



LOVE DEATH
&
HATE YOUR FOE

NOBLE SMITH

A WARRIOR TRILOGY NOVELLA

Love Death and Hate your Foe
By Noble Smith

This is the prequel to the Warrior Trilogy (from [Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press](#)). It takes place fifty years before the books [Sons of Zeus](#), [Spartans at the Gates](#), [Sword of Apollo](#), and the short story [The One-Armed Warrior](#).

For more information about Noble Smith and his series visit www.thewarriortrilogy.com.

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. . . and after burning the city of Athens and its temples to ashes, the Persian army of King Xerxes went north, into the valley of Boeotia—the Oxlands. There the enemy halted, two miles from the democratic city-state of Plataea . . . and they built a massive earthen fort, big enough to contain half a million men and slaves. Mardonius, the general in charge of the Barbarians, waited patiently for the Greek allies to assemble for their final stand against his invasion force. But before the Persians would agree to meet on the field of battle, their heralds came to the Greeks with a curious demand. . . .

—Papyrus fragment from the “Lost History” of the Peloponnesian War by the “Exiled Scribe”

Chapter 1

The Oxlands. Month of Hippodromios (August), 479 BC. Two hours before sunset.

Menesarkus of Plataea, a sixteen-year-old built like an ox yet blessed with the cunning of a fox, stood in the heart of his phalanx formation, surrounded by two thousand of his Plataean brothers-in-arms, waiting with nervous excitement for his first battle to begin.

The entire Greek army—sixty thousand strong—had been standing in this field of trampled barley for over an hour waiting in the “rest” position, their heavy wood and bronze shields sitting on the ground, eight-foot-long spears leaning against their shoulders.

Crammed into this mass of armored warriors, all that Menesarkus could do was stare at the back of the dented helm of the man standing directly in front of him, forced to listen to the endless and moronic banter of his fellow warriors. Menesarkus thought he might simply die of boredom rather than being slain by a Barbarian invader.

“Hey, Bull, scratch my back again,” pleaded the warrior to his left, a bard named Linos. Like all the young men of Plataea he called Menesarkus by his gymnasium nickname. It was a term of affection, for the pankrator had many friends in the city and very few enemies. Menesarkus was their hope for the coming Olympiads. He would bring honor to their city.

“Come on, Bull!”

Menesarkus sighed then reached over and slipped his left hand down the neck of Linos’s bronze carapace, seeking out a place in the middle of his sweaty back and scratching hard.

“Gods! That feels good,” exclaimed Linos. “Thanks, Bull.”

“Hey Bull, scratch my balls, will you?” called a sarcastic voice from somewhere behind.

“Scratch your own, goat-lover,” said Menesarkus.

Half a dozen men in the phalanx, bored out of their wits and looking for any distraction to calm their nerves, started a ridiculous game of “Hey, Bull,” calling

out all the things they would like Menesarkus to do for them, including wiping their arses, picking their noses and even killing their harpy of a mother-in-law.

“One punch from you, Bull, and that old shrunken wine skin would never scream at me again,” a warrior called out in a tone of mock hopefulness.

Menesarkus would have been amused by the banter if he hadn't been so anxious. He extracted his dripping hand from Linos's armor and wiped it as best he could on his rusted bronze breastplate. “Where are the Persians?” he hissed, glancing to his right at Teuker, his shield-man

Teuker's “pot,” as the grizzled veteran called his helm, was pushed to the back of his head revealing his bumpy old face—the lumpy, scarred mess of a lifelong pankrator. Teuker was seventy-six years old, one year older than required by the city of Plataea to bear arms, but he had the muscled body of an athlete half his age, and acted with the maturity of a teenager. And Menesarkus knew the bloodthirsty old man wouldn't have missed this battle for all the gold in Persia.

“Maybe they're greasing each other's spears over there,” he said and grinned, showing two broken incisors. Into his mouth he slipped a wad of mastik—the gummy resin used by pankrators to keep their teeth from smashing together from an uppercut. He offered Menesarkus some of the yellow droplets from a little pouch. “Tears of Kios?” he asked, using the slang for mastik. They came all the way from the island of Kios and were very expensive, but Teuker always shared them with Menesarkus.

“My mouth is too dry,” admitted Menesarkus, shaking his head. “I don't have enough spit to chew.”

Menesarkus had been training in the pankration since he was five years old and Teuker had been his instructor since he'd thrown his first punch. Menesarkus's face had suffered very few scarring blows in the arena, however. He liked dealing punishment rather than receiving it, and trained obsessively to keep it that way. He'd always been quicker than he looked.

His favorite technique was to grapple with his opponents, using his bulk to tire them out. Then he'd slip behind them, clamping his powerful biceps around their throats and squeezing until the blood was cut off to their brain and they passed out. Menesarkus hadn't invented the move, but he'd perfected it. Teuker called it the “Morpheus hold.”

“Mardo is wily,” said Teuker, referring to the Persian general Mardonius—the commander of Xerxes's army—as he champed the sweet resin between his teeth. “I'll be arse-plowed, but it looks like Mardo's goaded the allied generals into coming to play stand-in-the-field for a third day, and all for nothing! Bah! Maybe Xerxes is waiting for more men to arrive from Persia. Or perhaps more cavalry from those Thessalian arse-licking traitors.”

“Or maybe they're waiting for some of our men to bugger off,” said a warrior from down the row. Menesarkus recognized the voice of a wealthy farmer named Simonides, a cynical man who'd been telling everyone for weeks that the Spartans were going to abandon the cause.

“My brother says the Persians have five hundred thousand warriors in their dirt fort,” said a young man behind Teuker.

"Your brother's a goat-stuffer, Zenon," said Teuker. "And he can't count. That's why he always loses at dice. Half of their men are slaves come to wipe their holes and jerk their poles."

"He says the Spartans are going to bugger off if the Persians don't fight today," added Zenon. "Just like Simonides says."

"That's a pile of shit," replied a young sandal maker's apprentice named Myron. "If the Spartans go back to their home, and the Oxlands fall, they'll be next in line for invasion. Lakonia will end up in ashes like Athens."

Menesarkus chewed on what Zenon had just said about the number of Persian warriors. He'd heard the rumors too. Were there really half a million of the enemy? He couldn't even begin to imagine that many men. There were only ten thousand people living in the entire city-state of Plataea!

Menesarkus had been told there were a little over sixty thousand Greeks in the allied forces. This block of Plataean warriors in which Menesarkus now stood was only two thousand strong. The Spartans and Athenians had brought nearly thirty thousand warriors each. But how long would they stay in the Oxlands? The Spartans were the most likely to leave first. They couldn't risk being hundreds of miles away from their homeland for long because their Helot slaves might revolt as they'd done before.

The Athenians, however, had just seen their entire city and sacred Temple of Athena burned to the ground by the Persians. They desperately wanted revenge, even though they had recently crushed the Persian fleet at Salamis, and they had vowed to stay in the Oxlands until the bitter end.

Menesarkus craned his neck around the densely packed men and their forest of spears. From his position near the center of the phalanx he couldn't see anything other than his comrades. It was a comforting place to be, despite the cramped space. And he hoped he wouldn't lose his nerve when his row eventually shifted to the front during the battle.

Five minutes. All he had to do was stab his spear at the enemy for five minutes and then the phalanx commander would blow the reed pipes signaling that he and the rest of his row could break off and drop to the back row of the phalanx for their rest period. The phalanx was ten rows deep. That gave him ample time to catch his breath while his row worked its way back toward the front of the phalanx again, refreshed and ready to reap more men. In this way the Greeks would wear down their superior number of opponents, like a grinding stone turning wheat to meal.

He realized he was getting hotter and hotter. Sweat was pouring down his face.

Teuker leaned toward him. "The Persians will be no match for us," he said in a low voice, as if reading his fears. "I don't care if they outnumber us ten to one. Just watch your feet. They'll send the skinny ones down low to try to chop off your toes. That's what your lizard-sticker is for." He slammed the butt-spike of his short spear into the red Oxland earth. "Straight through the top of the head. No more Persian."

Somebody let forth a long, low fart and the men within earshot all laughed.

"Somebody put a lizard-sticker in *that!*" said a deep voice.

Menesarkus wiped the sweat from his neck and groaned. "Zeus's balls I'm dying."

"Wait until this odor hits you," said Linos who stood next to the man who'd broken wind. "You'll wish you were already safely in your funeral jar."

"Push back your pot," said Teuker, chomping hard on the mastik.

"I can't," said Menesarkus. "It's too small for me. I barely got the thing on. Now it's stuck."

Teuker and Linos started to laugh.

"Your pot is stuck?" asked Linos. "That's funny. I'm going to put pen and paper to this and write a song called "The Bull in the Pot."

Menesarkus ground his teeth and made no reply. He was dirt poor and unable to afford a set of armor that cost a year's wages. So he'd borrowed this rusted bronze helm and corselet from a ninety-year-old neighbor who was too decrepit to take part in the battle. In two years, when Menesarkus came of age, he would burn his hair on the altar of Zeus and his city-state of Plataea would provide him with a full set of war-gear—his due as the son of a warrior who'd been killed during the first Persian invasion ten years before.

He thought of his father, standing in the little doorway of their farmhouse on the day he'd left ten years ago to fight alongside the Athenians against King Xerxes's father Darius. That was the last time they'd seen him. He'd died so far away from home not even his armor had been returned, let alone his ashes.

Menesarkus . . . remember these words. . . .

"Did you hear somebody shout my name?" asked Menesarkus, startled from his daydream. He bent over quickly and picked up his shield from where it was resting on the ground. Several others saw him and picked up their shields too.

"Keep your dicks sheathed," said Teuker. "If the Persians arrive you'll hear their crazy horns blowing."

"Menesarkus of the Nemean tribe!" called out a voice from somewhere behind the phalanx. "And Teuker—Pankration Master!"

Menesarkus and Teuker exchanged mystified glances.

"They're over here!" called out the voice of Androkles from the back row. Androkles was their unit's rear-commander, responsible for keeping order in the ranks and preventing anyone from bolting during battle—one of the most important positions in the phalanx. "In the sixth row, center. Over here."

"I need them, now!"

"Make way, men. Let him in."

A messenger pushed his way through the warriors to where Menesarkus and Teuker were positioned. "You're to follow me," the messenger said with urgency. "Both of you. The general wants to see you." He grabbed Menesarkus by the arm and started pulling him.

"Hey, the Bull is my shield-man!" complained Linos. "What's going on? Where's he going? I need him by my side."

"Orders from the general," came the brusque reply. "Don't spear the messenger."

Chapter 2

Menesarkus and Teuker hoisted their round shields and moved through the phalanx, and the warriors who'd been on either side of them shifted over to fill in the gap their absence had made. When they emerged from the back of the phalanx the two saw Androkles standing with his huge arms crossed over his shining bronze chest, a dark look on his face.

"What did you idiots do this time?" he asked them as they passed. Menesarkus and Teuker were notorious for getting into mischief together, despite their vast age difference.

"Nothing," said Teuker and Menesarkus in unison.

The messenger led Menesarkus and Teuker past the neat rectangular blocks of warriors, each made up of thousands upon thousands of men. It was strange to be walking behind this Greek army, with all of the warriors standing rigid like statues and facing the same direction: across a field of barley toward a gentle slope and a low hill in the distance, stretching as far as the eye could see as they waited silently and patiently for the Persians . . . an enemy who refused to appear at the appointed time, like a sly girl who plans a secret meeting in the woods with a boy, then refuses to show up for the assignation.

"What's going on, Teuk?" Menesarkus asked under his breath as sweat poured down his forehead and into his eyes, making him squint from the stinging salt.

"Dunno, Mene," replied Teuker, taking out his wad of mastik and sticking it to the outside of his helm. Then he leaned over and whispered, "Except, somebody might have snuck into the Athenian camp last night for a game of dice and ended up swiping a general's gold dagger from his tent."

Menesarkus gave the older man a withering sidelong glance. "You goat-stuffing fool!"

"Just let me do the talking," said Teuker.

They came to a tent that had been set up right behind the middle rectangle of warriors. Outside the tent stood a gathering of the allied generals: Athenian, Spartan, Korinthian and Plataean. All of them were imposing-looking men in full armor with servants standing next to them holding their helms. All had black looks on their faces.

Nearby, mounted on beautiful Persian steeds, were two enemy heralds watching as Menesarkus and Teuker approached. Menesarkus thought they were the most ludicrous-looking warriors he'd ever seen, dressed in their fancy red outfits and wearing useless-looking flimsy gold mail encrusted with jewels. The heralds curled their rouged lips at the sight of Menesarkus and leaned over to whisper to one another.

Menesarkus and Teuker were ordered to stop in front of the generals and put down their shields and spears. They did as they were told. The Plataean general Terpandros, a sixty-year-old with a grey beard streaked with black and a deep scar along one side of his face, strode over to them.

"The Barbarians request a pankration match before they will engage in

battle," he said flatly. "The Athenians and Spartans have granted Plataea the privilege of choosing the champion since the Persians have invaded our territory. You, Menesarkus, have been chosen to honor the entire allied army with your fighting skills."

"Oh, good!" exclaimed Teuker, evidently relieved that he wasn't being called upon to confess to the crime of theft.

"A ploy," erupted the Spartan general, spitting on the ground in the direction of the Persian heralds. Menesarkus recognized him as General Pausanius, one of the dual kings of Sparta who had been given command of the allied forces. The other king, Leonidas, had been killed last year at a narrow pass up north called the Hot Gates, holding off the invaders long enough to give the Athenians time to evacuate their city and plan a naval assault against the Barbarian armada.

"They merely wish to make our men stand a little longer in their armor," the Spartan king continued. "To weaken them."

"The pankration match will kindle a fire," said the Athenian in a callous voice. "A pankration victory will give our warriors a taste for blood. A defeat will make them want revenge."

"It's a waste of time," said Pausanius.

"It's not one of your precious *spartiates* who will be fighting," said the Korinthian general. "What do you care?"

Menesarkus could tell by the weary tone in the generals' voices that they had made these arguments already. General Terpandros glanced at them to see if they were done speaking, then squinted at Menesarkus and bore into him with his dark eyes. "You are one of the best pankrators in the city, Menesarkus, or so I have been told by your trainer Teuker, here, countless times," he added with a note of contempt.

"He is, General!" said Teuker enthusiastically, not catching the barb in the general's voice. "The best I've seen. He'll be ready, in three years, for the Seventy-Fifths. He could have competed in the last Olympiad but—"

As Teuker spoke Menesarkus noticed the slightest sneer pulling at the corner of the Plataean general's white-bearded mouth.

"Very good," said Terpandros, cutting Teuker off. He turned his face ever so slowly toward Menesarkus—he'd been injured in the neck ten years ago at the battle of Marathon and his neck was perpetually stiff. "You will fight to the death against the Persian Arshaka," he said abruptly.

Menesarkus and Teuker exchanged astonished looks.

"Ar—Arshaka!" spluttered Teuker. "A death match?"

Menesarkus felt as though he'd been kicked in the stomach by a horse. Arshaka the Eye-snatcher was infamous. The Persian had made his name during the first invasion ten years before when he'd killed every Greek pankrator who'd challenged him to single combat—a dozen of the best fighters in Greece. The name "Eye-snatcher" had been given for good reason, for Arshaka could gouge the eyes from a man's skull with his thumbnails—nails grown to points and gilded with gold—before his opponent knew what had happened. And then the Persian would take his time with the blinded fighter, sadistically mocking his helplessness before he stole his teeth, destroyed his testicles, then broke the

man's neck. At least that's how Teuker had described it to Menesarkus. The pankration instructor had witnessed this horror in person.

"What about Androkles?" asked Teuker. "He should fight Arshaka. He's more experienced—"

"Androkles is a rear phalanx-leader," spat General Terpandros. "We cannot afford to lose him. We're outnumbered by the Persians four to one. Menesarkus is a stripling. We can spare him . . . and retain our honor."

"General," pleaded Teuker, "Menesarkus hasn't fought in a death match before. The Persians don't abide by rules. This isn't a fair fight. It's a sacrifice. He's just a lad! Let me fight instead!"

Menesarkus had never heard the unshakable and fearless Teuker so flustered and frightened, and the sound of his quavering voice begging the generals to find somebody else to fight chilled him to the marrow. He glanced at the Persian heralds who were watching him with smug expressions, whispering to each other in their own tongue, and he flushed with rage. His heart raced, blood pounding in his ears inside his padded helm. He looked quickly at the generals eyeing him with stony faces, as if he were already dead and nothing more substantial than the shade of a corpse.

"I accept!" burst out Menesarkus. He looked straight at General Terpandros. "Of course, I accept and I look forward to meeting Arshaka and pissing on his corpse. Tell him that," he said directly to the Persian heralds. "Tell him I'll piss on his corpse when I'm done with him."

One of the Persian heralds walked his magnificent horse closer to Menesarkus. He bowed and said in perfectly accented Greek, "Happily. We'll tell Lord Arshaka *exactly* what you said." He turned his horse and galloped away, followed by his companion.

"Don't embarrass us," said General Terpandros under his breath, pitching his voice for Menesarkus's ears alone. "Do not yield." His dark eyes flashed with fury, as if Menesarkus had already let him down. "Die with honor."

Menesarkus bristled and peered down into the shorter man's eyes. "You should be the last one to question my tenacity, General Terpandros."

The general blinked, then smiled grimly, and turning to Teuker said, "Get him ready."

Chapter 3

"It's a great honor," said Teuker under his breath as he undid the buckles to Menesarkus's breastplate. The two stood several paces apart from the front of the Plataean phalanx. "I'll bet Androkles is furious he wasn't chosen. But the general was right. We can't risk losing a phalanx commander right before—"

"General Terpandros wants me dead," said Menesarkus.

"Why do you say that?"

"You know that girl I told you I got pregnant?"

Teuker paused just long enough to look Menesarkus in the eyes, then shook his head and sighed. "You stupid ox. Terpandros's daughter?"

"It was her idea," said Menesarkus. "She thought her father would let us

marry if she was with child." He glanced southwest at the Kithaeron Mountains two miles away. The undulating summit resembled the curved back of a sleeping giant. At the foothills of this range stood the walls of Plataea. The citadel looked so tiny from this vantage point. As fragile as a bird's nest. He thought of Eudoxia. She would be standing on the walls, trying to catch a glimpse of the battle.

Menesarkus pulled off his tunic to reveal his chest. It was painted with a white "P" for "Plataea" so that his corpse could be identified in case his headless or mutilated body had been stripped of its armor. He turned and looked in the opposite direction.

"Zeus's balls," he uttered as he peered across the field of barley to the low hillside where an army of at least two hundred thousand Persian warriors now faced the Greek lines: barely a bowshot's distance separated the front ranks of either side. The Persian lines stretched for a mile to the west and another mile to the east. It was an awesome sight to behold. The Barbarians had appeared soon after the Persian heralds had left the Greek camp, and the sound of their coming had echoed across the valley like the noise of an endlessly crashing wave.

But it wasn't the sight of the invaders that had made Menesarkus curse just then; rather it was the glimpse of a black-bearded giant strutting before the Persian front lines, close enough for the keen-eyed Menesarkus to see every detail of his face. This Persian pankrator—his broad bare chest decorated with gold chains and gleaming in the sun—was the biggest, tallest, most bone-chilling aberration of a man that Menesarkus had ever looked upon. He was like some monster from a tale—a fiend birthed by a Persian-loving god whose sole purpose in life was to kill Greeks.

Arshaka the Eye-snatcher.

The Barbarian was making a lewd gesture and pointing in the direction of the Plataean citadel. "I'm going to claim every arse in your little shit-hole as my own!" called the Median, and the Persian warriors near him laughed uproariously.

Teuker started rubbing olive oil onto Menesarkus's naked back.

"That's right!" goaded Arshaka. "Grease him up. I like them slippery."

"I've seen Arshaka fight up close," said Teuker in a low voice. "He's left handed. He's got a scar on his right shoulder."

"The muscle will be weaker there," cut in Menesarkus. "I know. I noticed too." He chewed furiously on the wad of mastik, the big muscles of his square jaw bulging like a bull's.

"Zeus loves a Plataean!" called a voice from behind.

Menesarkus glanced back at the mass of allied warriors standing in their neat ranks. A spontaneous yet dispassionate cheer erupted from the Greek warriors within hearing distance.

"Give me a dog-cord," said Menesarkus.

Teuker handed him a leather thong and Menesarkus used it to quickly tie the foreskin of his penis to his scrotum—to prevent the Median from seizing hold of his manhood during the fight.

"Remember everything I taught you," said Teuker. He looked into Menesarkus's eyes and the young fighter could see the old man was crying. "Do

the unexpected.”

Menesarkus’s skin prickled up and down his spine and forearms. It hit him like a fist in the gut—Teuker didn’t think he would survive.

“Teuker,” began Menesarkus with a forced smile. But he stopped short, his voice catching in his throat. He couldn’t think of anything to say and his smile faded. “I can’t feel my feet.” And then, much to his own astonishment, he started to hyperventilate.

Teuker reacted at once, slapping Menesarkus across the face. Once. Twice. Hard stinging slaps that left red marks across either cheek. “You’re one of the Oxland brave,” said Teuker. “You don’t panic!” Menesarkus took in a deep breath and held it for a moment, forcing himself to be calm.

“Listen to me, Menesarkus,” said Teuker, his face taut with emotion. “You’re outmatched. If only I’d had a few more years with you I . . . ” he broke off, casting his eyes to the ground. “Any one of us would be outmatched against Arshaka.” He paused for a moment before saying in a hoarse voice, “Don’t let him grapple with you. His arms are too long. He outweighs you by a hundred pounds.” He peered into Menesarkus’s eyes, nodding his head slightly. “I’ll find him on the battlefield and avenge your death. Cast aside your heart now, my lad. You’re already dead.”

Teuker grasped him, pounding him on the back like he did before each of his training bouts. Then he shoved him away, turned his back and strode to the allied lines.

The trainer’s words echoed in Menesarkus’s brain, like a shout in a black well. He couldn’t believe what his friend had just said. Just then the Persians sounded their horns and Arshaka started walking toward him.

Menesarkus froze.

“Can I run away?” he wondered, and instantly cursed himself for such a childlike thought.

He scanned the line of armor-clad Greek warriors, their bronze helmets, breastplates and shields gleaming in the morning sun. Every warrior had set down his heavy shield and spear and was making the pankration sign—right fist against the flat palm of the left hand. Time slowed, like honey dripping from a jar. The flesh on his entire body tingled. The world seemed clearer all of a sudden. Brighter. As though it had been made by the hand of a god in that very moment. He glanced at the sky above the Kithaeron peak. A single white cloud floated there in the blue. He saw a cloud in the shape of Zeus’s face, and when Menesarkus grasped this wonderful omen he pointed to the sky and a yell erupted from his mouth, “Plataea! Zeus and Plataea!”

The Greek warriors cheered as one. At the same time the Persians began ululating in their language, a weird high-pitched sound that threatened to drown out the Greek voices. Menesarkus turned and started jogging across the field toward Arshaka. The Persian charged, and the two pankrators loped toward each other like mountain rams, heads lowered. Arshaka’s arms were held out front, fingers spread apart to grapple with Menesarkus. The long gilded thumbnails ready to seek out his eyes and rip them from his skull.

But Menesarkus had no intention of wrestling this brute.

Just before they came together Menesarkus dived forward, headfirst, with his body stretched out as though he were diving off the rocks at the nearby port of Kreusis, plunging into the Gulf of Korinth. He flew through the air and his big shoulder caught the surprised Arshaka on the right knee, causing a loud popping sound. When they hit the ground Menesarkus was on top, but Arshaka twisted violently, trying to gain the advantage. They thrashed about in a wordless and savage embrace. Arshaka's claws sought out Menesarkus's eyes, but the young pankrator jutted his face forward, opened his big jaw and clamped down on Arshaka's neck, ripping at the artery like a wild animal. Hot blood filled his mouth.

Arshaka pushed himself away from Menesarkus, screaming and holding a hand to his neck, cursing in Persian. He tried to jump to his feet but his right leg gave out and he toppled to the side. Menesarkus sprang upon him, throwing his fists like war hammers, smashing Arshaka on either side of the head. Arshaka clawed at Menesarkus's chest, scoring deep lines, then reached down to grab at Menesarkus's loins, but the lad had already squirmed behind the bigger fighter and wrapped his arms around the man's neck in a choker grip—the Morpheus hold. The Persian's blood gushed from the wound in his neck, making Menesarkus's arm slippery, but he held fast.

Arshaka flailed and fought. He reached back and got both of his claw-like hands clutching at Menesarkus's ears, trying to rip them from his head. But Menesarkus ignored the searing pain and would not let go. He squeezed tighter and tighter and a strange and almost orgasmic joy rushed through his veins. Every fiber of his body felt as though it were kindled with the fire of the sun—as if Apollo had entered his skin and was glowing through his organs and muscles and flesh with a godlike invincibility.

Arshaka clawed at Menesarkus's arms. But Menesarkus would not release his grip. He heard the Persian start to gag, and the huge man, infused with the strength of the desperate, of someone dying of strangulation, forced himself to his knees with a stupendous effort—then staggered to a standing position with Menesarkus clinging to his neck, his full weight on the taller man's back.

Arshaka tried to flip Menesarkus over his shoulder, but the young Plataean leaned back with all his might, kicking Arshaka's bad leg out from under him, flipping him sideways with a contorting wrestler's move so that Arshaka landed hard on his face with Menesarkus on his back. Menesarkus pushed his hips into the Persian's buttocks, pinning him down.

But still Arshaka would not die. He clawed at the ground, trying to drag himself forward. Trying to drag himself toward the Persian lines.

"You—should—not—have—come—here," uttered Menesarkus, each word ripped from his chest.

A dry rattle emanated from Arshaka's throat and he became still except for his feet, which remained twitching.

Menesarkus continued to squeeze until he heard the man's larynx pop. Then he slowly got to his feet, standing over the corpse of the Eye-snatcher. Menesarkus bled from his chest, and his face and ears were in shreds. But he felt nothing. Only joy. He stomped his foot on the man's throat three times to make

certain that his neck was broken—to make sure he would not come back to life like some monster in a nightmare.

Then he turned in a circle, first looking upon the Persian lines, then at his own people. There was a ringing in his ears and also a roaring, like a fierce wind coming down the mountain in winter. But it was summertime, and no wind blew. He started walking back toward the Greek lines, and only then did a cry of jubilation erupt from the hoplites assembled there—a thrilling cry the likes of which Menesarkus had never heard.

“Eleu, eleu, eleutheria!” The call of freedom.

The Persians dragged Arshaka’s corpse from the field. A short time later, while many friendly hands cleaned Menesarkus of his wounds and helped him back into his armor, the allied heralds met briefly with their Persian counterparts and it was decided that the battle would commence without delay.

Chapter 4

“Mene! Retreat! Retreat!”

Menesarkus could hear Linos screaming somewhere behind him, but the sound was distorted and muffled by his tight helm. His blood pounded in his ears as he hewed back and forth at the Persian *sparabara* fighters in front of him. There were too many of them. These lightly armored warriors had died in droves, flinging themselves onto the sharp spear points of the Plataeans for an hour or more, piling up at the hoplites’ feet in such great numbers that a wall of the Persian dead had risen from the ground, higher and higher, until the enemy had started using this rampart of corpses to leap over the Plataean shield wall and hurl themselves onto the hoplites from above.

The phalanx in which Menesarkus stood had broken and retreated. But still Menesarkus stood his ground—guarding over the body of his beloved friend Teuker who lay on the ground with an arrow through his left eye.

“Die!” Menesarkus screamed as he hacked off the top of a bald Persian’s cranium, sending it flying through the air like the end of a melon. But then he was pushed by the many Persians and fell, landing on his back as helpless as a turtle, immobile in his bronze carapace.

Out of nowhere another Plataean leapt into the fray, hacking arms and legs off the un-armored Persians and pulling Menesarkus to his feet.

“Idiot!” yelled Linos. “Come on!”

“But Teuker—”

“You can’t help a shade!” replied Linos as he struck down another Persian, and then another.

Menesarkus followed Linos. The retreating Plataeans were already two hundred paces away. Linos was much faster than Menesarkus and started to pull away from him. A line of Persian riders—hundreds of them—suddenly galloped down the hill between him and Linos, and Menesarkus lost sight of his friend in the chaos.

He started to run in the opposite direction of the cavalry, bulling his way through the scattered *sparabara* who also had gotten stuck on the opposite side

of this moving wall of horses and riders. Menesarkus realized that the Persian cavalry were going to circle around from behind and cut off the retreating Plataeans. Without thinking he ran back up the hill, gasping for air. He had to get higher up so that he could see what was going on with the battle. When he got to Teuker's corpse near the heaps of Persian dead he turned around and glanced down the slope.

He saw that his brothers-in-arms had reached the safety of the mass of allied warriors who were reassembling in the field of trampled barley. And they had formed up in double phalanxes with spears pointed out on both sides—a hedge of spears—to prevent the Persian cavalry from attacking the allies from the rear. The Persian horsemen, apparently flummoxed at how quickly the Greeks had organized themselves after their initial retreat, held themselves in check—a huge seething mass of horses and riders.

The tens of thousands of Persians who'd broken through the Greek lines had formed up into neat rows as well, guided by the sound of Persian trumpets sounding out musical battle instructions. But the invaders were just as exhausted as the Greeks after nearly an hour of fighting and were moving slowly. Neither side seemed willing to rush the other's lines.

The sun would set within the hour. The battle was most likely at an impasse. Both sides would retreat, and the engagement would have to be continued in the coming days.

It dawned on Menesarkus just then that he was in a terrible predicament. He was now actually behind enemy lines with night coming—two miles from the citadel. He looked down at poor old Teuker, dead on the ground. How strange that a man who had lived so hard and so brashly had died so swiftly. It didn't seem possible, like something absurd—a river running uphill, or a raisin turning back into a grape. But die he did. And that was that. He'd perished in a thistle patch and fed the weeds with his heroic blood. Menesarkus pried off the wad of mastik that was still stuck to Teuker's helm—he'd put it there when they'd gone to see the generals and had forgotten to put it back in his mouth. He opened his friend's jaws and wedged it between his teeth. Teuker, he knew, would want to chew the tears of Kios even in the underworld. . . .

He heard voices and saw four *sparabara* picking through the heaps of dead Persian warriors nearby. He was filled with disgust—these carrion were robbing their own brothers before the battle was even over! One of them spotted him and the four started loping toward him. He took up a defensive posture, knees bent, sword arm at his side.

"What's this?" said one of the *sparabara*, speaking in a familiar Greek accent.

Menesarkus realized with loathing that these men were Thebans—the bitter rivals of the Plataeans—whose city-state was located barely six miles north of this battlefield. The city-state of Thebes had offered earth and water to the Persians. And these Theban warriors had joined in the fight, but only for as long as it suited them.

They stopped twenty feet away. They were wary of a fully armored warrior, even a young and beardless one, for they wore no protection save padded clothes stuffed with wool like the Persian *sparabara* whose ranks they'd joined.

"Did you get lost, sheep-stuffer?" asked one of the Thebans.

"Plataea's that way," said another, pointing to the south. "We'll be there soon enough. I'll bet you were a big baby. Your mother's gash is probably still healing up. Well, I'll do more damage to her than you did after I'm through with her."

The other three Thebans laughed and made obscene gestures at him.

"Go back to Thebes, dogs of Persia," snarled Menesarkus.

"He wants to play" said one.

"I'm game," replied another.

The Thebans surrounded him, approaching to the length of their six-foot-long javelins, then stopped at a hand signal from the one who'd first spoken. Menesarkus noticed they all wore their hair in long ringlets in the old manner—a style that had gone out of fashion in Plataea years ago. And their eyes, lined with black antimony all around, gave them the look of wicked painted statues come to life.

Menesarkus reckoned he couldn't beat these four with his sword and shield. They would take turns lunging at him, spearing him in his unarmored arms, legs and groin until he was down on the ground, and then they'd fall on him, skewering him like a cornered boar until he'd breathed his life into the dust.

He was suddenly aware of an overwhelming thirst. He'd never felt so parched, not even after a day of scything wheat in a field under the blazing harvest sun—the hardest work he'd ever known up until now. Reaping men was much harder.

"Zeus, guide me," Menesarkus said to himself. In his head he heard the voice of Teuker, as though his shade were speaking in his ear:

"Do the unexpected. Deceive and attack."

Menesarkus started laughing obnoxiously. "What a pack of shit-eating fools you are," he taunted, staggering as though he were exhausted and barely able to stand. "I'm surprised you can even walk after bending over and grabbing your ankles for every Persian and his horse." He dropped his shield slightly as if his arm was fatigued, opening up his groin to attack—luring them in.

One of the Thebans lunged forward impulsively, aiming for his unprotected loins. But Menesarkus was ready, and he was much faster than the Theban had ever expected. The Plataean stabbed his sword into the ground, stepped nimbly aside, grabbed the Theban's javelin and pulled him forward with a mighty heave, smashing the Theban's face with his shield and shattering every bone from his eye sockets to his chin.

Before the others could react Menesarkus slipped off his shield from the support brace, gripped it by the rim with his massive arm as though it were a gigantic discus, spun around twice and flung the shield at the man behind him, nearly severing the Theban's head from his neck. He fell face down and his hips twitched in violent death throes.

"That one's so excited he's trying to hump Mother Earth," said Menesarkus in a goading voice.

The two remaining Thebans looked in amazement at their defeated comrades. One of them screamed and threw his javelin at Menesarkus, but the young fighter ducked and lunged forward, snatching his sword from where it

was stuck in the ground, springing swiftly to a standing position and lopping off the Theban's head with a flashing left to right sweep. The headless corpse stood for a few seconds, pumping blood from the stump of its neck, then toppled over.

Menesarkus turned to face the final Theban. "If I'd known killing your kind was this easy," he said, "I'd have taken it up years ago."

The Theban took one look at the murderous expression in his eyes and ran down the hill toward the back of the Persian lines. But Menesarkus, who'd spent each spare moment of his life since the age of five training in the gymnasium with every single weapon of war, wasn't going to let this enemy get away. He flung aside his sword, bent down, and grabbed one of the Theban javelins from off the ground. For a split second he felt the weight of the enemy's spear in his hand, reckoned it was cornel wood—and thus heavier than Plataean ash—adjusted his lead foot slightly to compensate, pulled back and sent the spear flying like a dart from a bow. It hit the running man with a dull "thud" as it pierced the padded coat covering his spine, and the Theban pitched forward, arms and legs suddenly slack. His face smashed into the ground and he lay still.

Chapter 5

Menesarkus pulled off the stifling helm and tossed it aside, staring in awe at the scene playing out in the field at the bottom of the hill. At least fifty thousand Greeks now faced a hundred thousand Persians with less than twenty paces between the two armies. Men on both sides were hurling insults at each other but nobody was making a move to fight.

Sweat poured from Menesarkus's hairline and into his eyes, stinging them with salt and making them tear up. He wiped his eyes with one arm. He could make a run for it now. Bull his way through the Persian lines and run the short distance to his brothers. But he hesitated.

In the space between the two armies he could plainly see a terrified rabbit, dashing this way and that on the flattened barley, trying to find a way out of the corridor that was walled on either side by warriors. The rabbit went too close to the Persian line and a spear stabbed out, skewering it. The spear raised up to display the twitching rabbit and the Persian holding the spear shouted in a voice that carried all the way up the slope to Menesarkus's ears, "Look! Another Spartan rabbit trying to run away!" The other Persians laughed.

"Where are the Spartans?" Menesarkus wondered aloud with fury in his voice. There had been at least thirty thousand of them on the left flank at the start of the battle. But now they were nowhere to be seen. Had they fled back to the citadel of Plataea? Had they given up and gone back to Sparta? Because of the rolling hills here he could only see into the dell below and not what lay beyond the hill behind the Greeks.

And what were the Persians waiting for? Why didn't they charge the Greeks? They had overwhelming numbers right now and the allies were utterly spent. The answer came soon enough. He heard the sound of hooves and saw a mass of Persian horsemen, ten thousand strong, cresting the hill of corpses behind him—the hill where his friend Teuker lay dead.

The other riders that had cut him off from Linos the bard had merely been an advance guard. A flag flew on a long pole from the center of the cavalry—a white flag bearing the symbol of a pawing lion. It was Mardonius, the Persian general. Mardonius—the man who'd razed Athens. The Barbarian who'd burned the sacred wooden Temple of Athena to ashes before marching here. Mardonius was the one tactician all of the Greek generals had feared, for the allies had no cavalry to speak of, and the clever Persian general, Menesarkus realized, had kept his riders hidden in the Persian Fort until now, drawing the rash Greeks to battle, wearing them down, then waiting to swing this final and deadly punch.

A sound of trumpets pealed forth from the Persian cavalry heralds, and the Persian army in the field below turned their heads as one, then let forth a deafening cry of joy at the sight of the cavalry behind them and Mardonius's flag flapping in the wind.

"Zeus help us," said Menesarkus softly.

He thought of his mother and younger brother hiding inside the city. He thought of his lover, Eudoxia, four months pregnant—the beautiful girl he'd got with child so her father would let them marry even though both were still underage. How long would they live if Plataea came under siege? No city had ever resisted the Persian siege-masters for more than a few months, at least that's what he'd been told. And Plataea's walls were old and crumbling. Would his unborn child be brought into this world a slave? Would his mother and little brother be raped and carted off to Persia? The thought made him sick.

He took out his knife and slit the leather straps holding the two halves of his bronze corselet together, yanking off the metal shells to reveal his naked chest painted with the white P which had become illegible from his sweat. The scratch marks Arshaka had scored across his breast burned as though they'd been branded there.

A heavy pouch slipped out from the armor where he'd stashed it. He hurriedly opened the pouch and pulled out an old leather sling and three lead pellets—missiles about the size of a hen's egg but tapered on the ends and marked with the shortened version of his name: "Mene." Menesarkus had spent his childhood using this sling to hunt for food after his father had been killed. He could take down a red goose on the wing, or a rabbit at a full run. He'd brought the sling and the pellets to the battle for good luck, and he'd wanted to be buried with them if he'd died today. But now Zeus had whispered in his ear what he had to do.

He slipped one of pellets into the sling, put another in his mouth and clutched the third in his free hand, then climbed over the heap of dead Persians, heading for a stand of gnarled olive trees growing from the hillside. At the top of the hill of dead warriors, he crawled onto a pile of rocks and crouched low.

Chapter 6

All of the Persian riders had come to a stop on top of the hill, and none of them were looking in his direction. The cavalry had arranged themselves so there was an outer square of horsemen surrounding an empty inner space. In the

center of this “courtyard” walled by riders he caught a glimpse of the warrior he reckoned must be the Persian general Mardonius—a big, elegant man with a flowing, black beard, golden armor and a tall, conical helm.

Officers were lined up in front of Mardonius, receiving his orders. The gold on their bodies gleamed red in the light of the westering sun. Menesarkus marveled at the sight. Every Greek had heard the tales about how Persian nobles rode to war with all of their wealth proudly displayed, but he’d never really believed the stories. There was enough gold around those necks to build the citadel of Plataea thrice over.

The cavalry officers were talking and gesticulating excitedly. A messenger on horseback broke from this group and shouted, causing the wall of riders to part for him. As he rode through the square the horses moved back into place, closing the wall. It was an awesome display of horsemanship. The messenger flew down the slope toward the Persian army at the bottom, galloping at breakneck speed.

Menesarkus calculated he was well within range of Mardonius. He’d flung lead pellets straight through an inch-thick piece of oak from this same distance. But that had been in the courtyard of the gymnasium with no wind and nothing impeding the flight of his pellets. Here the spears of the riders, like a thicket of trees, were in the way.

Out of the corner of his eye, below the rocks on which he crouched, he saw a flash of red and turned to look. Standing directly below him was a lone Spartan. The warrior was naked except for his blood-red cape, and he bore a shield with an “L” for “Lakadaemonia,” the Spartan word for their homeland. He had the long straight hair of his kind but was bigger than the average Spartan Menesarkus had seen camped around Plataea before the battle. Most Spartans tended to be lean like hunting dogs—almost starved looking. But this one was big and had the bent nose and deformed ears of a pankrator who’d taken many punches to the head.

The Spartan was staring straight up into Menesarkus’s eyes with his hawk-like gaze. His eyes flicked to the letter painted on Menesarkus’s chest. The Spartan held a single finger to his lips for Menesarkus to be silent, then passed the same finger across his throat to say, “If you make a sound you’re dead.” Menesarkus grinned to show the egg-sized lead pellet held inside his mouth and nodded to show that he understood the Spartan.

The Spartan clicked his tongue twice and a line of red-cloaked warriors emerged silently from a stand of olive trees. Like their leader they’d all taken off their armor and wore nothing but red cloaks. They formed up ranks behind the rock. Menesarkus counted a hundred of them and thought despondently, “Is that all that’s left of the Spartan army?”

Persian trumpets sounded from the field below and Menesarkus glanced back at the lines of Greek and Persian warriors in the barley field. The invaders had started marching slowly toward the allied forces. The Greek shield wall went up in unison and their ten-foot-long spears flashed in the dying sun. The sound of thundering horse hooves made him snap his head back toward the hill. The bulk of the Persian cavalry was breaking off from Mardonius and charging down the

slope, sweeping around in a direction that would take them to the Greek army's right wing. A thousand riders, all on black horses—no doubt Mardonius's legendary personal guard—had stayed behind, surrounding their general in a smaller, tighter square.

The Spartan with the broken nose glanced once more at Menesarkus, and then signaled for his men to follow, sprinting out from behind the rocks and into the open escarpment with his men hard on his heels. Menesarkus couldn't believe what he was seeing. These hundred brave Spartans were making a suicidal attack straight at Mardonius's bodyguard. He realized, with a thrill running up his spine, that the Spartans would cause the Persian riders to lower their spears to defend themselves, thus giving Menesarkus a clean line of sight at Mardonius.

Menesarkus ignored the sounds of the battle below. He focused on Mardonius astride his white horse. The general was peering intently down at his army. Menesarkus could see the man smile—a flash of white teeth behind the black beard.

All at once Mardonius whirled his horse with a stunned expression toward Menesarkus and shouted a frantic command. The hundred Spartans had collided with the flank of his bodyguard of cavalry, cutting the legs out from under the horses and pushing their way like a living sword toward the center of startled riders and Mardonius. The Persian riders lowered their spears and lunged at the Spartans who protected themselves with their shields, pressing relentlessly toward the Persian general.

Menesarkus sprang to a standing position and started whirling his sling, focusing all of his efforts on the face of Mardonius, forcing himself to forget about everything else. This way the slingshot became an extension of his thought, like a lightning bolt of Zeus. He released the pellet with a snap of his wrist and the deadly shot flew as fast as an arrow, but it just missed Mardonius, barely grazing his conical Persian helm.

Menesarkus shifted the pellet clutched in his left hand into the pocket of the sling and started spinning the leather thong again. Focus. Spin. Release. This time his projectile was way off, sailing high over Mardonius's head.

Menesarkus spat the lead pellet he'd kept in his mouth into the palm of his hand and fit it into the sling.

He shot a look at the Spartan attack force. Even though they'd managed to kill a hundred of Mardonius's personal bodyguard, there just weren't enough Spartans to break through the barrier of horses, and now the brave Spartans were being driven back. The Persian riders were jumping off their mounts and throwing themselves onto the Spartan shields, stabbing at their legs, sacrificing themselves to protect their leader.

Menesarkus saw the Spartan commander with the broken nose. He'd lost his sword in the crush of the fight. The big Spartan rammed his fist into the face of a dismounted rider with a brutal jab, dropping the Persian with the skill of a pankrator, and then crushed the Persian's face with his heel. Another Persian leapt on him and the Spartan grabbed the enemy on either side of his head, clamped his teeth on the Persian's nose and ripped it off his face before kneeling

him in the groin.

This Spartan was fierce.

Menesarkus forced himself to look away from the melee and started swinging the sling again. His last chance. He felt a strange rushing in his veins, as though the *ikor*—the blood of the gods—had been poured into him like a magic drink. He could no longer feel his feet or his legs or his body. The sounds of the battle—the screams of men and the clash of metal and wood—disappeared. He wasn't aware of anything except for the face of Mardonius.

The Persian general jerked his gaze toward Menesarkus, as if sensing the young Greek standing on the nearby rocks. Mardonius shouted to one of his mounted archers and pointed at Menesarkus. The archer fit an arrow to his bow and let loose the shaft. The arrow flew so close to Menesarkus that the stiff flights sliced through his right check. But he didn't flinch. A split second later Mardonius's right eye exploded in a spray of blood. The Persian general's head snapped back and his helmet flew off. Mardonius toppled over in his saddle and fell off his mount.

Chapter 7

Menesarkus looked down and saw the empty leather sling in his hands, hanging there like the sagging testicles of a bull. He didn't remember releasing the shot. He tried to swallow but his mouth was as dry as a bone. He'd done it. He'd killed Mardonius.

He took a step back and watched in awe as the Persian bodyguards, realizing their general had fallen, panicked and became like frightened children, screaming and riding hither and thither, leaping from their horses to protect Mardonius's corpse from the Spartans who, sensing some great change in the battle had occurred, were pushing forward again with renewed strength.

There came the distinct sound of aulos pipes, the signal calling for the Greeks to retreat. Menesarkus turned his head numbly toward the battlefield and saw the allies backing up again. The scattered Greek warriors on the edge of the phalanx were being chased down by the Persian cavalry and slain. But then, up on the hill, one of Mardonius's heralds put his trumpet to his mouth and let forth a frantic sound, a desperate call for help. Down on the battlefield, the cavalry, trained to respond without question to the sound of the distinctive trumpets, reined in as one and wheeled toward this alarm, heading back up the slope.

Menesarkus turned and sucked in his breath when he saw what had made the Persian herald blow his trumpet. The hilltop was now covered with red-cloaked Spartans. Thousands upon thousands of them, all armored hoplites . . . and more were coming! The missing Spartan army, Menesarkus realized, had snuck around from the other side of the hill with the intention of counterattacking from the Persian cavalry's unprotected side. The brave hundred, led by the broken-nosed Spartan commander, had been a mere diversion, and now Mardonius's bodyguard was being butchered by these new arrivals. But the contingent of warriors who made up the guard refused to leave the lifeless body of their leader. Persian riders were leaping off their horses, throwing themselves

onto the pile of corpses and dying under the Spartan swords, an ever-increasing heap of gold and jewels glinting in the last rays of the sun as they were hewn down.

An impenetrable shield wall of Spartans met the nine thousand Persian riders charging back up the hill. At the same time the Greek allies on the battlefield below reversed their retreat and started pressing forward again, driving the Persian foot soldiers back up the slope. The Persian cavalry made an effort to break through the Spartan lines at the top of the hill, but it was hopeless. There were too many Spartans. The riders veered off and galloped back down the hill in a chaotic mass, trampling their own retreating men under hoof.

The battlefield became a butchery as the organized Greeks marched toward their foes, hacking and spearing them with little opposition. The Persian cavalry, however, did not panic. They moved as one, like an enormous beast, galloping west and away from the battlefield.

"Victory and glory!" thought Menesarkus bitterly. "And I'm standing up here naked on a rock with my nuts in my hand."

Menesarkus felt an iron-like grasp on his arm and he whirled, instinctively throwing a punch. But the Spartan with the broken nose ducked swiftly and shouted above the roar of the battle, "Do you know this terrain, Plataean?"

"Of course," said Menesarkus, recovering himself quickly.

"The shortest distance to the Persian Fort," asked the Spartan with urgency. "A way to cross the Asopus river other than the defended bridge?"

"Yes," replied Menesarkus. He knew this land as well as his mother's face. "A footbridge, used by shepherds."

The Spartan practically flung him off the rock. "Lead us!" he shouted above the terrible noise of battle. "We must get to the Persian Fort before the retreating cavalry arrives! They must not make it to the safety of the Fort! We'll block the entrance even if we have to do so with our corpses!"

Menesarkus looked briefly at the band of Spartans assembled there. Only half of the hundred who'd attacked Mardonius's bodyguard had survived. These warriors were splattered with enemy gore and some were bleeding from their own wounds, but they all appeared undaunted. Menesarkus wiped the blood from his cheek—the wound caused by the Persian arrow that had narrowly missed killing him.

"Come on, Ox-head," said the Spartan leader to Menesarkus, slapping him hard on the back of the head. "Wake up!"

"I am called the Bull," said the young warrior indignantly. "I'm the one who fought Arshaka."

"I know. I watched."

"Then follow me, Spartan." Menesarkus took off running and the Spartan commander took up a position next to him, matching him stride for stride.

"I'm Draco," he said brusquely.

"How many Persians do you think are still at the Fort?" asked Menesarkus.

"At least fifty thousand," said Draco. "The reserve forces."

Menesarkus nearly choked. They were running from the danger of the battlefield toward even greater peril. They were going to place themselves

between an entire army of reserve forces on one side, and a desperate and disciplined cavalry trying to get to the safety of the fortress on the other. “Those wicked old hags the Fates,” he thought gloomily, “have spun a strange destiny for me this day.”

He saw his father’s face in his mind’s eye. Saw him crossing the threshold of their little farmhouse on that day, ten years ago, when he’d gone off to war during the first Persian invasion. His father had stopped and turned back at the sound of his son’s sobbing. He’d smiled and leaned down, kissing Menesarkus on the cheek and whispered something in his ear—

“Love death and hate your foe.”

Menesarkus flew along the goat path. He felt as though a god had put wings on his feet. If he were to die tonight, he knew his father would be waiting for him on the other side of the river Styx, smiling, waving to him from across the deep black water, shouting a hero’s welcome to his son.

Epilogue

Eudoxia stood on the northern battlement of Plataea peering across the fields and downs in the direction of the Persian Fort. The sun was setting. In her left hand she clutched her bow, in her right an arrow. Her father had told her how to kill herself if the Persians won the day and stormed the walls of Plataea.

“Slit your wrists first,” he had said in his laconic way. “Then place the point of the arrow on the yielding place above your trachea and shove as hard as you can.”

She looked at the women standing along the wall on either side, each holding a bow and arrow just like her, all staring into the growing dark. The battle had taken place too far away for them to comprehend what was happening. They had seen their warriors moving like insects, and the waves of Persians smashing into them. They’d seen the Athenian phalanxes break first, and then the Plataeans, and then they’d watched in despair and fury as the Spartans had seemingly fled to the north. Then the armies had disappeared from view, hidden by a hill. But the women had heard the terrible din of war—the distant clash of metal, the death screams, the neighing of panicked horses. . . .

Now it was too dark to see anything except the patchwork of fields standing out as dark squares in the twilight. Nobody had come from the battle. No messengers. Only the wounded helping the more severely wounded from the battle. But all they said was that the allies had broken the Persian lines and were chasing them back to the Persian Fort where the enemy reserves waited. That had been hours ago, and Eudoxia’s heart felt as heavy as lead, as though it was tied to a loom weight and was being pulled down to her toes. She thought of her lover Menesarkus and saw his big cheerful face clearly in her mind’s eye—and a sob burst from her throat.

“Steady girl,” said Phaedra, an older woman to her right. “Don’t mourn a shade until you see his body.” She set down her bow and put the shaft of her arrow between her teeth, then retied her hair behind her head for it had come loose.

Eudoxia nodded and wiped away her tears. She thought of the baby growing inside her. Would he favor Menesarkus, or herself? Would she live long enough to find out? She stood for another hour as it grew too dark to see. The whole time she was consumed by fear and grief, and chastised herself for both of these emotions. But then a woman down the line hissed, "I hear horses!"

All of the women on the wall tensed and nocked arrows to their bows. Eudoxia squinted into the dark, and from the direction of the Persian Fort, illuminated by starlight, she saw the shapes of two horses galloping across the fields. The riders checked their mounts when they got near the twenty-foot-high cliff that stood below the northernmost wall of the citadel, for Plataea sat on a little plateau that rose above the fields of the valley, and so the top of the northern wall rose forty feet above the valley floor.

The women held their breaths, waiting for the riders to speak. Were they Greeks bringing news? Or Persian scouts sent to reconnoiter the citadel?

"Hey!" one of the riders shouted up at them. "Is anyone up there?"

"They're Greek," sighed Eudoxia.

"What news?" Phaedra shouted down.

"You'll call me a liar if I tell you," the rider called up with jubilation.

"Tell us anyway, you goat-stuffing prick!" barked Phaedra.

"The Persians are defeated!" came the reply. "Mardonius is dead. The Persian Fort is taken. The Spartans swept round from the north and together we drove them back to their slave-built fortress of dirt, trapping them inside. They had no more heart for battle, though, and only fought for a short while before throwing down their arms. The slaughter was terrible and glorious. Some of the Persians escaped over the walls, but not many. Three hundred thousand Persians are either dead or slaves. Many orphans and widows were made in Persia tonight on the plains of the Oxlands. The allied armies will return at dawn bearing Persian treasure beyond your wildest dreams. Zeus has blessed us. We'll slaughter a hundred oxen to him tomorrow. Spread the news!"

The rider said no more. He and his companion turned their mounts and rode back in the direction of the Persian Fort, and the women on the walls dropped their weapons and embraced, crying and laughing.

But Eudoxia did not sleep at all that night. She sat waiting outside the gates, huddled with her back to the wall, waiting to see what the Fates had woven for her during the battle. Were her father and Menesarkus alive or dead? Orphan and widow? Or daughter and wife? Which would she call herself with the rising of the sun? She stared numbly into the dark, and saw Apollo's chariot rise behind the mountains.

An hour after daybreak the first men returned to the citadel driving carts laden with the dead Plataeans and their allies. They laid them out in the agora in honor and so that the Plataean families could identify their loved ones and take them home. Women volunteered to wash the corpses of the Spartans, Corinthians and Athenians—Eudoxia was one of these helpers.

She labored for many hours, cleaning the blood off the faces of the dead and, in some cases, pushing the guts that had spilled out from wounds back into the bodies. It was grim and sad work to see so many hardy men reduced to

carcasses. But they had all died valiantly and they must be honored. She kept waiting for someone to tap her on the shoulder and lead her to the area where the Plataean dead lay . . . summoning her to identify her father or Menesarkus or both. And so she kept her head down, hunched over the corpses, shutting their eyelids, stroking their hair as their own wives and mothers would have done.

The tap came eventually. And she dropped her shoulders and shuddered.

"Leave me," she said in a harsh whisper. "I don't want to see."

"Don't want to see your future husband?" asked a familiar voice.

She stood slowly, her entire body shaking with spasms, and Menesarkus took her in his arms and squeezed her so hard that it took her breath away.

"Oh, my heart! My Mene!"

"I told you I would come back."

"And my, my father?" she stammered.

"Your father is alive," said Menesarkus. "He's with the other generals. His horse was killed out from under him at the Persian Fort and he was pinned underneath, breaking his arm, but I heard him calling for help and pulled him out. He was very grateful. He no longer hates me, I think. But good old Teuker is dead," he said with a catch in his throat, and tears welled up in his eyes. He paused, took a deep breath, then went on. "And many others. But far less than might have been. We seem to have only a few thousand dead."

"Only. . ." said Eudoxia, looking around at the small army of corpses.

"The Persian dead are heaped like mountains," said Menesarkus, his voice filled with awe. "The ground was inches deep with their blood." She looked down at his feet and saw that they were stained dark red up to his ankles, as though he had waded in a vat of blood. "Captured Persians told us that King Xerxes never even came to the Oxlands! Can you believe it? He went back to Persia weeks ago. Oh what horrible news his messengers will bring him!" he added gleefully. He paused for a moment then said with pride, "I've been chosen to ride to Delphi with four other heroes to retrieve fire from the sacred flame. The priests want to relight all of the temple flames in Greece that have been polluted by the Barbarians." His eyes shone with excitement mingled with pride.

He took Eudoxia by the hand and led her across the agora, back to the gates where there stood a little Persian groom, no more than nine years old and naked but for a dirty loincloth, holding the reins of two beautiful horses that were harnessed to a cart laden with armor, weapons and a wooden cask heaped with golden things.

"This is my share," said Menesarkus, slipping some tears of Kios into his mouth and chewing hard. "I'm going to build you such a farmhouse! Watch over our treasure. I must get going. I'll be back tomorrow." He kissed her on the brow, and put his hand on her womb very briefly and smiled, then ruffled the hair of the slave as he walked past. "Get the boy something to eat, Eudoxia, if you can," he said over his shoulder. "His stomach was growling like a dog on the way here." He disappeared through the open gates and vanished into the crowd of warriors.

Eudoxia went up to the Persian child and smiled, and he bowed back.

"Your name?" she asked in halting Persian.

"Saeed," he replied shyly, avoiding her gaze.

"Are you hungry?" she asked in Greek, for she knew no other sayings in the Persian tongue. When he made no reply she gestured toward her mouth. He nodded slightly and turned to the horses, pointing at them as if to say, "They must eat first." She noticed many healed whip scars on the boy's back and reckoned that his former master must have been a cruel man to beat such a sweet-looking creature. He had intelligent eyes and an amiable face.

"You will like the Oxlands," she said, and gestured at the citadel. "Our home Plataea."

"Plataea," said Saeed, his mouth breaking into a wide grin, and in halting Greek he said, "Plataea . . . home."

The Beginning...

The Warrior Trilogy is available from [Amazon](#), [Barnes & Noble](#) and independent booksellers. The unabridged [audiobooks](#) are produced by Blackstone Audiobooks. The series is also downloadable on all ebook formats including [Nook](#), [Kindle](#) and [Kobo](#). To visit Noble Smith's iTunes page click [here](#).

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