, threatening to spill into the Helot rear. A Peer whirls from the mass shouting:

SPARTAN

SPEAR!

Zeo thrusts the one he's carrying into his hands. The man throws himself into the fray, knocking back the rising Medes. Zeo gropes for the other spear on his back, but it's plucked from him by another warrior before he can reach it. Instead he manages to unsling his bow.

IN THE FRONT RANK Dienekes crushes into the Medes, jamming the bronze visage of his helmet into the SCREAMING ENEMY FACES INCHES from his.

Spears CRUNCH through wicker over and over again as the Spartan Phalanx advances, grinding bone and body like some reaping machine. Dienekes' spear flashes into the faces opposite him as Alexandros' spear, reaching over, punches into a Medes' throat.

The rear ranks shove the lines forward, spears pumping vertically, killing Medes who have been knocked down and trod underfoot.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

BEHIND THE LINE Zeo glimpses Suicide flinging his javelins at a bunch of exposed Medes coming around the right, and then Suicide's gone in the melee. Zeo tries to fit an arrow to his bow when he's pelted with a hail of SEVERED FINGERS and fragments of a spear.

It makes him drop the arrow. He tries to pick it up, but steps on it by accident and breaks it.

Alexandros CRIES OUT as he shoves on Dieneke's back against the tide of Medes, his spear broken, jabbing with its jagged end. A WHANG from a scimitar knocks Dieneke's head back into Alexandros', but Dieneke doesn't fall.

The blow makes him look up above the fray, and he realizes they have driven the Medes back to the West Gate. A gust of wind blows DUST out of the way, and for a heartbeat he glimpses the TRACK BEYOND THE GATE.

It is filled with fresh Medes as far as the eye can see. JAVELINS begin banging down on them. And it is as if the entire Spartan line suddenly has run out of gas.

With a JOLT the line RECOILS from the weight of the newly arriving troops.

BEHIND THE LINE Zeo gets an arrow strung, and then JUMPS BACK as the Spartan Phalanx seems to HOP BACK. And then BACK again. Once more and the line will break, BUT --

-- with an ENORMOUS CHEER the THESPIAN PHALANX strides up into the Spartan rear.

Zeo is buffeted by armored Hoplites left and right as the allies pass lines, relieving the Spartans.

The Thespians DRIVE ON. Helot Squires rush in to withdraw their Peers.

And then Zeo spots Dieneke and Alexandros. Dieneke is on his knee, Alexandros trying to lift him. Zeo drops his arrow and runs to Dieneke's side. Zeo helps Alexandros get him up. A SHEET OF BLOOD runs out from under his helmet.

EXT. BASE OF PHOKIAN WALL - DAY

The Spartans tend their wounds and regroup at the foot of the wall even as the next allied unit musters in front of them at the Lion Stone.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The dead and dying litter the field from the Crown Stone to the Lizard Stone. At the West Gate in the far distance, the Thespians fight the last of the Medes.

Zeo pries Dieneke's dented cheekplate out so he can get the helmet off. It lifts from Dieneke's sweat-plastered head. He is missing an eye.

DIENEKES

I know.

He goes through Zeo's pack for a compress, pushes it into the socket as Maron gets the platoon in order. Alpheus comes up to check on him.

ALPHEUS

Aaa, you got another one.

DIENEKES

Where are my spears?

ZEO

I gave them away.

DIENEKES

To our side, I hope.

He puts out a hand, clasps Alexandros on the shoulder. He has done well. Alexandros nods. All around them men are hugging each other with tears of joy, kneel praying.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

Get some more down here. Hurry.

EXT. PHOKIAN WALL - DAY

Zeo scrambles to the top of the wall, hoists himself over the battlement, and stops. A great CHEER goes up from the onlookers. The Medes are gone, the field belongs to the Greeks.

EXT. DANCE FLOOR - DAY

Exhausted Thespians pass through the reformed Spartan lines, returning to the Phokian Wall. Zeo comes running up, finds Dieneke at Crown Stone. He hands him a spear.

DIENEKES

Good timing.

Out of the Track pour a horde of **CISSIANS**, barbaric, tattooed mountain men.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

They're armed with massive battle axes, heavy wooden shields... but wear no armor. They form up in massive WEDGES behind **CHIEFTAIN LEADERS**.

DIENEKES (cont'd)
Plant that one for me.

Zeo realizes he means the other spear, and he sticks it in the ground.

DIENEKES (cont'd)
Now get your ass back and try killing some of them, will you?

This contingent is mostly fresh Peloponnesian allies, except for the scarlet right flank which is all Spartan.

The wedges of Cissian berserkers HOWL in rage, beat their chests. The Greeks SING THE PAEAN in response. And suddenly with a desert cry of ELELELELELEEE --

-- a WAVE of Cissians comes straight down the mountain face on the left flank. Dienekes sees it just as the leftmost part of the Greek line turns to take the charge.

DIENEKES (cont'd)
Shit. HOLD HERE!

Polynikes shouts down the line at him.

POLYNIKES
There are your apes!

The Spartans are too far away to do anything about it anyway, and a big wedge of Cissians are holding them in place 50 yards away, daring them to turn to the new threat. Behind the line, Suicide grabs Zeo.

SUICIDE
Come on!

ON THE LEFT FLANK

The Helot squires rush up behind the Allied troops just as they're being overwhelmed by the Cissians. Fortunately the Cissians dropping down from the cliffs have no sense of order. The fight is a mad scramble.

Suicide flies into the fray, darting javelins left and right. Zeo's arrow rattles against his bow as he tries to fit it. A Cissian COMES RIGHT AT HIM, and he shoots the man dead through an eye. Shaken, he reaches for another arrow as a Helot's head is hacked off in front of him.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ON THE RIGHT FLANK

The main-force Cissians, seeing the Greek line troops won't be drawn off by the flank attack, step up and let fly a HAIL OF THROWING AXES.

They BANG HARD off shields, catch a few unlucky men in the helmets, disorder the Greek lines... and then the Cissians CHARGE, wicked battle axes raised.

Wedges of barbarians slam into the Greek lines. The first rows of Cissians go down to the Spartan spears.

Dienekes blocks with his shield, but the axe BASHES right through it! With a JERK, the Cissian tears away the Hoplon. A beat of astonishment from Dienekes, but before the Cissian can free his axe and strike again, Alexandros STEPS IN FRONT OF DIENEKES and punches his spear through the barbarian's bare chest.

All down the line the front ranks lose their shields to the axe blows, designed for just this sort of fighting. But the disciplined lines of the phalanx hold. And now the lack of order in the Cissian mob begins to show. The Spartans begin to SHOVE the masses back.

ON THE LEFT FLANK

The Helots gain the upper hand against the Cissians who are unable to descend the cliff in sufficient numbers and with sufficient speed to maintain the attack. Zeo and a cluster of other archers shoot them off the cliff face.

ON THE RIGHT FLANK

Cissians catapult themselves from their comrades' backs, throwing themselves bodily into the Spartan ranks, trying to break up their formation.

Dienekes, now behind Alexandros, stabs at Cissians over Alexandros' shoulder. He sees they've turned the barbarian wedge to the right. The enemy's back is now to the cliff and the drop to the sea.

He shoots a look left. Polynikes is there, several files away, fighting at Leonidas' side like a madman. But he spares Dienekes a look, sees what Dienekes sees, and with a cry that carries over the deafening mayhem, SHOVES forward, TURNING RIGHT.

DIENEKES
PUSH 'EM YOU SONOFABITCHES!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

The Spartans dig in and HEAVE. The mass of Cissians shifts backward... and begins to topple over the cliff.

EXT. SEA CLIFFS, THERMOPYLAE - DAY

SHOVE. A knot of SCREAMING men fall to their death.
SHOVE. Another sheaf of flailing limbs and weapons.

EXT. THE DANCE FLOOR - DAY

The Spartans DRIVE. And suddenly REINFORCEMENTS JOIN THEM from behind, files of Argives pushing their way between the Spartan files to continue the attack anew.

EXT. PHOKIAN WALL - DAY

On the ramparts of the wall a man SCREAMS in agony as **SURGEONS** try to extract his shattered arm from the wreckage of an axe-beaten hoplon. Identical scenes are being played out all over the camp behind.

Zeo, flecked in blood, helps Dienekes over the safety of the wall. Alexandros comes next. The cheekplate of his helmet is bashed in, his jaw broken. Zeo sees the wound, sees Alexandros' pain, but passes him down the wall to help Olympieus next.

DIENEKES

God damn. Who are those animals?

OLYMPIEUS

Somebody said Cissians. Mountain men.

The Spartans make way for the next rotation of troops, heading over the wall.

OLYMPIEUS (cont'd)

Go get 'em, boys. They're almost done for.

From the looks of things out on the battlefield, though, it seems a little optimistic. Dienekes glances up at the sky as he takes a new shield from Zeo.

DIENEKES

There's a lot of day left.

And at the far end of the field, behind the Cissians, glittering columns of fresh, mail-armored **EGYPTIAN MARINES** begin to assemble.

EXT. SPARTAN CAMP, THERMOPYLAE - DAY

The Spartans form up by platoon behind the safety of the wall, various allied contingents with them. Leonidas, Polynikes and Olympieus walk the line, examining the condition of the troops. Almost all of them are injured. Helots bind wounds, rush new weapons in, still hot from the pounding blacksmiths behind.

In the b.g. casualties stream in over the wall, the din of battle not far beyond it. Leonidas signals Dienekes out of his platoon, and together with the Allied Leaders, they mount the wall to observe the field.

Zeo and Alexandros watch the leaders up on the wall. And then they look at each other. Blood-stained, exhausted. A thousand years old. Then the leaders on the wall wave the troops up. Zeo falls back into the rear.

EXT. PHOKIAN WALL - DAY

The files wait in their chutes atop the wall. Dienekes roars out to his platoon:

DIENEKES

All right! Listen up! Xerxes has finally sent us somebody worth fighting. These Egyptian Marines are big bastards. They're good with their big swords. And they've brought some little buddies, Rhodian slingers. Now they fight scrambled, so we won't play their game. The slingers will try to disorder us. Keep the line. The Egyptians need room to swing those cow-choppers, so don't give it to them. Let's go!

The HORN SOUNDS, and they go over the wall. Zeo mounts it and looks down into --

EXT. DANCE FLOOR - DAY (CONTINUOUS)

-- the thick of the battle. At the center an all-out melee is underway, the Thebans fighting scrambled with the Egyptians. They have been pushed all the way back to Lion Stone, the Egyptians with their question-mark hooked swords, ring mail and metal shields more than a match for the Greeks man-to-man.

The Spartans and Thespians form up in their dense columns and ADVANCE. At the sight of their relief, the Thebans turn tail and run for the safety of the wall.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The Egyptians do not pursue. Instead, they reorganize themselves as well, **OFFICERS** screaming orders. And now in the loose, alternating ranks, **RHODIAN SLINGERS** step forward, arms whirling like windmills.

Zeo readies his bow as the air around him is suddenly filled with a WHISTLING ZIP ZIP ZIIIIIP! Skull and hair fly as a Helot next to Zeo goes down, hit in the head. And then all hell breaks loose.

A DEAFENING, RATTLING, SUSTAINED HAIL OF INVISIBLE SLING FIRE rakes the Spartan lines. Shields GO UP, but not before helmets explode in blood and men drop. The Helots in the rear are torn to pieces.

Zeo crouches and races for cover under the shadow of the phalanx.

OVER THE SHIELDS AT HIGH PORT the hail of bullets from the distant slingers dent and batter the dragon-like scales of the advancing files.

Helots huddle behind the Spartan rear-rankers. Flying debris, fragments of wood and bronze, spent lead bullets rain down on them. But the Spartans keep their order.

Egyptian Officers scream their orders, the slingers withdraw, and the Egyptians BACK AWAY FROM THE Greek Phalanx. A few overeager warriors BREAK LINES TO PURSUE.

POLYNIKES
DON'T FALL FOR IT, IT'S A TRICK!

And true to Polynikes' words, the lone wolves are quickly dispatched by teams of Egyptian Marines waiting for them.

Now the Egyptian Officers see their ruse won't work, and halt the feigned retreat. Their ranks whirl as one. But they are not densely packed like the Spartans' lines are.

With a CRY they CHARGE. For the first time the Spartans in the front rank HURL THEIR SPEARS. It's enough to disorder the Egyptians' already loose ranks, and then the Spartan front-rankers draw their short swords. CRASH!

The two sides collide and COMPACT upon each other. Now we see why the Spartans carry such short blades.

To a man, the Egyptians have half a head and fifty pounds on the Greeks. Dienekes, Alpheus and Maron, packed face-to-face with them, stab at their guts with their swords, able to work the short weapons in the crush.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

The rear-rankers jab their spears overhand into the hapless Marines' faces. It is pure butchery. Dead Rhodians crushed between the lines like victims in a soccer riot are swept along, upright.

The Egyptians need too much room to wield their swords which are designed for slashing, not stabbing. They are helpless, grist for the Mill of Ares. Rank upon rank they die upright, swords pressed uselessly against the Greek shields.

It doesn't take long for the Egyptian Officers to understand the futility of the situation, and with a racket of TRUMPETS, the Marines disengage.

A gap opens between the two sides. The Spartans mount a pile of bodies, and press after them.

The unarmored and otherwise unarmed slingers take off running on the flanks. Helots stream out from behind the phalanx after them.

Zeo kneels, draws his bow, and shoots, has another arrow and shoots again before the first kills a fleeing Rhodian at a hundred yards. A beat, and the second arrow drops the man beside the first. Zeo looks up to discover Suicide staring in awe at the feat.

SUICIDE

Get back to your man.

EXT. WEST GATE, THERMOPYLAE - DAY

The Egyptians cram back up the track, fleeing the battlefield as a handful of brave souls try to hold the gate against the massed Spartans.

EXT. PHOKIAN WALL - DUSK

The long, last light of day casts shadows across the Phokian wall and in the camp behind it. Zeo shares out bread to his Platoon. The Peers sit and lie in extremis on the steps to the wall. Dienekes tends a man with a fractured skull, a bullet injury, while Alpheus, next to him, wraps a severed index finger.

The low moan of the badly wounded saturates the camp.

Alexandros stares out at the battlefield, silent. It looks as if it has been ploughed by the oxen of hell. Thousands of bodies lie butchered in the churned-up dirt. Lakes of blood pool under heaps of corpses, arms and legs cocked in rigor mortis.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He begins to weep. Zeo comes up behind him, gives him bread. Alexandros tries to take it, still crying, but can't get it in his broken mouth. Zeo takes it back, chews it for him.

ZEO

You have to eat something.

Suddenly Leonidas, wounded in the leg, totters up the wall, turning to address the allied army below.

LEONIDAS

Brothers! Friends! The day is almost done. Our scouts tell me another wave musters beyond the West Gate. They tell me these are the Immortal Ten Thousand, Xerxes' own bodyguard. They are the best he has to offer, the greatest warriors in his empire. Yet this, I swear, will be the easiest fight of all. I will tell you why.

(beat)

You say they are fresh, rested. This is not the case. All day they have watched their comrades returning with their balls about their ears. What hell do they imagine awaits them here? This elite unit is more precious to Xerxes than miser's gold. These are his sons, his kinsmen, princes of his land. He will feel the loss of each and every one of them. Kill a thousand of them, and he will pull them out. Kill a thousand of them, and the day is ours. Can you give me a thousand of them?

A CHEER goes up, and slowly, in pain, the army gets to its feet one more time.

EXT. THE DANCE FLOOR - SUNSET

DRUMS HAMMER away, martial, as the perfectly-ordered ranks of **THE IMMORTALS** take the field. Black silk robes. Spears. Silver mail and shields. The scarred faces of veteran warriors. There is no bluster here, no cheering, just calm, almost-Spartan confidence.

Behind the long lines of spearmen, archers plant wicker body shields in the dirt, begin stringing bows, stick arrows in the ground within easy, rapid reach.

AT CROWN STONE

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Is drawn up the entire Greek army. The Spartans are at the center of the line. There are no reserves.

Leonidas confers with Olympieus, Dienekes and Polynikes. Zeo stands there as one of a group of runners.

DIENEKES

I was wondering where their archers were.

OLYMPIEUS

Well, what do you think?

Suddenly the Thespian Ambassador comes running up with a **THESPIAN SOLDIER**.

THESPIAN AMBASSADOR

This man has something to tell you.

He shows Leonidas a slave brand on his forehead.

THESPIAN SOLDIER

I was taken slave by the Persian some years ago. I'm a horsebreaker by trade. They had me work up their new mounts, the Immortals I mean.

Dienekes shares a quick look with Polynikes.

THESPIAN SOLDIER (cont'd)

You see, they're cavalry. Best in the world. But they fight like cavalry even when they're dismounted. They look for weak spots, break through, get in behind. It's all about maneuver.

Leonidas and the other Spartans look at each other, and he claps the man on the shoulder.

LEONIDAS

All right.

(to the squires)

Get the other platoon leaders up here.

Zeo and the other runners race off.

EXT. THERMOPYLAE - SUNSET

The SUN descends faster and faster over the shoulder of the mountain above the West Gate. A steady stream of silhouetted figures come and go from Xerxes' observation post: messengers carrying the Great King's commands.

EXT. DANCE FLOOR - SUNSET

And as the SUN sets in the eyes of the Greek defenders, ORONTES raises his sword and signals the archers.

They fit arrows, draw their bows, aim them at the sky, and as Orontes drops his sword, they let fly. With that a SHOUT goes up, the Immortals CHARGE.

CROWN STONE

DIENEKES

UP!

Dienekes' platoon raises its shields, COVER THEIR HEADS LIKE A ROOF. The arrows hit hard in battering shower after shower, shattering on the bronze hoplons, occasionally punching through metal and sticking.

The Helots don't fare as well as the men in the line. They race to get under the shields of the Peers, but drop by the dozen. Suicide is hit in the shoulder. Zeo, with Dienekes' spare hoplon on his back, falls on the ground and curls up under it like a turtle.

BAM BAM. Arrows ricochet off the bronze casing on his back. He spots Suicide trying to sit up, a LINE OF ARROWS marching like a terrible squall line toward him. Zeo crawls like hell and COVERS Suicide just before the arrows SPANG OFF his back, hammer the dirt around them.

Suddenly the hissing and banging of the arrows vanishes and with a DEAFENING ROAR the Immortals sweep up. They hit before the Spartans can mount their scrum-like drive. Thousands of Persian lances smash as one into the forest of Spartan spears. Splinters fly, men go down, and the Greeks are knocked back.

Dienekes and Alexandros hammer away at the swarming Persians in front of them. The files behind them DIG IN, but they're HEAVED backward by the equally-disciplined Immortals. A LOOK OF SURPRISE on Dienekes' face.

In the center Polynikes and Olympieus, flanking Leonidas, kill Persians left and right. Leonidas suddenly steps out of the front rank, and backs away between files. He gets to the rear, and from there he assesses the line with an expert eye. He has to step out of the way as the weight of the Immortal attack continues drive his men backward. He spots Dienekes' cross-comb helmet.

LEONIDAS

DIENEKES!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

There's no way on gods' green earth he will hear him... but Zeo does. He comes running. The King grabs him.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)
Tell Dienekes NOW!

Zeo runs for it. Arrows zip over his head. He gets back to the Platoon and screams for Dienekes.

ZEO
DIENEKES!

Dienekes hears him, looks back at the King. Understands.

DIENEKES
READY EVERYBODY... FISH THEM! NOW!

And with that, the entire platoon PRETENDS TO BREAK. In feigned panic, the rear rankers run away, and the front-rankers stumble back. The Immortals CHEER, and slam home what they think is a rout.

A black tide of Persians pours through the lines. Zeo shoots at them with the other Helots, then flees too.

The Spartans retreat maybe fifty yards, and then IN STARTLING UNISON, WHEEL AROUND IN THE PERSIANS' FACES. Eight across. Four deep. And they are FORMED UP. The Immortals aren't. The surprise shocks the oncoming soldiers, and ranks of them are cut down before the sheer mass of the incursion packs them back into a deadlocked shoving match.

Orontes SHOUTS, unintelligible in Farsee, but the TRUMPETERS next to him signal his intention: the last two ranks of Lancers left-face and end-run their line, pour into the hole.

DIENEKES (cont'd)
Close the line! CLOSE THE DAMN LINE!

The Greek line now has a terrible bulge in it, held only in the front by Dienekes' platoon and on the flanks by scrapping Helots. And the neighboring platoons in what was the main line can't close ranks. They're supposed to cut off the pocket of Persians, and are trying to, but instead the Persian attack continues to flow into the gap, SWELLING.

Leonidas sees the trap is backfiring on him.

LEONIDAS
Shit! POLYNIKES!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Polynikes hears him. Leonidas points. With a final stab, Polynikes kills the Persian before him and pulls his file out of the line.

And Polynikes RUNS. His file-mates after him.

The last of the Helots holding the inside flank of the bulge go down. Dienekes' platoon now is getting clobbered, men dying left and right.

They are driven back INTO ZEO. ZEO plants his shoulder behind Alexandros, pushes, but it's hopeless. The pocket in front of them is about to BURST, spilling Persians around them...

... but Polynikes, like the wind, slashes into the side of the bulge, knocking a row of men over, killing as he forges in.

For a heartbeat it is Polynikes alone against two hundred men... but before they can swallow him up, his file mates HIT the bulge behind him, tearing the gap Polynikes has made into a wound in the heart of the Persian exploitation attack.

Now Leonidas has rallied the main line, and the tide turns against the Persians without their two rear ranks.

Dienekes links up with Polynikes. They fight side-by-side, invincible in the slaughter. With a wail of fear, the Persians in the gap CRACK.

Zeo trips, and as he gets up, he is in the rear alone again. The entire Persian force crumbles before them.

He whips his gaze up to THE RIDGE LINE, so far away, and there, at the sight of the routing Immortals, a FIGURE leaps to his feet from his throne in terror. Xerxes.

Zeo's fists fly into the air. He HOWLS AT XERXES IN VICTORY.

EXT. SPARTAN CAMP, THERMOPYLAE - NIGHT

THE MOON shines down on burial parties descending the wall, returning from the battlefield. By firelight Zeo wraps puncture wounds on Dienekes' legs. Suicide sits there, arm in a sling. Dienekes changes his own compress in his eye, but, thank god, we don't see it. Instead, we watch Alexandros watching, his face black and crooked.

Zeo notices Polynikes there, at the edge of the light, watching them, thoughtful. An awkward beat.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DIENEKES
How're you doing?

POLYNIKES
Pulled a hamstring running after your
asses.

And they all just burst out laughing. Polynikes limps
into their midst, otherwise unharmed.

DIENEKES
Not even a scratch. Figures.

Polynikes sits down next to Alexandros, pulls a piece of
resin out of a pouch and begins to knead it.

POLYNIKES (cont'd)
You're a sorry looking piece of shit.

Alexandros snorts, jaw too swollen to reply.

POLYNIKES (cont'd)
Here. Bite down on it. Boxer's
lunch. Won't be able to pry your jaw
apart with a crowbar once it sets.
It'll keep it from hurting as much.

He gently opens Alexandros' mouth, pushes the resin back.
With a nod, Polynikes presses his jaw shut and Alexandros
BITES DOWN, in silent agony. Polynikes looks away, at
Dienekes, then at Zeo.

Zeo feels the heat of the stare, afraid at what Polynikes
might know... but instead Polynikes glances back at
Alexandros. It is hard for him to say this:

POLYNIKES (cont'd)
You did well. When Leonidas chose you
for the 300, I argued against it. I
didn't think you'd fight. I am sorry.
You do honor to your father and your
mentor. You do honor to our city,
Peer of Lakedaemon.

Suicide and Zeo look away with Dienekes, not wanting to
intrude upon the exchange.

POLYNIKES (cont'd)
And I am sorry I broke your nose. I'm
afraid it's your best feature now.

Alexandros begins to laugh. Polynikes laughs with him,
and then the others until Alexandros moans in pain.

EXT. CAMP SMITHY - NIGHT

Zeo helps Dienekes carry his dented shields, weapons and breastplate to the glowing fires of the camp smithy. **BLACKSMITHS** hammer away, sparks flying in the dark.

Dienekes, stiff, stares at the lines of warriors waiting in the shadows for their weapons. Haggard faces in the red firelight. Eyes still replaying the trauma. Like lost souls in hell.

And when Dienekes speaks, its quiet, as if afraid to disturb the dead.

DIENEKES

Do you know what it means to give your life, Zeo?

Zeo looks at him. A long moment. He looks every bit like the other men around him.

ZEO

Not really, lord. Not like I think you mean.

DIENEKES

To have it taken from you, stolen in the heartbeat that it takes the spear or arrow to claim you. To lose it in the depth of night to the disease that hunts you... that is one thing.

(beat)

But to choose it. To will it...

He is rendered speechless with emotion.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

These men. They have given all that can be expected of a mortal. Tomorrow they must give more.

EXT. BASE OF PHOKIAN WALL - DAY

The SUN hammers down on shrieking BEDLAM. The Spartans fight, backs to the Phokian Wall, against **INDIAN SWORDSMEN** in garish padded armor and headdresses with gold filigree designs of Hindu gods and heroes.

FIRE consumes the wooden arrow shields atop the wall. Helots desperately try to topple them free. Thespian Hopliters feed down the wall, trying to help the Spartans.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

On the slope of the wall Zeo gasps in the SMOKE, firing out at the enemy. Towering SHAPES MOVE beyond the masses of contending men: WAR ELEPHANTS with houdas. **INDIAN ARCHERS** in the houdas shoot flaming arrows over Zeo.

Backing up on the wall, Dienekes, Polynikes and Alexandros fight side by side with Leonidas. With the few feet of elevation, Leonidas spots a knot of Spartans, separated from the rest, fighting for their lives among the distant bath houses.

LEONIDAS
Goddamn Olympieus!

Alexandros and Polynikes look up and see the situation. Persian archers surround Olympieus and his platoon. They try to rally, but are hopelessly outnumbered. Arrows cut through them... and OLYMPIEUS FALLS.

ALEXANDROS
NO!

In fury he SHOVES the Indian in front of him down, surges forward. Polynikes throws himself after him. A beat, and it looks like they'll be heaved back, but the Thespians coming in behind break them free.

To Zeo's horror, they take off running across the open for Olympieus. Dienekes has his hands full in front of him, but feels Zeo right there behind.

DIENEKES
Go after him!

Zeo sees a gap appear in the Indian files, tenses, and hurls himself off the wall, before they can react --

EXT. DANCE FLOOR - DAY (CONTINUOUS)

-- and is into their rear! Indian soldiers turn after the three of them, but in their bulky armor, have no chance. Polynikes and Alexandros run like the wind. Arrows zing past, Alexandros CRYING OUT.

EXT. BASE OF PHOKIAN WALL - DAY

Leonidas cries out to the Helot archers on the wall:

LEONIDAS
COVER THEM!

Arrows turn on the Indian infantry pursing Alexandros, Polynikes and Zeo.

EXT. BATH HOUSES - DAY

The place is crawling with Persian archers. Archers on the roof, archers between the buildings, archers in the windows. The last Spartan in Olympieus' platoon goes down to a pair of Persian archers standing in the field.

BASH! Alexandros and Polynikes, shields lapped, flatten them dead from behind.

Olympieus' body lies apart, a dozen arrows in it. They race to it, shields high.

POLYNIKES

Grab him!

And as they flip up their shields and snag Olympieus by the cloak --

-- ZEO plants himself in front of them, bow drawn, FEARLESS, for this instant, an avatar of the Archer God.

With PRETERNATURAL, STYLIZED SPEED he draws down on an archer in the open, kills him. On a man on a roof. Kills him. On an archer in a doorway. Kills him. Then the one in the window next to him. Dead too. CUT SPEED-DRAW-EYE-DEAD MAN.

Two archers rise from behind a stone wall in his blind spot, have him dead to rights... but POLYNIKES' SHIELD flies up, and the arrows WHANG OFF it. Zeo turns, kneels, kills one of them. The other ducks. Zeo SHOOTS through a tiny chink in the stone wall. The archer staggers into view, arrow in his throat, falls dead.

POLYNIKES (cont'd)

COME ON!

Zeo stands, covering them as they run.

EXT. BASE OF PHOKIAN WALL - DAY

Dienekes watches them run. They'll never make it. Swordsmen close the angle of escape. But the sight makes the HEARTS LEAP in the chests of the Greeks, and with a last, mighty SHOVE and CHEER, the Indians tumble back. Freed-up speedsters on the flank fly out toward Polynikes and Alexandros, killing the intercepting Indians from behind.

And with a final volley of arrows from Zeo, the last attackers go down, and the three men are swept up to safety in the extending Greek lines.

EXT. PHOKIAN WALL - DUSK

Amid the scorched stone and collapsed sections of wall, parties of Helots roll Indian bodies off the rampart. There is no sound of fighting, just the low, steady wailing of the wounded.

EXT. SPARTAN CAMP, THERMOPYLAE - DUSK

Alexandros throws dirt over Olympieus, wrapped in his cloak, lying in a shallow grave. Polynikes and Dienekes stand at his side, hollow ghosts of men.

Zeo comes up behind. He gestures Dienekes to the knoll. Leonidas wants him. Dienekes puts a hand on Alexandros' shoulder, leaves.

EXT. KNOLL, THERMOPYLAE - DUSK

Leonidas sits heavily on a rock atop the knoll looking out over the battlefield. His left shoulder is cocked astray, permanently dislocated. Around him, the remnants of the Allied Leadership sit in the dirt, all wounded to one degree or another. The Messenger from the fleet is reporting as Dienekes and Zeo come up.

MESSENGER

The fleet can hold til noon tomorrow at best. They've sighted squadrons on the far side of Euboea. If we don't pull out they'll trap us in the Gulf.

LEONIDAS

The armies in Boeotia?

MESSENGER

Almost assembled. They'll be able to fight within a week.

The Allies look at each other. There is no way they can hold another day, let alone a week.

THESPIAN AMBASSADOR

We're going to lose Athens.

The Messenger, clearly an Athenian, looks away, tears welling, knowing it's true.

LEONIDAS

We never could have saved her. A pitched battle before her walls, and we'd lose the entire army. But Athens can be evacuated.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

LEONIDAS (cont'd)
Rebuilt when Xerxes is defeated. The
army is all. We must buy every hour
we can for them.

The Messenger looks back to Leonidas, resolution building
in his eyes. Leonidas turns to Dienekes.

LEONIDAS (CONT'D)
How are the men?

DIENEKES
I have ten in my enomotia who can
still fight. There are 106 of us
left, about a thousand of our friends.

Suddenly there is a DISTURBANCE in the camp. A FIGHT.
Polynikes looms over it, BEATING a man in Persian
clothes. A ring of angry spectators cheers him on. As
Polynikes jerks the man's head back, Zeo REACTS --

DIENEKES (cont'd)
Well I'll be damned...

EXT. SPARTAN CAMP, THERMOPYLAE - NIGHT

-- because the man is ROOSTER. Bound and beaten, he
kneels before a drum court of Peers. Among them
Dienekes, Alexandros and Zeo study his bruised face in
the light of a fire. Polynikes paces behind him.

POLYNIKES
You're a liar. There is no other way
through these mountains.

ROOSTER
Not through these mountains, you
idiot.

Polynikes hits him hard on the back of the head.

ROOSTER (cont'd)
The track comes out in the pass.
Further down. But still behind you.
He's sent the Immortals. Replaced the
ones you killed. Back up to 10,000.
Hence the Immortals.

DIENEKES
Why're you telling us this?

ROOSTER
Because they're even bigger assholes
than you are.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

POLYNIKES

You expect me to believe you swam all
this way and not a single one of their
sentries spotted you?

Rooster stares at Zeo, then Dienekes, deciding something.

ROOSTER

You're all fools, you know.

(beat)

Cause there's a way you could win.

EXT. PHOKIAN WALL - NIGHT

Dienekes, Polynikes and Alexandros confer with Leonidas.
Zeo and Suicide stand behind them.

LEONIDAS

Well, what do you think?

DIENEKES

If he's telling the truth and knows a
way to Xerxes' tent... it's worth it.

POLYNIKES

It's a trap. He hates us. It's his
way to fuck us personally.

ZEO

My Lord...

The Peers, surprised at Zeo for speaking up, look at him.

ZEO (cont'd)

He doesn't hate me. Or Alexandros.

They consider this. Leonidas breaths deep.

DIENEKES

What do we have to lose?

EXT. SLOPE, KALLIDROMOS MOUNTAINS - NIGHT

Polynikes and Dienekes lead the raiding party higher and
higher, up the steep mountain slope, climbing with hands
and feet. Alpheus and Maron follow, then Alexandros and
Rooster. Zeo and Suicide bring up the rear.

EXT. GAME TRAIL, KALLIDROMOS MOUNTAINS - NIGHT

They reach a game trail and stop. A light rain is
falling, the maritime fog socking in the lower ridges of
the mountains.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ROOSTER

Look.

He points up the slope still higher. Dienekes and Polynikes clamber up through a line of brush, and they stoop to the ground. THERE IS A FOOTPATH. The ground churned to mud, the hillside sliding down. It looks as if an army has marched through. One has.

DIENEKES

Looks like all 10,000.

Polynikes doesn't want to admit Rooster's right.

POLYNIKES

Somebody better go back and warn 'em.

EXT. SLOPE, KALLIDROMOS MOUNTAINS - NIGHT

Polynikes watches Alpheus scamper off down the mountainside. He then turns back to Rooster.

POLYNIKES

All right. Show us.

EXT. ASOPUS RIVER - NIGHT

The raiders pause on the banks of a RUSHING river. It cascades down the side of the mountain, out to the Plain of Trachis below. Light of countless campfires glow in the fog.

ROOSTER

We're on the far side. His pavilion is down below at the foot of the hill. Upriver so his horses can water first.

But there is no way to see Xerxes' tent in the fog. Dienekes starts off. The others follow.

EXT. CROSSING POINT, ASOPUS RIVER - NIGHT

Rooster and the others huddle in the darkness. For a beat he looks confused. The fog. Then he points out across the swift water.

ROOSTER

It should be right there.

Polynikes glances at him: it'd better be. And then slides first into the numbing current. Zeo holds his bow above water. He follows last.

EXT. OPPOSITE SHORE - NIGHT

They slide up out of the water, dripping, silent. And there, before them --

-- is a corral filled with horses. Not Xerxes' tent. **SENTRIES** pace, miserable and cold on the far side.

They all wheel on Rooster. Maron grabs him from behind. Polynikes has his xiphos out in a flash, but Alexandros stops his arm.

ALEXANDROS

I made you a promise.

And he draws his own blade to kill Rooster. A **CAVALRYMAN** suddenly thunders past in the fog. The Spartans hold, duck, Maron covering Rooster's mouth. And as they follow him with their eyes, we REVEAL:

A MASSIVE SHAPE invisible a moment before. It is enormous like the wall of a temple. The Cavalryman gallops toward it. Maron lets Rooster go.

EXT. XERXES' TENT - NIGHT

Two heavily-armored Sentries, muffled against the chill, damp night, stand at the end of the tent facing the river. Without warning, Zeo's arrows hit them one-two in their neck scarves.

One dies instantly, the other flops, gagging on the ground. Suicide is on him in a beat, dispatches him. Polynikes rushes the tent wall, SLASHING IT OPEN on the run. The Spartans fly in behind him, setting the place --

INT. XERXES' TENT, HAREM - NIGHT

-- SCREAMING. **XERXES' HAREM** panics out of the way, the big men flashing through the hanging veils, tripping over cushions, LUNGING DEEPER INWARD.

INT. XERXES' TENT, MAZE - NIGHT

Dienekes flattens two big **EUNUCHS** as the Spartans burst out of the harem chamber into a vast MAZE within the tent. Rich carpets, passages lead off in all directions. Polynikes punches the Eunuchs dead with his lizard sticker as Dienekes and Alexandros try to figure out --

DIENEKES

Which way?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Rooster doesn't know. Zeo shoots a **GUARD** coming down the passage. Dienekes goes right. The line follows him. SHOUTS of countless guards, shadows just on the other side of the silk walls, pursuing, parallel, cutting in front.

They rush from chamber to chamber, toppling over **BUREAUCRATS** and furniture, knocking tent poles down, killing anyone who looks like they're thinking of resisting. They wind through the maze, bursting at last through a wall into --

INT. XERXES' TENT, AUDIENCE CHAMBER - NIGHT

-- the vast, dim audience chamber we saw at the beginning of the movie. And there, in council around the throne, a mass of **PERSIAN GENERALS**. They look up in shock. Princes. In fine robes, ornamental armor, decorative weapons. Orontes is there. Ten yards away.

Dead men. A beat.

And then Dienekes and Alexandros, Polynikes and Maron, lap shields and **THROW THEMSELVES** --

-- right into a **HAIL OF FEATHERS** as the hundreds of **EXOTIC BIRDS** tethered to their roosts **EXPLODE INTO THE AIR**. It is the one, freak thing that could have thrown a hitch in the Spartans' stride. The one twist on which History can change.

For when the birds part, the Persian Generals have their weapons out, and Guards are coming in from all sides. Zeo starts shooting. Suicide too, killing Guards and Generals alike. There is no time for a line. It is hand-to-hand melee.

Dienekes and Alexandros leap back to back into the *deion* as Polynikes and Maron do the same beside them.

Rooster tackles a Guard, takes his sword. Polynikes and Maron fight the Guards, fast, lethal, punching spears, cutting with shield edges, hamstringing with swords.

But Dienekes and Alexandros... are **AWESOME**. They fight in **PERFECT HARMONY**, feeling each other's moves like dancers in a ballet. The *deion* wheels into the mass of Generals, a deadly, flashing spin of bronze and iron, some clockwork whimsy made by the god of war himself.

TIME BEGINS TO SLOW

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The sight makes ZEO'S HEART STOP, and then he starts shooting that way as mentor and student carve their way toward --

-- the FIGURE at the center. Gold robe. Jeweled. Unarmed. Waxed beard and curls of hair. Fleeing amid his Generals. He GLANCES back at --

ALEXANDROS. TIME CRAWLS. It is **XERXES**. Alexandros' EYE DILATES in recognition. Fist and spear go up beside his ear. Ten feet away. Arm cocks.

Maron and Polynikes, in the b.g., see it. Maron's head is cleaved with an axe.

ORONTES leaps sideways at Alexandros, SCIMITAR FLASHING.

And with every shaking ounce of strength in his body, Alexandros DRIVES HIS ARM FORWARD. He blinks because --

-- THE SPEAR FALLS STRAIGHT DOWN. And the figure that is Xerxes dodges behind a massive Guard. Gone.

In shocking STUTTER-STEP TIME IS BACK. Alexandros holds up his SEVERED WRIST in surprise.

A SPEAR hits him in the side. Dienekes wheels, covers.

POLYNIKES

Get out! NOW!

A Guard lunges at Zeo, and Suicide steps in his way, taking the spear in the heart. Zeo leaps back with Rooster, shoots the Guard who killed Suicide, and back into the Spartans. Dienekes KICKS over a brazier, its OIL FLAMING up, dangerous in the tent.

The obvious threat to everyone gives them enough of an opening to tear through the wall and out into the night.

EXT. SPARTAN CAMP, THERMOPYLAE - NIGHT

Zeo and Dienekes sit beside Alexandros, propped up on a shield. Polynikes hovers at the edge of the light. In the b.g. Allied troops are piling weapons and evacuating the camp. Dienekes holds Alexandros' hand. He is dying.

ALEXANDROS

Dienekes. I almost...

DIENEKES

I saw.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEXANDROS

I'm dying.

DIENEKES

I raised you from a pup. You can't die until I tell you you can.

Zeo feels Alexandros' side. It's stitched up, burnt with a cauterizing iron, but is still SEEPING BLOOD. The ground under him is soaked. Zeo lets out a sob.

ALEXANDROS

Why did Leonidas pick me?

Dienekes is suddenly OVERCOME. Tears pour out of him. A half-grin of agony. He masters himself with the dialectic. The teacher to the end.

DIENEKES

Answer me this, Alexandros. When we are gone, who will carry on the fight?

ALEXANDROS

Our comrades.

DIENEKES

Yes, these. All Greece will look to Sparta for courage. But who will Sparta look to?

(beat, breaking down, crying)
Alexandros, the King did not choose us. He chose our women.

And Alexandros has died. Dienekes pulls him to his chest, weeping, stroking his hair. Zeo cries.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

It would have been a grand hunt here next spring.

EXT. KNOLL, THERMOPYLAE - NIGHT

Leonidas, old, beaten, hunkers on the rock from which he can see the camp. Rooster and Zeo wait on him as runners come and go. Leonidas hands Rooster a bundle of tablets.

LEONIDAS

Take these back to Sparta. They are important communications to the Ephors. Don't get caught.

(beat)

Also, there are orders for your manumission. Your wife and son too.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Rooster's eyes water. Leonidas looks up at him.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)

You're free. But if you want to stay in Sparta, you will be needed. Hurry up. Get out of here before the bastards close off the pass.

ROOSTER

Thank you.

He takes off into the night. Men are carrying weapons, shields, armor up here to the knoll. The place is being turned into an ammo dump.

Zeo waits. Leonidas finally seems to notice him, then glances at Dienekes who comes up out of the darkness.

LEONIDAS

Go home, Zeo. You've served your master well.

ZEO

No.

Dienekes stares. Leonidas turns, severe on Zeo.

ZEO (cont'd)

No, lord. I won't go.

LEONIDAS

You are young so I will excuse your disobedience. Spartiate Peers only will remain. I have ordered all Allied troops to retreat. They will fight another day. You with them.

ZEO

No.

LEONIDAS

Boy, I will have you whipped, bound and carried back. Your choice.

ZEO

NO! You'll have to kill me first.

Leonidas stands, glowering. Dienekes speaks, soft.

DIENEKES

Zeo. Do you understand that when dawn comes we will give our lives? We have to. If we do not... Xerxes will win.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Zeo stands there, shaking.

ZEO
I will not leave you!

DIENEKES
Then I will have no son to succeed me.
Leonidas has returned mine to Rooster.

Zeo screams in TEARS:

ZEO
I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU!

A long beat. Leonidas sits back down, looks away.
Dienekes stares at the ground.

LEONIDAS
Then either I must kill you so that my
authority as commander is not
undermined by your insubordination...
or I must make you a Peer.

He looks up at Zeo. Zeo goes still. Leonidas looks at
Dienekes.

LEONIDAS (cont'd)
He knew you would do this. In those
tablets Rooster carries I have ordered
that you, Zeones of Astakos, are by
will of the Eurypontid King and
approbation of the Deukalion mess, a
Peer of the City.

Dienekes puts out his hand, and Polynikes comes forward
with a shield.

DIENEKES
It is Alexandros'. Take it.

It glitters in the firelight, bronze gleam of the LAMBDA
becoming:

EXT. THE DANCE FLOOR - DAWN

DAWN over the Phokian Wall. Wearing Alexandros' armor,
Zeo stands between Dienekes and Polynikes in the front
rank of the Spartan Phalanx: only 107 men in 27 files.
A pathetic remnant. Ragged with injuries, yet their
armor and weapons glint in burnished perfection. Zeo
checks his sparring glove, fixes it around a real spear.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Leonidas stands in front of them. Tommie and his son approach across the battlefield on their mounts.

BEHIND THEM, through the West Gate, rumble massive WAR CHARIOTS, assembling several ranks deep across the field. These are not light racing vehicles, they are big, heavy, ornamented three-man machines drawn by two armored war-horses each. Iron-rimmed wheels grind over bodies as they assume their places in line.

Ptammitechus stops in front of Leonidas. For a long moment he just looks at the Spartans, the horror around them. And then speaks, Boy translating.

BOY

Brothers. What more fame do you seek?
You have shown the world your honor.
You have slain 20,000 of his Majesty's
finest troops. But you cannot expect
to prevail this day. Even now His
Majesty's Immortal Guard approaches
you from behind. I beg you to yield.
His Majesty does not seek your lives.
He only seeks your arms.

Leonidas stares Ptammitechus down.

LEONIDAS

Then tell him to come and get them.

The Boy repeats in Egyptian. Tommie nods, turns his horse around, and leaves, the Boy with him.

EXT. EAST GATE, THERMOPYLAE - DAY

DRUMS thunder through the pass as the IMMORTALS, in snaking column as far as the eye can see, march through the East Gate into the rear of the abandoned Greek Camp. All carry bows on their backs, curved sword and shield in hand. They debouch into a broader front as the camp grows wider, seeming to expand and expand, filling the pass...

EXT. DANCE FLOOR - DAY

The Spartans can hear the drums behind them, beyond the ruins of the Phokian Wall. Heads turn. Trumpets sound among the chariots in front. Then the drums stop. Silence across the field.

Zeo looks up at the ridge line. There, lit by the rising sun, is Xerxes, watching from his place.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DIENEKES

Let's teach them one last thing.
Let's teach them fear.

And with a BLAST OF A HORN, the chariots lurch into motion. HORNS from the Immortals behind sound over the screaming **CHARIOTEERS**.

The Spartans LAP SHIELDS, and spears snap down one more time.

Chariots THUNDER AT THEM, reaching full speed, JUMPING over piles of corpses, canting back and forth from wheel to wheel, Drivers lashing the horses on, riders lowering lances.

Suddenly a HAIL OF ARROWS hits the Spartans from behind, killing several. Rear rankers turn as Immortals shoot down on them from the wall.

The chariots coming at them, angling in. 50 yards. 40. 30. And now we feel how enormous they are. Literal tons of horseflesh, wood and metal. Barbed with weapons. There is no way the Spartans, with all their shields and discipline can stop these.

10 yards. ABOUT TO HIT AND --

LEONIDAS

DOWN!

The entire phalanx drops flat on the ground, covering their heads with their shields. Horse hooves trample shields, then IRON WHEELS SLAM over the men, crushing arms and legs, killing a few --

-- but then the Phalanx JUMPS BACK TO ITS FEET with a ROAR. Within seconds, the charioteers are spitted and pulled out of their battle wagons, flung to the ground. More ranks of machines BATTER into them, but get stuck at the edges of the fray, blocked by their predecessors.

Zeo, Polynikes and Dienekes, in tandem, dispatch the crew of one of the new comers, and move to the next, killing them as they try to urge their horses away.

Leonidas spears a Driver, but his Lancer dismounts and stabs Leonidas through the side of the throat. Leonidas goes down.

Zeo, Polynikes and Dienekes take down another chariot, and then pause, seeing the LONG LINES of the IMMORTALS pouring down from the wall, encircling them.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

They look at each other, then turn as a HUE-AND-CRY goes up from the thick of the fray behind them.

POLYNIKES

The King is down.

Polynikes tears away, lunging back in for the King. Arrows begin arriving from the Immortal Archers.

DIENEKES

THE KNOLL! HURRY! BACK TO THE KNOLL!

A knot of Peers, maybe thirty of the closest, hear him and link up, try to form some sort of line. They get their shields up to protect themselves from the arrows and retreat.

Zeo is on the fringe, about to back away with them, but SPOTS a chariot which has singled them out. Shields up against the arrows, the Spartans can't see the threat, and are a perfect, vulnerable target for the chariot's shock attack.

The Driver lashes his horses up to speed, and the Lancers bend over either side.

Zeo runs at them, all the rage, all the violence he's ever suffered EXPLODES FROM HIS THROAT IN A ROAR which --

-- makes Dienekes look his way and see the danger. Zeo is the only thing between his men and annihilation. The chariot LOOMS OVER ZEO, vast, unstoppable --

-- and ZEO sidesteps the horse. The wagon bounces into the air, the Lancer's blow deflects off Zeo's shield, and Zeo impales the Driver with his spear. A millisecond later the CHARIOT'S WHEEL SMASHES down on him, his body breaking the rim and axle. The yoke ploughs into the ground, bringing down the horses and catapulting the crew into the air.

ON DIENEKES. Shocked. His unit saved. And then functioning again.

DIENEKES (cont'd)

BACK! Through the wall! Get to the knoll!

ZEO lies impaled to the ground by the spokes of the wheel as we first found him. His breath comes in shock and agony. Incredible that he's still alive.

EXT. KNOLL, THERMOPYLAE - DAY

The last two dozen Spartans retreat to the top of the knoll. Arrows bang off their shields. They form a ring. Even though the Phokian Wall is down at this end of the field, the chariots can't get over the rubble.

But the thousands upon thousands of Immortals can.
Dienekes looks out TURNING THROUGH 360 DEGREES REVEALING:

A BLACK TIDE surrounding them completely, pushing in, even from the edge of the cliff. There is not even the smallest gap in their deep, deep lines. There is not the faintest possible way out.

EXT. THE DANCE FLOOR - DAY

Black-robed men race by Zeo, ignoring him, filling the plain around him. But above the Phokian Wall he can see the top of the knoll. He can see Dienekes.

EXT. KNOLL, THERMOPYLAE - DAY

ON DIENEKES. Who blinks once. And then a deep peace settles over him.

Polynikes suddenly stumbles over the wall dragging Leonidas' body. Arrows pepper him. Stick him in the legs, hit the corpse. Still he flails up the hill. More arrows hit him. In the back. Through his breastplate. Finally, with a CRY, Polynikes topples back, and there he dies, lying across the body of his King.

There is a long beat. Just the shuffling approach of the sea of Archers. Dienekes grabs a fresh spear from the ground. He steps into the line beside his injured, spent survivors.

EXT. DANCE FLOOR - DAY

Zeo watches, condemned to witness what comes next, as the masses of Archers STOP.

EXT. KNOLL, THERMOPYLAE - DAY

Dienekes looks down from the hill. At the bottom in front of his Archers, Orontes reigns in his horse. The two men lock eyes, 50 yards apart. Orontes lifts his curved sword high.

AS ONE, the masses of Archers RAISE THEIR BOWS...

The Spartans lift their shields...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

And Orontes drops his sword.

THE SKY FILLS WITH ARROWS. Countless thousands. Blocking out the sun. Again and again. Volley then volley. Coming in flat from the front ranks. Point blank. Drilling through shields. Punching through greaves. Finding eye-slots in helmets.

Curving in on ballistic trajectories from the rear ranks. Battering the Spartans down. Hammering into backs, into necks.

The ring of Spartans contracts in on itself, the men trying to lap shields, keep the line, but toppling backward under the flying hail of metal and splintering wood. Dying, dying, dying...

...until only Dienekes remains. On one knee, shield over him. And the arrows stop.

For a long moment he doesn't realize it. There is an arrow in his unprotected shoulder. In his arm. In his thigh. He looks out at the litter of shields, broken bodies, his dead companions. He is overcome and draws off his helmet.

Then slowly he unfolds his limbs, stiff, agonizing. He stands.

EXT. DANCE FLOOR - DAY

Zeo sees him. Sees him. ONE PUPIL DILATED, the other a pinprick. His breath comes faster and faster. Shallower and shallower.

EXT. KNOLL, THERMOPYLAE - DAY

Dienekes casts down his arrow-riven shield, and in agony picks up a new one.

Orontes watches in silence. The Archers stand there watching in silence.

Dienekes begins to weep as he pulls a spear out of the ground. He turns to the Persians, holds it aloft for a LONG BEAT. One man against them all...

Not a soul stirs. Only the wind whipping through the fluttering robes of the Immortals.

AND WITH A CRY FROM THE SOUL, Dienekes twists and HURLS the spear at the masses below. He grabs for another. Throws it. And another. Throws it.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

A Persian easily deflects the spear. DIENEKES' CRY echoes and ECHOES through the walls of the pass.

FACES. FACES. FACES. Watching. Bearing witness.

Witness to a man, triumphant, INDOMITABLE.

EXPRESSIONS. EYES. Princes in gold and jewels. Captives. Remembering what they once were. Seeing what they could be.

Dienekes stumbles, out of breath, coming up with a last weapon, the haft of a broken spear.

And Orontes, his own eyes welling up, shouts to his men in Farsee. They all look at him. He shouts his command again. They RAISE THEIR BOWS, reluctant.

With a LAST, DEFIANT CRY, Dienekes winds back to hurl his broken shaft... and the ARROWS hit him.

Again and again. His arm drops. Haft in the dirt. He steps on the hem of his cloak, TWISTING about his legs. He pitches forward...

YET HE DOES NOT FALL.

The spear shaft catches under his collar, HANGING him UPRIGHT in his cloak, eyes open, unseeing.

He is DEAD and YET HE STANDS...

The Persians step back at the sight.

They have killed him and YET HE STANDS...

EXT. DANCE FLOOR - DAY

Zeo SEES it. A thrill of AWE at what the gods have shown him. And his head, far too heavy with what it holds, settles upon the dirt.

ZEO (VO)

Such a thing is a prodigy of the gods.
It is the fate of man to behold in
wonder what lies within us.

INT./EXT. PERSIAN COMMAND PAVILION, BOEOTIAN PLAINS - DAY

Orontes stares out from under the shade of the pavilion at a dry, rolling plain. The sky in the distance is a dark black pall of smoke.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

It stretches for endless miles from some spot so far beyond the horizon its source cannot be seen. Yet it must be a city.

Mardonius says something OC in Farsee. Orontes turns to him. The scene is subtitled.

MARDONIUS

Damn uprisings in the ranks. Now it's the Egyptians. Who's next?

Orontes looks out. In the plain below, ROWS of **EGYPTIAN MUTINEERS** are prodded to their deaths at the hands of exhausted axe-wielding **EXECUTIONERS**.

Orontes can't bear the sight, and looks away. His voice trails off, quiet:

ORONTES

They slew us that day...

MARDONIUS

What?

ORONTES

It is a story now. Thermopylae. That is where they beat us.

MARDONIUS

Don't be a fool. We've killed more of our men than the Greeks have.

ORONTES

(still to himself)

What more elegant weapon is there?

Mardonius stops stamping the execution orders and looks at him.

ORONTES

What do you want me to do with the barbarian? The storyteller?

MARDONIUS

Filling all these nights with his foolish tale. He is the reason for the King's nightmares.

(beat)

The King takes ship for home tomorrow. It's my campaign now, and I have no use for a bard. Kill him.

Orontes stares. Rigid. Then bows and turns away.

INT. SURGEONS' TENT - DAY

Zeo lies propped up in his litter, many of his wounds now dried scars. He looks up as Orontes' shadow fills the door to the tent. He smiles. Then sees Orontes' face.

EXT. PERSIAN CAMP, BOEOTIAN PLAINS - DAY

Two Immortals drive Zeo, lying on his litter, in the back of a rickety pram. Orontes rides on a horse next to him. Zeo looks out at the camp as it goes by. Long lines of sagging soldiers. Blank stares. Fear. A traumatized man sitting in the dust. They are taking Zeo away. Unafraid, Zeo looks up at Orontes, knowing what he intends. The cart disappears into a swirl of dust.

EXT. THREE-CORNER WAY - DAY

ON A WHITE SILK FLAG, on Orontes' lance. He leads the cart, Zeo in it, VERY MUCH ALIVE to the Three-Corner Way. And there, filling the roads in all directions, march the armies of Greece. Persian **DESERTERS** eye Orontes, hateful.

In a field to one side, long rows of **GREEK WOUNDED** rest in cloaks, litters, whatever. Beyond them, shrouds cover even longer rows of corpses. **WOMEN** make their way among them, sorting life from death.

Orontes nods to the two Immortals in the cart. They hop down, take Zeo off. Two of the women watch. Even at this distance, we see they are Arete and Diomache.

Orontes. Stares from the passing columns of men. Stares at his flag of truce, the only reason he is not dead. A face locks on his. **IT IS ROOSTER. IN SPARTAN SCARLET AND BRONZE.** He marches past.

Diomache sees Zeo. Then Zeo sees Diomache.

Orontes watches them, sees that they see each other, then looks out at the awesome ranks coming up the road. He spurs his horse, and turns away.

FADE OUT