Pronunciation

Military terms

	Ancient Greek	Ancient Greek Pronunciation	English Pronunciation	Meaning
archon	ἄρχων	ark-own	ark-on	Ruler, leader.
epistates	ἐπιστάτης	ep-ist-at-airs	ep-ist-at-eez	Chairman in the Athenian Assembly.
lochagos	λοχαγός	lock-a-goss	lock-a-goss	Rank equivalent to captain.
phalanx	φάλαγξ	fal-anks	fal-anks	Body of heavily armed infantry.
strategos	στρατηγός	strat-air-goss	strat-egg-oss	General.
trierarch	τριήραρχος	tree-air-ark-oss	try-err-ark	Commander of a trireme.

Underlining indicates stressed syllables.

Locations

Agora	Ἀγορά	ag-or-a	ag-or-a	Open place, market.
Cypros	Κύπρος	cou-pros	sigh-prous	Island of Cyprus.
Delos	Δῆλος	dare-loss	dee-loss	Island birthplace of Apollo and Artemis.
Pnyx	Πνύξ	p-nooks	p-niks	'Packed in'. Hill. Meeting place of the Assembly in Athens.

Characters

Agariste	Ἀγαρίστη	ag-a-rist-air	ag-a-rist-ee	Mother of Pericles.
Anaxagoras	Ἀναξαγόρας	an-ax-ag-or-as	an-ax-ag-or-as	Friend of Pericles, natural philosopher.
Archidamus	Ἀρχίδαμος	ar-kee-dam-oss	ar-ki-dame-ous	King of Sparta.
Artaxerxes	Ἀρταξέρξης	art-ax-erks-airs	ar-ta-zerk-sees	King of Persia.
Aspasia	Ἀσπασία	asp-as-ee-a	asp-ays-ia	Hetaira, companion to Pericles.
Cimon	Κίμων	kim-own	ky-mon	Athenian general.
Ephialtes	Ἐφιάλτης	eff-ee-al-tairs	eff-ee-al-teez	Athenian politician.
Nicomedes	Νικομήδης	nik-om-air-dares	nik-a-meed-eez	Regent to Pleistonax.
Pericles	Περικλῆς	per-ik-lairs	per-ik-leez	Leader of Athens.
Pleistarchus	Πλείσταρχος	play-star-koss	play-star-kous	Spartan king, son of Leonidas.
Pleistonax (Pleistoanax)	Πλειστοάναξ	play-stow-an-ax	play-stow-nax	Spartan battle king who succeeded Pleistarchus.
Thetis	Θέτις	thett-iss	thee-tiss	Wife to Pericles.
Zeno	Ζήνων	zairn-own	zee-no	Friend of Pericles, natural philosopher.

Prologue

Arion waited on one knee, nervous in the presence of kings. After all, Pleistarchus was the son of Leonidas himself, a name all men knew. More, Pleistarchus looked like a warrior born, his limbs powerful, his every movement in balance. Yet the Spartan was one of two royal figures in that place, nor did their ephors kneel to either of them. It was a strange system to the watching eye of Arion. Though he had heard they were of common stock, the five ephors had real power, even in the royal palace.

From beneath his fringe, Arion watched them discuss the plea he had brought. There was clearly some difference of opinion and he wondered if he would be sent away again. He had been summoned and dismissed twice before, until he was repeating all his answers and his voice had grown hoarse.

He understood they wished to test his story, to judge from repeated details whether he had told the whole truth. He would not have wanted to lie to such men, he realised. Arion was no clever courtier, no bard or poet. He was just a young man, a runner, sent to ask for help from the greatest warriors in the world.

'Your king still lives? You say you saw him alive?' one of the ephors directed to him. It was the oldest one, scrawny-looking with deeply tanned skin and scars like stitched leather. Arion blinked as they all turned to hear his answer.

'As I said it, master. When I left, King Hesiodos was alive,

though defeated. The League fleet had Thasos surrounded on all sides. They pulled down the walls of the royal palace . . .'

'Some goat pen, I would imagine,' one of the ephors muttered to another.

Arion flushed and stopped talking.

'An entire fleet at anchor around Thasos, yet you escaped,' the oldest one said.

Tendons stood out in his neck as he watched the young messenger for any sign of evasion. Instead, Arion answered with barely controlled exasperation. He had spoken the truth. Though he feared them still, he was weary of their suspicion.

'I took only a coracle, a fishing boat any man can carry on his back. I waited in the woods until dark and then slipped across. I have fished those waters and I know them well.'

The ephor shook his head, his eyes black.

'He lies. It is a trap, some game of the Athenians.'

Arion breathed out. He did not know what he would have done if he had actually been lying. The truth was his only shield and so he repeated words he had come to know as well as his own name.

'King Hesiodos sent me to ask for help. No one else has the strength or the will to throw a rein on the men of Athens. Persia is no threat to us now. Only the League demands silver or ships, with threats of violence if we refuse! Who then is the tyrant? I was told to say, "Sparta leads the Hellenes, those who know the gods and the words of men. We do not ask for aid; we ask for justice. Nothing more."'

He watched as they turned back to their discussion. Three of the ephors raised their hands, with two shaking

their heads. A subtle tension left the group then. A decision had been made.

After a beat, it was King Pleistarchus who responded.

'We will take up your cause, Arion of Thasos. You have come to us in proper humility, as is right. We will restore the balance – and Athens will be made to answer for the crimes of her people.'

Arion felt a shiver go through him as he listened, awed at what he had brought into the world. Men would die because he had reached that place.

In the distance, a rumble began, a sound like distant thunder in the mountains that cupped the city of Sparta. Arion had taken ship for a good part of his journey but run the last days, coming through high passes where wild deer grazed. The floor trembled and he rested his palm on it. Such things were common enough in that land. He felt his stomach tighten even so. It was as if something approached, something huge that made him afraid.

'Master . . .' he began.

'The earth shakes,' the other king said as if to a child.

Archidamus was young to have such power in that group. Yet they were respectful, as far as Arion could see. He'd understood the man was somehow a king of Spartans outside the field of war, though he could still lead in battle. Pleistarchus was the battle king, though he could apparently rule on civil matters as well. It was more complicated than the island of Thasos, that was certain. Arion shook his head, waiting for the trembling to stop. He had known such things before, along with the sense of utter wrongness that went with them. It never lasted long.

'Master,' Arion said again. 'I think . . .'

They all turned as a great crack appeared in one of the

walls. Arion could see dust shimmering along the polished floor, invisible before, but suddenly there, rising and falling. Another crack appeared, spreading in veins. The two kings looked at one another.

'We should go outside . . .' Archidamus said.

The ephors were already moving when the true earthquake hit.

Arion found himself on his back and realised he had been thrown. The ground had risen under him, rippling like water. He gaped at sunlight as the roof tore apart. Walls were falling and he heard one of the ephors cry out, the sound cut off as he was crushed.

Kings and men alike ran into the evening air, the royal palace crashing down behind them. Even as they moved, the ground surged again, hurling them from their feet. The air smelled foul, of damp and sickness released, as if they breathed airs of the underworld. Dust covered them all, billowing from the palace. It coated their skin grey, with splashes of bright blood where they had been scraped or cut. Arion saw kings of Sparta standing with weapons drawn, as if they could fight an invisible enemy who flung them like children.

All the while, the rumbling increased. They stood on a hill, looking down a street as it collapsed onto those who lived there. As the sun set, the entire city of Sparta bucked and kicked. Arion saw temples and houses made rubble. Somewhere nearby, screaming sounded, the high voices of women and children, of pain and shock.

'Go to the barracks. Bring the army,' Archidamus ordered.

His battle king raced away, weaving between fallen blocks of marble as more walls fell and broke apart. Dust

filled the street and there were already figures staggering, bloody and confused.

Arion looked for orders. He was a man of Thasos rather than Sparta, but there was something about the sheer scale of this that meant he did not hesitate.

'What can I do?' he asked the Spartan king.

'Help the trapped,' Archidamus said without hesitation.

A clatter of running men made them both turn. Twenty Spartan soldiers came through the dust with swords drawn and cloaks swirling. Archidamus snapped orders to them, sending them into fallen houses along the street. As Arion watched, they heaved masonry away with astonishing vigour, revealing flopping limbs that looked almost part of the dust. Some of the injured stirred as they felt a touch. Many more would clearly not move again, already stiff in death.

The rumbling died and crying and shouting grew to fill its absence. Arion was almost knocked from his feet by a stranger scrambling past, the man made blind by blood pouring from his scalp. Half his hair hung on a torn flap of skin, with a sheen beneath that might have been bone.

'Is it over?' the man called. 'Is it over?'

Arion did not know if he would even hear an answer. He turned to Archidamus with the same question. The young king shook his head.

'There will be another,' Archidamus said with dark certainty. 'They come like waves on the shore.'

The king's bleak expression eased as Pleistarchus returned from the barracks, leading hundreds of Spartiates. Some wore no sandals, Arion saw. Others bled from lost skin. They too had been caught by surprise.

Arion joined another group as they began to heave

rubble away, responding to the sobs of a trapped child. No one objected to him being there. The dust made them all one.

Arion choked on grief as the sound weakened. The little boy was limp by the time they reached him, his chest crushed. It was a wonder he had made any sound at all. Arion felt tears sting his eyes as he moved on to the next and the next. Sparta had fallen. Street upon street had been reduced to rubble. *Nothing* stood, for as far as he could see.

In the distance, in the twilight, a different roar sounded, more anger and fear than some spasm of the earth. Arion came out of the rubble to see what was going on. Spartiates near him had all put away their swords. Yet he could hear the clash of iron and bronze, the shouts and fury of the battlefield. It made no sense.

The royal palace had been built on the crest of a hill, with roads stretching down to the city proper. They were not far from the acropolis there, where people gathered to pray and hear kings or ephors in more normal times. Hundreds were streaming to it as he stared, but they looked back in fear then, as if something hunted them.

'By the gods, no . . . *no*,' Archidamus muttered.

King Pleistarchus was nearby and the two men exchanged a look that had horror in it. Arion stared from one to the other, but he could read no answer in them. He was an outsider and they cared not for him.

'The helots,' Pleistarchus said. 'If they riot . . .'

'*You* command the army,' Archidamus snapped. 'So give the order. Kill them all – before this madness spreads.'

'If I give that command, they will overwhelm us.'

For an instant, Pleistarchus glanced at Arion, the foreigner who watched with his mouth open. In that heartbeat

of time, the ground began to shake again, building fast in intensity. Every fallen stone or tile jumped and bounced. It was as if the earth shook flies from its flank and they were powerless before it.

'Can't you hear the fighting?' Archidamus shouted over the rumbling. 'They are *already* killing our people! What do helots know of discipline, of obedience? Give the order, or I will.'

'We can contain it. They are not soldiers,' Pleistarchus said angrily.

'There are seven of them for every one of us – they do not need to be! Give the order, Pleistarchus!'

'No. The army is mine. Take the women and children to the acropolis. It is high ground there. You will be safe enough. I will set the army to containing the violence – I will be ruthless with any helot who takes up arms. But I will not slaughter them. We'll need them to rebuild.'

'Ephors! A decision!' Archidamus said.

There were only four on the street, with one still crushed in the palace. In normal times, no equal vote was possible, but those four could cancel one another out.

'Pleistarchus commands the army in time of crisis,' the oldest said.

One of the others looked angry, but nodded even so. The third and fourth bowed their heads. They were common men of Sparta, elected as a check on the power of kings. They did not look away from Archidamus as he glared at them.

'Very well,' he said. 'Though if it spreads, you will have the blood of Spartans on your hands. We are, what, a forty thousand? Five thousand Spartiates, as many perioikoi, the rest children and women? Yet more than a *hundred thousand*

helots live in Sparta as our slaves. If they revolt, even we will be swept away.'

'Still, it is my decision,' Pleistarchus said, his voice cold. 'Save who you can. Take them to the acropolis and tend the wounded. I will keep order.'

They all heard a great roar go up a few streets over. The sun had dipped below the western hills and the last light was fading. Archidamus shook his head.

'If you can,' he said grimly.

PART ONE

'Circumstances rule men;
men do not rule circumstances.'

– Herodotus

I

As Pericles rose to speak, he knew he held a man's life in his hands. Banishment, ruin or death. All three were there, in Cimon's steady gaze and the twitching muscle in his jaw.

With a jury of four hundred Athenians, they stood on the Pnyx hill, a breeze ruffling hair and robes. Cimon had endured three days of witnesses and accusations, organised by two prosecutors chosen by Ephialtes, strategos of the city – and enemy to Cimon. The man himself watched from the side of the hill, his back to the Agora of Athens below.

Cimon had defended himself well enough. He had explained every decision with calm expertise. He had sworn on the gods that he had taken no bribe to free the king of Macedon on Persian land, showing only the mercy that was a victor's right. Those who would not have done the same would doubt his word, of course. Some of those present knew only spite or greed as their masters. They would never believe there were higher standards than their own.

Pericles touched a fist to his lips. He had joined the accusers, then chosen not to speak until the end. He could feel all eyes on him – in suspicion or surmise. They knew Cimon had been his friend, some of them. Yet for the right offence, that would be no protection. Any Athenian would condemn a man for impiety or treason. In such a case, even his own family would consider it their duty to

see him killed or banished. As a result, no one there truly knew what Pericles would do. He cleared his throat.

'I have listened to all that has been said,' he began. 'I have heard. Since the beginning of this trial, in the evenings, I have been approached by many who have known Cimon since his youth. Wherever I go in the city, I am stopped – by those who wish to remind me how Cimon commanded ships at Salamis, or how he took the war back to the Persians, breaking their great fleet and army at Eurymedon. How he brought the bones of Theseus home, the king of Athens who slew the Minotaur. All this is known.'

Over to one side, Strategos Ephialtes looked sour at such a recitation of honours. As well he might, Pericles thought, with so few of his own.

Pericles looked up as the breeze increased. The wind was turning, coming from the north. It carried an odd note of spices and dust he could taste on his tongue.

'Yet we hold our people to the highest standard. Any man may be a juror in Athens, to sit in judgement on any other – whether he be strategos or carpenter. That right to trial and judgement is the beating heart of our city, a living freedom. We are not tyrants, to condemn a man merely on some code of laws, or the word of his enemies. No. We gather, we listen, we decide.'

He looked around, at the implacable faces of his people. The men on that hill took their responsibility seriously. Cimon's fate hung on their judgement and he did not know yet if he could sway them.

'So I say to those who claim Cimon stands too high to be judged: all men can be judged. His father marched with mine from this very place, to fight and win the battle of

Marathon, but what of that? My father spoke against him at his trial, despite their friendship. Miltiades reached too far in the end. He was judged in this very place, here on the Pnyx – and he was found guilty. He died in prison.'

Cimon's stare was cold then. Pericles swallowed, his throat suddenly tight.

'You may say Miltiades deserved better.' He waved a hand as if searching for examples. 'You may say Archon Cimon fed the poor for years in Athens! That does not matter here. Perhaps he made his friends hand over their cloaks to those who shivered in the cold months. Put all that from your mind. The past does not matter. In this court, on this day, only these accusations stand.'

Pericles held up a single finger.

'Was Cimon within his rights as the victor of Eurymedon to free a king of Macedon, an ally of the Persians? Cimon did not have the time and peace we have today to decide the issue, not on that battlefield, with the smell of blood and smoke on the air. It was not his role to make new alliances, to turn enemies to friends with an act of mercy! That is for the council of Athens, for the people themselves.'

He paused, seeing them shift uncomfortably.

'The second accusation. Was Cimon correct not to continue the campaign deep into Persia, to pursue and destroy more of the king's fleeing army? I dare say his decision saved a few lives. There are some in Athens today who would surely have died in that pursuit into unknown lands. What of it? Men die in war! I have heard some say Cimon was in command, that the decision was his alone, but we sit in judgement of those decisions today. Far from that river plain, without the pain and exhaustion they knew

then. Perhaps he *should* have taken that risk. Well, you will decide, no other. Not Cimon, not Strategos Ephialtes, nor I will make that judgement. If you find Cimon guilty, it will be because his service to Athens displeases you. That is your right, as free men. To judge. As prosecutors, we will ask then for death or banishment for these errors – if errors they are judged to be.'

Every single eye was on him, he realised, as if he had lit himself on fire and they watched him burn. Pericles wanted to smile, but he had learned sternness from his father and he only nodded and held up a third finger, folding in his thumb and smallest.

'The last. The accusation that Cimon took a great share of Persian gold as his own, from Cypros, from the camp at Eurymedon. It does not matter how many of his men came home with pouches of coin or new coats! An archon is held to a higher standard. I have listened – to those who say Cimon wears no gold, that he lives like a Spartan. To others who say he broke a Persian threat that would have sacked and burned Athens for a third time. We know Cimon returned great sums to the city treasury, but who can say how much was kept back? His men brought earrings and gold to the city, spending like Persians themselves. Oh, Cimon may live simply, but he has his family land, his tenant farms still. His family paid the fine that helped build our fleet! They had wealth then. Gold may not grow corrupt, but men certainly can. I say wealth desires wealth and always has.'

He paused, worried he was making the point too well. He'd done all he could and deliberately chosen to speak in the last moments before the vote. A pot of water timed his speech, streaming into a second. It was already faltering.

Where had the time gone? Had he said all his lines? It was hard not to think of plays he had known. This too was a performance, though with considerably more at stake. He searched for a final word, something they might remember as they voted on his friend's life.

'This accusation rests on those three pillars. If even one is too weak, it all falls. You must not set Salamis and Eurymedon and Theseus against them, but decide on its own merit where guilt or innocence lies.'

The water died to a trickle and Pericles bowed his head. The magistrate directed the crowd of jurors to their deliberation. Elected for that day alone, the man was delighted to oversee such a serious trial. Pericles swallowed nervously as jurors walked away to discuss the judgement. It would not take very long. In just a few moments, they would raise their hands and decide whether Cimon walked free or not.

He did not look in Cimon's direction. From the instant he had put himself forward to prosecute, Pericles knew he'd walked a very dangerous path. If Cimon saw him as an enemy, their friendship was over. Yet he did not think Cimon would accept a subterfuge on his behalf either. The man was almost more Spartan than Athenian, with the same unbending sense of honour.

Pericles had understood from the first that Ephialtes wished to bring Cimon down – that his friend needed help. Whether it was simple dislike of his noble class or some stray word Cimon had said to sting Ephialtes' pride, he did not know. Nor did it really matter what drove the man. The strategos had thrown a knife by bringing that trial. Ephialtes would not, could not relent after that. So Pericles walked through thorns as he tried to bring Cimon out safe.

The great Themistocles had commanded at Salamis. He had saved the city while a Persian king watched from shore, and *still* been banished. Aristides had been a man of the highest honour. He too had been sent from his home, like a cur kicked from its bed.

Athenians were suspicious of all their leaders. They would not allow tyrants to rise again. That was Pericles' secret fear. He had sown doubt over the accusations. He had reminded them of Cimon's service and honour. Yet the truth was, they might bring him down as a reminder where power lay, or even for sport.

They had come to that place with clay dust or goat blood on their tunics. Many were working men, their hands rough with callus. Pericles thought he understood them. They loved the eminence of Athens, scorning lesser cities. Out of pride, they put themselves forward as council members and rowers, as jurors and magistrates. His people. Yet as much as he loved them, he feared what they might do.

Strategos Ephialtes did not trust him, of course. The man was not a fool. That was why he had set two others to make the case against Cimon. They had cast every doubt they could on the campaign in Persia, though it had made Pericles squirm to hear the way they twisted the truth. It had hurt to remain silent, but he had not said a word. His name was down as first prosecutor. In the end, he knew he had to be allowed to address the jury. He'd seen that awareness in the others, with every day and hour that passed. Time and again, they'd looked to see if he would rise, in support or rebuttal. He had only shaken his head. In that way, when they had run out of words and spite, his voice had been the climax, the last they heard before the vote.

Pericles stared at the ground, waiting. He hoped he knew his people. He had walked the running track in his local gymnasium over previous days, reciting aloud to prepare for this. Yet he could not tell if it had been enough. Some of the jurors looked over at him, but there was no way to know if enough had been swayed, not really. A few would have been in the fleet, even on the field at Eurymedon. For all he knew, they could revere Cimon, or despise him. Cimon's father had been found guilty by men just like these! Pericles could only whisper a prayer that history would not repeat itself. He found he was sweating, though the breeze had grown in strength. The day was hot, but it was more than that. Perhaps he was just afraid.

The jury returned to their places, facing Cimon. The breeze fluttered robes and cloaks, making a snapping sound in the silence.

'Jurors. Are you ready to pass judgement?' the magistrate said. His voice was strained. Dozens nodded in response and he darted his gaze to the sides. Scythian guards waited there, employed by the city to keep order.

The magistrate took up a tablet and read from it. As one elected to a position of power from sunset to sunset, he needed to know the correct form.

'The vote will be by show of hands,' he read aloud. 'I will call "Guilty" and "Innocent". Scribes of the city will make a tally. If there is a dispute, you will remain until a clear majority is declared.'

He paused, handing down the tablet.

'On the matter of Archon Cimon, of the deme Laciadae and family Philaidae, son to Miltiades, do you find him guilty?'

Hands rose. Pericles held his breath, beginning his own

count. It would clearly be close. Ephialtes was smiling to one of his group and slapping another on the back in congratulation. Pericles shook his head. He knew a little about theatre. It was just a show for the crowd, but sure enough, a few wavering men raised hands in response. Pericles saw others drop before they were counted. Condemning the greatest Athenian general to death or banishment was no small thing.

When the scribes had the first tally, the magistrate accepted their tablets. He took a breath and asked for 'Innocent'. Once more, a host of hands rose. Pericles heard murmurs as those who agreed or disagreed growled in reply. A few voices could sway those around them, he realised. Juries were just men. Pericles bit his lip as the scribes compared the totals. They gave nothing away in their expressions, treating the entire event as a sacred ritual. As it was, dedicated to Athena and watched by the goddess from her temple on the Acropolis. Pericles raised his eyes to the ruins there. The Persians had burned and broken all they could. They had begun to rebuild, but . . .

'The verdict is clear,' the magistrate said in obvious relief. He touched a sleeve to his forehead, mopping up sweat.

'Archon Cimon, by judgement of your peers, this jury finds you innocent of the accusations against you. Go in peace. You are free.'

The jury cheered and though some groaned or cursed, they were outnumbered and had no chance to start violence. Ephialtes was quick to leave the Pnyx hill, trailing disappointed supporters.

Pericles felt relief sweep through. It had been a dangerous course, for the highest stakes. He could not say aloud

that he had hoped for Cimon's freedom. Not in that place. Such an act would be seen as dishonour and perhaps even bring about his own trial. His would remain a private victory.

He walked to the steps that led down to the Agora. Sensing something, Pericles glanced back, finding Cimon's cool gaze. There was no thanks there, no acknowledgement. Pericles dipped his head, understanding the cost had been the friendship he had known. He turned away. If that was the price of Cimon's freedom, he was content.

With his foot on the top step, Pericles felt the ground shake, a rumble that spread across the city. He stared in horrified fascination as something passed through streets and markets below, the ripple of a stone dropped into water. He saw dust rise and roofs collapse. Shouts sounded and jurors rushed to the edge, risking a tumble down the slope. Below, the streets filled with people coming out to see what was happening.

It passed. It had been stronger than any Pericles had known before, but it passed. Dust hung over the open Agora and he shook his head, wondering if it meant the gods were pleased or angry at Cimon being free. He vowed to make offerings at the temples that evening, just in case. Pericles walked slowly down and as he went, the ground shook twice more. It felt like an echo and he wondered where the upheaval had begun – and where it would end.

Aspasia looked onto the street through bars of painted iron, so close she could barely fit her hand between them. She could hear the mother's voice calling her name, but there was no harm in looking out, not really. At seventeen,

the rules and strictures of the house seemed either pointless or designed to annoy her. The garden was beautiful enough, with trickling water and a fine growth of flowers that made the air rich with scent. Yet outside – outside! – the city was alive, with noise and dust and the strange shaking that had broken one of her pots. Black earth had spilled across the flagstones of the little garden. Her hands were dark from clearing it up, her fingertips like those who used henna to mark their skin or dye their hair. Aspasia snorted at that thought. Her own hair was thick and true black, a mane that hung in a single bond. The weight was something she could always feel, especially when the other mothers presented her in her red dress. The colour was meant to represent virgin's blood, so the other girls whispered. Men were said to value such things. Yet one of the mothers had given away her first quick pain to one of the servants – allowing Aspasia the choice of them. Aspasia was still not certain what all the fuss had been about. It had been enjoyable enough, though he'd seemed more excited and red-faced than she'd felt herself. There had been a distant tremor, she recalled, as she stared onto the street. Like the shaking of the ground that day, it had hinted at something greater, perhaps happening to someone else . . .

'*There* you are, Aspasia! Oh, look at your *hands*! What have you been doing?'

They called them 'mothers', in the hetaira house, though none were related to the young women who resided there. Aspasia liked only the youngest of the three, the one she pretended was her true mother when she needed comfort. Unfortunately, the lady who had found her was one of the others, the pair she called 'the crones'. Aspasia knew her

actual mother had sold her. She did not like to think of that.

'Did you feel the earth trembling?' Aspasia asked, trying to distract her. 'One of the pots broke!'

She looked out again through the bars, seeing a tall young man striding past. Her heart thumped in her chest then. She had seen that one before, always walking into the city from somewhere else. He looked so stern.

'Can't I go out?' Aspasia said without turning, saying anything that meant she could continue to stare, to drink in his movement. She knew some of the girls dreamed of favourites sometimes. She wanted to dream of him, no, to have him see her.

Her voice carried into the street. The mother who stood in her shadow reached out and pinched her arm. Aspasia ignored both the sudden pain and the hard words that followed. The man had heard! She saw his head turn. What would he see, she wondered. Her garden coat was clean but worn. Her eyes were dark, larger with the kohl she applied. The great tail of her hair was thick in its bind, swinging as she moved. She watched him become aware of her gaze.

In the moment before their eyes met, Aspasia was yanked back with a squawk from the little square of bars. She struggled, but the mothers were all extraordinarily strong. The women of that house seemed obsessed with her obedience, as if the world might end for a stolen hour in the garden.

Aspasia swore under her breath as she was tugged away from the light into cool shadows. The house was not large. In normal times, she shared her small room with another. That month though, she was alone. They said Marete had

been accepted as an acolyte to Athena, though Aspasia had heard that a few times and was suspicious. The men who came to purchase hetairai did not seem like priests.

'*Really*, Aspasia!' the mother said. 'I know you heard me! I think you should go without dinner this evening. Discipline is the *first* requirement, not an afterthought! How can we ever find you a place in a good temple, or with a good Eupatridae family, if you are so wilful? I will be asked about your character and I *cannot* lie. Do you understand? If they say to me, "Is she meek and biddable, this one?" – all I can do is remain silent. And they know very well what that means.'

As she stepped inside her room, Aspasia spun to face her accuser. The mother looked her over.

'You *are* beautiful, dear. Your skin, your figure . . . your teeth are strong, your eyesight is clear. That hair! It has a life of its own, I sometimes think. We should have found you a place last year. You are the oldest in the house, now! There is a new one coming tomorrow to replace little Marete. Now there was a daughter! Marete was a year younger than you and she will represent us in one of the richest temples in Thessaly.'

'And what will she do there?' Aspasia said.

The woman blocked the door and she felt trapped in her own room, denied the warmth and shade of the garden. That little patch of green was the closest place to freedom in the hetaira house. She felt she could breathe there.

'She will pray, of course, and play the lyre. They have slaves to scrub and clean and cook, so I imagine they will train Marete in the secret rituals of the temple, that she may one day become a priestess.'

'Not just a whore then?' Aspasia demanded.

The mother's face hardened subtly, her eyes growing sharp.

'A hetaira is not a whore, Aspasia, no,' she said. Her voice was deceptively gentle, as if under great strain. 'We take girls whose parents could not feed them, who sold them to keep their brothers and husbands alive. Some fall away – the *very* stupid, or those who cannot learn obedience! The rest we train: in music, in posture, in dance and conversation. We raise clever girls to be wives – and companions of great men.'

'And those men pay you well enough. Do they buy the whole woman though, or just this?'

Aspasia grabbed at her crotch in the crudest gesture she knew. She hated to be trapped and the conversation was bringing on tears. She wanted the mother to leave. Instead, the woman folded her arms, pale with anger.

'They buy service, Aspasia. They buy your advice and your skill and attention. By the gods, how they crave attention! We taught you to read and to write. No mere whore needs such things! Indeed, if you knew just a little more about the world, you would know how rare it is. You honestly believe this is a whorehouse? I thought you were one of the brighter ones. It seems I was mistaken!'

She saw tears glistening in the girl's eyes and her expression softened.

'Aspasia, you have misunderstood. This house is paid, yes, money we use to feed and clothe those who live here. Unless you think those pots we sell are enough?' The woman sighed and shook her head under that accusing gaze. 'Our girls probably do go to the beds of the men we find for them. And yes, perhaps some of them sell that

part you were grabbing, if all else fails. What if they do? The world is a hard place, Aspasia. There is no one to help us when we are hungry. We do what we have to, to live. In this house, we try to match intelligent girls with the lives they should have had. I have visited homes where the husband dotes on the one we found for him, where their children play and are loved.'

'*Everything* you say is a lie!' Aspasia shouted. 'You tell these stories to keep us all quiet – and when you sell us like slaves, we never come back. Why have I not seen any of the ones who left? They could tell us all about their wonderful lives, their warm and loving husbands, their fat little children!'

Tears were streaming then and her voice had grown harsh. The mother leaned against the doorway and crossed one foot over the other.

'Perhaps they feel ashamed, Aspasia, of the place that raised them. Or they don't want to be reminded who they used to be. They have new friends, most of them. Who knows? Every woman is different from the next. No answer will suit them all. Yet they – and you – are bound together, Aspasia, by one thing.'

Aspasia glared in silence, just wanting her to leave. The woman nodded.

'They want to do better than their own mothers. I remember that part, when my sons were born. I wanted to *show* her.' She smiled, but there was a world of grief in it. 'Well, I know a little more now. My eldest died in a fall, the other was killed in the war. My loving husband? He held his chest one day and was just . . . gone. Can you imagine? I sold his shop. He made shoes and I did not have the skill. Without that, the whole place was just tools and some

leather. So I came back to this house, Aspasia. And I was welcomed here. Even if you hate it, it's still your home.'

'I just want to get out,' Aspasia said miserably.

'Oh, we'll find you a husband, I don't doubt. Or you'll end up running this place and telling us all what to do. One or the other, before I kill you myself.'

She waited for Aspasia to smile, then stood away from the door.

'Come on. There is white fish and lemon for dinner.'

'I thought you said . . .'

'I say lots of things. Splash some water on your face before you come down. I don't want the others to see you've been crying. And clean your hands, Aspasia! I could grow vegetables under your nails.'

The older woman closed the door gently and went down the stairs. Another crisis smoothed over. She remembered the high dramas of her own years in the house, in that very room, though Aspasia did not know it. Life was hard. She had not lied about that. The hetaira girls were both freer and better educated than any women in the city. If the price of that was letting a few keen dogs get under the fence, it did not seem too high.

2

Sparta burned. As night came, a thousand different fires could be seen. They lent a red glow to the dark, with shadowy figures moving through it. Spartiates still worked in the centre of the city, by the cenotaph for Leonidas and the open forum. They searched through rubble with bloody hands, sending any wounded they found up the hill. Many of the women had gathered food and bandages on the acropolis there, as well as any children who wandered in alone. There was little enough to eat, even for the youngest. The rest endured with just cold water. There were worse things than hunger in the night, after all.

The aftershocks had died away, but no one dared seek shelter, not then. Too many had been injured by pillars and roofs suddenly dropping, betrayed by their own homes and temples. There were no walls left they could be sure would not fall. Instead, they huddled in the open, in groups of surviving family and clan. Army physicians tended wounds and splinted broken bones as best they could.

There was no silence on the acropolis. Children sniffed and murmured, shushed by their mothers. Others muttered prayers, fearing yet more anger from the gods. Lone men called aloud for their families, looking for those they had left to bring back a blanket or a jug of water. Or those who would never answer. It was chaos on the hill, but Spartiate warriors were there too, grim and watchful. No one would storm that place, and for that those who made

it there were grateful. The people looked to King Archidamus and the ephors, taking comfort from their presence. Torches were lit, a symbol of life against the night. No Spartan king would cower in the dark. Where the ephors stood, where the civil king held court, Sparta still lived. Yet the helots were not there.

A few had run with the families who owned them, seeking out authority in the first wild rush. Some of those had heard a distant call then and simply vanished as darkness came, slipping away in shadows. Others remained, though they were treated roughly and searched for weapons as they protested their loyalty. Many had been killed, even over the protests of their Spartan families. The mood of that crowd was grim and outraged, without the luxury of mercy while helots still roared and hooted in the city night.

Little by little, Spartan women and children crept closer to Archidamus and the ephors, almost without thought, until the king's party was surrounded by his people. It would be a long night. They had known the earth to shake before, of course, a thousand times. The helots had not rioted then, not like this. That night though, they had become feral. Families whispered of betrayal, of horrors greater than pools draining into cracks or the rippling ground. It had never been as bad, not in all their memories and tales.

In the forum far below, King Pleistarchus reacted to the sound of struggle. He was stalking along the edge of the market square when he heard scuffling feet and hard voices. With just two of his personal guard, he raced towards the sound, leaping over the fallen statue of a king. The three of them skirted the corner of a burning building, crackling away above their heads. Too many temples

and homes had kept charcoal braziers. Beams and roof slats had scattered coals as they dropped; the result was fire everywhere, with red embers drifting on the wind.

Pleistarchus had both his short kopis blade ready and a shield on his left arm. He had never dreamed he would go armed for war in the middle of Sparta, but he moved as if towards an enemy. As they had been trained, his companions joined him on both sides, swords drawn and shields raised. Only one had a helmet. The other was bareheaded and wore no sandals. His feet were already swollen and burned, but he did not complain.

Pleistarchus saw four men and two women struggling. He did not hesitate and roared a challenge, stunning the little group to stillness. The attackers tried to scatter and Pleistarchus cut them down in neat and savage blows, dropping them to the cobbled ground.

Two Spartans remained, a man and a woman. The woman sank suddenly to her knees, crumpling over a wound. The man dropped with her, crying out. His arms were running with blood and he had no weapon. Pleistarchus cast a glance at the helots he had killed. They had carried cleavers from some kitchen or shop. One of the things lay at his feet, old iron sharpened to a bowed edge.

As he watched, one of the helots moved. The man's wound was terrible, but he clung to life, trying to rise. They were not as powerful of frame as a Spartan. Lean and wiry, they wore dark and greasy cloth, stained by years of labour. No one would ever mistake a helot for a man of Sparta, Pleistarchus thought. Even in the firelight, he had known them.

One of his guards raised a knife to end the grunting struggle. Pleistarchus touched him on the shoulder. The

helot had been cut deeply under his ribs. One of the man's thighs was gashed right through, a hobbling blow. He would not live. Nor could he escape, though he seemed not to know it. Pleistarchus watched him crawl, leaving a red trail. He shook his head, disgusted at the display. Helots were not warriors. They were barely men.

'What happened here?' Pleistarchus asked the pair.

The Spartan pressed his lips to the woman's hair, lost in her. He shook as if he had an ague, a chill. There was so much blood dripping from his arm, Pleistarchus thought he might pass out. Yet he held the woman tight while she too paled. Her hands were clasped over her stomach, dark and wet.

Pleistarchus looked around in frustration, for anyone else to come and take them to safety. Half his guard were escorting women and children to the acropolis, bringing them safe through streets of savagery. Pleistarchus had already witnessed a hundred scenes like this. He could feel drying blood on his face and he still could not understand it. There was a kind of madness in the air, borne out of fear or the depths of the earth. He remembered the strange damp smell that had rolled through the city in the first hour. Perhaps it had driven the helots insane, making them beasts.

He remembered the fears of Archidamus as he looked around at burning buildings, breathing air that stung his skin with its heat. The fires were growing taller, fiercer. The night concealed brutal acts and he could hear cries and thumps and screams all around.

Pleistarchus felt weariness sweep through him in a dark wave. He looked in frustration at the couple sitting on the stones of the street. If he left them, they would be

helpless for the next loping group of helots. Oh, they scattered before shield and blade well enough, but he had seen them vanish down alleys and side roads, only to return, howling and peering at those actually trying to save the city.

'Give this man a sword,' he said to one of his companions.

It was an order and the guard did as he was told, the perfect example of *peitharchia* – the total obedience all Spartans learned. Only then did Pleistarchus realise he had no other weapon. In silence, he cursed his own inattention.

The man on the cobbles accepted the blade, understanding what it represented. He still held his woman in bloody arms, willing her to open her eyes. Pleistarchus could see she was dead. There was a stillness to her that he knew only too well. He dropped to one knee.

'She is gone,' he said. 'Come with us now. I will see you safe.'

'I can't . . . I can't leave her,' the Spartan whispered. His eyes were glassy, unfocused. He had no idea he talked to his king. Still, a man had the right to choose his own death.

Pleistarchus patted him on the shoulder and rose. Weariness tugged at his wits again, though he gave no sign. A king had to appear untouched by weakness. His men needed that, no matter what it cost. The truth was he needed to rest, to eat and sleep before he fell. Yet the night was full of screaming and he could not stop.

At his feet, the man holding the fallen woman suddenly slumped. There had been some other wound there, unseen, his tunic sodden with blood. He had showed no pain as death settled softly on him.

With a sigh, Pleistarchus took back the sword, returning

it to his guard. He looked up as more shrieks sounded, closer than before.

'Find whoever is making all that noise,' Pleistarchus said. 'We were too late here. Let's move a little faster this time.'

A hundred thousand helots, or even more. The slaves had lost thousands at Plataea, he recalled. The Athenians had somehow persuaded them to fight against Persian soldiers. They had been cut down then, butchered like goats. Pleistarchus took a grip on his hilt and settled his shield. It felt heavier than before, but he would not set it down. There was no flat edge below, where a man might rest for a time. No, Spartans stood and faced their enemies. He glanced at his father's massive tomb, a block of polished limestone and bronze. The cenotaph of Leonidas had neither ashes nor bones within its brooding mass. He felt his father's spirit even so.

Around a corner, a dozen helots came, laughing and howling like wolves. They halted when they saw his little group. For a moment, Pleistarchus thought they might scatter, but they saw just three battered Spartans and sprawling bodies on the ground. The numbers favoured them and Pleistarchus could see their smiles widen. They carried clubs and blades and they wore dogskin caps and dark cloth. They watched him as rats might watch a wounded animal, made bold by the smell of blood. They were not afraid. Perhaps for the first time in their lives. He clenched his jaw and readied his kopis blade.

'Stay close,' he murmured to the two others. They had sharpened up at the threat facing them, discipline stealing weariness. 'Watch for anyone coming up behind. Ready? With me when I move.'

The Spartans charged, surprising the helots. Pleistarchus smashed his shield into the face of one and cut another with his kopis before they could even react. When they struck back, they met shields and darting blades.

In moments, six of them were down. The helots may have been used to hard labour, but they faced soldiers who had trained in fitness and skill from the age of seven. Pleistarchus and the others went through them like a summer storm.

The survivors managed to run, vanishing into flame-coloured darkness. Pleistarchus turned to his companions as the one with sandals collapsed, the man's mouth opening in shock. He held a hand to his neck and Pleistarchus could see it was wet with blood. Even rats could bite, he realised. He stayed with his man as he died, giving him that honour, though cries sounded all around them. The helots were coming back, Pleistarchus thought, or calling more. He could hear tramping feet and voices giving orders.

For the first time, Pleistarchus faced the thought of his people being wiped out. For all their skill, their armour, their tactics, the Spartiates were few, had always been few. They could not face so many, not wounded and battered by the quake as they were. Without food, they would grow weak – and one by one, the helots would drag them down.

The king rubbed his chest, feeling pain throb there, a ragged beat. It was probably just some muscle aching, though he feared it. His father had died in glory at Thermopylae, standing for all Sparta, giving his life for enough time to bring the army out. Yet Pleistarchus had not been the one to secure the final victory at Plataea. That had fallen to the king's regent, Pausanias.