

LEONIDAS OF SPARTA

A Boy of the Agoge



Leonidas of Sparta: A Boy of the Agoge

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SPARTA

Late 6th Century BC

Cast of Characters

(Those marked with * are historical figures)

The Agiads

King Anaxandridas*

Taygete, his first wife

Chilonis, his second wife

Cleomenes*, his firstborn son, by Chilonis

Dorieus*, his secondborn son, by Taygete

Leonidas*, his thirdborn son, by Taygete, twin to Cleombrotus

Cleombrotus*, his thirdborn son, by Taygete, twin to Leonidas

Gyrtias, Cleomenes' wife

Agis, eldest son of Cleomenes

Gorgo,* daughter of Cleomenes

Dido, nurse to Leonidas

Polyxo, nurse to Cleombrotus

The Eurypontids

King Ariston*

Demaratus,* his son and heir

Leotychidas,* cousin of Demaratus, next in line to the throne

Percalus, wife to Demaratus

In the Agoge

Gitiades, Leonidas' first eirene

Ephorus, elected herd leader

Prokles, son of Eurybiades, herd member

Alkander, son of Charmos, herd member

Timon, herd member

Other Spartans

Hilaira, Prokles' sister

Philippos, Prokles' father

Lysandridas, Prokles' grandfather

Leonis, Prokles' grandmother

Lathria, Timon's sister

Euryleon, youth in Leonidas' unit

Eirana, daughter of Kyranios

Kyranios, divisional commander

Nikostratos, Spartan treasurer

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



THE DEATH OF LEONIDAS DEATH IS legendary. His last days have inspired great works of art and popular enthusiasm. The stand of “the 300” at Thermopylae has been harnessed to a hundred modern causes pitting East against West, and Leonidas with his 300 Spartans have come to symbolize what is good and noble in war: self-sacrifice for the sake of one’s country and family. But who was Leonidas? And what was he before he became the incarnation of Freedom fighting Tyranny?

Herodotus gives us some tantalizing tidbits—the story of his father’s forced second marriage, the tensions between his elder brothers, the precociousness of his wife. But he is silent on many key points, from the date of Leonidas’ birth to his role in Sparta prior to becoming king. Only one thing about his early life do we know for certain: because he was not the heir apparent to the Agiad throne, he would have been subjected to the full Spartan agoge. Knowing that, knowing how he ended, and building on fascinating insights into his personality provided by the few sayings attributed to him, I have created a young Leonidas.

Nothing in this novel contradicts known facts about Leonidas—not even the late date of his birth. It is true that most historians prefer

to think he was born “shortly” after Dorieus, as Herodotus says; but the fact that he personally led the Spartan advance guard to Thermopylae and fought in the front line for three days of fierce fighting, supports my thesis that he was not already an old man at the time of the battle. The fact that his son was still quite young at the time of his death is another undeniable historical fact that supports the postulated later birth date of Leonidas. I have made Leonidas roughly eight years younger than most historians postulate and from ten to fifteen years older than most popular portrayals of him in art and film.

That said, the novel is quite candidly fiction.

I wish to thank my editor, Christina Dickson, for encouraging me to publish this short work as a stand-alone Part I of a Leonidas trilogy, and 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 nit-picking of his highly effective and evocative design. Without their hard work, this book would not have been finished. I look forward to working with both of them on the next two books in the trilogy: *Leonidas of Sparta: A Peerless Peer* and *Leonidas of Sparta: The Dispensable King*.

PROLOGUE



AS SOON AS IT BECAME EVIDENT that the Gods wanted a human sacrifice, Leonidas knew it would be he. The priest appointed by his co-monarch Leotychidas, delivered the Delphic Oracle, reading in his deep, resonant voice:

*Hear your fate, O dwellers in Sparta of the wide spaces,
Either your famed, great town must be sacked by Perseus' sons,
Or, if that be not, the whole of Lacedaemon
Shall mourn the death of a king of the house of Herakles.
For not the strength of lions or of bulls shall hold him,
Strength against strength; for he has the power of Zeus,
And will not be checked till one of these two he has consumed.*

And every single man in the Council chamber turned to look at Leonidas. No one looked at Leotychidas, who was no less Sparta's king and no less a descendent of Herakles. They looked at Leonidas.

Delphi was rarely as unambiguous as in this oracle, and the cynical part of Leonidas' brain wondered just what it had cost Leotychidas to extract this message. Of course he'd taken a chance. He couldn't have been 100% certain that *everyone* would look to Leonidas. But his gamble had paid off. The Council was unanimous in expecting Leonidas to dutifully play the role of the sacrificial lamb.

He supposed he ought to be honoured. Since the sons of Herakles had come to Laconia and set up their capital on the banks of the Eurotas, no Spartan king had left his body on a field of battle. For sixteen generations, Sparta's kings had ruled over a city-state that consolidated its rule first in Laconia, then conquered Messenia, established its pre-eminence throughout the Peloponnese, and was now the acknowledged leader of all freedom-loving Hellenes. Only the cowards, those who had paid tribute to the Persian emperor, did not acknowledge Sparta's primacy. Even the richest and most populous of Hellas' cities, mighty Athens, acceded to Sparta the right to lead in this desperate coalition against the Persian invaders.

To lead meant to set an example, and for twelve years Sparta had set an example of defiance to the Persians. But defiance was mere bravado and bluster unless it was backed by the willingness to sacrifice life itself. Cities whose citizens are not prepared to die for their freedom deserved slavery. Leonidas did not doubt that the majority of Sparta's citizens—and their wives—would prefer to die than surrender their freedom. And what was a Spartan king other than a leading citizen? What *good* was a Spartan king unwilling to make the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of his city?

If the Gods would spare Lacedaemon from sack and slavery at the cheap price of his own life, then so be it.

"All right, then," Leonidas agreed. "But let's not make it a futile sacrifice. Any defence on land that does not simultaneously prevent the Persian fleet from simply bypassing our position and landing troops in our rear is worthless. We have to fight north of the Isthmus, or we will lose Athens and her fleet. Since Tempe proved untenable, the next best position is Thermopylae, with the fleet at Artemision."

"You can't take a full call-up that far north! It would denude the city! What if the Athenians fail us and Persian fleet breaks through or outmanoeuvres them?" Leotychidas (who fancied himself an expert in naval affairs) protested.

"And there's Argos to consider. They're only waiting for the chance to strike. Argos and Achaea," Orthryades added.

"Especially if the Allies go north with you. Without Tegea to worry about, Argos and Achaea are sure to fall upon us," Talthybius agreed.

“It’s at least a five or six days’ march to Thermopylae! If you take the whole army that far north, it could never come back in an emergency. At least from the Isthmus we could be home in two days if we’re needed here,” Alcidas added.

“Who said anything about a full call-up?” Leonidas snapped back. “I’ll hold Thermopylae with the Guard alone, if you want me to.”

“No hubris, brother. We can spare you more than that,” Leoty-chidas retorted flippantly.

“Two thousand hoplites,” Leonidas countered, adding up in his mind what the Allies were likely to bring. He thought he could count on their old Peloponnesian allies for at least 3,000 troops and the newer allies, those whose homes were directly threatened, for about that again. 8,000 heavies ought to be enough to hold the pass at Thermopylae almost indefinitely.

“Of course.” There was a general murmur of assent and the nodding of many grey heads around the Council chamber.

“Well then. You don’t need me here any more. I’ll get on with the business of our defence.” Leonidas stood, and something strange happened. The ephor Technarchos came to his feet. Traditionally the ephors did not rise in the presence of the kings. They represented the Assembly, and to symbolise the equality between the kings and the Peers, they showed no deference to the monarchs. But Technarchos stood, and after only a moment’s hesitation the other four ephors followed his lead, and then every member of the Council, ending with a somewhat disoriented Leoty-chidas, also got to his feet. Leonidas acknowledged the gesture with a nod of his head, and continued out of the Council chamber into the blinding light of a hot summer day.

The Council House was located directly on the agora and opposite the Ephorate. It was fronted by a broad, double colonnade and raised a half-dozen feet above the paving stones of the square. Leonidas paused in the shade of the colonnade, grateful for a light breeze that ran its fingers through his hair and fluttered the short sleeves and skirt of his chiton where it was not encased in airtight leather and bronze. The sun was high, almost directly overhead, and most of the merchants had closed up their stalls for a midday break. The helots from the surrounding countryside were packing their wagons and hitching up their mules to return home.

Leonidas let his gaze sweep around the marketplace, mentally caressing each familiar landmark in a prelude to farewell. The statues to Apollo and Artemis marked the boundaries of the “dancing floor” where he, like every other Spartan youth, had in his time danced in honour of the Gods. There were the two ancient and (after seeing Athens) rather dowdy temples to the Market Zeus and Market Athena. Far more impressive was the temple that housed bones stolen from Tegea just fifteen Olympiads ago and allegedly belonging to Orestes. This was an impressive modern temple completely encircled by a colonnade in the Ionian fashion, but Leonidas’ eye fell on the older sanctuary to the Fates beside it.

Was it fate or intrigue that had brought him to this juncture? And would his death really prevent this somewhat haphazard and amorphous—but fiercely beloved—city from being sacked and turned to ashes? Could he with his death really ensure that the acrid smoke of burning crops did not smear the air above the Eurotas? It hardly seemed credible.

Leonidas descended the steps from the Council House and made his way over the hot paving stones toward the tree-lined “Going Away” street that led northwards out of the city. At this time of day, the shutters on shops and houses were closed against the heat of the sun, offering rather grim exteriors. Spartan tradition and custom did not encourage the painting or decoration of houses. As a result, unlike other cities, the facades here were not brightly painted, but simply whitewashed. Nor were the door frames elaborately carved and decorated; they were made simply of tarred beams. Even the roofs here lacked the decorative tiles that in the wealthier cities of Hellas were increasingly used not just on temples but on private homes as well.

In recent years, Leonidas had travelled extensively; he had been in Corinth, Athens, Crete, and Alexandria. Leonidas knew that other Hellenes looked down on Sparta as little more than a rag-tag collection of villages. The very fact that there was no protective city wall was often used to suggest that Sparta was not a “proper” city at all. But to Leonidas, this very openness was much of Sparta’s charm. Unlike other cities, in Sparta there was no stark contrast between the wide, paved public streets and the cramped jumble of back alleys. Although Sparta’s paved streets were not monumentally wide, the back streets

were hardly narrower. Because Sparta had no walls, it had room to expand. Rather than cramming houses closer and closer together, new houses were simply built on the fringe, stretching farther out into the broad plain around the city. And the houses behind their simple facades were spacious and well lit. Leonidas had been in homes of prominent citizens in other cities where the light of day hardly ever penetrated, but the houses he passed now had citrus, almond, and cypress trees reaching skywards over the walls—clear indications of the large, sunny courtyards and gardens that graced them.

He heard high-pitched voices behind him and the patter of feet. He glanced over his shoulder and stepped aside just in time to let a herd of little boys dash past him. They were barefoot, their heads shaved, and their chitons so ragged from constant wear that they seemed hardly to cover their nakedness. Their bodies were thin as only the bodies of fast-growing boys can be when they never got quite enough to eat. In other cities, the slaves dressed better, but nowhere did boys enjoy so much freedom and have so much say over their own lives.

Clearly two boys were contending for the lead and their fellows were chasing after them, shouting encouragement to their favourites. One of the boys noticed Leonidas before the others and abruptly tried to stop, causing his supporters to groan and curse and demand an explanation. But then the other boy also caught sight of Leonidas and tried to stop, too. Half the boys careened into one another, and one of the boys even fell over in the confusion.

“Father!” the first boy called out respectfully. “Is it true? There is an oracle from Delphi about the Persians?”

They were all looking up at him now, their chests still heaving from the exertion of running, sweat glistening on their thin limbs, but their big eyes fixed on him alertly. Leonidas estimated that they were no more than nine or ten years old. They were certainly still at an age when half the day was theirs to play with and when they were not yet learning how to wield even wooden swords and wicker shields. They were so young, he thought, that they would undoubtedly be spared the sword if the Persians came. Instead they would be herded off into slavery—some of them would undoubtedly be castrated for service as eunuchs or sold as prostitutes in the markets of Asia. If his death

could really save them from such a fate, he wished he could give it a thousand times!

“There is an oracle,” Leonidas confirmed, reluctant to share it with them.

“What does it say, father? Will our Allies fight, or will we have to fight the Persians alone?”

They unmanned him with that utter confidence in their own unshakeable defiance, and it took him a moment to answer. “It did not answer that particular question; but I am confident that our allies will stand by us, as we will be defending their freedom, too.”

“But to defend Athens, we’ll have to fight north of the Isthmus,” one of the boys protested. It was one of the boys who had been leading the informal race.

“Are you the pack leader?” Leonidas addressed the boy.

He nodded, and dutifully introduced himself: “Leonymos, son of Gylippus, father.”

“What would you rather, young Leonymos: to fight together with the Athenians, Boioteans, Thespians, and Plataeans north of the Isthmus—or to stand at the Isthmus with our Peloponnesian friends, while the Persians land ten times ten thousand men in the Gulf of Laconia and slaughter and burn their way up the valley of the Eurotas?”

Their eyes widened in astonishment. They had never thought of that.

“The Persians have a fleet—far greater than Athens or Corinth or Crete or all the Hellene cities together. They can carry more men than all the cities of the Peloponnese have together and land them anywhere they like. Without Athens and her fleet, we have no way to stop them.”

“But will the Athenians *fight*, father?” another boy asked anxiously.

“They fought—and won—at Marathon.”

“But will they fight under *your* command, father?”

How could even these little boys be so certain that the command was his? But there was no point questioning them on the point. They would have heard it from their fathers or older brothers, or the Peers in the *syssitia* where they served as mess boys. “There’s only one way

of finding out, isn't there? Now that's enough, boys." Leonidas cut the interrogation short. "Carry on."

They gazed at him, clearly still full of questions (and not a little excited to have him all to themselves for once), but the order had been too explicit. So they nodded and thanked him and started off at a trot. Then someone shouted a challenge and they broke into a mad dash again, apparently for the bridge.

Leondidas followed them at a more decorous pace. On the bridge across the Eurotas he stopped and took a deep breath. The river itself was at its weakest this time of year—a meandering, shallow stream upon a broad bed of sand. But from here he had a good view of the broad basin of fertile land that formed the heart of Lacedaemon. Straight ahead to the south and as far as the eye could see was the broad, rich plain of the Eurotas valley. Sparta, and beyond it Amyclae, backed up against the west bank of the river. Near at hand were a number of bathhouses with long piers leading to the deepest part of the river, and there were a number of boys jumping off the ends of these with loud, happy squeals he could hear even from this distance. Farther downriver there were tanneries, factories, and sawmills built hard upon or into the river itself. But beyond the town the barley fields stretched into the hazy distance. It was enough, even without Messenia, to ensure that no one in Lacedaemon went hungry.

Behind him, to the north, the valley narrowed rapidly between the foothills of the Taygetos and the Parnon ranges. The lower slopes of these steep hills were covered with olive and almond orchards, while the upper slopes were dotted with grazing sheep and goats. To the west, beyond the acropolis and city of Sparta, the Taygetos range reared up majestic and haughty, rising rapidly to 8,000-foot peaks. To the east, just beyond the river, were the drill fields at the foot of the comparatively moderate slopes of the Parnon range. Here the vineyards gradually ascended toward these mountains, lost in purple haze.

Leonidas brought his eyes back to the drill fields. These were being used at the moment by youths of the agoge. Nearby was one of the younger cohorts of the upper classes, identifiable by the fact that they were using wooden weapons and were still very inept at manoeuvres. In fact, they could hardly keep their lines and files straight when they advanced, much less perform any reverses or turns. There was

nothing shameful in that. There was only one way to learn, and that was drill, drill, and more drill. It was odd the way foreigners seemed to imagine the Spartans were uniquely made for war, when in fact, one on one, they were no better than other men. It was only practise that made them good soldiers—hard, gruelling, boring, unrelenting drill. How he had hated it most of his life!

Leonidas left the bridge, heading toward the drill fields. He had barely started along the road between the fields and the river, heading for the oldest of all Sparta's sanctuaries, the Meneleon, when the eirene in charge of the boys on the drill field recognised him. With a shout, he called to his charges to halt and come to attention. The youths drew themselves into a semblance of order. Leonidas halted and waited. The eirene came and presented arms in front of him respectfully. "Sir!"

"Oh, it's you, Simonidas." Leonidas recognised him with a smile.

"Would you do us the honour of reviewing us, sir?" the eirene asked.

"If you want," Leonidas agreed. With Simonidas a respectful pace behind him, he walked along the line of youths standing at attention. They were a skinny, bony, dirty lot, and with their shaved heads they looked very young. They were at an awkward age, really—rebellious, sullen, overconfident, impudent. The Persians might decide either to kill them as potential troublemakers or to enslave them in some capacity where they could be best controlled—the galleys and mines sprang to mind. Leonidas again told himself that if his death could spare them such a fate, he would die smiling.

"How old are your charges, Simonides?" he asked the eirene.

"Fourteen, sir."

That made them only two years older than his own son. He held his breath for a second as, with a sharp stab of regret, he realised that Pleistarchos would never stand here like this. He would not be given the chance. He would be king before the year was out, and they would yank him out of the agoge after that.

The thought made Leonidas' throat dry as he, out of respect for the youths, pointed out every one of their faults, one after another.

There were many, and not one of the youths escaped unscathed. Then he nodded to Simonidas, and continued on his way.

The Meneleon stood on a steep hill that loomed up quite abruptly from the floodplain of the Eurotas like an advance sentry of the Parnos range. It was built in honour of the Mycenaean king made famous by the *Iliad*, and was said to stand on the foundations of his palace. Certainly there were ancient graves in the area. Leonidas felt certain that, whether or not this had been the exact site of Menelaus' palace, it had been part of the Achaean city of Sparta. Leonidas leaned forward into his stride to make it up the steep road to the ancient sanctuary. Half way up the road he realised he had come without any kind of offering, and faltered. But then he remembered that *he* was the sacrifice, and there was no need for any surrogate at this stage.

The temple was very ancient, with no windows, only the entrance fronted by two columns. It seemed dark as Hades after the bright glare of the sun. Leonidas paused for his vision to adjust, and his ears registered before his eyes that someone else was also here.

"The news must be bad," a voice said from the darkness.

"Gorgo?" He couldn't quite believe it—and then again, he did. It was his wife. She was, as always, one step ahead of him.

She had been sitting on a bench. Now she rose and came towards him. She walked with the surefooted self-assurance that had scandalized all of Athens when he took her there a few years back. Gorgo had never been deemed a beauty. Her mouth was too wide, her jaw too prominent, and her hair too red. Now she was 33 and there were smile lines running from her nostrils to the corners of her mouth, crows' feet around her eyes, and a certain sagging about her neck. But she had bright, well-spaced eyes that met his now, knowing as much as asking.

Leonidas opened his arms and she walked into them. That was all. He held her. After a long time he answered her question. "No. The news was not bad. Lacedaemon can—and will—be spared. We will not suffer the fate of Troy."

"At what price?"

"Blood."

"You don't have to be a seer to know that!" Gorgo retorted with a short flash of annoyance. She pulled back from him to look him in

the face again. She was almost as tall as he. Their eyes met and she understood. "You mean *your* blood."

"Yes."

She stared at him mutely.

He felt obliged to explain. "I can't remember the exact wording, but the gist of it was that either Sparta would lose a king in battle or the city itself would fall."

"In that case, Leotychidas would do just as well." Her tone was endearingly tart.

Leonidas pulled her back into his arms. She tried to resist, angry with him; but he was stronger, and she did not want to be angry with him. The thought that she would soon lose him made her stop struggling and cling to him instead.

As soon as she had surrendered, Leonidas lifted one hand and shoved back her veil so he could run his fingers through her thick, tangled hair. Then he bent and kissed her on the lips. They were trembling from the effort not to cry.

"It had to be me, Beloved, because I am superfluous. I always have been—from the very day I was born the younger twin to a father with two wives and two near-grown heirs. My whole life, if you like, has been nothing but marking time in order to be ready to fulfil this destiny of losing it."

CHAPTER 1



THE FIRST SEVEN YEARS LEONIDAS RARELY saw either of his parents. In fact, when he was still a toddler it had surprised him to learn that the exalted personages who occasionally swept in and out of his life, surrounded by an elaborate entourage, had anything particular to do with him. He and his twin brother Cleombrotus were fed, clothed, washed, and disciplined by their respective nannies, Dido and Polyxo. These were buxom, sturdy girls with black hair and eyes, and apparently sisters.

Polyxo and Dido competed as fiercely as mothers with regard to their charges, each claiming to have the finest boy. Polyxo had all the obvious advantages, because Cleombrotus weighed a pound more than Leonidas at birth and he grew faster. By the time the twins were two, Cleombrotus could knock Leonidas over with relative ease—which he frequently did. Dido, however, insisted that her little charge was nevertheless the better of the brothers because while Cleombrotus had brute force, Leonidas had tenacity and cunning. He might get knocked down, but he did not let that defeat him. Quite the contrary, he would at once seek to drag his brother down on top of him. He did not always succeed; but like a good hunting dog, once he had hold of his prey he could not be shaken off easily.

Polyxo and Dido had once rushed after the sound of high-pitched screaming to find Cleombrotus trying to run down a long flight of

stairs to escape Leonidas. But Leonidas clung to his leg so fiercely that he tripped his brother. They both fell all the way down the marble stairs, Leonidas still clinging grimly to Cleombrotus' leg, to land at the scandalized feet of their mother, Taygete.

Taygete was a regal personage. She was tall and slender, and despite her 50 years of age, she was as straight as a battle spear. Her hair, pulled back behind a diadem of ivory, was the colour of iron. And so were her eyes. Leonidas never forgot the way she levelled those merciless grey eyes on him and then lifted her head to demand in an icy voice of Polyxo and Dido: "What in the name of the Dioscuri is going on here? Are these not princes of the Agiad house? I will not have them rolling about in the dirt like helot brats. If you cannot raise your charges in a befitting manner, I will find better nurses for them. The likes of you can be found in any marketplace of any perioikoi town all across Lacedaemon!"

The girls were terrified—and so was Leonidas. He staggered to his feet, bruised and bleeding, and tried to grab hold of Dido. His mother reached out and yanked him free of the nurse with a single gesture. Taygete's hands and arms were as hard as her eyes. She had trained at the bow and javelin all her life. Leonidas went flying halfway across the hall to land with an audible thump. Dido gasped in sympathy but did not dare move.

"Have I made myself clear?" Taygete asked the terrified helot girls.

"Yes, ma'am," they answered in unison.

Taygete turned on her heel and departed, her magnificent purple silk peplos billowing out behind her.

Dido came and collected Leonidas into her arms. She was weeping, and he soon found himself comforting her, rather than the other way around. It was then that she tried to explain things to him.

Taygete, his mother, was the niece and wife of King Anaxandridas, Leonidas' father. She had been barren for many years after her marriage, and she reached the age of 30 without her womb quickening once. By then King Anaxandridas was in his mid-forties and the ephors and Council of Elders became increasingly concerned. They searched the heavens for a sign, and the stars said that the Agiad King must marry another woman or the Agiad house would die out. So the

ephors had demanded that King Anaxandridas put aside his barren wife and take a new bride.

“Your father,” Dido explained, “being very fond of your mother, flatly refused to do so. He called the suggestion improper and pointed out that his wife was without blame. After much thought and discussion, the ephors and the Council of Elders agreed that the stars had advised only that King Anaxandridas need marry *another* woman, not that he must divorce his current wife. They decided to make an exception to the law to allow him to take a *second* wife. Although your father at first resisted this suggestion, after some time he gave in and submitted to the will of the Council and ephors. The ephors then selected a maiden descended directly from the wise Chilon himself. (When you get older and go to the agoge, you’ll hear all about him.) And to your mother’s great dismay, your father not only married her, but bedded her as well.

“In fact, within a very short period of time, your father’s second wife, who is called Chilonis after her famous ancestor, became pregnant. One year after your father had taken her to wife, she produced a son, your half-brother Cleomenes.” Leonidas thought: oh, no, not *another* brother!

Dido continued with the story, “but no sooner had Cleomenes been presented to the ephors and found sound and healthy, than your mother found herself pregnant, although she was nearer to 40 than 30 by this time. There were many people who did not believe her. They thought she was making it all up and would try to deceive the people by putting another woman’s child into her bed and presenting it as her own. So the ephors insisted on being present at the birth – right in the birthing chamber!

“But perhaps it was a good thing after all, because the ephors saw for themselves that there was no deceit, and your mother had indeed produced a fine son. In fact, she presented them with a bigger and healthier son than the boy of the other wife.”

“What about me?” Leonidas asked, hurt and distressed that even his own Dido would speak only of his bigger, stronger brother.

“Oh, this was more than ten years before you and Cleombrotus were born!” Dido explained with a little laugh and a hug. “I was speaking of your brother Dorieus.”

Yet *another* brother! Leonidas thought in despair.

“After that, your mother felt she had been vindicated of all blame in the affair, and no one ever expected to her to have another child, but ten years after Dorieus was born, she became pregnant again. And at the end of her time, you and Cleombrotus came into the world.”

“Why don’t I ever see my other brothers?” Leonidas asked, rather hoping that they lived on the far side of the Taygetos, or beyond the Pillars of Herakles, or anywhere where he would never have to encounter them. Cleombrotus was trouble enough.

“Dorieus is already in the agoge, but he visits his parents on holidays. Cleomenes lives in his mother’s household on the far side of the Eurotas. Your mother will not let him or his mother cross the threshold of this house. When your father wishes to see them, he must go to them.”



At age seven, Cleombrotus and Leonidas were enrolled in the agoge. Dido had warned him this would happen, and she had always looked sad when she told him, but she hadn’t been able to tell him very much about it. She was a helot, after all, and no one in her family had ever been allowed to go to the agoge. Nor could Leonidas’ father tell him much – if he had dared ask him – because the heir apparent to the throne was exempt from attending the agoge and so King Anaxandridas had never gone. As for Dorieus, he didn’t waste time talking to his youngest brothers, so neither of the twins had any idea what to expect except that it meant leaving home and living in the agoge barracks with other boys their age.

One day just after the winter solstice, their father came for them dressed in his armour and scarlet cloak. He was already a great age by then, much more than three score. He had white hair that he wore braided in the Spartan fashion, but it was so thin that his plaits were tiny little strings, and his scalp was almost completely bare. The skin of his scalp was flecked with brown. He could no longer stand upright; the weight of his breastplate appeared to be too great for his shoulders and dragged him forward. He kept himself partially upright by using a T-shaped walking stick that he propped under his right armpit.

Without a word he signalled his twin sons, who had been told to be ready for him, and with one on either side of him he walked out of the palace. At once they were caught in the cold wind that blew down off the Taygetos. Leonidas clutched his himation tighter around him, but his father shook his head. "Better get used to the cold, boy. You'll not be allowed to keep such a thick himation in the agoge."

Leonidas gazed up at the old man, who he knew was his father but who was still a stranger to him, and started to become alarmed.

The king led his sons to an imposing building standing directly on the Agora, opposite the dancing floor and at right angles to the Council House and the Ephorate. Although given the same prominence as these buildings, it lacked the lovely colonnade and elegant portico of the government buildings. Instead, the entrance was supported by three ancient Kouros. All had once been painted but were now naked stone, except for some remnants of colour in the curls of their hair. Boys of various ages with shaved heads and rough, black himations came and went in groups. Leonidas noticed that despite the snow lying in the shadows, the boys were all barefoot. This was going to be terrible, he registered.

They entered an office. An elderly man in Spartan scarlet sat behind a desk. Several middle-aged men stood about discussing things earnestly. At the sight of King Anaxandridas, the others fell silent, and the elderly man behind the desk got to his feet respectfully.

"Here they are," the king announced simply. "My youngest boys."

All eyes were drawn to the two boys, whom Anaxandridas now pushed forward.

"You'd never know they were twins!" one of the men exclaimed.

Hardly a brilliant observation, Leonidas thought. Brotus was dark-haired and dark-eyed, with a stubborn set to his jaw and a compact body that—as one of the men immediately observed—made him look a good year older than his twin. Leonidas was not blond, just brown, but he was much lighter in colour than his brother and his eyes were hazel. He was also ten pounds lighter and two inches shorter than Cleombrotus.

"Who's this fine fellow here?" They all focused on Brotus.

"Cleombrotus," the king said.

“Then this is Leonidas.” The oldest of the men walked around his desk and stepped closer to look intently at Leonidas. Leonidas wanted to step back, but he felt his father’s hand on his shoulder. In a vice-like grip it held him in place. Leonidas stared rather terrified up into the headmaster’s face, but Leonidas decided that whatever the man thought of him (and he did not say), he did not seem hostile.

The king took his leave. It was the last time Leonidas ever saw him up close. A little more than a year later he was dead.

The two boys were left in the cold room, surrounded by strangers.

“I think we best separate them, sir, at least at first.” one of the younger men suggested. “Twins have a tendency to be dependent on one another.”

The Paidonomos, or headmaster, nodded. He looked from one boy to the other, evidently considering something, and then nodded. “Put Cleombrotus in Herripidas’ and Leonidas in Gitiades’ unit.”

Leonidas was taken out of the administrative building and down the street to an even less assuming building. Here he was taken along a long corridor to a simple room furnished with what looked liked shelves running around the perimeter at knee and shoulder height—except there were ladders leading up to the upper shelves. There were wicker bins or baskets under the lower shelves. Already there were a half dozen other boys his own age in the room. All looked as bewildered and uncertain as he felt. There was also a young man there. He was tall and well formed, but not a citizen yet because he wore a black rather than a scarlet cloak. Also, his face and head were shaven. Leonidas knew enough about the agoge to know this young man must be one of the so-called eirenes. The eirenes were 20-year-olds who had just graduated from the agoge themselves. They were required to spend one year as a unit leader of younger boys before being enrolled in the ranks of the citizens and army at age 21.

The man escorting Leonidas addressed this eirene: “Gitiades, here’s another one for you: Leonidas, son of Anaxandridas.”

“King Anaxandridas?”

“That’s right.”

That made the other boys look over and stare. The older man was gone, and Gitiades addressed Leonidas. “You’re nothing special

here. Remember that. Just one of the herd. And you can get out of those fancy clothes—all of you!” he ordered his charges collectively. “Put them in that bin over there.” He pointed. Shyly the seven-year-olds took off the chitons and himations lovingly made by mothers, aunts, and sisters, and put them into the indicated basket. The room was unheated and it was cold standing around naked, but Gitiades seemed unconcerned. “Line up over there.” The boys did as they were told, while yet another couple of boys arrived and were ordered to strip as well.

Gitiades arranged the boys in order of height. Leonidas was second from the last. “Remember your place! Whenever I ask you to line up, do it in this order. Later, your position in rank and file will be based on which of you deserves praise and which of you deserves humiliation. That!” he pointed—“the outer right-hand wing—is the place of honour. It is the position of officers, because the man who stands there has only his own sword to protect him. That—the outer left-hand wing—is the place of disgrace. The man there is sheltered behind the shield of all his comrades; it is therefore the coward’s or bungler’s post.”

Leonidas thought that simplified things somewhat. Everyone knew that the enemy might come from any direction. In an instant the army might have to about face, and suddenly the man on the outer right found himself on the outer left and vice versa. But Gitiades was obviously not going to accept any objections, certainly not from the boy second from the left-hand post of “disgrace”.

Gitiades next handed each boy a couple of unbleached chitons from a stack on a nearby shelf. Leonidas had never felt such rough wool in his life. It felt as if it were half hemp. The boys were told to put one of these on, which they gladly did because of the cold. Only the cloth scratched the skin so that Leonidas wasn’t sure it was an improvement. Gitiades next handed out himations of dirty brown, natural wool, just one a piece this time. The weave of these garments was so loose that the cold seemed to come right through them. Leonidas sighed inwardly, knowing that these were to be his only clothes for a full year – only to be replaced next year by a new set of identical clothes. Not until he graduated from “little boy” to youth at age 14 would he get a better chiton and a black cloak, along with his

first set of leather training armour. At 17, after enduring the test of Artemis Orthia, he would at last be given real weapons and armour, and the clothes that went with them. At 19, as a meleirene, he would be issued real hoplite clothes and equipment, only in black rather than scarlet, and rather than attending classes would serve the army as messenger, watch-keeper and the like. At 20 he would become an eirene like Gitiades, and finally be allowed shoes again. Only when he attained his citizenship at age 21 and went on active duty with the army would he at last be given Spartan scarlet for his battle chiton and himation and be free to wear whatever he liked off duty. Fourteen years seemed an interminable period to Leonidas: it was twice as long as he had lived already.

The next thing that happened was even more unpleasant. One after another, the boys had their hair shaved off. Long hair was the mark and privilege of full citizens, the men over 31. That was the age at which men at last went off active duty and into the reserves, and therefore also became eligible for public office. The men on active service were allowed to grow their hair only as long as the back of their helmet. The boys of the agoge went shaved, while the eirenes—in accordance with their transitional status—were in the process of growing out their hair after 14 years of going about shaved.

By now there were eleven of them in the little group. Gitiades had them line up again, and assigned them each a bunk. The taller boys got the upper bunks, and Leonidas had a lower bunk near the back door that, by the smell of things, led to the latrines. Clearly this was another post of relative disgrace. They were informed that at the next new moon from this day they would be allowed to elect their own “herd leader”, after which they would be given the mornings from breakfast to lunch free to fend for themselves “productively” (whatever that meant). Until then, Gitiades announced, he was going to introduce them to their new environment, from the sports and running fields, to the classrooms and the *syssitia*, where they would serve as mess-boys.

By the end of his first month in the agoge, Leonidas knew that he was going to survive. Unlike some of the other boys, he had not been

terribly spoilt at home. Dido had lavished as much love on him as she could, but her authority had been very circumscribed. Furthermore, Brotus had always cast a large shadow, filling each day with uncertainty. At the agoge, Leonidas faced no similar bully.

The elected herd leader, Ephorus, was a bit of a show-off, faster than the rest of them and confident of his superiority. He took a certain pride in pointing out to Leonidas that he was faster and stronger than a “son of Herakles”, but he didn’t actually hurt Leonidas as Brotus frequently had done. At worst, he gave him a shove or shouted something like, “Eat my dust, son of Herakles!” Leonidas shrugged it off.

As for the other boys, they were mostly just as unsure of themselves as he was. The bulk of them followed Ephorus’ lead and tried to win Gitiades’ approval by fawning on him a bit. One of the boys, Prokles, seemed a bit stand-offish and almost rebellious, refusing to pander to Gitiades’ every whim and sometimes challenging Ephorus. Timon, the only boy shorter than Leonidas, distinguished himself by being rather sullen and aggressive, apparently determined to get out of his position of “disgrace”. But he really didn’t have much to worry about, because it soon became evident that Alkander was destined to be the herd dunce.

Alkander was taller than Leonidas, but he seemed strangely uncoordinated. He tripped frequently and knocked things over. He even had a slight stutter, which the others mercilessly mocked. This had the effect of making him speak less and less often—and when he did speak, the stutter was worse than ever. Initially, Leonidas was glad that there was someone worse than he, who consistently landed in the position of “disgrace”, but after a while he found himself just feeling sorry for Alkander.

By then, of course, his brothers had found out that he, unlike Brotus, had not been elected herd leader. When Brotus saw Leonidas following around behind another boy, he’d charged over and throttled him for “disgracing the Agiads”. As this was pretty much what Leonidas had expected from Brotus, he wasn’t terribly upset by it. What came as a complete surprise was that his entire herd took this as an insult to *them*. Ephorus roared to the attack, knocking Brotus down, and soon it was a full-scale free-for-all between the two herds. The brawling seven-year-olds attracted a crowd, with older age-

cohorts from the agoge and even citizens standing about shouting encouragement. It ended pretty much in a draw, with every one of them bleeding someplace or other and their chitons very much the worse for the “engagement”. But there wasn’t one who didn’t feel very proud of himself. Leonidas had never felt so happy in his life. He was no longer alone in the world; he had comrades.

Dorieus took a different tack, and it was far more humiliating. Leonidas had seen little of Dorieus over the years. Although Dorieus always returned to the palace during the frequent holidays, he was so much a favourite with their mother Taygete that she never wanted her younger boys around when Dorieus was there. As a result, Leonidas had seen his oldest brother only at a distance, or for brief encounters of no substance in the corridors or courtyards of the palace. It came as a horrible shock to have Dorieus stop him in the middle of the agora in full view of citizens, matrons, and even perioikoi and helots.

Leonidas and his herd had been lurking around the stalls of the agora, hoping for handouts to supplement the boring diet of the agoge. Meals at school were, in Leonidas’ opinion, dismal, and the portions skimpy. At the agora there were almost always some helots with kindly hearts who weren’t above giving boys bruised fruit, burnt crusts, or other less marketable wares. Leonidas had his eye on a meat pasty that had fallen off the counter of a pastry stall and been pecked at by some sparrows. He was sure the vendor wouldn’t sell it to a real customer, and if he could just—

“Leonidas, son of Anaxandridas, is that you?” Dorieus called out in loud voice that turned everyone’s head.

A seven-year-old Spartan boy is at the very bottom rung in the long ladder that ended with the men over sixty. They are required to show “respect” for every other Spartiate, male or female, who is older than they. (Children under the age of seven were still “infants” and not expected to know their manners yet, so they were exempt from duty and discipline.) What this meant, among other things, was that the younger boys had to give way to their elders in the streets, to stand up for their elders if they were sitting, and to give up their seats to them if requested. They were also strictly admonished to hold their tongue in the presence of their elders unless directly spoken to. In the latter case, however, they were required to address adult females

with “ma’am” and adult males of active-service age with “sir,” and all men old enough for the reserves with “father.” Unfortunately, since anyone of an older age-cohort and especially the eirenes or citizens had a “responsibility” for training the boys and youth in the agoge, they also had a right to stop and question any boy.

At the sound of his name, Leonidas jumped guiltily and turned around to face his older brother.

Dorieus was beautiful. In fact, he seemed to embody manly beauty in the abstract, as if he were a direct throwback to Herakles himself. He was tall for his age. His shoulders were as broad as a grown man’s. His arms and legs were a melody of entwined muscle. His belly was flat and hard as if it were made of bronze. He was now an awesome 18 years of age, and so Leonidas had to stand with his hands at his sides and his eyes at his feet and call him “sir”. “Yes, sir,” he said dutifully.

Dorieus came to stand directly before him. His head was shaved, too, of course, but he was wearing training armour, carried a shield slung on his back, and a real sword hung from his baldric—something Leonidas couldn’t even dream about for another ten years.

“Is it true what I hear? That you were not elected herd leader?” Dorieus had been herd leader of his unit ever since he had been enrolled in the agoge. He had won the contest of Artemis Orthia at 16. He had innumerable prizes for running, wrestling, javelin, and discus. Dorieus was quite simply the most splendid of all the young men still in the agoge—not excepting even those youths in the age-cohorts ahead of him.

“Yes, sir,” Leonidas answered the question.

“And why not?”

“Ask the others, sir. They were the ones who voted.” Even as he answered, Leonidas stiffened his stomach muscles and braced for the blow Brotus would have given him for such an impudent retort.

Dorieus was made of different stuff. “That was a very facile answer, boy, and you know it. Try again.”

“Ephorus is faster and stronger than I am, sir.”

“Then why aren’t you in the gymnasium improving your strength rather than loitering around the agora looking for handouts like a mongrel dog?”

Everyone in the whole agora (it seemed like the whole city to Leonidas) was listening to them.

“Because, sir, if I get that meat pasty over there, I will have far more strength than if I try to exercise in the gym when I’m half starved to death.”

The pastry vendor laughed outright, but Dorieus was unimpressed. “You are either a fool or you are trying to provoke me. The leanest dogs run fastest, and the hungriest lion makes the kill.”

“How do you know that the hungriest lion makes the kill, sir? Have you talked to one?”

“Now I know you are just trying to provoke me, little brother, but I won’t play your silly game. You disgrace our house and our mother, just as Brotus told me you did.” Dorieus turned on his heel and departed, everyone in the agora making way for him as if before a reigning king. Leonidas stood in his wake, feeling very small and silly and worthless.

Someone jostled his arm. He looked over alarmed, but it was only the pasty vendor. “Here you go, lad.” He offered him one of the good pasties—not the one picked at by the birds. “Eat up and enjoy it. Don’t let that pompous ass get you down.”

The vendor was a helot, of course. Leonidas knew that his brother would be appalled if he turned around and saw what Leonidas did next, but he didn’t care. He took the pastry and smiled up at the vendor. “Thank you! I won’t forget this. When I grow up and have money, I’ll buy only from you!”

The vendor laughed. His front teeth were missing. “Is that a promise, little Leonidas? Will you make me a purveyor of the Agiad royal house one day?”

“Well, I can’t do *that*,” Leonidas admitted with evident regret. “I’m never going to be king. But I’ll buy all my own pasties from you,” Leonidas assured him solemnly. He *was* serious, even though the helot seemed to think this was all an enormous joke.

By the time the third of his brothers, Cleomenes, took notice of his failure to win election from the other seven-year-olds in his “herd”, Leonidas was rather tired of the whole thing. Besides, he had been raised to look down on this half-brother as something distinctly “inferior” and “distasteful”. Cleomenes was King Anaxandridas’ son

by “that other woman”. Although the ephors had made a great show of setting aside Spartan marriage law and allowing King Anaxandridas to take a second wife, Leonidas had been raised in his mother’s household, and she insisted that the ephors (“nothing but a rude coterie of jumped-up royal servants”) had no such authority. How could five ordinary citizens (who were not even priests and without the sanction of Delphi!) simply set aside Spartan law? This question, when asked indignantly by the Agiad queen, was clearly rhetorical, and Leonidas had never heard anyone dare to answer her. Even his father, on the one occasion when Leonidas happened to hear her raise this beloved topic in his presence, had only shrugged. The ageing king had been too weary to fight with his queen over this bitter issue.

If the ephors had no right to set Spartan law aside, then “that other woman” was *not* King Anaxandridas’ wife, but his concubine. Ergo, the child this concubine bore was a bastard—pure and simple. Taygete never referred to Cleomenes by any other term than “that bastard” —although the adjectives used to describe “the bastard” varied over time.

At first, on the basis of helot rumours, Taygete had been led to believe that Cleomenes was “sickly” and so he had been “that feeble bastard.” Then it was rumoured that he was rather wild and self-willed, so she called him that “unruly bastard.” When as a little boy of about 10 it was reported in the City that he had been caught telling some minor lie or other, he became “that deceitful bastard.” And because, as the heir apparent to the Agiad throne, he was exempt from flogging, she called him “that cowardly bastard” – although obviously Cleomenes had no choice in the matter. Following an incident in which he allegedly showed disrespect for the Gods in one way or another, he became “that impious bastard”. So it was this “feeble, unruly, deceitful, cowardly and impious bastard” that confronted Leonidas just outside the monument to Lycurgus one fine early-summer morning of Leonidas’ first year in the agoge.

Leonidas like most of his fellow “little boys” did their best to avoid interrogations from their elders about what they had (or had not) learned so far by avoiding their elders altogether. At the sight of someone older, most boys tried to dart out of the way without being noticed. Leonidas was no exception. Unfortunately, just when

he thought he'd made his escape, a mocking voice called after him: "Well if it isn't my littlest brother Leonidas! Trying to run away like a coward too. Come here, boy!"

With an inward sigh, Leonidas stopped, turned around, and, when he stood a yard away from his tormentor, dutifully stopped and faced him. "Sir?"

Cleomenes was a year older than Dorieus and hence 19 years old and should have been a so-called *meleirene*. But Cleomenes, as the heir-apparent to the Agiad throne, was exempted from the *agoge*. He therefore did not wear his hair shaved, nor was he barefoot. He was dressed in a simple but fine *chiton*, probably of angora wool. Although Leonidas was supposed to keep his eyes down, he couldn't resist one glance at the face of this feeble-unruly-deceitful-impious coward. To his embarrassment, he met his brother's eyes, which were examining him with discomfiting intensity.

Cleomenes could not be called beautiful by any means. He did not have Dorieus' even features or his broad shoulders and muscular arms and legs. He was tanned and by no means fat, but there was nevertheless a softness about him. Furthermore, his shoulders were narrow and his joints all seemed too large for his limbs, suggesting that his muscles were underdeveloped. His face, too, was somehow misshapen without being actually deformed. He had his father's too-large nose, his teeth were too prominent, and his eyes set too close together.

But these eyes were very sharp, and they seemed to miss nothing as they drilled into Leonidas. "So you're the runt of the family, are you?"

Leonidas viewed this as a rhetorical question and said nothing, but Cleomenes snapped his fingers. "I asked you a question, boy."

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, sir, what?"

"I'm the runt of the family, sir."

"Couldn't even get elected herd leader, I heard."

"No, sir."

"I like that." Cleomenes answered with a smile that was anything but friendly. "At least you won't have any populist delusions like your elder brother."

Leonidas wasn't sure what he was talking about and held his tongue. Cleomenes' eyes narrowed. "I must say one thing for you, however. You don't look as dumb as your brothers." He paused as if expecting Leonidas to protest, but Leonidas had no intention of making that mistake. So Cleomenes continued with a mixture of provocation and satisfaction. "You're not so dumb, are you, little Leonidas?"

Although this too seemed rhetorical, Leonidas did not want to risk another rebuke and answered dutifully, "I wouldn't know, sir."

"If you are half as clever as you look, you'll remember one thing: you are the product of incest, the product of a boneheaded sire cross-bred with a dim-witted dam. I, in contrast, am descended through *my* mother from Chilon the Wise, honoured throughout the civilized world for his intelligence. You won't outwit me, little Leonidas."

Leonidas shook his head dutifully, noting that the "feeble-unruly-deceitful-impious-cowardly bastard" clearly had a lot of unpleasant titles for his half-brothers as well.



But by far the worst consequence of not getting elected herd leader was his reception at home on the first holiday thereafter. Except on those festivals where the age-cohorts of the agoge were involved directly in rituals (the Hyacinthia, the Gymnopaedia, Artemis Orthia, and the like), the children of the agoge were sent home during the holidays. Although Leonidas had come to enjoy the agoge more than he had expected, still he looked forward to going home that first holiday. He looked forward to as much food as he could eat, to honey and raisin cakes, to sleeping as late as he wanted, to taking a proper bath in the heated palace bathhouse, and most of all, to telling all his adventures to Dido.

It did not surprise him that his arrival aroused little attention. Dorieus was already home and with the king and queen. The king was ill, and both Brotus and Leonidas were told they would be sent for when he wanted to see them. (He never did.) Brotus went straight to the kitchens, while Leonidas went in search of Dido. He couldn't find her. Finally he asked someone.

"Dido?" they answered as if they had never heard of her.

“My nurse,” Leonidas insisted, frowning with frustration.

“But she was sent home as soon as you went into the agoge,” the astonished servant answered.

“Home?”

“Back to her family.”

“But where is that?”

“Good heavens, how should I know? I think she came from Boiai, or was it Kotyrta? I really don’t know.”

Boiai and Kotyrta were perioikoi towns out on the Malea peninsula—farther than Leonidas could ever get on his own.

Without Dido, the palace was empty. More than that: it was hostile. Because of his father’s illness, everyone tiptoed about and talked in whispers. Leonidas had the feeling that whenever he tried to do anything, someone hissed at him to be quiet. His mother and Dorieus were almost always closeted together, apparently in earnest discussions about something. Brotus, fortunately, considered it beneath his dignity to harass Leonidas, and generally ran off and joined his friends. Leonidas hardly knew what to do with himself and hung about listless and bored, wishing for the holiday to end.

And end it did, but not before he had attracted the attention of his mother. Coming upon him sailing twig-and-leaf triremes in the central fountain of the “diplomatic” peristyle, she paused just long enough to remark to Dorieus: “It’s no wonder really that that boy was not elected herd-leader like Brotus. Brotus is a natural leader – big and vigorous and strong-willed. But Leonidas has always been weak and backward. Sometimes, I wonder that the Elders let him live at all, don’t you? He’s completely superfluous.”