

Five men and women in Ancient Greece are set on a dangerous journey of self-discovery during the bitter conflict of the Peloponnesian War.

GIFTS OF THE GODS: Fire and Ash

By Thomas J. Berry

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VOLUME 3

GIFTS OF THE GODS

FIRE AND ASH



THOMAS J. BERRY

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This is a work of historical fiction, based on actual persons and events. The author has taken creative liberty with many details to enhance the reader's experience.

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First Edition

Foreword

Joe Frazier looked desperately for the Champ's formidable left jab but his eye was swollen shut and the 31-year-old challenger could barely see the bright lights shining down on the bloody spectacle. Finally, an exhausted Frazier spied a blurry image before him and swung out with everything he had. The 1975 'Thrilla in Manila' was the third and final meeting between Frazier and his long-time nemesis, Muhammad Ali, and both men were trading powerful punches well into the 14th round. Frazier had won their first meeting and Ali had taken the second. Their third encounter, on foreign shores once hotly contested in WWII, was going to decide the true undisputed champion once and for all.

The two boxing legends could have taken a page of history from the storied tales of Sparta and Athens. Almost, 2,400 years before the 'Thrilla in Manila' made Ali and Frazier household names, the two Greek city-states had bloodied the shores from Macedonia to Sicily as they tried to become the greatest and most powerful rulers in the land. In my first book, *Iron and Bronze*, I detailed the beginning of this rivalry, the perilous ups and downs each side encountered during their long, bloody rounds, and most of all, the fundamental human factors that transcended it all. The sequel, *Silver and Gold*, was a story of conquest and high expectations. The champ reigned supreme until the challenger stood in his way, hellbent on stopping him. When it was over, the mighty had fallen and a new king stood on the throne.

Now, the final installment, *Fire and Ash*, will see these old foes battle one last time, winner take all. Athens is reeling after the affairs in Sicily and is desperate to regain their strength before Sparta can finish them for good. The landscape changes once again, this time to the distant shores of their old enemy, Persia. Xerxes may be gone but his descendants make strange bedfellows for the noble Athenians and strong-willed Spartans. Some of the biggest battles ever fought in Greek history occur during this last decade, far from home. Most importantly, we stand witness to the strengths and frailties of both political systems being contested – democracy and socialism.

The names have changed over the years but the land and waterways being fought over remain the same. The narrow strait of the Hellespont is now the Dardanelles, the ancient city of Byzantium is now Istanbul, and the Propontis is now the Sea of Marmara. Athens and Sparta have pummeled each other for 27 years and the Peloponnesian War will finally come to a dramatic close. Much like the last fight between Ali and Frazier, the battles in Persia during this decade will decide, at last, one true champion! I hope you enjoy *Gifts of the Gods: Fire and Ash!*

Thomas J. Berry
July 2020

Novels by Thomas J. Berry

Lewis and Clark: Murder on the Natchez Trace
Texas Freedom: Last Stand at the Alamo
Crosshairs

Gifts of the Gods

series

Iron and Bronze
Silver and Gold
Fire and Ash

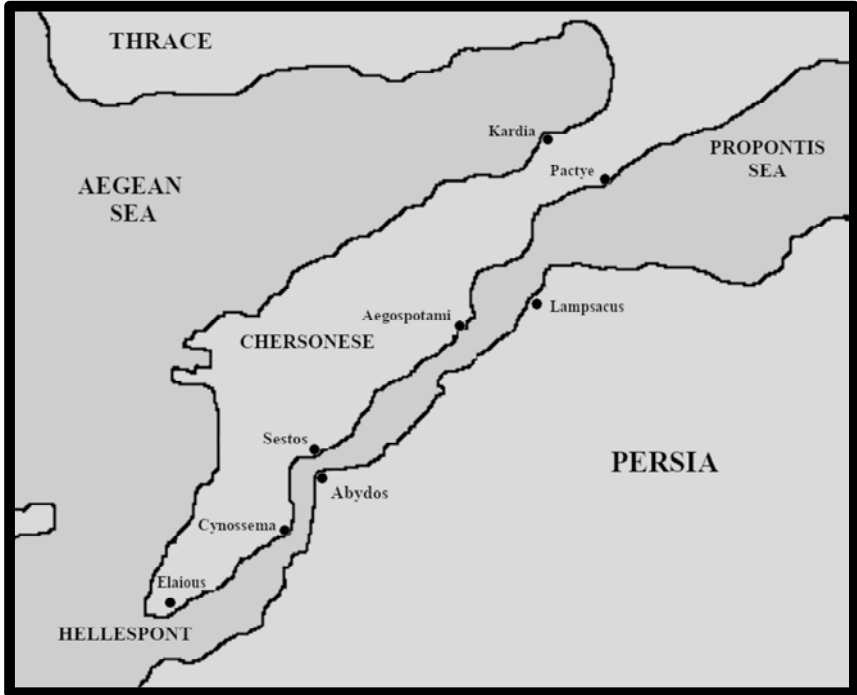
Ancient World 413 B.C.



Western Persia



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Book of the Year 2019
Gifts of the Gods: Silver and Gold

“From the festival of Pyanepsion in Sicily to the utter defeat of the Athenian army under Nicias during the Siege of Syracuse, Gift of the Gods: Silver and Gold is in all ways a Historical Fiction triumph.

Told from the viewpoint of five very different people from opposing sides, the book is as rich and as potent as the wine once served in the dive bars in Syracuse, Sicily. This is a story that is not only tense, powerful and compulsive in the telling, but one that is also profoundly moving. The author has brought this time and place back to life in his crystalline prose and compelling narrative. His attention to the historical detailing is as staggering as it is accurate.

But, this book is not for the faint-hearted. Berry does not gloss over the history, nor does he gloss over the reality of the battles and the appalling treatment and torture of the prisoners. This book is a realistic retelling of this period of history.

Berry is a master at his craft. His writing is as effortless to read as watching a Wolfgang Petersen's Troy, and it is just as rewarding. This skill is clearly demonstrated when he brings back to life the excitement, the danger, and the thrill of chariot racing at the Olympics. I could feel and see the enthusiasm of the crowd, the nervous agitation of the horses, and the determination of the competitors. Brilliantly written and wholly unforgettable.

There is enough adrenaline in this book to keep you reading all night. It is one of those stories that you simply cannot put down. Fans of battle heavy historical fiction will fall in love with this book. There is no doubt in my mind that Thomas Berry has written a masterpiece.”

Winner - Book of the Year, Historical Fiction
Silver Award, 2019

-Mary Anne Yarde. The Coffee Pot Book Club

Book of the Year 2018

Gifts of the Gods: Iron and Bronze

“From the opening chapter, I was left in no doubt that Berry is a vivacious storyteller. He writes with both elegance and authority. I lost myself in this spell-binding epic retelling of the events that led up to the Peloponnesian War and the war itself.

Berry's lucid historical insight gave this book authenticity, and the fast-paced narrative kept me turning those pages. Gifts of the Gods: Iron and Bronze is an example of historical fiction at its very best. Filled with memorable characters, adventure, war, love, hate, retribution, and forgiveness, there is certainly something for everyone within this book's pages.

The battle scenes were skillfully done. As a reader, I experienced the anticipation, the fear, the horror as well as the exhaustion of those involved. The realities of what a soldier's life was like was not brushed over with fancy prose. It was gritty and harsh.

This book explores both the darkness and the lighter side of human nature. There are vile deeds but also brave endeavors.

Berry has to be commended for the amount of research he has done to bring this ancient world back to life. The story is vast and yet utterly dazzling. Gifts of the Gods: Iron and Bronze is a historical triumphant.”

**Winner - Book of the Year, Historical Fiction
Silver Award, 2018**

-Mary Anne Yarde. The Coffee Pot Book Club

High Praise for
Lewis and Clark: Murder on the Natchez Trace

"A skillfully interwoven saga of twin stories of discovery. Thomas Berry has shown a great respect for and understanding of history as he takes us through his tale of what may have been, which includes an engrossing description of the Battle of New Orleans; the culmination of America's second war for independence. This book is quite highly recommended..."

- AllBooks Review

Critical Acclaim for
Texas Freedom: Last Stand at the Alamo

"Thomas Berry evinces a true love of history and a respect for accuracy that is quite rare. He exhibits a great ability to tell a good story. This book is highly recommended."

- AllBooks Review

Soaring Review for
Crosshairs

"Meticulously authenticated...a World War II saga that contains a vast amount of technical information, war strategies, experiments, failures, missions, losses, and weather-related catastrophes, all artfully intertwined into a compelling narrative."

- AllBooks Review

Chapter 1

Piraeus

11th day of Poseideon
December 21, 413BC

≈ Lissy ≈

Thick, acrid smoke hung in the air like a blanket. The sun had risen two hours earlier, but little could be seen of it along the Watering Lane. It was a dreary place in the best of times with small, dirty houses built on top of one another in the poorest district in Piraeus. People stopped and stared at the fiery spectacle. They clogged the narrow streets and covered their faces against the heat and the thick smoke.

One house was ablaze, a small timbered hut crammed with recent immigrants from the islands, but the flames had already spread to adjacent structures. It was only a matter of time before the entire block went up. The heat pulsed through the street as flames licked hungrily at the dry wooden structure.

“Help!” A thin wail arose from somewhere deep within the thick smoke. “Save my...” but an explosion of fire suddenly ripped through a small window and cut off her cries. Many in the streets ran for cover as bits of blackened timber and glowing sparks filled the air around them. The curious spectacle was getting dangerous now.

A young woman ran around the corner suddenly with a man at her heels. She was small in stature, but her frame belied a strength that could only have come from a lifetime of hard labor. Her face registered shock and despair at the sight before her. This was her community, her neighborhood. When she focused on the source of the flames, her heart skipped a beat. This was close to her home! “Damn the gods!” she cried as she ran forward.

A firm hand gripped her arm. “No, Lissy! There is nothing you can do, not now. You’ll only get yourself hurt...or worse.”

“Matty, what about Cora?” Her friend had been at home watching the children. For all she knew, they were still in the inferno.

“If they got out, they’re safe. If not...” the man’s voice trailed away.

Suddenly, she tore herself loose from his grip and ran forward, almost blind in the intense smoke emanating from the fire. She noticed a dozen

men armed with buckets of water had made vain attempts to quell the blaze, but they couldn't get near enough to make any progress. Fires in the crowded districts often had to burn themselves out, frequently at the expense of entire blocks. The poor accepted their lot in life and often just picked up and moved on. For some, however, tragedies cut deeper to the bone.

She looked frantically around, hoping to catch a glimpse of her friend or her two young children in the crowd of onlookers but they were nowhere to be found. The heat kept her back, however, and she was forced to watch helplessly from a distance as the flames leaped from one building to the next. Tears streamed down her face as the fire raged out of control.

After an hour, Matty tugged at her arm. This time she followed him, but her heart was broken. No one could recall seeing Cora or her two young children exit the house, and the cry from within was heard by more than a few onlookers. It confirmed Lissy's worst fears. Her friend was gone and the innocent babes too. Their home and the entire block would be reduced to ashes by nightfall. It was almost too much to bear.

She closed her eyes and slowed her breathing, hoping the raw intensity of those memories long ago would fade back into obscurity. The terrible fire had ravaged the southern district over three years ago, but it still seemed like yesterday. The songs must have brought it all back, she realized with sadness. They were sweet melodies to be sure, ones she and Cora used to love to chant and dance to when they thought they were alone...and even when they weren't.

"Is everything alright, Lis?"

Her brother stood beside her with a worried look on his face. He always seemed to know when she needed a shoulder to lean on. Lissy nodded quickly while wiping the tears away with the back of her hand.

Matty was all that remained of her old life. He had just turned 30 last month and was eight years her senior. He had a trim beard and a head of curly hair but kept it short in the local style. A simple woolen *chiton* covered his lean frame but underneath lay dozens of crisscrossed scars, all courtesy of the brutal overseers of his youth. The harsh yoke of Spartan rule had not been kind to him, but her brother had earned his freedom with blood, sweat, and a great deal of the gods' fortune. He was her salvation, her inspiration. She owed him everything and it was not enough.

"Yes, Matty, I'm...I'm alright. That song..."

"I remember, dear sister. Sometimes I think about them too."

“Do you...miss them? I know Cora was quite fond of you and the kids loved it when you carried them on your shoulders.”

Matty smiled but kept his thoughts to himself. She understood. Some things were better left unsaid.

The pair was close to the open courtyard in the port of Piraeus, six miles southwest of mighty Athens. A choral contest was underway on the steps of Athena’s temple and they had stopped to listen before heading home for the night. It was a lively affair and dozens of people, mostly older men and a handful of women, were enjoying the festive display of youth.

The small town had been their home ever since Athens signed the peace treaty with Sparta eight years before. Piraeus was a remarkable piece of land and represented a truly unique perspective on the future of city projects. It had been Matty’s idea to settle in the area and take advantage of the quiet atmosphere while still living near a major metropolis. The best of both worlds, he had said at the time. Over the years, she had come to agree with him.

The entire town was an experiment in urban planning, the first of its kind in the known world. It was designed by Hippodamus of Miletus 50 years before during the reign of the Olympian, Pericles. The roads were straight and true, with segregated locations dedicated to government buildings, residential housing, public parks, theaters, and waterfront harbors. Most importantly, perhaps, adequate temples and monuments took center stage in the middle of the town, all dedicated to the divine entities who kept the people under their protection.

Three harbors surrounded the port and kept the dockworkers busy from dawn to dusk. Large merchant vessels from all over the Mediterranean and the Black Sea brought exotic wares to sell for a princely sum as well as more basic staples the average farmer could better afford. She was very familiar with the ship captains who frequented the port and knew which bars to avoid when their crews came ashore. Her brother had worked the docks for the past few years and often related violent and unsavory tales from the men across the waters.

It was all well and good, she thought, as the siblings headed south into the crowded neighborhoods where most of the waterfront families called home. Fancy streets and marble *stoas* meant little to people who struggled to put food on the table every day. If it wasn’t for her new husband and his family, they wouldn’t have a place at all. Lissy was not one to forget where she came from.

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She wondered, not for the first time, when those tall ships would be sighted off the southern coast and turn majestically into the harbors once again. The colors would be flying, of course, representing the great families of Athens who financed the *triremes* and the men who rowed them. Tropenzo had signed with the *Ulysses*, the flagship of Eurymedon, a general of distinction and honor. He had been excited at the prospect of going to Sicily last year.

Like most men of simple means, Trop had jumped at the chance for a steady wage and guaranteed employment for a few months. He had a small family to support and his meager income cutting hair for the sailors coming ashore barely made ends meet. He was a good father and a loyal husband, a man Lissy was content to spend the rest of her days with. She prayed for his safe return every night and kept vigil during the dark, bleak hours when the rest of the house was asleep.

Lissy was of medium height with a lean build, and a round, pleasant face. She wore her long black hair loosely around her shoulders today. Tucking a few strands absently behind her right ear, she opened a rusted iron gate and approached the small house she shared with her husband's family.

She greeted her oldest daughter in the courtyard with a hug and kiss. Three-year-old Dionosa was a happy child, full of wonder and mischief, but she was far behind her peers and barely walked on her own, even now. Lissy had known something was wrong in the first days after birth but she refused to abandon the tiny babe to the wolves. The flat facial features, slanted eyes, and short neck hinted at a serious imbalance in her little body. In some respects, she knew, it would have been easier on the family if she had, but the former slave had seen enough death and hardship in her short life. She had been determined to keep the child and never had a day's regret, despite what others thought.

Trop's mother stood in the doorway, holding the youngest in her arms. Where Nosa was small and dim-witted, her little sister, Thea, was growing stronger with each passing month. She was just over a year now and already walking under her own power. Blond and fair, the toddler was different in most respects to her dark-haired sister. Lissy was grateful for her mother-in-law's help with the kids. The young woman would have loved to spend more time at home but her earnings at the factory helped them all while her husband was away.

She had given birth just two weeks after the second fleet had departed to the colonial island far to the west. Lissy wanted to greet Trop with their

new daughter when he finally stepped on home soil once more. Her husband had been gone for too long already! It was time he saw his new daughter with his own eyes.

“How is Thea’s head today?” she asked. The toddler had bruised it this morning during a fall, but it hadn’t appeared too serious at the time. Some injuries took a while to show their true colors, however.

“She’s seen worse,” the older woman said matter-of-factly. “Nothing ever seems to slow that one down.” Pomperousa was never especially fond of children, even the two boys she had raised in these mean port districts. Lissy knew Trop’s mother had always aspired for more out of her life but reality had a way of knocking those dreams back to earth.

“Got an extra shift tomorrow,” Matty announced once the family was together once more. “Should go a long way towards buying another damned goat. Old Rammi’s seen her last good days. The little ones need the milk and we...”

“Could do with some of your delicious cheese, mother,” Lissy interjected. Pomperousa smiled thinly but gave a slight nod. It was as much acknowledgment as they were likely to get from her.

As the god, Helios, pulled the setting sun over the horizon with his golden chariot, his sister, Selene, was just starting her nighttime journey on the opposite coast. The moon was only half full tonight but as it began to rise, Lissy took the children to bed with her. Tomorrow was another long day.

The house was situated in a cluster of ramshackle dwellings that had been thrown up to support the strong backs running the docks. They were single-story affairs, unremarkable at best, with a small kitchen and two bedrooms surrounding a small open-air courtyard. This permitted a cool breeze coming off the water to circulate through the house and provide relief for the people during the hot summer months.

The rooms were stuffy with only a lone small window from which to look outside. Thin piles of straw were bundled against the far wall and she took Nosa into her arms and cuddled down with her until she fell into a peaceful sleep. Thea lay across her right leg, dead to the world. The hours of darkness were always a time for family, and with such tight quarters, there was little room for privacy. Still, she knew it was a far leap from the slave huts she grew up on. She listened contently to the children’s breathing before drifting off herself.

The next morning, brother and sister headed north once more, he for the docks and she for the factories on the far side of the great bay. Lissy

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spent up to ten hours each day crafting sandals and other footwear for export across the sea. The temperature this morning was noticeably warmer than yesterday, she remarked to Matty. He was quick to remind her that tomorrow could swing back to freezing. Such was the case when the earth goddess, Demeter, mourned the passing of her daughter to the underworld each year. Come spring, however, her return meant blooming flowers and hopefully a bountiful harvest. Many songs had been written over the years about their story and the chorus of young girls had sung it quite well the day before, much to Lissy's delight.

Several ships were already in port today, 400-ton vessels from the Arabian deserts of Libya and two smaller ones from the coastal towns of mountainous Italy. Their holds were full of wooden crates, clay jars, and precious valuables destined for Athens and the surrounding countryside. Matty and his friends would have their work cut out for them today, she mused.

On the south side of the harbor stood a wide assortment of small buildings that catered to the hundreds of sailors and marines coming ashore each day. Most offered watered-down wine and young, beautiful women in equal measure while a few down along the far western edge offered more practical services. For those men looking to clean up their appearance before heading up to the city, several barbers clipped their beards and trimmed their hair for a modest price. Her husband had worked for Old Vollanty going on five years now and enjoyed his work even if the pay wasn't as good as what the strong backs got unloading the cargo ships along the quay.

She smiled when she saw a familiar figure suddenly emerge from the building where Trop had recently worked. Lissy was sure her husband would be able to get his job back once the fleet returned. He was a good employee and never missed a day due to drink. Even his boss couldn't say the same.

She was about to wave to the old man but suddenly withdrew her hand, noting the look of fear on his face. Something was terribly wrong. He had a desperate look about him and seemed to be struggling with some inner demons. She pointed him out to Matty and hurried to the barber before her brother could object. Reluctantly, he followed.

"What's the matter, Vollanty?" she asked, trying to keep her tone calm.

When he saw the woman standing before him, the old man's features fell, and he cried out in sorrow. He reached for her arm and almost collapsed. Matty jumped in to steady him.

“Tell us,” her brother commanded. “What’s this all about?”

The barber looked at Matty and seemed to get a grip on himself. But when he spoke, his voice seemed thin and frail. “A sailor stopped into my shop just now. He’s still there, in fact. He was on the ship from Locri and...and...”

“What did he say?” Lissy asked in earnest.

“The fleets we sent out to Sicily have been destroyed! Both of them! The men have all been killed or taken prisoner but even those are not being exchanged. Almost everyone we knew is gone! The people of Athens have lost their fathers, sons, brothers, and friends! It is too much to bear! I must tell the authorities!” With those words, the old barber left the siblings and ran for the hill that led to the city up above.

Chapter 4

Sparta

22nd day of Gamelion
January 30, 412BC

≈≈ Aleki ≈≈

Glistening frost hung on the warrior's sharp features and the long, sharp sword that reached ever skyward. His flowing cloak splayed out across his broad back, marking him as one of Sparta's elite. The crimson color had lost some of its hue, but it was still vibrant, nonetheless. It had been almost a decade since his nephew has been killed fighting the Athenians up in the north country, but the people had not forgotten him.

Statues and busts of Brasidas stood alongside other heroes of the times all up and down the coast. The stonework would crumble one day and the paint fade over time but the stories...those would last as long as the people drew breath on this earth.

Aleki knew people grew inspiration from seeing their idols such as the Kings Leonidas and Menelaus and bold demigods like Heracles and Ajax. It encouraged them to excel in their training and strive towards greatness, all done for the good of the State. He had realized long ago that such accolades would never belong to him, but a true son of Sparta did not seek reward or personal fame for himself. He was proud of the boy, he had to admit. Brasidas had never shied away from danger nor commanded his men from a position of safety. He was a soldier, first and foremost, and had set the bar high for all the soldiers serving under him.

The old man grunted and turned to watch a group of young cadets practicing in the field. At 60, he was well past his prime by the standards of the warrior class. Aleki was a small, thin man who had spent his career alongside the strongest and bravest the world had to offer. He had never risen above infantry captain despite several campaigns, and those were long forgotten now. The memories and the few friends left who shared them were all he had these days.

"Damn sight to see," he declared ruefully. "Those jackrabbits will run at the first sign of trouble, mark my words! How are they ever gonna hold the line?"

“Not like when we were young, eh?” Hiram replied with a laugh. “I seem to recall your grandfather saying the same about us, ya raven!”

“Give ‘em time to grow into those weapons too,” Neomantus cautioned. “The kids can’t be more than eight or nine at most. You weren’t lifting full shield and spear back then and I doubt you can now!” All three of them laughed heartily as the ribbing continued in short order.

Despite the cold weather, the young boys were dressed in simple woolen shifts as were most of the men observing them. Several older youths were in charge and barked orders as the two dozen cadets charged their opponent once more. Burdened under the weight of heavy, wooden shields, the tired group seemed noticeably slower than before. Fatigue was their real adversary, and no one wanted to come up short. The drills continued for the next two hours. As the younger students left the plains, three dozen older boys marched onto the field, stripped down to their waist and eager to show their superiors what they could do.

Aleki and his companions eyed the proceedings with amusement. They enjoyed spending their mornings out here watching the next generation of soldiers assert themselves. The young commanders were looking to be noticed by the adult officers around them just as much as the cadets were. They knew their performances would be broken down and discussed at length in the mess halls that evening.

Several groups of men stood off along the northern plains, talking among themselves in hushed tones. They were dressed in more colorful garments than Aleki had seen of late. Long flowing robes of blue and ivory complemented their golden sandals. Their manner of dress identified them as foreigners, particularly Persians from the distant shores of Asia Minor. They were an unusual selection to have been admitted to the Spartan stronghold and Aleki was not sure if it had been a wise decision.

The chronicles of the Persian invasion 70 years before had grown into the stuff of legend. Every Spartan boy learned about the brave stand taken by King Leonidas and his 300 warriors at the Thermopylae pass, the destruction of the imperial fleet at Salamis, and the final rout of the invaders on the battlefield outside Plataea. The Persians had brought a quarter of a million soldiers and a vast fleet of ships to wipe Hellas off the map and succeeded in part by burning Athens to the ground. Xerxes, their arrogant king, set off a chain of events that rippled down through the decades and unwittingly started a Hellenic civil war long after his death.

Seeing Persians standing on such hallowed ground left a bitter taste in his mouth, but Aleki knew to keep his thoughts to himself for now. Times

were changing yet again, and it would be interesting to see how things played out. These days, Sparta had no conflict with the men across the sea. It was those in their own backyard who had long stirred up trouble. Athens had risen from the ashes, built up a strong and disciplined navy, and formed a vast empire of subject states stretching across hundreds of island and coastal towns. For the past 20 years, they had been a thorn in Sparta's side, first as outright enemies and later as wary allies. Now the recent events in Sicily had brought the hated empire to its knees and everyone wanted to be the first to deliver the killing blow.

"It's not my place to say," Neo muttered under his breath, "but the King needs to make a decision soon or the opportunity will be lost. Which direction will Pleistoanax take, do you reckon?"

"It's not Pleistoanax I'd be concerned with," Hiram countered. "Agis, from what I've heard, has been making his own decisions on where our troops should be heading, if anywhere at all."

"Spartans have no use for baubles and trinkets although I'm sure both sides will offer us plenty," Aleki smirked. "That's why we keep to ourselves, but they just don't understand. Our world view is simple and straightforward. If only the rest of mankind acted like us!"

He noticed another foreigner approach from the direction of the Bronze House, a sacred temple north of the square. The man was tall and strongly built with a mass of brown, wavy hair that cascaded about his shoulders. Wearing a tunic of undyed wool, the former Athenian General could have easily been mistaken for one of the heroic legends of yesteryear.

"Alcibiades, it's good to see you observing our youth this morning. We seem to be drawing a crowd today." Aleki nodded in the direction of the well-dressed Persian envoys.

"Yes, old man," the Athenian replied with a laugh. "They are the future, I'm told. None of us are getting any younger."

"You've been here over two years now," Hiram stated matter-of-factly. "You've adapted yourself to Spartan customs far better than I thought you would. However, as much as a man may try to hide his past, he can never truly escape it. Athens is as much a part of you as Persia is to them," he said. "You have a mind that was not molded in the Spartan tradition. What are your thoughts on their bids for conquest?"

Alcibiades smiled. He was, and always would be, an outsider to this close-minded group, but patience and good fortune had given him an unprecedented role in Spartan politics. Wherever he walked among his former enemies, he gave wise and sage counsel and his reputation for

strategic thinking soon won him the ear of the King himself...and his beautiful wife. With Agis out campaigning in the field and Pleistoanax wrapped up in domestic disputes, the traitor from Athens quickly found himself in the center of Spartan affairs.

The Athenian nodded towards the first group where four regal-looking men watched with little fanfare. "The Persians from Sardis support the Chian revolution as do I," he replied. "The governor, Tissaphernes, understands that if Athens were to lose her hold on those island colonies, especially Chios, they would come under his authority once again. He has fallen behind on the required tribute King Darius requires from his Ionian districts. Ridding himself of Athens might just save his head as well. But the Chians need our help if they are to break away from the Athenian empire altogether. It would be a lightning strike, quick and direct. Right now, only a small minority of their people even know about their rebellious intentions. Sparta needs to act fast if they want to keep it that way."

"Why do you support this group rather than the contingent from the Hellespont district?" Neo asked. "Surely the navy who controls the grain shipments out of the Black Sea can starve all others into submission."

"Pharnabazus is the governor of the northern Persian districts and he wants Sparta's aid for much the same reason as their southern neighbors. That kind of commitment is a long-term investment. It requires considerable funding and extensive planning. I should know something about that!" he laughed.

"And what of Agis?" Aleki inquired. "I'm sure you've heard by now that other emissaries are asking him for support as well."

"Your Spartan King has a considerable army behind him," Alcibiades replied. "Even more than we have here at the moment. He has been spending time canvassing Attica and gathering to himself more men, arms, and funds to spearhead an assault on my former home. Now he suddenly has options. I have heard Euboea wants a quick revolt from Athens and has asked for his aid before anyone else did. They ship a substantial amount of food to Athens each month, as you know, and it would be a stab in the heart if the capital was to suddenly lose another grain route. From what my spies report, the King promised them several ships and a handful of able commanders."

"But then Lesbos came calling," Neo interjected.

"Yes, indeed, and that put our King in another dilemma! Suddenly Lesbos wanted to revolt from Athens, and they garnered the support of our Boeotian allies. He can't back both revolutions at once and was loath to ask

the *ephors* back home for support. Agis is an experienced leader, so he made his own choice. Without knowing our situation here with the Persians, he agreed to send ten ships with Boeotia supplying ten more. In addition, he's providing them 300 freed *helots*. Those *neodamodeis* have become an important part of his army, thanks to Brasidas in the last war. He was your nephew, am I right?"

"Yeah," Aleki said with pride. "His statue is right over there." He pointed out the eight-foot stone monument that had been erected three years before.

"You've got quite the family line, old man," Alcibiades replied. "Wasn't the Spartan admiral who defeated my fleet in Sicily related to you as well?"

"Andreas is a mothax, not a true Peer, but he did well to make a name for himself. He's my brother's son, and I'll claim him as mine."

Alcibiades laughed again. "Coming from a race of people without much experience on the water, he managed to outsmart the best Athens put against him and with considerably less to work with. Corinth and Syracuse, at least in my mind, wouldn't hold a candle to my fleet. But yet somehow, here we are!"

"It stopped being your fleet, Athenian, the moment they came to arrest you," Neo replied a little hotly. "You left them to their fate. Their failure was ultimately yours as well."

Alcibiades bowed his head in submission. "I quite agree with you. If I had retained command, I would have conquered the entire island in short order. But the fickle gods decided to cut me down in my prime and now I will do the same to Athens. I am no traitor, sir, for the government I once supported turned their backs on me. I love the city and will one day return but the men in control must first be brought low. That is why I will give my support to Tissaphernes and the revolt at Chios. If Athens can be defeated quickly and decisively, I will be able to return in triumph that much faster. It is all for the better!"

Chapter 7

Sparta

29th day of Thargelion
June 4, 412BC

≈≈ Troezenus ≈≈

What areas of the body should you exercise to alleviate fear?”
A youth of 19 stood at attention at the center of the room. His eyes locked onto the speaker. “Lungs, knees, lower back, shoulder, and loins!”

“What are the causes and symptoms of *Nekrophaneia*?” another asked in quick succession.

“The ‘little death’ is brought on by exhaustion and dehydration. The warrior suffers convulsions and unconsciousness. It represents the point of no return for the spirit. One can be revived only if immediate care is given.”

“Have you ever seen someone reach this point, Menkalos?”

The young man looked out across the room and spotted the Athenian exile. He was a well-known figure in Endius’ mess and quite highly regarded.

“Yes, General,” he replied, using the man’s former rank as a sign of respect. “Twice, in fact. Both in my company, last year. One survived. The other...did not.”

The sweltering day had turned into an uncomfortably hot evening. 23 men sat on stiff wooden benches and listened attentively while eating small bowls of black broth. Full Peers all, they encompassed a wide range of ages and experiences. Three older youths had been invited from the senior ranks of the *agoge* to be interrogated and lectured by wily veterans of past campaigns.

Cleonpus was the oldest among them and could remember with perfect clarity the infamous *helot* rebellion that nearly destroyed the Spartan villages 50 years before. Others had served in the last war over a decade ago, a long bloody affair that had pitted neighboring city-states against each other leaving few untouched by its impact. Younger men had watched a fragile peace with Athens shatter as tensions escalated beyond repair. The ancient traditions and long oral history forged the backbone of the isolated

militant State. The men who would lead them into the future had much to learn.

A tall man walked slowly towards the front of the room wearing a nondescript woolen *chiton* and a crimson cloak draped across his back. Endius was the benefactor of the group, a man of power and prestige who owned the two-story building they frequented each night just a stone's throw from the Eurotas River.

The room was utilitarian in nature. Iron tools of all kinds hung from the walls while bloody carcasses of chickens and other fowl lay stacked up on a far table. A pair of mangy dogs wandered among the men hoping for a few scraps of food. The best cuts of meat had been doled into the bowls of the younger men upon whom the future of the city rested. Some of the older ones occasionally passed a few morsels down to the hungry mutts when no one was looking.

Endius was the wealthiest man in Sparta, a society that had long ago forsaken greed by giving up money and material goods. The purists still rankled at the changing times but men with influence and power still managed to rise to the top. He controlled more farmland than anyone south of the Taygetos mountains and his personal army of loyal followers dwarfed anything either of Sparta's true kings could bring together. He served this year on the important council of *ephors*, men entrusted to keep the two Spartan monarchs from overreaching their power.

"Before we continue the questioning of our young men, I have news to convey from the King," he began without preamble. "After more than ten months abroad, he is returning to Sparta and will arrive in a matter of days. There are recent developments regarding the Chian expedition, however, that concern us all."

The expedition to Chios had long been expected and it came as a surprise to no one to hear it had officially been launched. Messengers from Corinth had arrived several days ago to report the findings of the allied Council. Endius had relayed Agis' plan to send five warships under Spartan ownership in a second wave to support the rebellion, along with dozens of others from key cities in the Peloponnese. The vast Empire of Athens was soon going to become a lot smaller, he had boasted.

Tonight, the handsome officer wore a sobering face. He had a personal stake in the expedition, having fronted the money to build and supply one of the swift *triremes* now moored at the mouth of the river several miles downstream. He had a sailing crew of almost 200 men as well as a handful

of trusted Peers armed with sword and spear to guide the islanders once the troops arrived to assist them. Now he had to tell them it was all for nothing.

“The initial launch of 21 warships from Corinth has been intercepted by Athens,” he began slowly. “Most of the vessels are still intact but they are now blockaded in a small harbor a few miles south of the Isthmus. Ground troops have assaulted our forces and have only been repulsed with heavy casualties. The expedition commander, Alcamenes, whom most of you know, has been killed and Agis has sent them another commander to take over. Themon was at Decelea and is heading there now.”

“That’s terrible,” someone responded in a shocked voice. “We should march out and drive the Athenians off!” His call to arms was met by a chorus of approvals from around the room.

“If Spartan pride were the only thing at stake, I might agree with you,” he continued, “however, the King has to consider the larger picture. How does this setback affect the Chian rebellion and our desire to curtail Athens’ military might?”

“Don’t tell me he got cold feet,” someone murmured in the back of the room. Troezenus was not a native of Sparta and had no ties to the closed society where he and his friends now lived. Yet, he had more to lose than any of the warriors wearing the crimson cloaks if the expedition was held up.

He was a tall man in his late thirties with a head of black, curly hair that he had grown long since their arrival here three years earlier. Troezenus was the most scholarly of his small but close-knit group of friends and had learned the intricacies of legal documents at the knee of his father, an official of the late, great Pericles. As a result, he had also taken on a curious nickname.

“Bet you ten to one that he did, Memo,” murmured his companion. Doro shook his head sadly and took a quick swig from a small cup beside him. Unlike his long Athenian robes of old, his short woolen *chiton* could not hide the scared right arm from the curious and the young. Only the night brought any sense of relief...and the wine.

“Quiet, the lot of you,” growled a third man. “I sense more is coming. This could impact us all if I’m not mistaken.” Alcibiades was not one given to dread and pessimism, so his friends knew something had to be troubling him. Memo thought he knew what it was.

Endius continued, keeping his voice measured and strong. “The King realizes that Athens has accumulated a navy once again, at least a few dozen ships, maybe more. It was our hope their *triremes* being built in

Piraeus would not be ready for several more weeks but this attack upon our expedition has proven otherwise. Agis has now decided to withhold our own five vessels from the second wave to Chios. He does not want a repeat of this debacle.”

This time Alcibiades stood up to face his old friend. Memo watched the showdown with a hint of amusement. It was like watching two tigers circle each other slowly, hoping to find a weakness before one of them suddenly strikes. The Spartan and Athenian had been friends for decades and their unusual bond had transcended wars and strife. However, neither man was afraid to mix it when the moment was right.

“Endius,” Alcibiades called out. All heads turned to look at the Athenian exile with a keen eye. Despite his foreigner status, he was well-liked by the Spartan populace and many often sought his counsel on matters both public and private. His friendship with the powerful *ephor* was well-known even if his motivations were not.

“Yes, Alcibiades, I understand your role in the expedition must now wait until another time, but Agis...”

“Damn it, we don’t have the luxury of waiting on this!” Alcibiades lashed out in anger. “Athens does not have the strength to suppress a revolt at Chios yet. That will soon change if we stand by and do nothing. I know Agis is discouraged but that is no excuse for Sparta to turn its back on its allies. You still have the power to override him. Send the five ships to Chios and let me command! I’ll get us through any Athenian force they send against us, no matter the numbers! I know the Athenian navy. Hell, I built their damn fleet myself! I know every trick they will pull to stop you.”

Endius looked irritated but kept his calm. He was not on the best of terms with the King but did not feel he had sufficient grounds to reverse his decision. Tonight, he was only an officer relaying critical information to his messmates. He expected the men in the room to listen and accept the advice from their monarch. However, the Athenian exiles were a breed apart, raised with a democratic mindset where questions were encouraged, not ignored.

“There will be other expeditions, I’m sure,” Endius continued, hoping his friend would drop the matter. Alas, it was not to be.

“The rebellion on Chios will shift the balance of power in the Aegean,” Alcibiades countered. “If it spreads to the colonies on Asia Minor, as I expect it will, Athens will be hard-pressed to contain it. Who do you think will get credit for supporting the rebels? Agis, I have no doubt, in spite of the fact that he now wants to keep our few ships from aiding our allies. But

if you send them, Endius, all the credit will be yours and the glory that goes with it! I much prefer to see you accept the praise for this venture, and there is not a man in this room who would disagree!”

“Here, here!” Memo shouted with gusto and more chimed in all around him. It was not the Spartan custom to put oneself over the good of the State, or the King, but Endius had not reached his position by passing up opportunities. His father and grandfather had increased the size of their estate by buying up property of their less fortunate comrades, full Peers who had fallen on hard times. They bred loyalty by using their money and influence to cover mess hall fees for those unable to pay and helping others purchase much-needed armor and weapons. Spartan warriors of this class, no matter what their ancient lawgivers thought, still needed funds to keep their status as true Peers of the State.

“I...I will take the matter to the council of *ephors*, Alcibiades,” Endius agreed after a time, “but I warn you they will not overturn the King’s decision lightly unless he has acted outside the laws. There will be no further discussion on this tonight. It is time to bring our youth forward once more and question them on matters of doctrine and principle!” With that, he turned towards a captain next to him who rose to begin the next phase of the evening.

Two hours later, the dinner broke up and each man began to walk back towards his house for the night. The group of Athenian exiles had been living together in the eastern section of Limnon, near the temple of Athena Chalkioikos, or the Bronze House as it was usually called owing to the thin metal walls that encased the inner sanctuary. It was a holy place indeed, but any Spartan knew its infamous history. The King had thought it a fitting landmark to watch over the foreign exiles from Athens.

Alcibiades walked ahead with Doro and Three-Fingers, but Memo fell behind, caught up in conversation with a few of the young men from the *agoge*. When they parted after a short time, he noticed Endius approach, something quite unusual for the powerful *ephor*. He had been elected to this office a few months before and had been offered to lead the Council as *Eponymous Epor*, a title which granted him renowned status for having the Spartan year named after him.

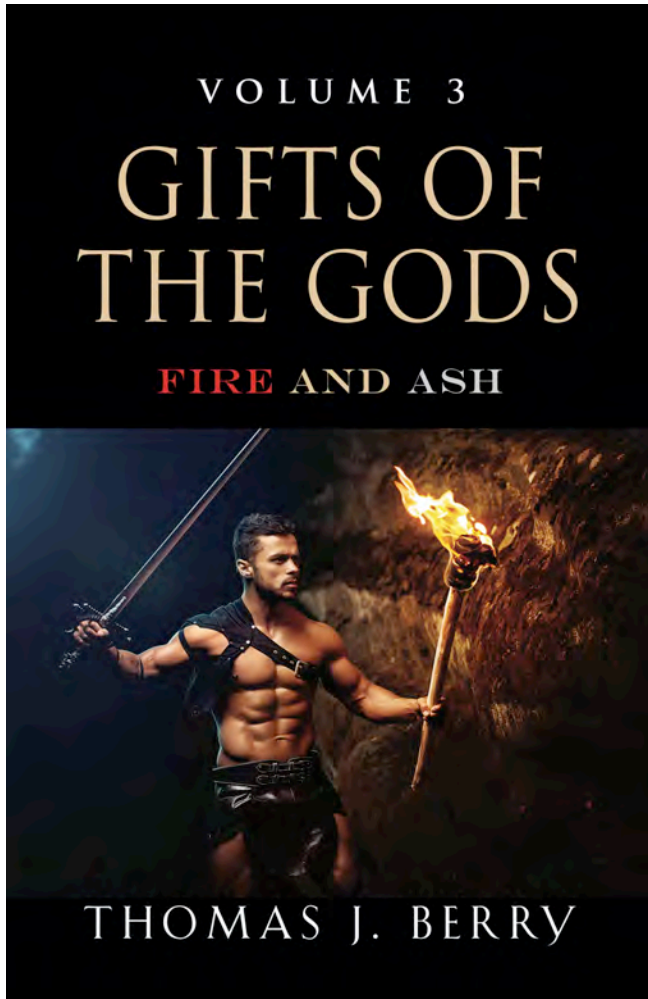
“Mind some company, Troezenus?” Endius inquired. They walked down the Righteous Road without speaking for several minutes. Memo knew there was something on the *ephor*’s mind, a question that seemed hard for him to talk about.

“What’s troubling you, Endius?” he finally asked. The silence was killing him.

“It’s our mutual friend,” the Spartan said slowly. “I was taken aback tonight by his powerful arguments about the King’s decision. There was a lot of talk and bluster, but I know him better than most. He is usually two or three moves ahead of everyone else on the board. He wants me to override the King and allow the ships to proceed to Chios. I heard what he said tonight. I need to know what he is holding back from me. What is his real motivation?”

Memo thought it might come to this. If it would help Alcibiades achieve his ends, it might be worthwhile to share some knowledge with the Spartan. “Alcibiades, as you know, has been spending a lot of personal time with the Queen this year. You know the type of man he is, Endius. Her child, Leotychides, was born only a month ago. Agis may not be the smartest man in Sparta, but he can count just as well as you or I. Behind closed doors, she even calls the babe Alcibiades. You didn’t hear it from me, but the prince is not the king’s son. Alcibiades seeks to leave Sparta before Agis returns and ends his life once and for all. A worthy goal, if ever there was one.”

Endius continued to walk in silence. Suddenly he stopped and turned towards Memo, his face grave and impassive. The moon’s weak light cast a pale glow across his face. “Alcibiades will have his ships. They will sail on the morrow.”



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