

# LEONIDAS OF SPARTA

A Peerless Peer



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*Leonidas of Sparta: A Peerless Peer*

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# INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LEONIDAS IS ARGUABLY THE MOST FAMOUS of all Spartans. Numerous works of art depict him. He was the hero of two Hollywood films. There is even a line of chocolate confectionery named after him. But no serious biography has ever been written, and what is most often portrayed is his death. Leonidas is remembered for commanding the Greek forces that defended the pass at Thermopylae against an invading Persian army. He is revered for refusing to surrender despite betrayal that made defeat absolutely certain. Thus Leonidas came to symbolize the noblest form of military courage and self-sacrifice. The events leading up to the three-day battle and the death of Leonidas with three hundred other Spartans and seven hundred Thespians at Thermopylae have been the focus of historians, writers, and artists from Herodotus onward.

But Leonidas was not a young man at the historic battle where he gave his life. He had lived close to half a century (if not more) and reigned for ten years before he took command of the Greek alliance defying Persia. It was those years preceding the final confrontation with Persia that made him the man he would be at Thermopylae. To the extent that we admire his defiant stand, learning more about his early life and tracing the development of his character is important.

Yet so very little is actually known about his early life that historians have been discouraged from attempting a biography.

Novelists, fortunately, enjoy more freedom, and what we do know about Leonidas' early life is enticing. In the first novel in this trilogy, *A Boy of the Agoge*, I built upon known facts about his birth and family situation and Sparta's unique educational system to construct a plausible picture of Leonidas' boyhood. In the second book of the trilogy (which can also be considered in its entirety as a three-part biographical novel), I focus on the next stage of his life, the years when he was a common citizen before he became a king. This is the period in which he married his niece Gorgo and gained experience in battle and politics. Building on the few known facts, listening to the sayings attributed to Leonidas and Gorgo, and knowing how Leonidas met his destiny at Thermopylae, I have written this novel. While based on all the known facts about Leonidas, Gorgo, and the society in which they lived, the novel goes beyond the bare bones of the historical record. It interpolates from these facts a reasonable hypothesis of what Leonidas and Gorgo might have been like and what they might have done, thought, and felt.

The characters that emerge are greater than the historical input. Leonidas is consciously portrayed as the quintessential archaic Spartan, because that is what he has become in legend. Gorgo, likewise, epitomizes that which set Spartan women apart from their contemporaries, without robbing her of individual traits and personality. The two principals are surrounded by a large cast of secondary, largely fictional characters, each of which is unique and complex. In short, this novel is quite candidly fiction.

This book, like its predecessor, contains a number of Greek terms that are specific to Leonidas' time and culture. Some of these terms are explained in context; all are defined in the glossary at the end of this book. Appendixes also outline the presumed organization of the Spartan army of the time and explain a number of other aspects of Spartan society. A list of key sources is provided for those who wish to do more research.

I wish to thank Paul Bardunias for reading the manuscript with an eye to historical detail and accuracy that added an additional layer of authenticity to the manuscript. He meticulously pointed out even

the slightest anachronism in phrase, image, or deed, and this manuscript has benefited immensely from his knowledge and insight. I also wish to thank my editor, Christina Dickson, for patiently correcting all my persistent spelling errors and inconsistencies in form and usage. I wish to thank my cover designer, Charles Whall, for putting up with my changing visions and my nitpicking of his highly effective and evocative design. Without their hard work, this book would not have been finished. I look forward to working with all three of these professionals on the last book in the trilogy, *Leonidas of Sparta: A Dispensable King*.



# LEONIDAS OF SPARTA

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## PROLOGUE

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE MEN FOR sacrifice? The question seemed to hang in the stagnant summer air, thick with the dust kicked up by the herds of sacrificial beasts driven into the city for the start of the Karneia. Leonidas had looked into the eyes of the passing steers, and they had looked back at him with recognition and understanding. “We are part of the same fraternity,” the four-legged sacrifices seemed to say as they nodded their heads and moved on, flicking their tails at flies.

But Leonidas had come to terms with that. He had been selected by the Gods. He was a descendant of Herakles. He had taken up the burden of kingship with the conscious intention of leading Sparta to a better future. At the time, he had pictured different challenges, but he knew now this was his destiny. He would not fail.

But what about the others?

Leonidas looked about the empty streets. At this time of day on a holiday, the city seemed abandoned. School was closed and the children had been sent home to their families. The soldiers of Sparta’s army were furloughed. The stalls in the market and the workshops of craftsmen were boarded up. The racecourses, palaestra, and gymnasias were deserted. Only on the edges of town and along the backstreets, behind the shuttered windows and closed doors of the houses, families rested in the noonday heat, gathering their strength for the athletic and choral competitions scheduled for later in the day and week.

Pleistarchos would be taking part in the sporting contests for the first time, and Agiatis had been selected to perform in one of the dances. Leonidas wanted to be there for them, cheering and applauding—but not if the price was that the next time they performed it would be as slaves for a Persian master!

The Persians were advancing faster than expected. Sparta could not wait until the end of the Karneia to deploy the army. By then it might be too late—particularly with half of Hellas in Olympia sticking their heads in the sand!

For a moment, the anger flared up in his chest. Two-thirds of the Gerousia and two of the ephors were as stupid as all the other Greeks, who thought Persia would respect the Olympic peace. They refused to see that this struggle was like none that had gone before. They refused to understand that Sparta and her allies could not wait for a convenient time to respond. They had to march *now*. If they didn't, they would come too late—as they had at Marathon.

The argument in the Council still echoed inside his aching head. The ghostly voices of his counterparts and the even more ghostly whispers of what he *should* have said had kept him from his sleep throughout the night. Leonidas felt acutely his failure to prevail in Council. He had mustered all the intelligence they had on Persian strength in men, ships, and horses. He had described in detail the terrain between the Persian host and Lacedaemon, underlining the advantages of a defense at Thermopylae. He had reminded them in gruesome detail of the costs of failure. And he had stressed until his throat was raw that too little, too late, could be fatal for all they held dear.

At length the Council agreed that Thermopylae, although far north of Sparta's sphere of influence and beyond the usual range of operation for her army, was the ideal place to make a stand. They agreed further to ask the Assembly to call up five classes of reserves, increasing the strength of the active army to three thousand men, and they agreed this force must deploy "as soon as possible." But the Council stubbornly insisted there could be neither an Assembly nor a deployment until the Karneia was over. To do either would be an insult to the Gods.

That was when Leonidas had taken a desperate gamble. Since a

king could take the Guard anywhere he ordered, Leonidas had made a last attempt to force the Council's hand by announcing that if they would not give him the army at once, he would march north immediately with the Guard alone. To his dismay, they had agreed.

Three hundred men against a million!

Well, three hundred Spartiates and maybe twenty times that number of allies against the million.

A stray cat trotted purposefully but with lowered head along the side of the nearest barracks, disappearing into the next alley. A mouse hung limply from either side of her mouth. It was still twitching and left a trail of blood on the cobbles. Yet even a mouse, Leonidas thought, when cornered will stand and fight. They would fight.

Still, since he was allowed only three hundred Spartiates to hold Thermopylae until the army arrived after the Karneia, he couldn't take the Guard. They were all young men, the majority unmarried, all but a handful childless. Casualties were inevitable while waiting for the promised three-thousand-strong army to arrive. Leonidas did not want to have the extinction of any family on his conscience. So he had asked permission to substitute Guardsmen with volunteers from among the citizens with living sons. The ephors had agreed.

Leonidas expected about a thousand volunteers. He calculated that if he had a thousand men to choose from, he would be able to put together the balanced force he needed. He needed both canny veterans and enthusiastic youths. He needed men good at dogged defense, but also men capable of a quick sortie or a night raid. He needed men who cared more about the freedom of their families than their own lives, and that meant men who *loved* their families. He needed men who were prepared to die—but only after taking a heavy toll on the enemy first.

Oh, yes, he knew what he needed in principle, but how was he to select the men in fact? How was he supposed to walk down a line of men he'd known from childhood—men who'd sweated and bled beside him in the Argolid, youths he'd mentored as eirenes, men whose daughters sang and danced with his own, and men whose sons went to school with Pleistarchos—and decide who he was going to throw in front of the Persian host like bait?

Eventually, they would all fight. They would all take blood for

blood when the time came. And every one of them—no matter whom he chose—was a trained soldier.

But because he'd failed to prevail in Council, only three hundred would be squinting into the sunlight to watch for the darkening that indicated a new volley of arrows. Only three hundred would stand in the murderous sun, shield to shield, while sweat poured from their straining bodies until their feet were churning mud rather than the dust of summer-baked earth. Only three hundred would be splattered with blood amid the screaming and the groaning of the dying—risking their limbs, their eyes, and their lives while the others remained with their wives and children, singing paeans and cheering the grape-runners and feasting in the nine ceremonial tents of the Karneia...

Was he supposed to pick the three hundred men like the helots chose a sacrificial lamb? For the beauty of their bodies? Was he supposed to select the best Sparta had to offer? Or should he do the opposite, and take with him those that Sparta could best afford to lose?

Leonidas realized he was not prepared to risk the latter. If he took the worst and they failed when it mattered most, Gorgo and Agiatis, no less than all the other women and children of Sparta, would pay the price. No, he had to take the best, to ensure they could hold Thermopylae until the full army reinforced them.

He picked up the pace and turned the corner to enter Tyrtaios Square, where he had requested the volunteers to muster. Instantly he was taken aback by the glare of sun reflected from bronze. The volunteers had drawn up across the square in full panoply. Although they stood at ease, with hoplons resting on their knees and helmets shoved back to expose their faces, they wore bronze fighting armor and red cloaks. The stiff black horsehair crests bristled proudly from their helmets.

Magnificent as they appeared, however, they were a mere handful—far fewer than the one thousand men Leonidas expected. Making a quick count of the ranks and files, he realized that exactly three hundred men awaited him. That could be no coincidence. Someone had made the selection for him. He frowned. He did not

intend to let whoever it was get away with that! He would demand to see the complete list of volunteers.

He had been spotted. A voice called the men to attention. With remarkable unison for an ad hoc unit, the shields came to the ready. But Leonidas was now close enough to distinguish the faces under the helmets of the front rank. He halted abruptly, unable to move a step closer.

Dienekes stepped forward smartly. "Sir. May I present the three hundred volunteers of your Advance Guard, all fathers of living sons."

"And all my friends. Is not one of my enemies willing to defend Greece?"

"On the contrary, sir. Even your brother Brotus and your nephew Pausanias volunteered, but we turned them away."

"Just how many volunteers were there?" Leonidas looked at him suspiciously.

"1,359—not counting these men."

"You sent 1,359 men away?"

"That's right, sir."

"That was not what I told you to do," Leonidas told him in a low, ominous voice. "I told you to muster the volunteers—not to usurp my prerogative of selecting the Advance Guard." Leonidas was beginning to get angry, and his voice carried to the front rank.

"Leo." Alkander broke ranks to come up beside Dienekes. "It was our decision," he said softly.

"Who do you mean by that?" Leonidas snapped back. He did not want Alkander to come north with him. The risk was too great. He wanted him here in Sparta so he could be with Gorgo, Pleistarchos, and Agiatis when the news came that he was dead. He wanted Alkander to be the father Agiatis would need when she was old enough to marry. He was counting on Alkander standing by Gorgo and Pleistarchos in the years to come, when Pleistarchos would be a boy king with too few friends and too many enemies. And even after he was a man, Pleistarchos would need the advice of the utterly loyal and profoundly trustworthy Alkander.

"The men in the front rank," Alkander answered.

Leonidas glanced at them again. The others were still standing at

attention, eyes fixed straight ahead. They were each in their way the best Sparta had to offer—even battered Prokles.

Alkander continued. “We chased Brotus away with insults and mocked Pausanias. A couple hundred others left with them to protest our rudeness. Then we put our case to the remaining men. We said they would all have the chance to show their courage soon enough. After all, the main body of troops—three thousand strong—is due to march out at the end of the Karneia; that’s only ten days away. We pointed out that this Advance Guard was in effect your personal guard, and that it was only right that the men closest to you be allowed to serve in it.”

“Why?” Leonidas asked. “Do you think I want to drag all of you down to Hades with me?”

“No. But nor will we let you face your death alone.”

“I’ll hardly be alone among three hundred Spartiates—not to mention the perioikoi and allies!” His distress made his deep voice rough; to the rankers at the back, who could not catch his words, it sounded like the growl of an angry lion.

Alkander did not answer directly; he just shook his head. “You may have made the decision to die on your own, but you have no right to tell us we cannot be beside you when it happens.”

“Damn it! I am your king! I’ll choose my own damn bodyguard!” Leonidas growled more loudly still.

“For the better part of your life you have been one of us—and proud of it,” Alkander countered calmly. He had foreseen this reaction and was prepared with his arguments. “As Brotus has never forgotten or forgiven, you are king because we made you king. No matter how much of Herakles’ blood runs in your veins, or how important it is to you that your son becomes the next Agiad king, you are *still* one of us. We turned away men who wanted to serve their *king*—in order to retain those who wanted to serve *you*. We will go with you, Leonidas, and die with you if need be, not as your subjects—but as your peers.”

It took a moment for Leonidas to get sufficient control of his emotions to be sure he could speak. Then he nodded, took a deep breath, and managed to say: “You are right. The best part of my life I was no more and no less than a Spartan Peer.”

## CHAPTER 1



# THE BOAR SLAYER

“BUT IT WOULD BE EXCITING TO go to war!” Chambias admitted to his friend Lychos with a grin, as he let his stallion stretch out his neck.

The two Corinthian youths, sons of leading families, were returning from Acrocorinth, where they had been trying to get a glimpse of the Spartan army. The Spartans had invoked the defensive treaty with Corinth and her other allies that required the allies to follow wherever Sparta led. For days now, allied contingents had been pouring into Corinth in response to the Spartan summons. Punctually at the start of the full moon, the Spartans themselves arrived.

As the sons of wealthy men on the brink of manhood, Chambias and Lychos were enrolled as ephebes in the Corinthian cavalry, and they took a keen interest in the impending war. They were particularly curious about the Spartans, because they flattered themselves that they understood “a thing or two” about things military, and the reputation of the Spartan army was unmatched anywhere in Hellas. They wanted to see it for themselves.

And so, taking their flashiest, most high-strung horses and carrying their javelins to underline their status as combatants, the two young men had set out to inspect the Spartan camp. They dressed in bright, patterned chitons to show off their status and wore their short cavalry capes, called chlamys, which fluttered straight out when they galloped. They also wore broad-brimmed leather hats and boots that laced halfway up their shins—all of the best quality.

They were soon disappointed. Unlike the troops of the other Peloponnesian allies, the Spartans set up a camp outside the fortress and then put up sentries that prohibited entry to the camp. Lychos and Chambias had been turned away.

The day being young and the weather good, however, they elected to ride around the back of the camp into the surrounding countryside to get away from the bustle, dust, and stink of the overcrowded city. They galloped a bit to wear off some of their frustration and energy, but now they let the horses walk on a long rein so they could talk.

Lychos didn't share Chambias' enthusiasm for the impending war because his father, the chief polemarch of Corinth, had returned from a symposium the previous night fuming that the Spartans wanted to invade Attica and bring down Athens' democratic government. Lychos eagerly explained to his friend what he had learned from his outraged father. "The only reason for this war is King Cleomenes' injured pride—or his loins. My father says there are rumors that Cleomenes has his eyes on the wife of the Athenian leader, Isagoras."

"I thought Cleomenes was married to the most beautiful woman in Sparta! Didn't people talk of a second Helen?" Chambias countered.

"That was years ago! She's had several children and is probably fat and sagging now," Lychos retorted with the wisdom of his nineteen years, his views reflecting the sum of his experience with women—his mother, grandmothers, and aunts.

Chambias nodded agreement, his experience being no different.

Lychos had inherited an interest in politics from his father, however, and he continued intensely, "What I don't understand is why the Spartans have kings at all—much less two!"

"That's because they are so pious," Chambias answered, echoing his father, chief priest of Apollo. "The Spartan kings are descendent from Herakles, after all, and to cast them out would be an insult to the Gods."

"But how can you have two men in command of an army? That would be like having two captains on a ship!" In addition to being the chief polemarch of Corinth, Lychos' father owned a trading empire that depended on a fleet of over a hundred ships. Lychos had sailed with his father often enough to understand command at sea. "What

if the two kings disagree?” Lychos asked rhetorically, adding: “My father says the present Spartan kings hate each other. Demaratus is very jealous of Cleomenes, who he thinks is vain and takes too much credit for everything.”

“Which one was which?” Chambias asked. “They all looked the same to me.” Chambias was thinking of the ranks of Spartan soldiers, all wearing red chitons under their bronze armor and red cloaks. Even the shields were identical, all bearing the lambda of Lacedaemon—except for those of the officers, who had individual shields and whose crests, rather than black, were white or striped.

“The two kings wear cross-crested helmets,” Lychos explained. “Crests that go from ear to ear. They rode ahead of the Guard. Cleomenes was on the right.”

“On the white stallion?” Chambias could picture him now.

“Yes, exactly.”

Chambias nodded thoughtfully. As the sons of aristocrats, they were both cavalymen and connoisseurs of horseflesh. There was no denying that the Spartan kings had been exceptionally well mounted: something that surprised Chambias, who had always thought of the Spartans as infantrymen.

Lychos continued showing off his knowledge. “Cleomenes was on the flashier horse, but Demaratus won in the four-horse at the last Pythian Games, driving himself. My father predicts he will win again at Olympia.”

“They weren’t at all as I expected them to be,” Chambias admitted, looking over at Lychos uncertainly. Lychos was a fair youth with even features over a lithe body, toned to perfection in the gymnasium. Chambias was plumper, poorer, and not so sure of himself. Chambias had only had one love affair, with a senior priest, and it had been rather short and vaguely humiliating. Lychos, in contrast, had attracted a very rich, witty Athenian, the kind of lover who drew attention and could be politically useful in the future. Chambias felt a touch of jealousy. Lychos had everything: he was the heir to one of the greatest fortunes in a rich city, he was attractive, he was healthy and bright, and his father adored him. Chambias had spent most of his life trying to keep up with Lychos and always coming up short.

“What do you mean?” Lychos asked.

Chambias shrugged uncomfortably. He didn't like Spartans. He didn't like men who were so disciplined and unimaginative, men who did everything in groups, men who were arrogant and sure of themselves. But until the day before yesterday, he had never actually seen one. "Well, you know, they're supposed to be taciturn and dour, but they were laughing and singing even as they marched. And today they flooded the bathhouses just like everyone else. They don't even—"

Chambias did not get a chance to finish his thought. Without warning his horse leaped sideways, reared up, and then spun around on its haunches, dumping Chambias on the ground. The youth landed on his knee with an audible crack and blinding pain shot upward, but he had no time for it. A massive boar with coarse black hair and gigantic tusks was charging at him with such force that the earth shook under his hooves.

Chambias saw his death in the malicious eyes of the black beast.

Lychos flung himself off his horse, grabbing his cavalry javelin from his back. He landed between the boar and his friend and hurled the javelin with all his strength. It was a gallant but futile gesture. The cavalry javelin was not designed to penetrate the tough hide of a boar.

The javelin glanced off the boar's shoulder without even slowing him down. An instant later, the boar rammed his tusks into Lychos' belly, and the youth crumpled forward.

The boar lifted his head with Lychos draped across his now bloody tusks and shook his head from side to side, with slow deliberate shakes. The beautiful gored youth screamed in agony as his guts were ravaged by each jerk.

Chambias staggered to his feet, screaming. He tore his chlamys off his back and tried waving it at the boar in a frenzied attempt to distract him. His friend's blood was splattering everywhere as he waved his arms and legs helplessly and screamed in agony from where he lay across the tusks of the boar.

Chambias could barely stand because of his shattered knee. His own two javelins had spilled onto the ground when he fell, and they now lay out of reach. He had no other weapon on him but his knife—a weapon far too short to damage a boar of this size, even if he could have thrown it with accuracy. He knew he had no chance of saving his friend or himself.

Out of nowhere, two men appeared on the run. They paused only long enough to grasp what was happening, and then reversed their spears from an underhand to an overhand grip and started to advance on the still-raging boar with a deliberation that made Chambias scream at them. "Hurry! He can't last much longer! Hurry!"

The two men ignored him. His friend was dying with each shake of the boar's massive head, yet the two men approached only with wary deliberation. Then, with a single exchanged glance, they raised their spears in a double-handed grip. The sun glinted briefly on the tips of the spearheads, and they brought their arms crashing down in almost perfect unison.

The boar saw the danger too late. He managed to toss the limp body of Lychos into the nearest gorse bush and turn toward his attackers, but by then they had already struck. The boar crumpled onto his right haunch, but he was far from dead. Grunting his outrage, the boar shook his bloody tusks and flailed wildly with his forelegs, trying to regain his footing.

From out of the underbrush, the Spartans were suddenly joined by a hound. She threw herself into the fray without a second of hesitation. While the men impaled the boar, pinning it to the earth with the weight of their bodies, the dog leaped onto the boar's back and tried to bite down on the spine just behind the boar's head. Yet the wild animal was not subdued.

It was now evident to Chambias that his rescuers had not come prepared for boar hunting. They had attacked with ordinary war spears. These did not have a cross guard and were thinner, less sturdy. Chambias groaned in horror as he heard the unmistakable crack of a spear breaking.

"Hold him!" the man with the broken spear shouted urgently to his companion. The latter flung his weight forward onto his own spear a second time, while his friend stepped back, reversed his spear, and used the butt end—the "lizard sticker"—to gore the boar a second time.

This, too, failed to kill the boar, who with an abrupt, twisting motion sent the dog catapulting through the air. The man with the long spear gave a shout of alarm, realizing he could not hold the

boar alone much longer, and instantly the man with the broken spear abandoned it to draw his sword.

With alarm Chambias registered that the sword was ridiculously short; yet that did not deter the swordsman. The man lunged forward and sideways—not, as Chambias expected, for the jugular, but to thrust the sword deep into the chest cavity of the boar from behind the right elbow. He ran the sword in all the way to the hilt. The boar thrashed violently with his forelegs one more time; but then the life went out of his eyes, and he sank down on the ground with an audible thud.

The two strangers were breathing very hard and dripping sweat, as they stared at the massive beast they had only with difficulty managed to dispatch between them. Their red chitons and himations identified them as Spartans, but Chambias could think only of his friend. “Lychos! Lychos!” He staggered forward, dragging his injured leg.

His cries and sobs of pain drew the attention of his rescuers, and they went over to where Lychos had been flung. Together they retrieved the bloody body from the bushes and stretched it out in the small clearing. The hound, having recovered from her toss into the bushes, ran frantically around them, panting in evident agitation.

“Is he alive?” Chambias asked, hobbling over painfully.

“Yes,” came the succinct answer; and then as Chambias got nearer, he could hear and see for himself that his friend moaned and writhed, trying to stanch the bleeding and pain in his abdomen. The two Spartans, meanwhile, had opened Lychos’ belt and sliced through the Egyptian linen of his bright yellow chiton to get a look at the wound. Chambias tasted his lunch in his mouth as his friend’s innards slithered out of the gaping wound. The Spartan who had dispatched the boar deftly shoved the innards back inside the wound and held it firmly closed in a grip that made his knuckles go white under the blood of boar and man mixed together. Meanwhile, the other set about tearing one of their red cloaks into bandage strips and winding these firmly around Lychos’ torso. Lychos screamed in pain as they worked, but they ignored him for his own good. When they finished, a broad band of scarlet held the wound closed and slowed the hemorrhaging. The second man then yanked off his himation and covered Lychos with it, tucking it in all around him and even

winding it around his head so that he looked like a corpse, with only his face exposed.

“Will he live?” Chambias asked.

The Spartans looked over their shoulders and up at Chambias. To Chambias’ astonishment, the two men looked hardly older than himself. One possessed the kind of classical features that the sculptors liked to put on statues of Apollo. He had short, curly blond hair, bright blue eyes, and gentle lips. Chambias couldn’t help thinking he must have had lovers fighting over his favors as a boy. The other was less beautiful, with light-brown, coarse hair and green-gold eyes; but he was taller and broader than his companion, and he was the one who had thrust his short sword deep enough into the boar to kill it. It was also this young man who now replied. Without answering Chambias’ question, he stated, “You’d better sit down and let us tend to your knee.” He nodded toward Chambias’ leg, already discolored and swelling.

Chambias didn’t have the strength to protest. He hobbled toward a large boulder where, with an involuntary gasp, he eased himself down. The Spartans followed, the blond already working deftly to rip up what was left of his cloak. When he started bandaging Chambias’ knee, however, the pain was so intense that Chambias had to bite down hard to keep from crying out. Everyone knew the Spartans scorned anyone who couldn’t endure pain with equanimity, and Chambias did not want to disgrace himself or his city. Despite what he wanted, however, he was trembling all over, and he could not hide that. He stammered an apology, “I don’t know what’s the matter with me. I’m not usually like this.”

While the blond Spartan continued with the bandaging, the other tossed Chambias a smile and remarked, “Hopefully, you don’t regularly get yourself nearly killed! Don’t worry about it.”

Chambias felt guilty for his earlier hostility to the Spartans. “Thank you. We would both be dead if you hadn’t happened along.”

The Spartan’s expression grew serious again. “Your friend needs a surgeon. Are you from around here?”

Chambias nodded and then, remembering his manners, added, “I’m Chambias, son of Pytheas; and that is Lychos, son of Archilochos.”

The Spartans flinched—as if they recognized the name—but made no comment. The spokesman merely asked, “Will your horses run home and alert someone about the accident, or should we chase after them?”

“Mine will probably run home. Lychos’ mare is better about staying.”

“I’ll see if Beggar and I can catch her,” the darker Spartan said to his companion; and whistling to his hunting dog, he set off. She was one of the big Kastorian hounds bred in Lacedaemon and admired around the world for their acute sense of smell, tenacity, and intelligence. This one had an ugly white patch on her face that would have made a wealthy Corinthian scorn her, Chambias noted; but she had certainly attacked the boar fearlessly. Now she bounded after her master with an eagerness and agility that was both beautiful and touching.

Chambias watched man and hound disappear behind the stunted trees and then turned awkwardly to the remaining Spartan. He found it disconcerting that because Spartans all wore identical red chitons and cloaks, he could not tell if this young man was rich or poor, the son of someone powerful or powerless. All his life up to now he had been able to tell at a glance whether he was dealing with someone of consequence. Now he could not.

The strange young man drew a goatskin off his back and offered it to Chambias, who accepted gratefully, only now conscious of how thirsty he was.

“Are you with the Corinthian army?” the Spartan asked.

“Not yet; we’re both ephebes—in the cavalry,” Chambias added proudly. “And you?”

“Peers,” the Spartan answered simply—and inadequately from Chambias’ point of view—but the yapping of a dog distracted them and they turned in the direction of the noise. A few moments later the other Spartan reappeared, leading Lychos’ black mare. “If you can climb up on that rock,” he suggested to Chambias, “you should be able to mount despite your leg.”

Chambias looked at the indicated rock, at his friend’s sweating and clearly nervous mare, and then down at his knee. The mere thought of trying to mount and ride with this knee made him nauseous. If the horse spooked and he was thrown a second time, it would be

unbearable. He shook his head. "Can't either of you ride for help? I can direct you to my father's house. It is directly behind the Temple to Apollo; he is the chief priest." Chambias felt it was important that these Spartans realize that even though he was not as rich and important as Lychos, he was not a nobody.

The Spartans glanced at one another, and for a moment Chambias feared that neither of these ordinary Spartans was capable of riding; most Corinthian foot soldiers had little skill with horses. But then the darker of the two decided, "You had better go, Alkander. Beggar and I have a better chance of fighting off any predators."

The Spartan addressed as Alkander, the Apollo-like blond, frowned and seemed inclined to contradict, but the other Spartan shook his head once and the blond accepted the decision. Wordlessly and effortlessly he vaulted onto the mare before turning to Chambias for more instructions. These given, he trotted away, leaving Chambias with the other Spartan.

The latter went at once to check on Lychos, but quickly turned back to Chambias. "Could you lend your friend your chlamys? He is dangerously cold."

"Of course." Chambias was ashamed he had not noticed himself. The Spartans had, after all, already shredded one of their cloaks for bandages and wrapped Lychos in the second. Chambias pulled his short cape off his back and the Spartan came and took it from him. The Spartan seemed to hesitate as he noticed that the garment was of the finest wool, dyed a costly turquoise blue with an elaborate border. It was obviously very expensive. "It's all right," Chambias insisted. The Spartan returned to Lychos and, kneeling on one knee beside him, carefully tucked the chlamys around him.

Now that he was without a cloak, Chambias noted that the sun was behind the western mountains and it was getting chilly. He looked again at Lychos, who was rolling his head back and forth in evident pain. Chambias registered for the first time that it could take hours for someone to get here with a stretcher or litter. By then Lychos might be dead. Even if the bleeding had slowed, only the Gods knew what damage had been done to his insides. It would also soon be dark and, as the Spartan had already hinted, there were other wild beasts that might be drawn by the smell of blood.

The Spartan seemed to sense what was going through Chambias' head, because he abruptly broke in on his thoughts. "Alkander is a good rider, and we visited the Temple to Apollo this morning. He will find your father's house without trouble. Meanwhile, it's a fine night. The only thing I'm worried about is that the carcass of the boar may draw scavengers." He pointed to the wheeling vultures overhead. Finishing his thought, he added, "I'll build a fire to warm your friend, keep the wild animals away, and help Alkander find us again. Do you have bears or wildcats here?"

"No bears; but the cats, although small, are very vicious. And there are wolves, of course."

The Spartan nodded and started to collect dried wood, of which there was plenty. As he worked, Chambias noticed that he was holding his left arm cradled at his waist and worked only with his right hand.

"Are you hurt?" Chambias asked as the Spartan went down on one knee to build the fire, still cradling his left arm.

"The boar broke my left forearm as I went in for the kill. That's why I sent Alkander for help."

Chambias was ashamed to think that they were both suffering from broken bones and the other was doing all the work. "Can I help?" he asked.

"If you could strike the flint it would be a big help," the Spartan admitted with a smile.

Chambias looked blank.

"It's here. In my hip pouch." The Spartan indicated the leather pouch that hung from the right-hand side of his belt.

Chambias hobbled over, reached inside, and withdrew the flint; but the Spartan had to explain how to use it, and it took Chambias several tries before he managed to strike a spark. It took many more tries before he ignited the pile of dry leaves and twigs the Spartan had so carefully prepared. "I've never done this before," Chambias said, defensively excusing his obvious incompetence. "We have slaves to light our fires."

The Spartan nodded ambiguously, blowing gently to stoke the fire and then feeding it from the pile of kindling he had collected. Only after it was going solidly did he again turn his attention to the Corinthian, suggesting, "We might as well eat some of that boar."

This was going too far. It wasn't just that Chambias hadn't the faintest idea of how to go about flaying a carcass; he also did not think it a proper task for a youth of his station. No priest sullied his hands with the meat of the sacrificial beasts. His father employed no less than three professional butchers to flay and filet the sacrificial animals. They were skilled men, but all were slaves or former slaves.

The Spartan apparently understood his look of outrage and shrugged. "If you aren't hungry, we don't need to bother. I can go without." He then settled down to feed the fire.

"Have you spent the night out in the open before?" Chambias asked, glancing nervously at the darkening sky.

"Many times; haven't you?"

Chambias shook his head. It had never occurred to him that spending the night out in the open might be something desirable. In his experience only beggars, vagabonds, and shepherds slept out at night. It was a mark of status that he had never done so—but somehow this Spartan had managed to turn things on their head and make it sound like a deficit of some kind.

So they sat in silence, the Spartan feeding wood to the fire with one hand while his bitch gnawed happily at the carcass, and Chambias miserably listening to his best friend die.



"Master! Master! A catastrophe!" The slave burst into the symposium, at which his master was hosting a dozen important guests. "A horrible accident!" the slave gasped out.

Archilochos' symposia were famous for the quality of the food, entertainment, and conversation. Wealthy, well-traveled, and active in politics, Archilochos prided himself on employing the best cook and serving the most coveted wines in all Corinth, because he found both useful bait to pull men into his circle. He was, at the moment, exceedingly pleased to have snared one of the Spartan kings, Demaratus.

King Demaratus was not a handsome man. He was short and bowlegged and had a very large nose. Aware of this, he was not vain about his person, and he dressed in the practical clothes of a common ranker in the Spartan army, without any hint of his royal status. He

braided his hair from the roots, as was custom, and bound the tips with tarred twine like marines did.

Despite the superficial differences between Demaratus and the elegant and cultured Archilochos, they found common ground in their opposition to the other Spartan king's plans to make war on Athens. They met tonight to discuss ways of putting an end to the ill-advised adventure; and Archilochos deplored the unprecedented interruption by a slave, who had no business in the symposium for any reason.

"Stop babbling!" Archilochos snapped.

But the old slave was Lychos' tutor, the man who had watched over him when he was growing up, and he was far too distressed to calm down. "Lychos has been gored by a wild boar. They say he was tossed around in the air, speared on the tusks of the boar, and his guts were spilling out of him!"

"Who says? What are you talking about?" Archilochos started to focus on what the man was saying.

"Master Lychos is bleeding to death! He—"

"Calm down and give me a coherent report!" Archilochos ordered, alarm rather than outraged propriety lending his voice an edge now.

Except for Demaratus, Archilochos' guests were all Corinthian aristocrats who knew their host's son personally; they exchanged horrified glances. Even Demaratus knew that his host had lost one son at sea, and guessed that this youth was Archilochos' heir.

"He was riding beyond Acrocorinth when his horse shied at the sight of a boar, and he was thrown to the ground, and the boar gored him!" The slave was trying desperately to get his master to do more than stare at him in horror.

"Where is he?" Archilochos demanded.

"In the forest on the far side of Acrocorinth!"

"*He's still out there?* But how did you hear of this?" Archilochos demanded, rearing up from his couch.

"A Spartan! A Spartan found him and killed the boar, but he could not bring him back. He only just managed to capture his horse and ride to Pytheas for help."

"Pytheas?"

"Of course!" The slave was impatient with his master's slowness.

“Lychos was riding out with Chambias, and Chambias gave instructions to his own house.”

“Why didn’t he come himself?” Archilochos demanded in terrified outrage, his anger an expression of his unfathomable fear. He could not lose this son, too!

“Chambias broke his knee falling from his horse. Lychos—”

“They left him out there? Bleeding to death?” Archilochos was grabbing for his himation, fumbling for his sandals.

Demaratus had never seen a grown man look so lost and helpless.

“The other Spartan and Chambias stayed with him, but we must get help to him! Master, we must get the surgeon!”

“Don’t give me orders, slave!” Archilochos snarled back, and only then remembered his guests. He turned to them, unseeing, muttered “excuse me,” and was gone, the old slave in his wake.

The other men collected their himations and slipped their feet into their sandals. The owner of the flute girls shooed them away while they chattered excitedly like a flock of chickens. Demaratus, however, took his time. While the other guests departed, he tied his own sandals and deliberately wrapped his thick red himation around him. Then he set his cross-crested helmet on the back of his head, the nosepiece on his forehead, and followed the others out.

Just as he had expected, he found his host in the outer courtyard. By now Archilochos had sent for a surgeon and ordered his horse tacked up, while a crowd of slaves collected in the courtyard carrying stretchers and torches. Demaratus moved calmly into the maelstrom of activity swirling around Archilochos.

Archilochos scowled in annoyance at the Spartan king. “Forgive me, but this must take precedence—”

Demaratus waved him silent. “Of course. I merely wanted to reassure you. If two Spartiates were at the scene of the accident, then you can be sure they did all that could be done to save your son.”

“You don’t even know who they were! How can you be so sure? Ordinary soldiers are no surgeons!”

“Spartiates have gone through the agoge, and they are huntsmen. They know how to treat wounds caused by sword and spear, claws, teeth, and tusks, as well as how to handle other common injuries

from sprains to broken bones. They will have done all that is possible for your son until a surgeon can see him.”

Archilochos was in no mood to listen, so Demaratus stepped back and let him go, but he called for his own horse. His helot attendant came forward at once. Having anticipated the order, he had already tacked both their horses. Demaratus swung himself easily onto the animal's back and followed in the wake of Archilochos' noisy party with their many torches.

They did not have far to ride. Just behind the huge Doric temple to Apollo, they stopped beside a house ablaze with torchlight. All the neighbors had lit torches, too, and slaves filled the street; the women crowded the balconies, shrouded in their shawls so that only their eyes showed.

Archilochos was met at the door by a man with long white hair and a flowing beard, who assured Archilochos that his own rescue party had set out a quarter of an hour earlier. Archilochos, however, was not calmed, and insisted on following them. Proceeding at a jogging pace along the long avenue leading out of the city to the west, they overtook the priest's rescue party before it had passed out of the city walls.

Demaratus tagged along, unseen by the others, until he suddenly cantered past the rest of the party to the young man who was leading them. He drew up sharply, his horse's hooves skidding on the paving stones. “Alkander! You? You killed this boar?”

“It was Leonidas who killed him. I merely pinned him down.”

They gazed at one another while the Corinthians came to a halt in confusion.

“What is this? We must hurry!” Archilochos demanded, riding up beside Demaratus.

“Indeed. And so we shall. Let me introduce my wife's brother, Alkander.” Demaratus hesitated, but then he decided it would eventually come to light anyway. “And you need not fear that your son's rescuers were ‘ordinary soldiers.’ The young man who killed the boar is none other than Leonidas, son of Anaxandridas and brother to King Cleomenes.”

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King Cleomenes was happy that Demaratus had accepted the invitation to dine with the Corinthian polemarch. As a result, he was the only king present in the royal mess. This gave him undivided precedence in everything, and enabled him to dictate what wine was poured and in what proportion it was mixed with water, to choose what songs (if any) were sung, and to dominate the conversation.

Cleomenes was thirty-three. Like his co-monarch, he was not a handsome man, though it was harder to say why. Cleomenes was tall, with no obvious blemish, and yet neither his features nor his limbs seemed to fit together gracefully. His forehead was too high, his chin too short, his shoulders too narrow, and his arms too long. He had huge knees over weak calves. But the worst of his features was the way his eyes wandered, never settling on anything for long and rarely looking another man in the eye—as if he wanted to avoid the disapproval, shock, or anger he so often saw reflected back at him in the faces of others.

Tonight was no exception. He either did not notice, or did not care, that the faces of the men around him were grim or disapproving as he drank more and more. Before too long the others had ceased drinking altogether, and shortly thereafter the five regimental commanders, the lochagoi, excused themselves one after the other.

This left only two priests. Yet even as Cleomenes addressed Asteropus, the younger of the two priests, Cleomenes did not actually look at him. Instead he gazed at the tent wall over his head. “So what’s this I hear about the Corinthians having an omen foretelling *Corinthian* triumph?”

Asteropus had a long, acne-scarred face, and he stroked his short beard as he considered his king. Truth to tell, he did not like Cleomenes. He thought the king impious, arrogant, and excessively temperamental—although there was no doubt about his raw intelligence or his high level of education. Cleomenes could cut through superfluous discourse like a knife through butter, and he hated illogical argument. Asteropus had learned to admire that, because he was an ambitious young man and Cleomenes had offered him a rare opportunity—to be the Agiad representative to Delphi.

Asteropus had snatched at the opportunity not only because it was a fascinating job, but because he had not had many successes

in his short life. He had been one of those boys and youths who, no matter how hard he tried, inevitably lost at contests of strength and speed and dexterity. He was short-sighted and had spent most of his years in the agoge slogging miserably behind the leaders. It had not helped that he could not sing or dance, either, as those were skills the Spartans admired at least as much as skill at sports. Only his wits had sometimes won him praise and respect; but once he had joined the army at age twenty-one, even that no longer mattered so much. In the army, skill at arms and physical courage eclipsed all other virtues. Asteropus hated army life.

Cleomenes had rescued him from it. He had reached out his bountiful hand and appointed Asteropus his representative to Apollo, and from that day forward Asteropus was exempt from military service.

Asteropus knew he had attracted the king's attention because, despite his mere twenty-five years of age, he had demonstrated an uncanny ability to read the omens of the Gods—as if his physical short-sightedness had been replaced with divine insight. When still in the agoge, for example, he had predicted a disastrous thunderstorm that killed five boys during the Phouxir. And just this spring he had foretold the disaster that would strike Cleomenes' half-brother, Dorieus. The latter in particular brought him Cleomenes' favor, because the Agiad king hated his brother Dorieus—even more than he hated his co-regent King Demaratus.

Dorieus had been born to Cleomenes' father, King Anaxandridas, by his first wife—but only *after* the ephors had made Anaxandridas take Cleomenes' mother, Chilonis, as his second wife. Although Cleomenes had been born a year before Dorieus, Dorieus had been such a paragon of manly virtue while growing up that there had been a faction that supported his claim to the throne, saying he had precedence since he was son to the first (and implicitly only legal) wife of their father. At Anaxandridas' death, the ephors and Council had ruled in Cleomenes' favor and the Assembly had ratified the decision—albeit by a small (and some said dubious) majority. Outraged by the slight, Dorieus left Sparta in a rage, unwilling to accept Cleomenes as his king. He first tried to set up a colony in Africa, but was expelled by the Carthaginians. The oracle at Delphi then advised him to go to Sicily and found a city in honor of Herakles, promising him success

if he did so. With only a handful of Spartiates but many perioikoi, he departed. Cleomenes had been glad to see him go; but he also feared that Dorieus, if successful abroad, might return to challenge Cleomenes at home—this time with an army at his back.

Cleomenes' worries increased incrementally as news of Dorieus' successes filtered back to Sparta. Dorieus appeared to be growing richer and more powerful by the month. Soon alarming news arrived: Dorieus' Spartan colony was considered so powerful that he had been asked to assist in local wars—just as Sparta did at home. Cleomenes could picture the fleet that would land on the western shore of the Peloponnese and sweep through Messenia, rallying his subjects to revolt against him. His nightmares became so dreadful that Cleomenes consulted Sparta's senior seer, Hekataios, but the answer was ambiguous and unsatisfying. He had then, almost as an insult to the older man, asked Hekataios' barely mature son, Asteropus, what he thought Dorieus would do next.

In a flash of inspiration from his "second sight," Asteropus had replied without hesitation. "You have nothing to fear from Dorieus, for he will pay for transgressing the instructions of the oracle. He will leave his body on the field of honor and be in Hades as soon as he tries to use his arms for a purpose other than that assigned him by Apollo." Within just two months a ship from Sicily put in with the news that Dorieus was indeed dead, and Asteropus had secured the job of Cleomenes' personal representative at Delphi.

Unfortunately, he had no flash of inspiration now. The Gods were fickle, after all, and he did not have an answer that would calm Cleomenes' unease.

"Well?" the king prodded impatiently, reaching again for his wine. "What is all this nonsense about? Our allies share our victories and defeats. The Corinthians cannot win a victory without us. Surely they can see that?"

"Undoubtedly—if only the signs we had were not so adverse."

"So why are they adverse?" Cleomenes demanded.

Asteropus was relieved by the arrival of a helot messenger. The man entered the tent and respectfully came to a halt before Cleomenes, his eyes down and his hands by his side.

"What is it?" Cleomenes demanded irritably.

“The surgeon sent me to inform you that your brother has been injured by a wild boar, sir.”

“Which brother?” Cleomenes wanted to know. Even with Dorieus dead, he still had two younger half brothers, likewise sons of his father’s first wife, and so from Cleomenes’ point of view untrustworthy.

“Leonidas,” the helot answered.

“Oh. Will he live?”

The helot glanced up, startled. “He has only a broken arm, sir.”

“So why the fuss?”

The helot treated the question as rhetorical, and withdrew.

“Fool!” Cleomenes commented to Asteropus with contempt. “He shouldn’t be out hunting boar if he doesn’t know how to keep out of their way.” Cleomenes reached again for his wine.

But in that moment Asteropus had one of his flashes of inspiration, and he warned Cleomenes, “Do not underestimate Leonidas. He may prove far more dangerous to you than Dorieus ever was.”

“Little Leo? Nonsense. Cleombrotus is the one to watch. He covets my throne. Leonidas is as docile as a lamb. Lambonidas would be a better name for him!” Cleomenes liked his own joke and laughed at it.

Asteropus let it go. He did not feel it was his job to contradict the king. He had done his duty by warning him.

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Cleombrotus was Leonidas’ twin brother. The news that Leonidas had killed a wild boar reached him in his tent, where he was dicing with his seven mess-mates. Hearing that Leonidas had broken an arm in the encounter, Cleombrotus snorted and remarked contemptuously, “Lucky someone was around to rescue him from worse harm!”

When they were little, Cleombrotus had been significantly bigger and stronger than Leonidas and had used both advantages to bully his brother. In the agoge they had been separated and rarely met; but Cleombrotus continued to excel, particularly at boxing, eventually winning in the youth competitions at Olympia. He had won the honors at the Feast of Artemis Orthia as well, and he carried that title and trophy for life. Throughout these early years he had looked

down on his smaller twin, sneering at him for failing to be elected herd leader and for failing to win honors or Olympic laurels. But last year everything had turned upside down and bitter, when both youths were twenty-year-old instructors at the agoge, called eirenes. Cleombrotus lost his command after a case of unprecedented insubordination by his unit, resulting in its being turned over to his twin brother.

“That’s not what Alkander is saying,” noted the man who had brought Brotus the news.

“Alkander? That trembler! He p-p-probably shit at the sight of the b-b-boar and didn’t notice what was g-g-going on.” Cleombrotus imitated the stutter that Alkander had had as a boy, to the amusement of his companions.

When they stopped laughing, however, the messenger put him right. “You’d better come see the carcass first, Brotus. It’s huge! It took four men to carry it, and the tusks are at least two feet long. Alkander held it down with his spear while Leonidas stabbed it with his sword. They weren’t hunting and didn’t have a proper boar spear with teeth—just their standard-issue war spears, which were still in it when Demaratus got there.”

“Demaratus? What the hell was Leonidas doing hunting with the Eurypontids?” Cleombrotus made it sound like treason.

No one bothered to answer, because everyone knew that Leonidas and Alkander had been friends since boyhood, long before Alkander’s sister married Demaratus. “Come and see for yourself,” Brotus’ comrade suggested sensibly, and they all scrambled out of the tent to take a look.

Torches were forbidden in a Spartan camp, no less than in the city of Sparta, but they didn’t have much trouble finding the source of commotion. It was, after all, not yet late, and most men had not gone to sleep. The arrival of Demaratus with this immense trophy had brought many men out of their tents, and word had rapidly spread that Leonidas had killed it.

Despite himself, Cleombrotus was impressed. The boar was the largest specimen he had ever seen. Nor could he comfort himself that the beast was old, decrepit, or lame. Not a hair was gray, and there was not one other injury on its body besides the ones sticky with fresh blood. The boar was muscular, with bristling black hair and

eyes that—even in death—were full of power and contempt for lesser creatures. How could Little Leo have vanquished such a beast? For the first time in his life, it occurred to Brotus that Leonidas might have qualities he had failed to notice up to now. Leonidas, he registered, might be more than he appeared to be.