

AN APOLLO SERIES NOVEL

DELPHI'S CHOSEN

BY

A. K. PATCH



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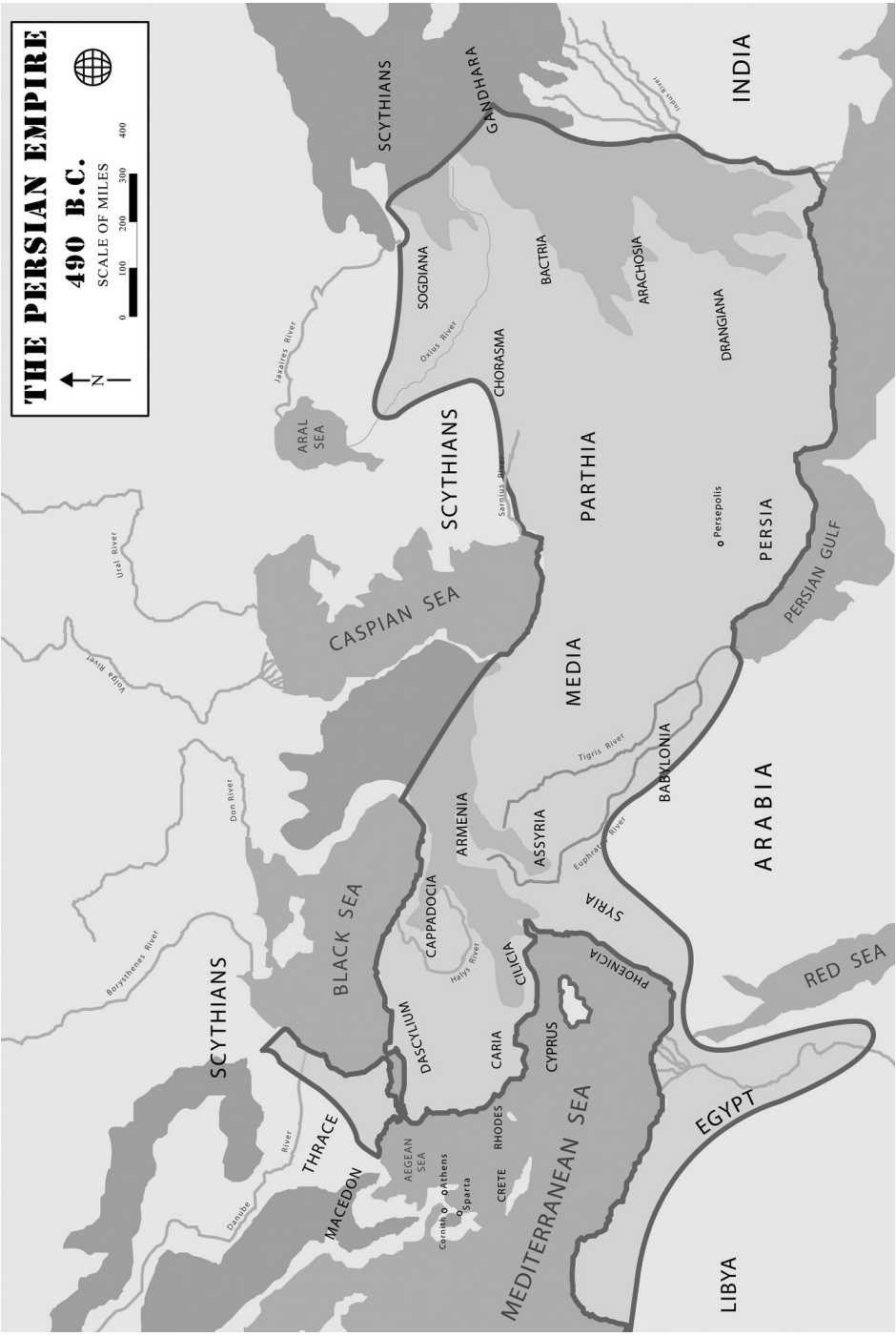
To our parents
Rosella and Milton Maly
Edith and Philip Patch

*All the great things are simple, and may be expressed in a
single word: freedom, justice, honor, duty, mercy, hope.*

— Winston Churchill

Acknowledgements

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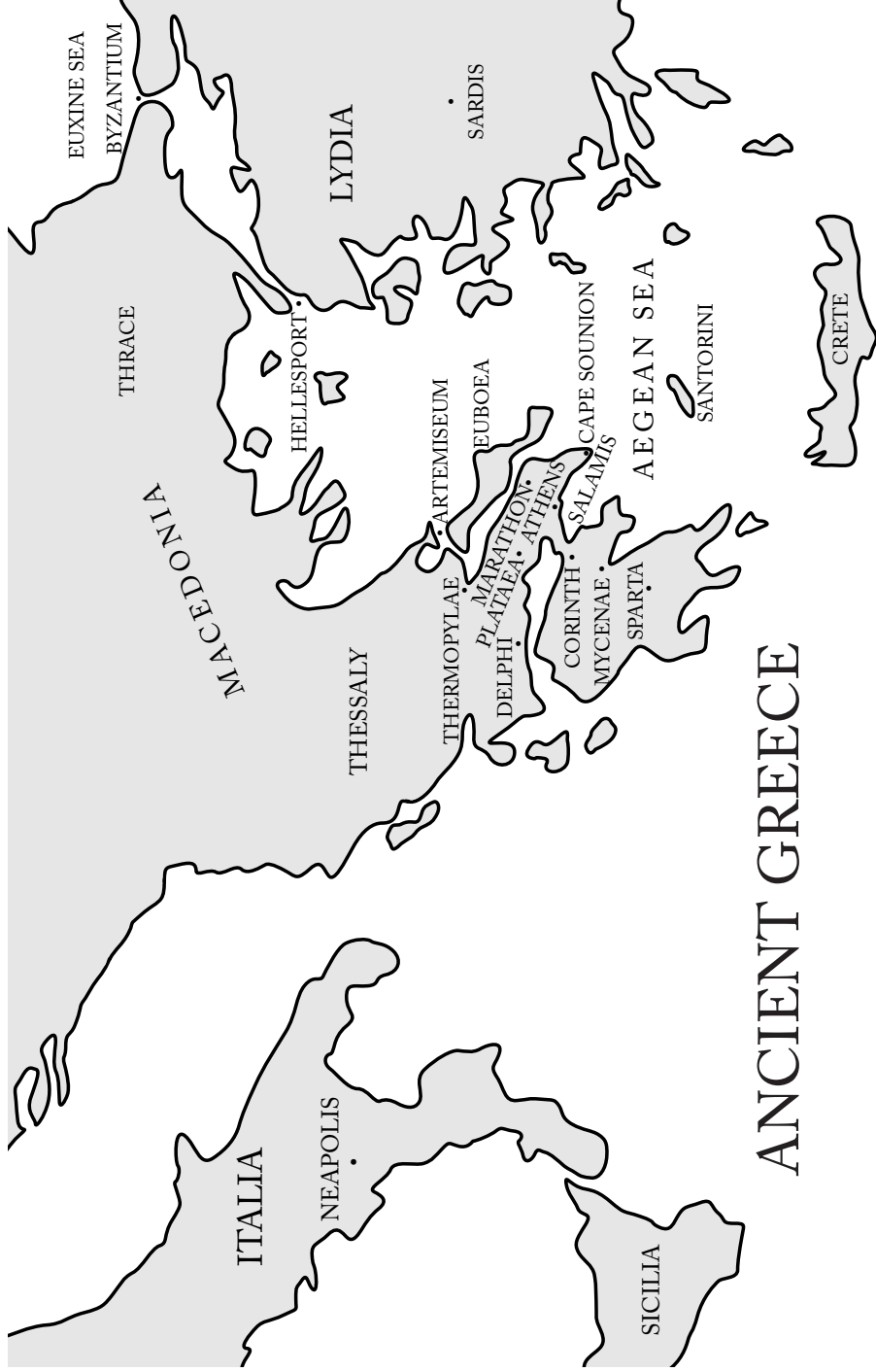


THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

490 B.C.

SCALE OF MILES





ANCIENT GREECE

Chronology

BC

- | | |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1650 | Approximate date of volcanic destruction of Santorini (Thera)—Minoan Civilization on Crete weakened. |
| 1450 | Mycenaeans from mainland Greece dominate Crete. |
| 1200 | Dorian invasion from north of Greece.
Mycenaean cities destroyed. |
| 1100-800 | Greek Dark Age |
| 776 | First Olympic Games |
| 590 | Solon establishes foundations of Athenian democracy. |
| 550 | Foundation of the Persian Empire by King Cyrus. |
| 490 | Persian King Darius sends invasion force to Greece and his army is defeated at Marathon. |
| 480 | Persian King Xerxes invades Greece. Battles of Thermopylae Pass and Salamis. |
| 479 | Battle of Plataea. Persians defeated. |
| 468 | Argos conquers Mycenae. |
| 448 | Construction of Parthenon begins. |
| 431-404 | Peloponnesian War. Athens is defeated by Sparta. |
| 334 | Alexander the Great attacks and conquers the Persian Empire. |
| 323 | Alexander the Great dies in Babylon. |
| 264 | Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage begin.
Carthage defeated in 146. Rome becomes the dominant power in the Mediterranean Sea. |

Delphi, Greece

There were many oracles in ancient Greece, but none more famous and trusted than Delphi, Apollo's sanctuary in the mountains west of Athens. For almost two thousand years, pilgrims traveled from near and far to reach Delphi, at the time believed by the Greeks to be a site of divine inspiration.

The trance-induced ranting of Pythia, a chaste holy woman, converted into versed prophecies by temple priests, was considered to be the will of the god Apollo. This foretelling of the future influenced not only decisions of everyday life, but also the prospects of colonies and the fate of kingdoms.

Unforgettable are the simple virtues carved into the forecourt of Apollo's temple: "Know Thyself" and "Nothing in Excess." These proverbs demonstrate how the triumphs and tragedies of ancient peoples could serve to guide our lives in the modern day.

Prologue

Married professors Zack and Lauren Fletcher live the good life. Teaching at San Diego State University means living in one of America's finest cities. And their respective fields of history and ancient languages means summers abroad, immersing themselves in their fields. If they can agree on when and if to start a family—if Lauren can get Zack to commit past the next dig – life will be perfect.

The breaching of the academic cocoon in which Zack and Lauren exist is both unexpected and violent when an enraged warrior from the past appears in their lives as a present-day, albeit eccentric, thug. Yet, while frightened, their focus returns to their work and the ongoing discussion of having a child.

Embarking on what Lauren believes to be a second honeymoon and what Zack knows is yet another dig, their ensuing quarrels continue in Athens, until they are threatened by the same thug. Now alarmed and feeling hunted, they escape to Delphi. But their escape is, in truth, a manipulation, and they are hurled into the fifth century BC.

The histories they had studied and immersed themselves in pale in comparison to what they are experiencing first-hand. With no idea of who is pulling the strings or why, Zack and Lauren are embroiled in events that test their grip on reality. Beginning with the attack in San Diego and continuing in Greece, they find themselves fighting for their survival both in this century and one long past. But it is their eventual separation that hits them both hardest.

Zack misses Lauren. Despite the danger he faces, his wife is at the forefront of his thoughts. Did she make it back to twenty-first century San Diego? Was the killer who had stalked them across time and continents still pursuing her and the girl in her care? Their past disagreements became trivial in light of what they had faced together and apart. Commanded to focus on his mission, Zack finds that he cannot totally comply; not knowing Lauren's fate consumes him.

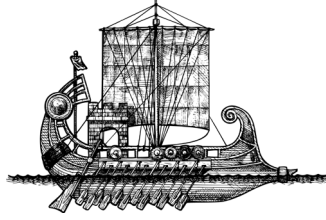
Many centuries removed from her husband, Lauren is no longer angry with Zack. The man she had come to resent had changed, tempered by their struggle to survive. Lauren wants Zack back, wants their life back, even wants their quarrels back. But inexplicably separated from him, and now protecting an orphaned Greek girl transported with her from ancient times, Lauren discovers she has more fortitude than she realized. If she can escape the wrath of Bessus, an enraged warrior of the fifth-century BC who has vowed to slay her, whether in her century or his, then she will focus on finding Zack. Whatever it will take.

Bessus has been sent by Apollo to Delphi in the present day, but a year earlier. Unaware that he carries out Apollo's plans, Bessus finds himself in a world that he can't have imagined but must navigate to slay Lauren and earn his return home.

Desperate to change a future unacceptable to him, Apollo has enacted his plan, one in which Lauren and Zack are unwitting, but important pawns. Having selected and drafted them, he still wonders if they are brave enough, wise enough, strong enough to be the leaders who will counter the threats he knows that gather from without... and from within.

Experiencing history's brutal lessons in real-time, Lauren and Zack begin to understand what has been sacrificed by so many over the centuries for a way of life now in jeopardy. And in recognizing this, they come to realize what is really at stake.

The trail of this odyssey will be marked by peril—for Zack, for Lauren, and for the world into which they were born. Selfless devotion to this cause will be necessary for them to become the heroes needed to forge a promising future. But as history teaches us, heroes don't always return home...



PART I



Delphi, Greece

PRESENT DAY

Apollo, the god of prophecy, dug at the sacred soil of Mount Parnassus with his heel. After creating a hole, he selected a triangular rock and set it into place.

I need a home. I will have a home.

With a cornerstone laid, he picked less-perfect rocks and arranged a square.

He had come to know strength at Delphi, seat of the oracle and a site of ageless wisdom.

Apollo gazed out over the sloping terrain that ended on the Corinthian Gulf. He would build a stout hut with a porch to watch the turning of the day.

"I vow that I will share this land with all who love peace," he said. This alcove would be his sanctuary, a place where he would finally know eternal comfort.

However, an arduous road must be navigated before he could rest.

History had recorded how the West had fallen.

And it was not far off.

Heroes fight and die, but peace between men and nations can be made with goodwill. He shouted, "Goodwill is stronger than the sword," and heard his words ricochet off the mountainside.

Apollo reset a curly forelock behind his right ear. The last echoes of his declaration faded.

But even gods can lie to themselves.

Peace is not what happened. The western world collapsed and all the gods agreed it must be restored or there would be no future. When the other gods had perished, he knew it was his duty to make their decision to act...a reality.

If, despite the training, his heroes—Zack, the “Traveler,” and Lauren, “Golden Hair”—did not survive the fight, Apollo would have to find others to serve or alter history himself, something he did not want to do. Even Bessus, the Bactrian warrior from 480 BC, misaligned in time also, must unknowingly play a role in the sacred mission’s success.

Apollo kicked at the new cornerstone for his home and dislodged it. He would have to be honest with himself.

No more lies could be told. Victory would be hard bought or there would be no peaceful home for him, or anyone else.



Delphi, Greece

SEPTEMBER 480 BC

The serpent's head on the stone wall brandished a forked tongue, but it tasted no air, nor did it pose any threat. For having been carved in bas-relief, the snake guided the lost, or the knowing, and served as a reminder of a powerful civilization long departed.

Undulating along the wall of an underground passageway, the body of this colossal python, a remnant of archaic times, guided the way to the surface temples at Delphi. Professor Zackary Fletcher, long-haired and bearded, separated from everyone he loved, trudged downhill in the dark. He ran his hand over the artistry for a hundred yards or more, across a seismically shifted trail and a forest of roots. After negotiating these subterranean obstacles for nearly an hour, he reached the tail of the snake, knowing the ladder to the upper levels would be just beyond.

Zack halted and caught his breath. What he really needed was time to rest and heal.

But physical wounds were just the beginning of his torment.

The first time Zack had been on this path, he had no idea of the disasters that awaited him and Lauren. At least then he had his butane lighter to help illuminate the way. The memory of Lauren, all she had endured, and the young girl from ancient Greece, Cassandra, and their desperate escape, felt like a burning, guilt-tipped knife in his guts.

How had everything gone to hell?

Actually, he knew the answer to the question, and there was still no consolation.

Apollo was responsible, to some degree.

The rest was on him.

He had made decisions, disastrous ones, out of arrogance, jealousy of Lauren's success, and his own selfishness. He needed that one project to gain tenure at the San Diego State. And he was obsessed about the past. Manipulating Lauren to go to Greece had been a bad idea, with dire consequences for everyone.

Somehow, he would have to make it right.

But now, he didn't know what to do, having been sent back through the tunnel by Apollo. What awaited him wouldn't be clear until he could get topside.

The odors of dank air and rotting earth permeated the route. Relieved to have escaped an injury in this trek along the blackened maze, he ascended the stone-cut ladder, Nestor's Marathon sword in a scabbard, and his long-traveled leather satchel over a shoulder. Finding the hatch door still open, he lifted himself into the room above. He crawled toward the doorway and felt strands of hair on the floorboards. Zack jerked his hand back, suspecting something spidery, until he recalled what the hairs might be attached to. Flashbacks of violence commanded his thoughts. He followed a clump of severed scalp to the double-bladed axe, the one owned by the man he hated most on earth.

But this monster wasn't even of his world.

Bessus, a Bactrian warlord of the Persian Wars period of ancient Greece, born twenty-five hundred years before him, could not have brought more ruin upon his life and those he cared about most. It took only a moment for a cauldron of anger to build up inside him. Zack, Lauren, and Cassandra had barely escaped the fight at the farmhouse and in the tunnel room. He lifted the heavy axe and it struck something. Searching with his hand in the dark, Zack felt pointed horns fastened to a bronze helmet.

"Someday, I will make you pay for what you've done," Zack said, heaving the dreaded axe and helmet down through the hole. He slammed the hatch door shut.

It was as much revenge upon Bessus as he could manage right now.

Zack wondered if he had returned to approximately the same time period. He could assume he was back in 480 BC. If it was still summer, and shortly after the Battle of Thermopylae, then he could make it back to the farm.

He had always dreamed of living in ancient times.

Only, he never could have imagined all this.

Zack kicked aside the fractured pieces of the wooden door that Bessus had smashed earlier during the chase to the tunnel room. He negotiated more underground passageways until he passed the *antron* of the Pythia, the sunken chamber where legend says that the mysterious priestess breathed in the fumes of the python's decaying carcass and went into a trance to receive Apollo's prophecies. The three-legged stool was empty and no priests were in attendance. Zack knew from geological studies in modern times that the invisible gas, ethylene, leaked from a fissure in the bedrock. Now it occurred to him that if they accepted males, he'd be a hell of a Pythia.

He alone knew the future.

Well, that was partly true. Someone else did, too. Apollo knew.

Zack had studied this period of ancient Greece for so long that he took risks. And now Lauren had paid the price, and so had the generous family they'd met.

Not interested in a serious drag of whatever noxious fumes leaked from the earth, Zack took the stone stairs two steps at a time and arrived at the top. He avoided the egg-shaped omphalos stone he'd whacked his knee on last visit. He dashed past surprised priestesses in white gowns guarding the sacred flame in Apollo's temple. Ignoring their protests and pushing bronze doors open, he ran between pillars and exited down a stone ramp with dawn creeping over the horizon. More flashbacks attacked: Cassandra screaming for Athena to save them, Bessus straining to open the chamber door and Lauren's quick kiss on his cheek as

she said good-bye. He had some fleeting memory of seeing her somewhere else, talking to her—recent conversation, too—but it wouldn't hold in his mind.

Zack just couldn't remember, and he was sure doing so was really important.

He staggered down the Sacred Way, caught a poorly set stone, and fell at the foot of a statue. Grasping the pedestal, he hoisted himself up. Statues of the gods lined both sides of the switchback trail. They appeared almost alive in the moonlight, sculpted motion in stone. Getting to his feet, he found himself holding on to of the statue of Apollo.

"It's you," Zack said, stunned by how the likeness of the statue matched the farmer he had met on the road north of Athens, and the god who had surprised him in the tunnel room.

Here was more proof that he had, in fact, met a god.

Zack scratched his temple. Scenes of violence raced through his head, but he couldn't slow them down enough to concentrate on when they happened or what they meant, almost like trying to catch a silvery trout in a fast-flowing river. His chest ached. Zack dug his fingers into his chest muscles and felt soreness. Something had happened to him. He'd been wounded several times, and not from a Persian sword like before or the stones of the slingers. He drew a blank and petitioned the statue instead.

"If you're in there, I'm begging you to help. What's happened to me? I need another medallion to get home. I've got to know what's become of Lauren and Cassandra." The painted marble face of Apollo looked off to where his arrow had landed.

"Now I'm talking to rocks." He stormed down the Sacred Way, past treasures and temples, statues of military heroes and mythological creatures.

Nearing the gate entrance, he saw two hoplites standing over the guard that Bessus had beheaded the evening before. That meant he'd only been unconscious for a few hours. Zack stayed out of sight of the guards. He climbed onto a crate, hoisted himself over the top of a wall,

and landed hard on gravel. After waiting a minute for aching in his knees to stop, he headed for the trees at the side of the road. Trumpets blared behind him, signaling dawn. It would only be a matter of time before foot and cart traffic clogged the roads.

He ran past the sacred Castalian Spring and around a curve in the road, toward the square temple of Athena Pronaia. Just beyond, the front door to Nestor's farmhouse was open. Zack saw no Persians and wondered if they were still down the road awaiting Bessus's return.

They might have to wait a hell of a long time for that. As far as he knew, Bessus had followed Lauren into the time tunnel, and to wherever she ended up with Cassandra. Bessus could already have killed both of them. He felt a grinding in his stomach. He'd have to block it out of his mind if he was going to function.

Cautiously entering the farmhouse, he made his way to the back door. Chickens and goats called from the pens. Birds chirped, oblivious to the devastation he knew awaited him. Entering the courtyard, the hard reality of slaughter caused him to slump against the door frame.

Zack went to Persephone first, finding her on her stomach, head turned toward the courtyard, with eyes open and fixed, in a vain search for her daughter. He gently closed her lids and brushed the bloody tangles of hair back from her forehead.

"Cassandra is in good hands. Lauren will love and fight for her as you did."

From her wrist, Zack carefully slid off the snake bracelet, something Lauren had admired upon their first meeting. He placed it in his satchel. As Zack lay her arm down reverently, he saw the massive cleaving that had severed her spine.

He averted his eyes from the wound. "I promise I'll avenge you."

Zack then turned to the task he dreaded most. Nestor had been a welcome friend in this twilight zone of existence. Nestor lay on his side with his eyes closed, his fingers gripping loose stones. Zack pulled the shredded cloth away from the blackened mess that was Nestor's shoulder. He muttered apologies, wiping the gray hair from his friend's face.

But Nestor felt different than Persephone. Not as cold. Zack quickly checked Nestor's wrist and then placed his fingertips over the notch of his neck. It was faint but unmistakable. There was, miraculously, a pulse.

"You're alive, you beautiful son of a bitch. I can't believe it."

Nestor's condition was grave and he'd have to act fast. He bolted to the barn and hitched the horse to the wagon as Nestor had taught him earlier. Lifting Nestor's weight was a job for two men, let alone one weakened by wounds. But Nestor's only chance to survive was for Zack to get him up to the temples. He hoisted him up and onto the open bed of the wagon.

Zack guided the horse through the side gate, much to the displeasure of the goats and sheep waiting for their morning feed. The wagon wheels creaked as the makeshift ambulance rambled up the roadway to the temples.

"Please, Nestor, hang on," Zack begged. He reached the guard post as the morning became fully lit. A squad of hoplites hovered over their murdered comrade. Zack shouted, "Help me."

The guards raised their shields and spears.

"Raise the alarm," Zack said.

"Declare yourself," the captain of the guard said. "Are we to be attacked?"

"The barbarians are camped down the road," Zack answered. "One of them killed a woman in a farmhouse nearby and wounded this man. Do you have a physician here?"

One of the soldiers leaned over Nestor. "This man is the architect. I've spoken to him many times."

"Sound the alarm. The barbarians are here!" the captain said.

Horns blasted out a series of long notes. Priests and officials ran out from doorways. Guards helped Zack drive the cart to the physician's house. They gently laid Nestor on a cot inside the small clinic and called for the doctor.

A slim, bearded man emerged from an adjoining room. He fastened a gold-colored headband over tousled white hair. "Why do you

rouse me?" Minander, the temple physician, asked. Before the guards could answer, he slapped his cheeks hard.

"Nestor? This is a disaster." He felt for a pulse in the crook of Nestor's neck, shaking his head while murmuring the name of the son of Apollo, Asclepius, the god of healers. He dipped a linen cloth in a shallow bowl that held leftover wine and squeezed it, drenching the deep axe cut in Nestor's shoulder. After cleaning away the twigs, stones, and dirt, he dug yellowish-brown paste out from an earthen jar with a bronze spatula, and spread it on the wound.

"What medicine is that?" Zack asked, moving closer.

"A poultice made of honey, lentils, and mustard," the doctor replied, sounding irritated. "Afterward, I'll bleed the evil vapors from him before they foul his insides."

"Over my dead body you will," Zack said in ancient Greek. "I'll be damned if I'll allow you . . ." Zack felt suddenly faint. He reached for a table corner.

The physician ignored Zack. He handed a metal cup to one of the guards, instructing him to heat it in a fire. He turned to Zack. "Tie your tongue, stranger. I'm the physician here. Disturb my work and I will have you thrown out by the guards. I must make haste or Nestor's eyes will set forever."

Zack watched the doctor poise the heated cup on Nestor's wound, holding it with a hot pad. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"What the hell are you doing?" Zack said.

"Drawing out the harmful fluids," the physician said. "Get out of my way."

The wound sizzled. Nestor groaned, stretching his fingers, but weakly.

"This is a good sign. He stirs."

Nestor rolled his head.

"There, my friend. I will do what I can for you." The physician placed a dampened cloth on Nestor's forehead.

"Can we get him something to drink?" Zack said.

"Are you a physician?" Minander asked, flinging his hand at Zack.

"In my land, we have a different method to treat so much blood loss."

"But you are in Hellas and this is my patient. Stand back and see to yourself instead. You look dazed," the physician said flatly.

"He's my friend, too," Zack countered. "I'm an envoy and Nestor is my host. Persians did this to him and killed his sister-in-law." Zack saw Persephone's blackened blood on his fingers.

"Not Persephone? She lies there now?"

"She was slain by the same barbarian."

Nestor groaned. Minander turned back to him. Zack pointed at the half-filled krater cup on the table.

"If that is wine, physician, get him to sip it. In my land, this is how we treat a man who's lost a lot of blood. We keep him warm, make him drink, and raise his feet. We would never draw more blood from him."

"Your land must be full of the dead. Only the gods know if he will recover," Minander said, walking to a cabinet where he searched through a tangle of metal instruments. "We'll have him drink his own blood when I've eliminated the evil vapors."

"What? You can't have him do that! I—" Zack raised his hand to his forehead. "I need to sit." The physician picked up a ceramic bowl. He held Nestor's forearm and dragged a small iron blade across a faint blue vein.

"No!" Zack shouted, leaping to stop him. The physician raised an arm to protect Nestor. A guard cracked Zack on the jaw with his fist. He crashed to the floor in a heap and passed out.

"Set him on the other cot," the physician said. "This barbarian has lost his mind."

Later, Zack awoke to the tickle of a fly perching on the tip of his nose. He jerked his head to send it away only to see an attendant adjusting the bandage on Nestor's shoulder. He watched his friend's chest rising and falling rapidly. Nestor licked his lips and strained to breathe.

Nestor blinked and said something unintelligible. Zack rolled off his cot and crawled to Nestor's cot while the attendant ran to get the physician.

"Wine," Nestor managed to whisper. Zack dipped a cloth in the wine bowl, parted Nestor's lips with his fingers and dribbled the diluted wine into his mouth. The physician rushed through the doorway.

"Move," he said, pushing Zack aside. "Nestor, how do you fare?"

Grimacing, Nestor said, "Minander, my friend."

Zack managed to stand up. He smiled at Nestor. His grin turned when he saw the urn next to Nestor's cot.

"No. You idiots," Zack yelled.

Nestor's blue eyes brightened when he recognized Zack. He murmured weakly, "Praise the gods." He raised his hand but it fell back. Zack hugged him gently.

Nestor said, "I revel . . . in your embrace." He smacked his lips and asked, "Cassandra?"

"Lauren and Cassandra escaped from the barbarian. We defied him."

At least I think they escaped.

Nestor cringed. "His axe . . . left a scratch."

"Oh, Nestor, you are a tough bastard."

Nestor raised an eyebrow. "Zack, you look poorly."

"I also had a dance with the barbarian."

Nestor seized Zack's robe, gripping it tight. "The boatman calls me, but I will head to Eleusis, instead."

"You must drink all the watered wine you can to live. Do that for me, will you, Nestor? Stay with me."

The physician directed his attendant to fetch more wine and then left for his quarters. While he was gone, Zack's mind raced with the idea of devising some kind of intravenous drip for Nestor. Rubber tubing and hollow needles hadn't been invented yet, and forget about blood-matching tests. He stood over his friend. Nestor's breathing quickened and he looked shriveled and gray.

Nestor eyed him sadly, "Persephone?"

Zack shook his head. "I will see to her funeral."

"That monster . . . destroyed my family. Somehow . . . you must make him pay. Where did Cassandra . . . go?" he asked, grimacing.

"To the Western lands. She and Lauren are safe." Zack blinked,

guilt swelling within him. How could he tell Nestor that he had no idea where they were?

“Praise the gods.”

Nestor gripped Zack’s robe again and his eyelids fluttered. “Go to the cave.” His voice weakened.

“Bring three torches. Go through the hole in back of the cave.” Nestor cringed. “Crawl straight...then left at the fork, down...the right fork and into a chamber...look for a rock in shape of an owl.” His voice cracked. “Dig below it...find my wealth. Take it...to my niece. There’s enough gold for all. Take care of my Cassandra. She is my...light.”

“You need to get well and we’ll all be together. Hold on. Stay with me,” Zack said with an urgency that soon he might be alone again, in a time not his own.

“Nestor, I sent Lauren and Cassandra to safety. They’ll travel west until they reach my land. I told you it was Atlantea, but it is better known as America. You may not believe what I will tell you next.” Zack took a stabilizing breath.

“If you make the journey to Eleusis, I want you to revel in the knowledge that the future is bright. Lauren and I are not of your land . . . or of your time. The gods have allowed us to travel through the course of the ages . . . in a flash.”

Nestor blinked and muttered, “Faster than the flash from your fire stick?”

Zack grinned. “Yes, my friend. I know that what I’m saying is confusing, but it is your god Apollo who allows this. Lauren and Cassandra are back in my land, in my own time...over two thousand years into your future.”

Nestor sucked in his breath and let it out forcefully. “Then...you are...a god, too?”

“No. I am flesh and bone and mind, as you.”

“Truly, you must be a mortal.” Nestor coughed. His throat rattled. “A god could never look as bad as...you do.”

Zack turned his face, hiding his smile. When he turned back to

Nestor, he said, "I know what's going to happen. The Greeks will win this struggle. Greek ways will spread to the limits of the earth, for all time."

"I believe you," Nestor said, but then struggled with his next words. "Use my wealth wisely...protect my Cassandra."

"Revel in what is yours, Nestor. Peace is in your mind, just like they told you at Delphi. We will love Cassandra as our own daughter."

Nestor strained and tried to sit up, gripping Zack's injured shoulder. Zack barely winced as he tried to comfort him, "There is so much to tell you, Nestor. Greek culture will be the basis for the future of the Western nations that love freedom. Our lives will see its influence at every turn. King Alexander, a Macedonian, will conquer the Persians many years from now and spread Greek ideas to the Far East . . ."

"Macedonians, they're nearly . . . savages."

Zack laughed. He held Nestor's head up and lifted the cup of wine to his lips. Nestor took a small drink but coughed out the rest.

When his throat cleared, Nestor said, "Protect...those who love freedom."

"Even in our time, Greek ideals are the basis for our government, our art, philosophy, and culture."

"Hold onto the best . . . of what . . . we are. Discard the bad."

"You must drink more, Nestor."

Nestor gripped Zack's forearm. "Live for me." His breathing hastened. "Save Athens." He licked his lips. Zack dribbled more wine in to his mouth.

After he swallowed, Nestor continued, his voice raspy, "I agree with you...about fate. A man decides what path...to take in life."

Nestor's words jolted some kind of memory in Zack. Visions of screaming people in the streets of modern-day Athens permeated his thoughts, but it flashed by and he couldn't retrieve it.

Nestor's eyes blinked twice and he tried to swallow unsuccessfully. "Eleusis awaits me." Red spittle sprayed out of his mouth. Nestor gurgled out, "Live boldly." He took a deep breath and struggled to speak. "My eyes, they cloud. Save Cassandra . . . my Honeybee."

His head rolled to the side. A long release of breath signaled the end

of Nestor's life. Like his grandfather before him, his blue eyes held a steady gaze.

Minander walked into the room to find Zack openly sobbing. Minander closed Nestor's eyes and said, "Rest well. You will share a funeral pyre with Persephone. Your shades shall travel together."

The physician told his assistant, "Send a wagon down to the farm. Fetch the body of the lady and prepare a pyre. Take guards with you in case you find Persians."

Zack draped himself over the lifeless form of his friend.

The physician held up a papyrus scroll. "He signed this before you awoke. He bequeaths the farm and all he has to you. My attendant bore witness to this."

Zack clutched Nestor's body. He was alone.

It was several minutes before he would let Nestor go. When he did, he asked for cutting shears.

The faces of the dead had been propped up to greet visitors in the courtyard behind the physician's residence. The bodies of Nestor and Persephone, cleaned and prepared the day before, lay prone in white gowns on a crisscross of timbers with crowns of vine leaves around their heads. Coins placed on their eyes would pay the boatman's toll to row their shades across the river Styx and into the underworld. Both bodies held honey cakes in their hands as offerings to the gods, and vials of anointed oils lay beside them. Visitors wept openly for hours, ceremoniously sprinkling water over themselves before they left, for their protection following a visitation with the dead.

It was barely dawn when Zack and Minander stepped outside the temple of Apollo, accompanied by a group of temple priests, guards, and locals. Zack and Minander helped carry the litters of Nestor and Persephone to the funeral pyre. Zack had shorn his own hair nearly to his scalp, in the manner of the bereaved. It was an uneven cut, and with his beard whiskers longer now, he fit in easily with those attending. Two young men with wooden flutes played lyrical tunes

softly in unison, slowly up and down the musical scale. Zack gazed upon the bodies.

They send you to Hades, Nestor. But I know, having vowed yourself to the Elysium Mysteries, you dwell now in the fields of Eleusis instead. Peace is there and a happier eternity for you and Persephone. Now I wonder if Eleusis could have been an earlier version of the Christian heaven.

The pile of logs and sticks of the pyre were interspersed with chips of aromatic cedar. The morning breeze brushed across Zack's face and sent the flames of his torch leaping. Minander stepped forward and read Nestor's will.

"My friend, Nestor, was well-known in these mountains and a legend in Athens. His brother died long ago at Marathon, his sister-in-law lies on the bier with him now, and his niece is lost." Minander gestured toward Zack with his hand.

"I testify that Nestor has bequeathed his farm and all his holdings to this man, Zack, the Atlantean. I bear this as the truth, and it is further witnessed by my assistant, Meanna. Nestor cannot be replaced. He worshipped the gods. He fought for freedom at Marathon, too. He answered to no man. What higher praise could a man receive?"

Zack withdrew a dagger from a scabbard at his side, cut a strand of hair from each of the bodies, and wrapped them in a leather folder. The muscles of his face twitched. He clamped down his emotions. If he let it, grief would break him down. He bit the insides of his cheeks. Both of his friends looked so small, caricatures of who they'd been in life.

Zack clasped Nestor's crossed hands, those that had slapped him on the back after long practice sessions with spear and shield. This man had fought at Marathon. Years from now no one would know he did. Neither of them would be remembered, lost to history. He stared at the shrunken corpses and wondered where the spirits of his dear friends had gone. Nestor's eyebrows would no longer lurch when Zack asked a question. Penelope's lips would never separate again to smile in a motherly pride for her daughter.

Zack stared into the cloud-filled sky and silently asked Apollo why it had to work out this way.

Holding the firebrand, he looked to Minander for the signal to begin. He touched the flame to the prepared wood of the funeral pyre. Tongues of yellow fire rose quickly, along with thick white smoke. The pungent odor of cedar pervaded at first until the smoke turned black. The fire sizzled and crackled. In a few minutes, the two forms of his friends disappeared in a yellow and red blaze.

Zack swallowed repeatedly in a losing attempt to hold back a bestial cry of agony. Something, some memory nagged at the periphery of his thoughts, distracting his torment. The mourners wailed, turning away from the overwhelming heat and odor of the pyre. Finally, Zack stood by himself. He held his breath and let himself be immersed in the rising, smoky remains of Nestor and Persephone. When he could take no more, he walked away, soot-faced and solemn. He had not wrought all this disaster by himself. Bessus was responsible, and so was Apollo.

I know there is something I'm supposed to remember.

The next afternoon, Zack sat on a stool in the courtyard of the farmhouse, a few feet from where his friends had been killed. He had combed stones to hide the bloodstains. He stared at the two barns, one containing food and supplies along with the bedroom that he and Lauren had shared. The other barn, about twenty yards to the left of the first, housed the horse and some oxen. Toward the southwest and the Corinth Canal, a narrow path shrouded by trees and brush led toward the creek emanating from the Castalian Spring. A hundred yards farther along the hillside was the hidden cave.

Like a magician practicing a trick, he twirled a gold coin in his fingers, examining the uneven contours. This was a single coin taken from one of five large jars of gold, silver, and precious stones that represented the life work of his friend. Nestor's directions had been exact: the treasure was easily located, buried under the owl-shaped stone. Zack had left the jars in place, hoping that Cassandra and Lauren would somehow get his correspondence in the future and find them. He had packed other items and buried them with the jars, withdrawing coins to pay for his upcoming expenses.

Zack had decided not to live at the house, the memories too vivid and painful. He couldn't care for the livestock, so he considered selling them. He couldn't stay because the Persians were still close by and could stage another raid at any time. History taught that there had been no successful assault into Delphi, yet historical accounts of the war could not account for every occurrence.

He had learned that the hard way.

Herodotus, the famed historian, had written that the Persians had attacked Delphi, but the gods and supernatural heroes had supposedly blunted the attack by rolling giant rocks down upon the Persians, sending them reeling back down the mountain.

Zack tapped his feet on the pebbles, pondering his next move.

Within the week, the Battle of Salamis would take place in the Saronic Gulf, near Athens. He couldn't trek the same mountain road to Delphi, since it would be guarded by Persians. His choice was to cross the Gulf of Corinth to the south at the port of Itea, go over to the Peloponnese, then head east toward Corinth, and join the allied forces at the island of Salamis. With only himself to worry about, there was no reason not to witness the next climactic battle in the Persian Wars, another that would decide the future of Western civilization.

He extracted a notebook from his leather satchel and began a letter to Lauren.

Dear Lauren,

If you have found this package then I am overjoyed.

Zack returned to the cave and deposited the letter into a pot hidden within a wall alcove. He reconstructed the stone obstacles that protected the entrance and hid it with branches.

Zack gathered his belongings, made final arrangements for the animals, and left the farm that afternoon.

He realized he had gotten what he asked for. He lived among the ancients, but now he'd also have to accept that he might not survive the experience, or ever return to his own time. Apollo had told him there were greater struggles ahead.

Talk about a vacation gone bad.



Salamis

SEPTEMBER 480 BC

The fifty-oared penteconter under Zack's feet glided toward the island of Salamis. It scraped the sandy shore at the lead of ten other transports. The crewmen hoisted their oars vertically to make room for the other ships to unload their cargo of supplies and warriors.

A long gangplank hit shallow water and a twenty-five-man squad of archers disembarked from the ship. With bows slung across their backs, they shared in the hauling of large leather sacks of iron-tipped arrows, stacking them in rows onshore. Hoplites cheered and made a path. The archers wasted no time hitting a trailhead that led to the other end of the island.

Other ships dispersed similar cargo.

These famed archers from the island of Crete had been pulled from duty at the wall at Corinth, and transferred quickly to Salamis in an effort to thwart the plans of the Persian king to build an earth-and-rock mole across the bay. Upon completion of the mole, his navy would surround the island, and his enormous army would march across toward Salamis, easily trapping the Athenian forces, their allies, the displaced population of Athens, and the trireme dry docks. With the

Greek navy defeated, and the hoplites aboard captured, Sparta would be isolated and overwhelmed by a land and seaborne assault.

Zack slung on his satchel, relieved that the movement no longer hurt. The archery unit marched along a dirt trail that followed the shoreline. The path headed uphill and, at the top of a rise, revealed the narrow bay just outside the town of Salamis.

Across that bay, clouds of dust and smoke obscured the shore. Up above the dust, a bluff jutted upwards to the top of a mountain. There, Zack knew, Xerxes had set his throne to watch his naval victory unfold.

From Zack's perch, he could see the battle-ready triremes of the Greek allies lying in rows along the shore with their masts set down to hide their location. The Greeks knew that Xerxes's view from across the bay to Salamis would be hindered by inlets, hills, and a small island in the middle of the narrows.

Nearing the triremes docking stations, Zack sprinted to the head of the line, anxious to find the Athenian admiral, Themistocles. He recalled staying at Themistocles's residence in Athens. He had argued with Lauren, vehemently, over his desperate need to go to Thermopylae. Both Nestor and Themistocles agreed with Lauren. The look of terror and anger on Lauren's face should have convinced him of their wisdom. But, he wouldn't listen.

He found an Athenian hoplite speaking with the captain of the archers. The captain wore the innovative composite armor that he had seen some hoplites wear at Thermopylae. Layers of linen glued together, creating a kind of ancient Kevlar.

"Your archers are most welcome," the hoplite said. "Those ships you see in the distance are waiting to carry you out near the mole where you can fire on the barbarians and disrupt their work."

The captain of the archers pulled off his leather cap and wiped his brow with his forearm. "Keep us supplied and our arrows will surely find their marks for you. I'll take the archers aboard the ships now. They're itchy as a pack of hounds dancing around a rat hole."

Two hundred archers moved out to the docks, leaving Zack standing with the hoplite.

“Where can I find Themistocles?”

“Who wants to know?” the Athenian said. He scanned the short-haired, bearded giant before him from foot to head. “You are no Hellene from what I can see.”

“I have been to his home in Athens,” Zack replied, fully aware the allies would be suspicious of any foreigners that might be Persian agents disguised as locals.

The Athenian captain placed his hand around the handle of his sword. “Then you would know the name of his most trusted slave.”

“Sicinnus,” Zack answered.

“A home that is surely in flames now,” the hoplite said, relaxing his grip. “Look for him in Paloukia or at the docks. He’s not a hard man to find, but his guards will gut you if they think you are a spy.” The man pointed toward the ships, abruptly turned, and jogged off to catch up with the archers.

The crackling of campfires commenced with the coming of dusk. Zack approached the fleet of triremes lined up on the shore, their hulls painted with pitch. He ran his hand over one of the battering rams protruding from the hull. These three-pronged, solid bronze protrusions were hammered and bolted onto the nose of the ship just below the waterline. Zack felt the serrated edges of the ram with his fingers, aware that no triremes from Greek or Roman times had survived to the modern day. It was not until the 1980s that an effort was made to reproduce one and test it on the water.

Soon, you’ll be stuck in the guts of a Persian ship.

A knot of hoplites and men in civilian dress surrounded a bonfire. Outside this circle of men stood Themistocles, dressed in dark leather armor with white borders, holding an eight-foot spear. He halted before entering this meeting of the naval squadron captains and the hoplite commanders. The warriors stood with their feet set apart and their arms folded.

Themistocles entered the circle with his chin set high. He was middle-aged and thickset, with a broad forehead and short hair. A long mustache fell into a clipped beard. For all his groomed appearance, he

looked more like a boxer or a wrestler. He peered into each man's face while standing in front of a fire that shot hot embers into darkening skies.

Zack found a spot outside of the ring, towering over the warriors in front of him, with a good view of the man Nestor had introduced him to in Athens just over a month earlier. Northern Greece had fallen. The Spartan king, Leonidas, had been slain with his elite warriors. Now, Athens lay in cinders. The allied navy of three hundred triremes had been cornered here, near Salamis, holding onto this small island. It was a daunting task for Themistocles to keep the allies together. The Greeks fought for their lives and homes but Zack knew more was at stake. The birth of Western civilization hinged on this naval battle.

Themistocles hoisted the spear high over his head. He closed his eyes as if gathering his will. He transferred the spear to his right hand and drove it into the sand beside his sandaled feet.

"These are our lands. Our ancestors lived and fought here. The temples and sanctuaries to our gods have been built of stone cut in our mountain quarries. Would the all-knowing gods have set their thrones upon the snowy peaks of Olympus if they had any intention of being dislodged by the god of upstart barbarians?"

Themistocles walked around the fire, halting his speech to allow the impact of his question to take hold.

"I tell you the answer is nay. Our gods expect us to fight; they expect us to be victorious and in doing so, earn their devotion and trust. Yet we fight not only for our gods, who might easily vanquish the foe if they chose to, but also to continue our ways."

He stared into the eyes of each official and warrior while he spoke.

"A free man wakes and decides how he might best spend his time. Will he till and harvest the barley, or pick succulent grapes heavy with juice drawn from our fine earth, or smooth the splinters from his fishing boat and cast off early to ensure his catch? A free man can do all this and more."

Now he stood in the center and folded his arms. The crowd remained silent.

“His sons may improve themselves; go to academy, argue to the best of their intellect, prove to friends that they are noble men and seek justice in all matters. Might they change their mind and decide to take on a new vocation, they may do so. We have seen this life take seed and begin to blossom in our land.”

Themistocles raised his voice and pointed at the Persian camp on the hills across the strait.

“Yet I ask you to examine the day-to-day life of those who foul our land and shores, over there, just across this tight but gentle strait. May he pick up his sword and return to his land? May he tell the barbarian king he does not wish to fight the brave warriors who oppose him? Must he approach the stacked shields and the bristling points of our spears with a whip licking his shoulders? I ask you fair and brave men of Hellas, which of these lives will you choose?”

Themistocles now quickened his pace, walking the circle of men. “Will you fight and expire, if need be, to pass freedom to our children? Will you strike out at the enemy, until your limbs have no more strength, as did the Spartan king at the Hot Gates? Did he not perish to buy you this time to gather your strength and put iron into your will?”

He thrust his hands at the sky, bent his elbows, and threw them skyward again.

“I ask you to choose the finer manner for a man to live. I ask you to test your character and come away with victory. Choose now, warriors of Hellas. There is no more time to bicker. There is no more time to consider new lands to move our populations. The barbarian king will follow us until we will have no place to bring our ships ashore. The enemy is here for us to slay. They have been drawn into our pit. We will now coil and strike out at them. Make them regret they ever set their eyes upon our rocky shores, our mountain meadows blanketed with wildflowers, our teeming peaks tipped with snow, and the scratchy soil from which only we can bring life?”

Zack watched Themistocles, the craftiest of politicians, moving fast now within the circle of men, searching the faces to see if he had won them over.

"Tell me that you will all stand together and share the danger. Unending glory will be ours; even on Olympus they might say that we are worthy of them. Will you fight when the signal is given? By Zeus and Athena and all we hold dear, tell me your reply."

Some screamed their resolve and others argued to retreat. The surging voices, amid hurled firebrands and kicked sand, hit a crescendo. Fists were thrown and others wrestled their opinions out on the sand. Above the swirl of opinion, someone demanded silence. It was the voice of the Spartan admiral, Eurybiades, given command of the entire allied fleet by Themistocles and the Athenians, a brilliant political tactic even though the Spartans brought fewer ships to the battle.

"Curb your tongues. Save your arguments and anger for the barbarians," he bellowed, joining Themistocles in the middle of the circle. The arguments continued in whispers until finally the voices were raised again in disagreement.

Zack slid through the throng of warriors to position himself close to Themistocles. Eurybiades pulled Themistocles closer to him. From a distance, Eurybiades would be seen as jabbing his finger in Themistocles's chest, giving the impression that they were arguing. "It would be well that we speak alone, noble Themistocles. Let us set ourselves near that rowboat and debate each other there."

"I see the sense of it," Themistocles replied, pushing his hand away. The two separated themselves from the surge of leaders still casting their opinions and stratagems at their backs. Zack hovered near the rings of bodyguards and heard Eurybiades speak first.

"What a fine speech from a fishmonger. Do you think any of the king's agents swallowed it whole?"

"I hope so," Themistocles said. "They must believe that no two voices in this fish soup of allies will agree. As long as you and I see eye to eye in secret, the plan will carry forth in the dark hours. My trusted pedagogue, Sicinnus, will deliver a message to Xerxes, declaring to him that we cannot agree and that we will attempt to escape by both sides of the island channels. Xerxes will hear that I secretly covet his alliance so that Athens will survive. He will be forewarned that during the night, or

possibly at first light, the Greek navy will attempt escape. If there are agents nearby with eager ears, they will corroborate what Sicinnus will tell them.”

Themistocles knew that the eyes of all the allied captains were upon them from afar. Eurybiades pounded his fist in his palm, continuing the theater of discord.

“I will inform my Peloponnesians to be prepared at first light to let the Persians pass, if they swallow the bait.”

“Let us pray to the gods we are better actors than leaders,” Themistocles said, his eyes reflecting a popping bonfire. “We part ways now, but when dawn lifts the veil of night, we will be as one.”

“It is the only way to victory,” Eurybiades replied before leaving to rejoin his captains. Themistocles walked to the edge of the bay and soaked his sand-crusting feet in the channel. Zack saw his chance and hurried in his direction, hoping for a short audience. Two sets of strong arms latched themselves onto him and a dagger was pressed to his throat.

“In haste, are we?” one of his captors whispered in his ear. Zack, his neck stretched and his arm twisted to the brink of agony by guards far shorter than he, gagged out a plea.

“Themistocles will know me. Tell him I am the friend of Nestor.” Zack didn’t see that Themistocles had come up behind them.

“Let me see this man,” he said. “I am confounded by the darkness. What companion of Nestor’s are you?”

Zack realized that he no longer resembled the man that had met Themistocles earlier. Now he was grateful for his increasing command of the language of the ancient Greeks. He spit out through gritted teeth, “I am the envoy from Atlantea, noble Themistocles. I came to your home, with my wife, Lauren, accompanied by Nestor.”

Themistocles, straining his eyes in the darkness, stared in Zack’s face.

“Your hair is shorn on top, and you have a face full of fur. Was not your name Zack? Why the disguise? Have you any more of your medicine? My temples pound harder than the beat-master’s hammer on a trireme.”

"I bear sad tidings. There is no other way to say it. Nestor is dead."

Themistocles took a step back. "How can this be?" he said, putting his hand out as if to stop the news from reaching him.

Zack said, "A detachment of barbarians, sent up to Delphi, came upon his farm. Persephone is slain also. His niece and my wife escaped."

"Ye gods, the world is crumbling around us. I lose his counsel at such a time?"

"These are the times that try men's souls," Zack said, stealing the phrase from the desperation of the American Revolutionary War for his response, but it fit.

"Truer words were never said, Zack. Yet alas, I have no time for mourning, there is much to do. Seek me out after the battle. You will find me, or my head."

Zack breathed in deeply. "Themistocles, I want—"

"Can I assist you somehow? Or should I? You make a nasty habit of tempting the gods." A guard tugged on Themistocles's forearm, pulling him and pointing to the rowboat, barely lit in the distance. A figure lurked near the rowboat. When the man turned, Zack could see it was Themistocles's slave, Sicinnus, the one he and Lauren had met at the house.

"I must take leave. Seek Poylas. His trireme lies yonder." He pointed to a ship pulled up onto a *neosoikoi*—a stone boat ramp, its hull being painted with another coat of pitch.

"Keep heart, victory will be yours," Zack said.

Themistocles stopped suddenly. He raised his thumb and forefinger to his chin. "And Zack, will it be our will or the will of the gods that will decide the victor tomorrow?"

Assured by his experiences with Apollo, Zack replied, "It will be both. You are the strong arm of the gods. You do their bidding."

"You are a changed man, Zack. Tell that message to all our Hellenes, and speak more loudly, so the gods will hear you as well." Themistocles left with his guards.

Zack's sandals kicked up sand running to the ship. He saw a shadowy figure up on the deck.

"On board there, I seek Poylas," Zack said, panting.

"Come out of the darkness. Who seeks him?"

"A friend, my name is Zack. Will you tell him?"

"There will be no need. It is I, and as soon as I can believe my eyes, you may come aboard."

Zack ascended a rickety gangplank and met the curly-haired sea captain at the top where they clasped forearms.

Poylas said, "You didn't wait for us at the Gates. Where is your wife?"

"It's a long tale," Zack said. "She has gone west to safety. Walking south from the Hot Gates was not a good choice, but I am here and offer my assistance to you."

Poylas narrowed his eyes. "You want to fight. Do you know which end of a sword is the sharp one?"

Zack laughed but was aware that most knew that he had no experience in battle.

"I am not even sure that I could row for you." Zack grinned. "I've been in some fighting and my shoulder was cut." Zack turned and showed him the raised scar that crossed from the front of his left shoulder, over his deltoid, and ended just before his shoulder blade.

Poylas said, "You won't be much good to anyone with that, but I couldn't put you on a bench either way. Rowers train for months to pull their oars in unison. One bad oar and the ship could go dead in the water or fail to catch enough speed when we're ready to ram." He pointed at a hill about a hundred yards from shore. "Go to the camp of the Mycenaeans, where you see three fires up on that rise. Seek out Prince Diomedes. He'll put you to work somewhere."

Not exactly what I had in mind.

"I'll see you off in the morning, Poylas. May the gods be with you tomorrow if the battle commences."

"It will have to be soon. We cannot hold these rascals together much longer." He sniffed at the air and rubbed his arms. "It's a bit colder tonight. That means there might be some fog in the morning. Take off now, I must attend to my ship."

"Sink one for me, Poylas."

"You are not greedy enough, my friend. I will wreck five, just for you."

Zack began to hike to the Mycenaean camp, but turned to view the beached flotilla. There was no chatter and few campfires. The sailors worked quietly, aware the noise would carry over the water to alert the enemy of their activities.

Reaching the top of the rise at the edge of the camp, Zack met a team of hoplites, fully armored. After he explained why he was there and who sent him, they escorted Zack to a blazing campfire. A haunch of steer smoked over the flames, making Zack realize he had not eaten since he started his day at the wall in Corinth. It had taken many hours to hitch a ferry ride over to Salamis. The aroma of roasting meat assaulted his stomach, distracting him from the warrior who now stood before him.

"You are the envoy from Atlantea, the husband of Lady Lauren?"

Zack studied the warrior before him; taller than most, oddly clean-shaven, lean but muscular, dark hair tied in braids that fell across his back.

"I am, but how do you know this?"

"I am Diomedes. I fought at the pass. I am among the men grateful for the attention both of you gave to our wounds. I didn't recognize you at first with the whiskers and chopped hair." Then he froze. "But wait, where is Lauren? She left for Sparta and then to search for you. Only the gods knew if you were a corpse."

"She awaits me in the west."

Diomedes exhaled heavily. "It is well that is so. She was a welcome guest in our palace." He looked away momentarily, concern on his brow.

"There is much I don't know about her travels without me," Zack said. An unexplained shiver ran through him.

"A man should guard his woman," Diomedes replied, staring into Zack's eyes.

"How may I assist you tomorrow?" Zack asked, not wanting to dig deeper in what the hoplite might have meant.

"You didn't fight in the north, if I remember well. Ever stick a man

with one of these?" Diomedes held out his eight-foot spear.

"No, but maybe someone could teach me."

Chuckles erupted around them as other hoplites sidled up to listen.

"A warrior is not made overnight and a shield grows heavy quickly. Tomorrow, if the barbarians reach this island, you will surely need it. If they unload their Immortals, you will have to stand with us. When their sailors wash up on the shore, we will spear them like carp in a barrel."

"Teach me what you can tonight."

"Then come over by the fire, but don't think my men will treat you like a child. You will rest this night, but not too comfortably."

While a near-full moon rose overhead, Zack alternated between being slammed to the ground as his feet were knocked from underneath him, to rising to take on a spearman or a hoplite darting in, slashing him with a wooden practice sword. He had learned to parry a sword cut with his shield and drive a man back with a series of swipes and stabs. He remembered his lessons with Nestor and attacked his instructors with a spear, bending his knees and coming in low.

After an hour, Zack held his hand up. "That's enough for tonight," he said. "I must reserve some strength for tomorrow." Zack peeled the bandage from his shoulder. Diomedes raised his eyebrows, as did others who had done the sparring.

"You didn't say you were cut."

"Did you not continue to fight when wounded at Thermopylae? I must also."

"You may yet be a warrior and a worthy opponent. Come and eat with us," Diomedes said, walking away.

Zack nodded, confused by being called an opponent.

What the hell did he mean by that?

Zack awoke with a start when someone tripped over his leg. The man swore in hushed tones and then continued on in the dark. Quickly, many others rose and quietly donned their linen armor. Zack rubbed his shoulder, finding that he had overdone it the evening before.

It was a hard lesson and Zack realized more than ever that he had a long way to go before he could survive hand-to-hand hoplite warfare.

Now I could use some pain pills.

No fires were allowed. He went to where Diomedes and his guards were strapping on their leather sandals and fixing the clasps of the greaves covering their shins.

"This is a day that will be remembered," Zack said.

"For those of us that still stand after the barbarians are beaten," Diomedes answered. "If you have no armor, I have a leather jacket you could wear."

"That would be appreciated. I go to see Poylas off. I will return to stand by you."

"You have no stake in this war. Why do you fight for us?" Diomedes asked.

"But I do, Prince Diomedes. I do."

Zack approached the line of triremes, all with their masts and sails down, stripped for battle. The crews crept up and down the gangplanks in the dark, loading the last of the battle ware. He heard a loud splash and a series of groans. Zack stepped aside as a line of twenty Athenian marines—carrying two spears apiece, their helmets and shields slung over their backs—boarded Poylas's trireme. They took their stations at the bow, behind a raised superstructure, much like a castle wall. The last of the hoplites carried grappling hooks to cast aboard the enemy ships when the signal was given to board and attack. The rowers already sat in their tiered rows. Oars were pulled up and in, creating a crisscross pattern under the two long walking planks that stretched the length of the ship. Zack ascended the gangplank and saw Poylas standing at the stern, where the captain's chair, called the trierarch, was bolted to the deck. He heard muted cursing coming from him.

"Greetings, Poylas."

"The day is not starting out well. My shield bearer fell off the gangplank just now and broke his arm. By the gods, what a foul fortune blows my way."

“What’s his task?”

“To shield me from the missiles that will pelt our decks when we close in. I can’t watch them fly at me and direct the helmsman at the same time.” He looked out at the glimmers of dawn. “We must embark while it’s dark.”

Zack waded through a jumble of thoughts in his mind. Was it sheer foolishness to offer what he knew might cause his death? Abandoning all temperance, Zack blurted out before he could stop himself, “I will take his place.”

“Are you mad?” Shortly thereafter, Poylas said, grinning and scratching his chin whiskers, “Can you swim?”

Zack nodded.

“We may not come back. Do you venture to tempt fate once more?”

“I will accept the fate the three sisters have set for me.”

“Then take my shield and stand with us. I cannot spare marines.” Poylas pointed his index finger toward a bronze shield lying on the deck. On the face of it was a blue dolphin leaping from the sea.

“A dolphin,” Zack said. “A good omen and a symbol of Apollo?”

“It is so. He came to the oracle long ago from Crete disguised as a dolphin. We will require all his grace this day. Now eat some bread and ready yourself.”

Zack picked up the shield and felt its weight, almost twenty pounds of oak and beaten bronze. He stared at the dolphin. Delphi was the Greek word for dolphin and thus was named the temple site dedicated to Apollo.

Apollo must be watching me now. Am I choosing to do this, or is this my fate?

“What am I getting myself into?” Zack whispered in English. There was no one to answer him, just the resigned efforts of men facing their fate. He wanted to live real-time history, but not as an observer, like at Thermopylae.

The order went out to sleeve the oars through the hooks and lower them into the bay. Dockworkers pushed the trireme down the oiled ramp into the still waters, as did many other crews among the other

inlets and coves. Darkness still blanketed the sky. The allied fleet could only be so quiet. A fleet preparing for battle is noisy. The Greek oarsmen and marines only heard the thump of pulse in their chests and in their ears.

Zack felt a muscle twitch on his right cheek. He rubbed it, but it came on stronger. And it wouldn't stop.

King Xerxes wore purple-beaded slippers. He strode upon a white drape, laid over a dirt path leading to a bluff overlooking the narrow waterway. Courtiers accompanied the royal person, ready to catch the king if he tripped. He arrived at his white throne chair, positioned to allow him to direct the entrapment of the Greek rebel navy lying out in the darkness.

Xerxes, lord and king of much of the known world, ruled from where the eastern sun rose in Bactria near India, westwards to Anatolia, Ionia, and Thrace, now studded with the colonies and cities of these same Greeks. He commanded the riches of Egypt and Ethiopia in the south with its wildcats and population with skin the color of coal; over Medes, Iranians, Assyrians, and Babylonians in the middle lands; Scythians, Armenians, and Thracians who dwelled in the north; the prosperous port cities of Sidon, Tyre, Halicarnassus, Tarsus, and Ashkelon along the shores of the inland sea. King of a brave and devoted aristocracy, Xerxes dedicated himself to expanding the empire his forebears had created. The invasion so far had not been without its difficulties. An oversized black eunuch spread a tasseled shawl over Xerxes's shoulders, shielding him against a morning breeze.

"Mardonius, did word reach us of the Greek navy making their attempt to escape through the west channel of the island before us?"

Mardonius, marshal of the army, answered, "No, my lord, the Egyptian squadrons report no movement, so far."

Xerxes scratched his ear. "And the Phoenician admiral below signals no attempt by the main Greek navy to escape either?"

"Nay, sire. They are trapped like sows in a pen, ready for slaughter.

Perhaps they wait for light. The messenger who came to us last night revealed their discord. It may be they chatter and scramble and cannot yet decide a course of action. Soon all will be revealed. The signal flags are ready. They will move on your command, my lord."

Xerxes's fleet of four hundred triremes waited in the bay, down to his left. A screening detachment beat a slow path back and forth across the channel opening, waiting to catch any Greeks hoping to make it to safety in the open sea.

"My crews," Xerxes asked. "Have they been awake all night?"

"That is so, my lord," Mardonius answered. "Yet, they know you watch them from this point. They will not tire."

"They must not fail me. Are the admirals and captains aware what their fate will be if the Greeks escape?"

"I am sure they enjoy the manner in which their heads are fitted now, my lord."

"When Ahura Mazda sends forth his first burst of light from the east, I shall pour the sacrifice and the sacred fire shall be lit. Victory requires only one climatic sea battle to destroy the Greek navy. Then I will march upon the meager wall the Greeks built on the isthmus to the south. My army, without end, will then smite the southern Greeks, including the hated Spartans, and the war to conquer Greek lands will be over."

"I welcome it," Mardonius answered, sensing a stiffening breeze. He sniffed the air. The high ground of the island lay silhouetted in the first glow of light coming up on their left, from the east. Xerxes stood, holding a golden chalice, and dribbled wine on the ground beside his throne. Next he waved his hand and a firebrand holder lit the stone hearth. Ahura Mazda was properly sacrificed.

"When the Greek fleet is crushed, I want only the women and children spared. The fire of rebellion in the men must be stamped out. The slave markets will prosper."

Mardonius did not seem to hear the words of his monarch. His eyes strained to pick out the ghostly shapes revealing themselves with the coming of dawn.

Xerxes prattled on. "Without the Greek navy to stop us, and as you have planned, we will land troops on the southern island and corner the Spartans in their homeland. The Spartan troops will withdraw from the wall, and with no navy to make their escape, we will surround the remaining Greek warriors. They will all be on their knees begging for mercy before the moon makes another cycle."

Mardonius walked to the cliff edge for a better look.

"Mardonius," Xerxes said, irritated at being ignored.

"My lord," Mardonius shouted back. "There to the right, up in the channel. I see sails, many of them. The Greek ships are turning to flee. A trireme does fight under sail. The Egyptians will catch the Greeks as they round the island on the other side. Victory will be ours."

Xerxes stood on the pedestals before his throne, craning his neck in the gathering morning to witness this news for himself. He nodded his head and said, "Then the message the Athenian leader sent to us was truthful. Signal the Phoenicians and Cypriots to enter the narrows at full speed. Close the trap and chase them down."

Signal flags unfurled as a rose-colored hue cast itself upon the sky, mountains, and peninsulas in the distance. The bay began to lighten below as the first squadrons beat their oars and triremes surged forward. Xerxes saw that many of the Greek ships still sat at their docks.

Xerxes said, "We have caught them sleeping." He clasped his hands together in front of his lips. "We will smash them before they can run."

Off to the right, the Greek ships under sail still ran north. The leading triremes of the Phoenicians and the massive numbers of ships behind them were now all moving into the channel in pursuit. The royal party slapped each other on their backs. Xerxes's eyes remained locked on the chase.

Then they heard voices coming from the narrows of the straits.

"Do you hear that, Mardonius?" Xerxes said with a puzzled look. "What is that commotion bouncing off the rocks? I hear singing. Is it our oarsmen singing so mightily? How proud I am of them."

Mardonius leaned his ear toward the narrows below, attempting to filter the voices from the slap of oars.

"It is as if one voice can be heard," Mardonius murmured. "Could all of our ships sing the same song? Do they not speak different tongues?"

Mardonius sensed spidery fingers of fear lancing through him. To their right, the Greek triremes in flight stopped. Sails fell, then their masts.

Mardonius stepped back and braced his stomach with both hands.

Xerxes leaped to his feet, thrusting his finger toward the Greeks. His lips moved but no words came from his mouth. Down to his left, just when his squadrons cleared a tiny island in the middle of the narrows, lines of Greek ships came out of the morning fog.

And the voices, louder with each stroke of the oars, came from the Greek decks.

Xerxes bellowed, "What treachery is before me? The Greeks are to flee, the messenger told us so. Yet their oars beat a path to strike my ships. This cannot be."

Mardonius mouthed a response but instead it became lost in the tactical dilemma developing before his eyes. A chill ran the length of his back, something he had not felt since his precious Immortals lay slain before the Spartans in the north.

"Call our ships to return, Mardonius. Make haste," Xerxes spit out.

A blast of trumpets echoed across the straits. The Greek ships came on in even lines, like arrows to a target.

"Signal them now, I demand it. Summon them back." Xerxes covered his cheeks with his palms.

Over the voices of the Greeks and the beating of oars, the strain of ropes, the wind whistling, and trumpets echoing off the mountainside came a sickening crunch from out in the bay.

Xerxes groaned hideously and leaped from his throne, shaking his fist at the scene unfolding before him.

"I will not allow this. This cannot be." With lips curled, Xerxes croaked out, "No, no, call back my ships. Call back my ships."

A new breeze blew in from the north. Zack heard shrill flutes and the voices of oarsmen and marines on his ship. He tried to sing but no words came out. All he could do was continue staring at the lines of Greek triremes, leaping forward with each sweep of their oars. Ahead, the Persian fleet packed themselves into the strait, all eager to join the fight.

His arms lost their strength. Spreading his legs for balance, he held on to the rim of his shield with one hand and a railing with the other. The timbers creaked and groaned at the simultaneous dig of three banks of oars into the still waters of the Saronic Gulf. One hundred and seventy men labored, singing at the top of their lungs. Zack's heart beat faster. The drum master pounded out an increasing cadence. Zack concentrated on the singing, trying to understand the words. It was a paean, a prayer to Apollo.

He heard the Greeks sing, "Onward, sons of Hellas. Free your country, set free your children."

With the Persian ships getting closer, he latched onto the back of the trierarch chair. It was time to thread his arm through the sleeve on the inside of his shield and grip the hold cord. Zack didn't know the words of the song. He hummed it, faint at first, as a distraction from what he knew was about to happen. Then louder, he belted it out, when the words were repeated over and over again, till his voice matched the others. He made up words at times. He didn't care. He sang. His heart beat faster. The song took him over.

Zack wanted to fight. He could do it. He could be one of them.

Poylas shouted, "On ye hounds, wade into them, harder now. Pull, you freemen, pull!"

Poylas's commands jogged Zack back from his song-trance. Before him, the Persian fleet surged into the bay like a jam of logs coming down a river.

Zack could see the archers running to the rails on the Persian ships. His trireme surged toward them.

"Marines, hold on to your rails," Poylas instructed. "We'll ram them."

To their left, an Athenian trireme outraced them and crashed into the side of a Persian ship with a resounding smash that echoed off the mountain heights. Screams followed from the struck ship. Men ran from the impact area. Some leaped overboard. Cheers erupted from the other Athenian ships closing on their targets.

"Helmsman," Poylas barked, pointing. "Turn and spear that one amidships. Steady, steady now. Dig your oars faster, men. Now hold on."

Zack saw the terrified eyes of the Persian oarsmen. They scrambled to escape the imminent collision. Many were chained down and could only throw up their arms in defense.

"Faster." Poylas said, holding on to the forearms of his chair and planting his feet on the deck. Zack saw fire arrows pelt the other Athenian triremes until the Persian archers turned their attention toward his. He raised the shield to protect both Poylas and himself.

The collision hurled Zack into the trierarch's chair. He heard wooden beams cracking. Both ships shifted violently in the water. He regained his footing and lifted his shield again. The impact knocked the enemy archers from their feet, giving Zack enough time to recover his position.

"Backwater, you dogs of war. Backwater." Poylas boomed over the cries of wounded enemy oarsman tossed into the bay. Marines with long poles pushed against the side of the Persian trireme, separating their ship from the damaged enemy ship's hull. Zack raised his shield higher and covered Poylas.

"Don't block my view, off to the side with that shield." Poylas seized Zack's leather vest, shouting, "Watch the missiles. Here they come again."

A volley of arrows flew at them, hissing as they passed. Some struck timbers. Others overshot their targets and sliced into the bay. Two of the oarsmen on the top outrigger row caught arrows, twirled, and fell onto the long deck planks. Zack's shield rang out as a few shots found his target. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"They'll roll over and have no time to shoot at us again." Poylas said, pulling on his rudder.

The trireme detached itself from the enemy hull. All along the line now, the splintering of oars and timbers was heard. At a right angle to them, the Persian fleet came on. The Athenian navy, smashing into the left side of their fleet, set a chain reaction of floundering Persian triremes that tried to turn, but could not. Each succeeding row of Persian ships collided into the row in front of them. Except for the leading squadrons, the Persian fleet was dead in the water. The Greek Peloponnesian and Aeginian ships, seeing their opportunity, attacked from the southern inlets, deep into the flanks of the enemy.

"That one there, helmsman, turn us," Poylas yelled above the din.

A new target presented itself for broadside. The oarsmen strained and grunted. The beat of drums announced the pace.

"Can we gain enough speed to ram?" Zack said.

"Maybe," Poylas said. "Marines, ready your fishhooks."

The Persian ship ahead saw them coming and attempted to turn.

The new angle gave Zack a view of the hundreds of faces manning the oars. They were all slaves, from mostly interior kingdoms of the Persian Empire, pressed into service for the navy. Most could probably not swim, with barely a chance of survival if their ship was struck or boarded. The Phoenician ship locked oars with another ship and neither enemy vessel could move.

Poylas saw the opportunity and shouted with his hands cupped, "Row and we'll skewer another."

The three banks of Athenian oarsmen couldn't see where they were headed. Facing the stern of the trireme from where they sat on their benches, the oarsmen slid on the greased lambskins under their flanks, enabling them to draw a longer pull. They sent their trireme forward, building speed.

Zack held the chair tighter this time. When the impact came, he was thrown, but still able to keep his feet. The ram smashed into the enemy hull, piercing it, but not too deeply. Railings splintered along the right side of Zack's ship. Crewmembers were thrown from the outrigger and oarsman sent sprawling from their long benches.

The marines regained their footing and formed rows at the forecastle.

“Throw your hooks,” their captain said. Grappling hooks latched onto the enemy vessel. The Athenian crewmen tied ropes to ship rails, holding the ships together. The first marines climbed over the rail, deflecting darts and sword thrusts from the enemy marines protecting their decks. More Athenian marines followed, spearing their counterparts and working their way down the planks, dispatching crewmembers and oarsmen as they went.

Zack held his shield high, catching more arrows from the Persian archers aiming at Poylas. The Persian commander knew from where the Greek ship was commanded. Enemy oarsmen leaped into the sea, grasping for anything afloat. The sea was clogged with debris and thrashing men, crying to their gods for deliverance. Zack and Poylas viewed the progress of their marines who were now amidships, moving fast, fighting in two rows down both lanes of the enemy vessel’s deck. Enemy rowers, having been passed by, escaped behind the Athenian marines, effectively cutting off the marines from their boarding point.

Zack’s concentration on the progress of their marines evaporated when he saw an enemy trireme turning toward them. They were hopelessly locked in with the Persian ship and only four of their marines remained on board. Zack recognized the peril immediately.

“We are going to be rammed,” Zack said.

“By the gods, we’re trapped,” Poylas screamed over the pandemonium. “We’ll be struck, watch out.” Some heard the order and took hold.

The impact sent them sprawling. Speared below their waterline, their trireme had suffered a deathblow.

“Dammit,” Zack said, regaining his feet. Within minutes, dozens of enemy marines lined up and hopped over the rails, holding small shields and swinging axes, maces, and swords. The unarmed oarsmen fought them with bare hands, but many leaped into the frothing bay, knowing well their ship was doomed. The four marines left on board defended the two center long planks that served as a deck. They parried axe blows, killing some with their long spears, but they were steadily driven back.

Poylas shouted, "We must help them, Zack. Keep the shield and follow me."

Zack picked up a broken piece of the outrigger and ran with Poylas to join the Greek defenders, who were losing control of the decks. Fire arrows lodged in their hull. With Poylas at his side, they reached the two hoplites on the left side of the ship. They put their weight behind the hoplites, pushing into their backs to shore up their balance. The weight of the enemy attack was too much, and there was little traction on the slippery deck. Run through by a spear, one of the hoplites fell and his body was kicked aside by the Persian marines.

Zack took his place in the line. His mouth went dry. A sword came in a downward arc toward Zack's head. He blocked it with his club and then backhanded his adversary across the face, sending him to the deck. Poylas came in low with his sword and gutted another Persian swinging a single-bladed axe. Zack alternated forehand and backhand, knocking weapons from hands and smashing arms and heads, anything he could hit.

With their backs to the stern hull, the remaining two marines from the right side joined them and locked shields.

The enemy stopped momentarily, gathering their courage to continue the attack. Their advance along the deck had cost them. Half of the enemy marines lay wounded or dead on the decks.

Zack caught his breath in great heaves. They were trapped. Blood pounded in his ears. Black smoke enveloped his ship.

We're on fire.

He bent his legs to receive the charge that he knew would come.

Flames and smoke billowed behind the enemy. Shouts and screams filled the air. Zack heard unceasing crunches as more Persian ships were struck by the Greek triremes. To his right, the Athenian marines who had bordered the enemy vessel now saw the peril on their own ship. They doubled their efforts to cut a path back to their decks.

With a battle cry, the enemy marines rushed at them. Zack and the two Athenians with shields ran forward to block their advance. Poylas swung his sword over the top, gashing an extended neck and severing an upraised hand.

Axes crashed onto his shield. The faces were close now. Wild-eyed and filled with bloodlust, Persian marines drove onward, knowing victory was near. Another Athenian took an axe cut and dropped to his knees. Zack, gasping for air, felt his back foot against the hull.

I've run out of ship.

There was little in the back of the ship to brace against. He wedged his back foot along the floorboard rim and prepared himself for the end.

Lauren, why didn't I listen to you and stay away from the fighting?

Javelins were thrown at them but they were easily blocked by the shields. Arrows flew by. Zack swallowed and licked his lips. He had no saliva. His heart pounded in his chest. Smoke obscured the sky, at least partly. He glanced skyward and wondered if you can always see so clearly just before one dies.

The rush came again. He bent to receive the jarring impact. Metal rang. He swung his club and connected. The last Athenian marine fell. A blur of motion came from the right.

Poylas blared, "Watch out."

A sledgehammer smacked Zack's jaw. He lost his eyesight. Stars burst in his head. Hot blood sprayed across his face. He spun, lost his footing, hit the rail, and toppled over the side.

He fell like an iron anvil, unable to flail his arms for balance. He hit debris before the sea, smacking on top of mangled bodies and desperate men, fractured rails, floating hulls, and rigging.

The saltwater revived him. Zack choked and gurgled. Hands grasped for him or anything else to halt their owners from descending to the bottom of the strait. A trireme raced by, unknowingly whacking the sea-tossed survivors on their heads. The swimmers screamed cries of terror in languages he'd never heard before.

Two hands grasped his shoulders from behind and pulled him under. Zack thrashed and thrust an elbow into his assailant's soft underbelly. Rising to the surface, he connected with his right fist, and gained his release.

He kicked with his legs and found himself in a scene of complete chaos.

Zack grasped a shattered plank, held onto it like a paddleboard, and willed his legs to move. He heard a deep groan, not from a man, but of a ship, capsizing to his right. He spit the briny sea from his mouth. On the surface, the blue sea was mixed with the blood of countless men. Barely holding on to consciousness, saltwater filled his mouth, making him gag and cough.

Zack closed his eyes while catching his breath and summoned his remaining will to live. Oddly, Lauren, in her wedding gown, flashed into his fading consciousness. She had asked her father to give her away dressed in his Marine Corps dress blues. They all stood together. Who would know that he died here?

An oar missed his head. He put one arm over his head to keep from being clobbered. He kicked away from the sinking trireme. Men cried their last cry and sank below the sea chop.

To both sides of him, Athenian triremes sped by, hulls above the bronze ram painted with blue eyes. Drums beat from their decks and fifes played. The men still sang the paeon to Apollo. Zack saw the shore of Salamis, a hundred yards ahead. He pushed aside floating bodies and wreckage. He found a plank that would support his weight. He pulled himself halfway onto it.

I can make it.

He kicked with slow, even strokes.

Nearing shore, still hugging the plank, he heard screams. All along the beach, hoplites skewered the washed-up sailors from the enemy fleet with their lances.

No mercy today. Help me, Lauren. Help me . . . Apollo.

A wave caught him. Exhausted, he fell off the plank. He floated on his back. Seawater flowed into his mouth. The wave left him rolling in the low surf on the shoreline. He dug his fingers into the sand for traction. He crawled onto the shore, gagging.

He heard in Greek, "Another, over there, to add to our collection." He heard splashing feet and clanking armor.

Zack looked up, but couldn't see too well with the sting of salt in his eyes. Coughing out seawater, he saw a spear raise and the sun glinting off its shiny blade.

He cried out weakly, "Diomedes." Zack twisted enough so the point missed his leather-covered chest and plunged into his shoulder, the same one injured before.

"Diomedes," Zack gurgled out, absorbing the bite of the spearhead. The hoplite twisted the lance and then pulled it out to strike again. Zack arched his back and raised his right hand to halt the finishing strike.

I'm sorry, Lauren. I did all I could. It's over.

"Go to your death, Persian," the hoplite shouted.

Zack mouthed the words but nothing came out. Why couldn't he speak? Then a third time, he screamed through clenched teeth in Greek, with all the strength he could muster.

"Prince . . . Diomedeeeeees!"

"Choice words then," the hoplite said, holding back the butt spike of his spear just above Zack's breastbone. "Drag him to the physician. He might be one of ours."

Later, Zack awakened on the sand. He heard voices drawn out, like bad videotape, and the aroma of newly cut burnt wood. He attempted to rise but his left side refused. The muted voices coalesced into cheering men, waving spears and tossing their helmets high.

Jubilation erupted all along the shore.

His tongue stuck to his palate. Zack coughed and waved his right hand, hoping to catch the attention of anyone nearby. He saw a man spin, fall to his knees, and throw his arms in a reverent act of supplication. The look on his face bespoke pure joy. Others joined him. They threw their arms over each other, fell, and rolled in the sand. The words rang clear now: "The barbarian navy has sailed away."

Zack raised himself on his right elbow and tried to get up. Forget it. His left shoulder was wrapped in tight bandages. His left jaw was tied tight also. He ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth and felt hamburger. The Persian navy had sailed away and the Persian king would now be racing to the pontoon bridges at the Hellespont to make his escape. The history books had said so.

"Lay back, sailor. There's no need to rise. The battle is over, at least for now," said a man with dark locks held back by a golden forehead band.

Zack said in scrambled English, "We won?"

"You're difficult to understand with your jaw wrapped up," the man said, squinting and trying to block the sun with his hand. "You have been dreaming a full day. I put the iron in your shoulder while you slept. Lucky man you are, not to feel the bite of the hot iron."

"I've been out a whole day?"

"Do not deny the gods what they require of you."

Zack raised his chin and felt a circular burn mark on his chest.

Oh shit, I hope they didn't bleed me.

"You'll have more time to rest. Prince Diomedes will be back soon. You should have heard him laugh when he saw you. He guessed for sure that you would have been slain. He asks that you accompany him to Mycenae. The gods favor you, sailor. They truly do."

Zack turned his head to the gentle lapping of waves on the shore. Then he heard the smack and piling of wooden beams.

"What?" Zack asked through clenched teeth, understanding now how hard it must be to make a living as a ventriloquist.

"They will be making piles all day and then maybe for the next seven thereafter. Except they gather not wood or ships; what you hear is the stacking of corpses."

"Pull me up?" Zack asked, levitating his right hand to signal his desire to be hoisted to a sitting position.

Damn, he thought, I'm the Mumbler again. He remembered his time in the makeshift aid-station outside Athens. After he was struck unconscious by the slingers, he mumbled for days in and out of sleep and was given the name Mumbler by the Persian surgeon.

Cheering hoplites packed the shoreline, running amongst the trireme crews, screaming thanks to the gods. Fractured and half-submerged ships lay beached all along the shore, and across below the heights where Xerxes sat the morning before. As far as Zack's eyes could see, an unending string of beached corpses lay on the edge of the water.

Just like the shoreline at Thermopylae. The midday heat potentiated the aroma of death.

"We haven't enough wood in all of Hellas to feed the funeral pyres that will be needed," the physician said. "They will be tossed in holes before they corrupt. Until I pass to the land of Hades, I will never forget the unceasing crunch of bronze rams upon wooden hulls out in that bay. The Peloponnesians hit them on their left flank, trapping them in a rabbit's snare. They fouled each other and strove to retreat backwater, but to no avail." The physician sifted sand through his fingers as he spoke. "The sea echoed with the dirge of desperate men, knowing well they would die. The paean our sailors and marines sang, methinks, was the last sound they ever heard, 'cepting the gurgle in their throats." The physician broke only the faintest of grins.

Zack ran his fingers along the bandage that secured his jaw. He winced and rolled his eyes. The physician stuck three long sticks in the sand and placed a cloth over them to make him a shade.

The physician prattled on. "Worked all night to repair our ships, we did. This morning, we sailed out to meet them again, but their triremes had gone. Not to be seen at Pireaus, nor past the bend of Cynosure, or even docked at islands just beyond our shores. They tore down their king's throne in the time it takes to drain a krater of wine. With so few ships and no food, Xerxes had to flee, too. They say he bypassed the smoking ruins of Athens and made haste up the inland road to the north. I declare before the gods, this is a day I will never let loose from my memories."

Zack's teeth were bound so tightly he could barely speak. He pumped his fist instead.

The physician said solemnly, "The cost of failure for them has only begun. They were so sure of victory. Last night, when the light left the skies and the only sound to be heard was the screams of men filling their lungs with water or the others that were slain by our hoplites, it ran certain in my thoughts that our gods would not allow their temples to be sacked by an inferior race of men. Our gods are far stronger than theirs. The barbarians must know that by now."

The physician gathered wood and made his own pile of smaller pieces.

"These men are all dead because of the arrogance of their king and the brilliance of Themistocles. The dead lose everything. Who knows what gods they travel with now?"

The physician handed him a cup of wine with a sandy bottom. "There now, partake of this before there is none left. It will deaden your pain. If your cuts fester, have someone bleed you and drain the evil vapors."

Not a goddamned chance, Zack said to himself. I almost got my head handed to me again and I wonder if Poylas made it off the ship.

"Leave that bandage on and don't try to spit out that resin holding your jaws together. It'll have to stay that way for almost two moons for the bones to mend. You'll be drinking your meals for a spell. I must leave you now to bind the broken limbs of our wounded."

The scene on the trireme replayed itself in his mind. He was alert now, and the throbbing that was faint earlier had now increased and spread throughout his left shoulder where he'd been stabbed. *Where the hell is my satchel? Maybe Diomedes has it back at camp. That's where I left it. There's still penicillin and pain pills left in it. I hope it's enough.*

The physician turned to walk away. "They'll come by later with a wagon and load you on with the shields and breastplates. Two days of bumpy road and you'll be under the Lion Gate of Mycenae."

Zack tried to grunt a thank-you, but the physician had left.

The whirlwind of events, from when Lauren and he were captured by the Persian cavalry to his encounter with Apollo, coursed through his imagination like film clips. He closed his eyes, willing the pain to cease its domination over him. The drink in the cup had to have some kind of opium in it. The tension began to leave him. He unclenched his fist.

He remained lost in recollection.

Lauren, you would have been proud of me. But I almost bought the farm. Would Apollo let me die? He said he had some kind of plan in store for me; a mission to save lives. Does that give me some special protection?

Zack tried to take a deeper breath and winced. He couldn't rise.

If Apollo's got my back somehow, he isn't doing a very good job.

The wind picked up and a corner of the sheet protecting him from the sun blew loose. The sun warmed his face. It felt good on the raised black-and-blue bruises on his cheek and chin. He must look hideous.

I have another reason to live. I'm going to Mycenae and nothing is going to stop me from seeing that citadel. Maybe it won't have the grandeur of earlier Mycenaean times, but . . .

He heard a creaking wagon approach.

Zack surrendered to the shadows that crept from the periphery of his thoughts. He turned his head to the side, with his cheek burrowed into the white sand comfortably. Drool from his gummed-together mouth leaked out and soaked the sand under his chin. He saw the blurred image of a tall man pulling the wagon and an amused grin on his face. When he bent to load Zack onto the cart, a long curl, tucked behind his ear, loosened and fell across his face. The man lifted him up effortlessly. The stab wound in Zack's shoulder caused him to cry out loud.

"There, there, Traveler," Apollo said. "I will tend to you soon enough and see you safely to your next stop in Mycenae. I fear you will choke if I let you drink. I will bathe you in the healing potions instead."

Zack saw blue light, and an instantaneous electrical charge that encompassed his body. *How many more times can I escape alive? I have to get back to you, Lauren. Can you hear me?*

Then he sensed soothing warmth, and let it encompass him.