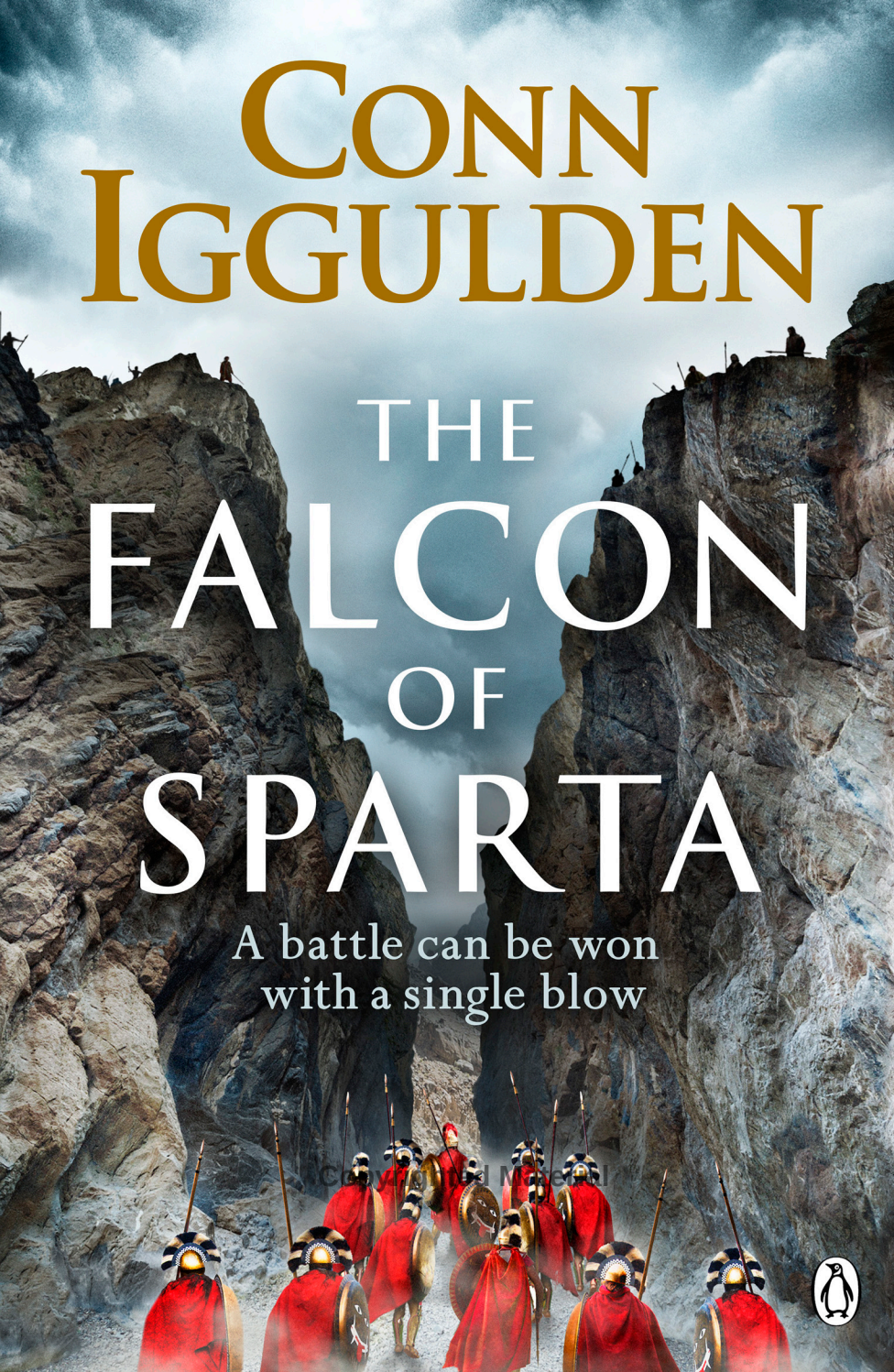




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with a single blow



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To my son Cameron,
who came with me to Sparta.

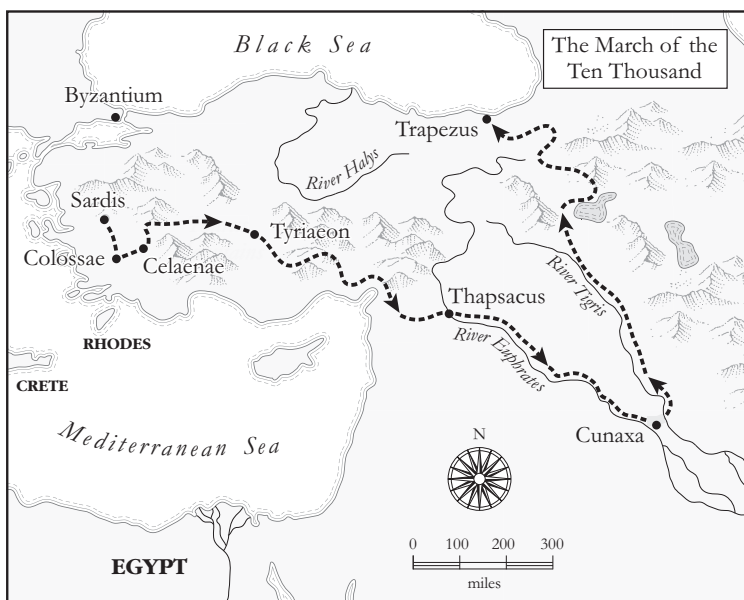
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In 401 BC, the Persian king ruled an empire
from the Aegean to northern India. As many as
fifty million people were his subjects – and
his armies were vast.

Working together on land and sea, only Sparta
and Athens ever turned them back.





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Prologue

In Babylon, starlings gaped in the heat, showing dark tongues. Beyond vast city walls, the sun leaned on those who laboured in the fields, pressing them down.

As he walked in the middle of the road, the Great King bore a sheen on his skin, of oil or sweat his son could not have said. His father's beard gleamed in tight black curls, as much a part of him as the odour of roses, or the long panelled coat he wore.

The air smelled of hot stone and cypress trees, like spearheads against the sky. The streets all around had been emptied of those who lived there. Not a child, not an old woman, not a chicken had been left to scratch the earth as the imperial soldiers had cleared a way for the king to walk. The silence lay so heavy, the boy could hear birdsong.

The street of Ningal had been laid with soft palm branches, thick underfoot and still green. No foul odours would interrupt their conversation or distract the older man from this moment of instruction. His purpose was the very survival of his house, and he had allowed neither courtesans nor spies to stand close enough to hear. His captains thought it was a royal whim that had sent them out to clear the districts on either side, long before the sun rose that morning. The truth was that some words could not be overheard. The king knew there were many listeners in his court. There were just too many small satraps, too many kingdoms whose crowns he had crushed beneath his sandals. Ninety rulers paid their spies to listen, while a thousand courtiers jostled

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for position. The simple pleasure of walking alone with his son, as any shepherd might have done, had become a luxury as great as rubies, as valuable as the thick gold coins they called ‘archers’ that bore the likeness of King Darius across the empire.

As they walked, the little boy stole sideways glances at his father, adoring and trusting him in all things. Young Artaxerxes matched his gait to the king’s, though it meant he had to add half a pace every once in a while, skipping to keep up. Darius appeared not to notice, though Artaxerxes knew his father missed very little of anything. The secret of his long reign lay in his wisdom. If the little boy’s opinion had ever been sought, he would have said his father had never been wrong.

On court days, the king sat in judgement on his most powerful lords, on men whose armies ran to tens of thousands, who ruled lands of jade and ivory about as far off as the moon. Darius would listen and run a hand down his beard, picking up a shine on his fingers. He would rub thumb and forefinger together, or take a grape from a golden bowl held by a slave kneeling at his feet. In such a way, Darius saw through to the heart of a problem while his advisers were still weighing and arguing. Artaxerxes wanted that extraordinary insight, so he listened, and learned well.

The city was as still as only thousands of soldiers holding knives to throats could make it still. The king’s generals knew his wrath would fall on their heads if they disturbed him – and so father and son walked as if they were the only two alive in the world, with dust and warmth and the sun setting, bringing them ease after the heat of the day.

‘Babylon was the heart of an empire once, a great one,’ King Darius said. His voice was gentle, more that of a teacher than a warrior.

His son looked up, his eyes bright.

‘Though Persia is greater,’ Artaxerxes said.

His father smiled at his pride.

‘Of course! In all ways. Persia is a dozen times larger than old Babylon’s ambitions. The borders of my empire cannot be walked in a lifetime – or two, three. Yet it was not given to me, boy. When my father was killed, the crown fell to my brother. He took it before the tears had dried on his face – and ruled for just a month before he was murdered.’

‘And you took vengeance on the one who killed him,’ Artaxerxes said, wanting to please.

The king stopped and turned his face to the sun, closing his eyes the better to see the memories.

‘I did. As the sun rose that day, there were three of us, three brothers. That evening, I was alone. I was spattered in blood – but I was king.’

Darius filled his chest, making the panels of his coat creak over the fine silks beneath. His son straightened in conscious mimicry. Artaxerxes did not know why his father had called him to his side that day, nor why even the famous Immortal guards were out of sight. His father trusted no one, so it was said, yet he walked alone with his oldest son and heir. At fourteen years of age, it made Artaxerxes light with pride and happiness.

‘A king needs more than one son,’ his father went on. ‘Death comes all too quickly, as a desert wind can rise without warning. It can reach out as a horse stumbles or a knife slips. It can come from poison or treachery, from spoiled meat, from fevers and djinns of the air. In such a world, a king with just one son is a challenge to the gods, as well as all his enemies.’

Darius walked on, clasping his hands behind his back and making the boy scramble to keep up. As Artaxerxes drew abreast, his father continued.

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‘Yet if that first son, that most beloved boy, survives to become a man, a different game begins. If he has brothers then, so vital in the years gone by, they are the only ones in the world who can take it all from him.’

‘Cyrus?’ Artaxerxes said suddenly. Despite his caution, despite his awe for his father, the idea that his little brother could ever be his enemy made his eyes sparkle in amusement. ‘Father, Cyrus would never hurt me.’

His father spun on the spot. The panels of his coat rose like the carapace of a beetle about to fly.

‘You are my son and my heir. If you are taken, Cyrus will be king. That is his . . . purpose.’ The king went down onto one knee and clasped the boy’s hands in his. ‘You will wear my crown, I promise you. But Cyrus . . . is a born warrior. He is only thirteen, but he rides as well as my own guard. You have seen how they look to him? Only last month, they carried him round the palace yard on their shoulders when he shot a bird in flight with his bow.’ The king took a deep breath, wanting Artaxerxes to understand. ‘My son, I love you both, but when I am on my last bed, when the empire is hushed and in mourning, on that final day, I will call him home – and you will have to kill him. Because if you leave him alive after that, he will surely kill you.’

Artaxerxes saw tears come into his father’s eyes, sparkling there. It was the first time he had ever seen such a display of emotion, and it shook him.

‘I think you are mistaken, Father, but I will remember what you have said.’

The king rose to his feet, his coat creaking. He had grown flushed, though whether it was anger or some other emotion was hard to say.

‘Then remember this as well,’ he snapped. ‘If you say one word of this to Cyrus, anything at all of what I have gone to

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such lengths to keep private, you will be cutting your own throat. Not today or this year, of course, while you laugh and play together. He will promise you his loyalty and I do not doubt he will mean it with all his heart. Then a day will come when you fall out, or when he sees he will never have the authority he wants, not as a mere prince. On that day, he will come to you and take the throne for himself. And if I am alive on that day, if he comes to me after, even if he has your blood on his hands . . . even then, I will have no other son and so I will embrace him. Do you understand, Artaxerxes?’

‘I do,’ his son said, his own anger swelling. ‘Yet if you admire him so much, Father, why not just kill me here in the road and let Cyrus take the throne?’ Before his father could reply, Artaxerxes went on: ‘Because you have no other sons and you would risk the succession. You are truly so cold? It does not matter to you which of us is king?’

‘If it did not matter to me, I would not have cleared half a city to walk in private with you. Do you see Cyrus here? You were the child we longed for, my brave boy. I do not doubt your intelligence, your wisdom, Artaxerxes. You have my blood in you and you will make a great king.’

Darius reached out and touched his son’s cheek.

‘I saw my father broken when he came home from Greece. King Xerxes had beaten the Spartans at Thermopylae, but then his armies were routed at Plataea. Just as his father’s had been cut to pieces at Marathon ten years before. Well, no more! I vowed it when I became king. We have left enough of our blood in Greece, enough for a thousand years. Instead of war, my reign preserved peace – and brought us gardens and wine and gold and extraordinary learning. There are things made common today that would be sorcery in any other age. With you, we will go further – the greatest empire the world has ever known. If it is you. If the gods put Cyrus

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on that throne, he will wage war once again, I do not doubt. He is too much my father, too much *his* father.'

'I can fight, you know,' Artaxerxes said, stung. 'I know you don't think of me in that way, but I can.'

The king laughed and clapped him on the back. He loved his son too much to hurt him by disagreeing.

'Of course. Though any moneylender's guard can fight. You are a prince, Artaxerxes! You will be a king. So you need more than a quick smile and quicker sword. You need strength of a different kind. Beginning today. You are not too young for this.'

The king looked around them at the empty street. Not a face peered from a single window.

'Remember. On the day you are king, you must make an end. Until then, learn from your tutors, ride horses, enjoy the pleasures of women, boys and red wine. Do not speak of this day to anyone. Do you understand me?'

'I do, Father,' Artaxerxes said.

His serious face made the king smile, his entire bearing changing, so that he reached out and ruffled the hair of his son.

'I am a thousand times blessed.'

PART ONE

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I

The mountain cradled the city like a mother with a child in her lap. Before climbing the steps to the great plateau, Cyrus decided to lead his personal guard to the river. The Spartans left their armour and weapons on the bank and charged into the water, gleefully washing away the dust and sweat of four hundred miles.

From the height of his warhorse, the prince smiled to see them splashing and running fingers through their hair and beards. The march east had made his men lean, like hunting dogs, darkening their skin and pulling taut the cords of their muscles. They had not faltered, though some of them had left prints of blood on the road.

‘My lord, will you not change your mind?’ Tissaphernes said softly.

Cyrus glanced over at his old friend and tutor. Tissaphernes sat a chestnut gelding that snorted and tossed its head, of a bloodline as fine as any in Persia. The nobleman kept his gaze on the Spartans, his expression sour.

‘Should I climb the steps alone?’ Cyrus replied. ‘Should I come home like a beggar? Who am I, if not my father’s son and a prince? These are my guards. They are the best.’

Tissaphernes worked his mouth as if a tooth bothered him. Prince Cyrus was in his twenties and no longer young and foolish. The tutor had made his reservations clear, and yet there they were on the banks of the river Pulvar, with men of Sparta washing like horses in the water, throwing up spray. The prince had brought an old enemy to the very eye

of Persia. Tissaphernes frowned at the thought. He had seen Greek maps of the world that knew little of the great empire of the east. He had no desire to help Spartans fill in the location of Persepolis, still less the royal tombs along the river, just half a day's march away.

'Some might see it as an insult, Highness, to bring the very men who faced your ancestors, who denied them on land and sea. Spartans! By the deva spirits. Here, in the heart of the world! If your father was a younger man and well . . .'

'He would congratulate me, Tissaphernes,' Cyrus snapped, wearying of his voice. 'These men have run at my side. They did not falter or ask for rest. They are loyal to me.'

'They are loyal to gold and silver,' Tissaphernes muttered under his breath.

Cyrus clenched his jaw, so that the muscles stood out.

'They own nothing. Even their weapons come down from the hands of their fathers and uncles, or are given to them for acts of valour. Enough of this. No more now, old lion.'

Tissaphernes accepted the rebuke, bowing his head.

The Greeks had been brisk at their ablutions, coming out quickly to stand on the banks and dry in the evening sun. Local washerwomen hooted and called at the sight of so many naked men. One or two of the warriors smiled in return, while others loosened up with exercises. They were not made for laughter or light talk.

Irritated with his companion, Cyrus suddenly dismounted, stripping off his helmet, his tunic and armoured coat, his leggings and cloak, then removing his sandals, all with neat economy of movement. The prince was untroubled by nudity and strolled into the water with just a nod to the Spartan officer, Anaxis, who watched from the bank.

The washerwomen ceased their calls at the sight of a young man who wore his beard curled like a Persian and left

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a helmet marked with feathers of gold on his cloak. They may not have known his name, but they did not dare call out to him. Cyrus washed himself in the waters with slow care, almost as a ritual, a cleansing of more than sweat and the smell of horses. The Spartans on the bank were silent, showing respect. The prince had come home to mourn his father, after all.

The message had reached Cyrus fourteen days before and he had pushed the Spartans almost beyond endurance to be there in time. The prince had changed horses at crown taverns on the great Royal Road, or cut across country through tilled fields of wheat and barley, yet they had kept pace, loping along at his side day after day, as if it was nothing. They were extraordinary, and he was proud of their red cloaks and the reaction of others when they discovered who they were. The reputation had been earned, over and over again.

In that place, with the cool of evening upon them, Cyrus took heart. The city of Persepolis seemed subdued, but not in the public throes of grief. The streets were not lined with soldiers, nor draped in mourning cloths, with pots of sandalwood burning. Yet until he passed through the gates of the plateau above the city, he could not be sure the old man still lived. He turned at the thought, looking up at the mountain his father and grandfather had remade, to the imperial plain that was a line of green and grey at such a distance. Wild falcons circled lazily above it in the warm air, watching for fat pigeons in the fruit trees. That royal terrace contained palaces, barracks, theatres and libraries. His father's pavilion would lie at the centre of the lush garden they called a 'paradise', the secret green heart of an empire.

On the river banks, low bushes clung, their roots worn into smooth sculpture. White flowers of jasmine showed on trailing vines, filling the air with scent. The prince breathed

deeply, standing waist-deep in the waters with his eyes closed. He was home.

The Spartans dried quickly as they patted themselves down with their cloaks and ran fingers through their hair, made cool despite the sun. The prince too was refreshed, dressing once more with care. He strapped on the armoured coat over his tunic, but also bronze Spartan greaves onto his shins, perfectly shaped to him so that the muscles and the curve of his kneecaps were marked in the polished metal. They were more use to those who stood with shields than those who rode, but Cyrus liked to honour his men in such a way. Tissaphernes thought it a foreign affectation and beneath him, of course.

If the young prince had not been coming home to his father's deathbed, Cyrus might have been amused at the way the people of the city gathered to watch the strangers. Traders from the fruit market had come wandering over, while those they paid to guard them looked on and glowered. The Greeks who wore red cloaks were famous even there, though entire nations and a stretch of open sea lay between Persepolis and the valley of Eurotas – three months and a world away. As well as the legendary cloaks, the Spartans wore their own bronze greaves, covering both legs from ankle to knee. They had come ready for war, even to escort a prince home.

They had stacked their shields in neat unguarded piles as they dived into the water, as if they could not imagine another man stealing from them. Each one was marked with its owner's name on the inside, while a single letter showed the enemy where Sparta lay in Greece – the lambda that was the first letter of the region of Lacedaemon. Each one was polished bright and cared for like a lover.

As he mounted up, Cyrus wondered if any of those staring

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would ever know Sparta as he did. To the mothers pointing out the foreign warriors to their children, these were the very ones who had humbled Persian Immortals time and again, earning themselves a legend. Such men of Greece had smashed the army of Darius the Great at Marathon. It had been Spartans who led Greek soldiers against the Persian King Xerxes at Thermopylae and Plataea and Mycale. Persia had conquered almost thirty nations, but been turned back by Greece – and the warriors who wore red cloaks.

Those dark days were far in the past, though memories were long. Cyrus looked away as his men formed up in a perfect double rank, ready for his command. Spartans had come in the end to break Athens and rule all Greece, but they fought for him because he paid them – and because he understood their honour. The silver and gold he gave them went home to build temples and barracks and armouries. They earned nothing for themselves, and he admired them above all other men – except for his father and brother.

‘Come on, old lion,’ he said to Tissaphernes. ‘I have delayed long enough. I must not wilt from this, though I can hardly believe it is not a mistake, even now. My father is too strong ever to die, is he not?’

He smiled, though his pain was clear. In response, Tissaphernes reached out and gripped his shoulder, giving comfort to a younger man.

‘I was your father’s servant thirty years ago, before you were born. He had the world in his hand then. But even kings have just a short time in the sun. It comes to us all, though your philosopher friends would question even that, I am sure.’

‘I wish you had learned enough Greek to understand them.’

Tissaphernes made a scornful sound.

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‘It is the language of shepherds. What do I care for the speech of slaves? I am a Persian.’

He spoke in easy earshot of the Spartans, though they gave no sign they had heard. Cyrus looked at their officer, the one named Anaxis. Fluent in both languages, Anaxis missed nothing, though he had long ago dismissed Tissaphernes as a bag of Persian wind. For the briefest of moments, Anaxis met Cyrus’ gaze and winked.

Tissaphernes saw the prince’s expression lighten and jerked around in the saddle, trying to see what had caused the change of mood, who had dared to mock his dignity. He saw only that the Spartans were ready to march once more and shook his head, muttering about farmers and foreigners.

The Spartans wore their shields on their backs for long marches. Though they were in no danger, Cyrus passed the word for parade style. Marching through one of three capital cities of the Persian empire, they would carry the discs of golden bronze and wood on their left arms, with long spears ready in their right. They wore short swords on their hips, with the infamous kopis weapon ready at the small of their backs. Those heavy, bent blades were fearsome things, considered unsporting by their enemies. The Spartans laughed at that sort of complaint.

The bronze helmets they wore covered their beards as well as thick braids of hair that hung down to their shoulders. The helms hid both exhaustion and the weaknesses of men, leaving the cold aspect of statues. Having their features in shadow was just one of the things that made them so feared. Reputation meant something more. Carrying the weapons and shield of a father or grandfather meant more still.

As they left the river behind, Cyrus and Tissaphernes walked their mounts through the streets, the crowds clearing

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ahead, giving them room. An eerie silence fell, both among the people of the city and the men striding through it.

‘I still think you should have left your mercenaries behind, Highness,’ Tissaphernes murmured. ‘What will your brother say when he sees Greeks chosen over Persians?’

‘I am a prince and the commander of my father’s armies. If my brother says anything at all, it will be that my dignity is the honour of our house. The Spartans are the best in the world. Who else could have kept pace with us these last weeks? Do you see any Immortals here? My servants? One of my slaves *died* on the road trying to stay with me. The rest have fallen behind. No, these men have earned their place at my side, by being at my side.’

Tissaphernes bowed his head as if to acquiesce, though he was angry. Cyrus treated the Spartans like true men and not the mad dogs they were. The Persian general knew without turning his head that some of them would be watching him as they marched. They trusted no one who stood close to their master, just as curs would threaten and growl. Still, it would not be much longer. The two horsemen led the Spartans uphill, following the road to the great steps that would take them higher, to the plateau of the Persian king.

The great steps had been cut wide and shallow to allow the king to remain on horseback as he returned from a hunt. Cyrus and Tissaphernes walked their mounts ahead and, in jingling ranks, the Spartans followed them up. Cyrus could feel the eyes of his father’s Immortals on him as he approached the narrow gate of the outer wall. His father had spent the treasuries of nations on his plateau, both in deepening the cut across the face of the mountain and on all the luxuries that lay within. Though it was the garden of an empire, it was yet a fortress, with a permanent guard of two thousand men.

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The final step ended at the door, so there was no place for an enemy to gather and attack. Cyrus felt the light change as Persian officers blocked the sun overhead, staring down at his party – and in particular at the Spartans on the steps behind, bristling with four weapons to a man. Cyrus showed a bland face as he looked up at the walls, lit gold by the setting sun.

‘I am Prince Cyrus, son of King Darius, brother of Prince Artaxerxes, commander of the armies of Persia. In the name of my father, open this door that I may see him.’

They left him for a beat longer than he expected, so that Cyrus began to colour. His rising temper subsided as he heard chains and bars removed and the door swung open, revealing a long yard beyond. He swallowed, determined not to show fear. In that, he and his Spartans were well matched.

Without dismounting, Cyrus and Tissaphernes rode their horses through into the sunlit yard. The light was softer by the hour, shading gently into summer’s evening. Cyrus knew that he was home at last, that he should relax and look ahead to seeing his father. He was not yet certain how the old man would react to him, nor he to the Great King. He felt unsure of himself in the face of that loss, rushing down upon him. Not all the strength of arms in the world could keep his father in it for one more day if it was his time. It was that helplessness that made Cyrus tremble – not the killing ground he entered.

The defences of the plateau were not just in the men on the outer walls, but also the funnels through which attackers would pass. If they somehow reached the steps and broke through the gates, each side of the fortress was separate from the other. Enemy forces could not rejoin until they had passed through two long and narrow yards, open to the sky.

Cyrus and Tissaphernes did not hesitate and rode through

to the end of the killing ground. Fifty ranks of six Spartans followed in perfect order, spear-butts resting on the dusty ground as they came to a halt before an even greater door ahead.

Behind them, the outer gate was shut and barred. More than one of the Spartans frowned at being held in a place where they could not manoeuvre. There were shelves of stone running all round that yard, the height of two men from the floor below. The purpose of them was not obvious and the Spartan officer Anaxis tightened his grip on his spear. He felt the hostile stares of Persian guards more used to looking fine in their polished panels than any actual fighting.

In the front, Cyrus and Tissaphernes glanced at one another and dismounted. Anaxis tried not to crane his neck to see who had come out to greet them, though the conversation was blocked from his view by the horses. He did not like that. It was his duty to protect Cyrus, and perhaps the fat, older one as well. Yet no orders had been given to remain alert or to watch for a threat. Anaxis knew he was in the citadel of an old enemy, but he was also the personal guard of one of their princes, a man he rather admired for his honesty and lack of affectation. Certainly, as Persians went, the prince was a good one. Cyrus had shown no fear, or anything other than concern for his father. Yet Anaxis found himself looking up to the stone shelves around them, almost like the long seats of an Athenian theatre. The Persians were half-decent bowmen, he knew. The Spartan did not like the thought of being overlooked, not in that place.

None of those thoughts showed in his face, which remained hidden in the shadow of his helmet. Anaxis stood like a statue in bronze while Cyrus and Tissaphernes spoke in low voices ahead. Yet Anaxis was pleased when one of the mounts moved, letting him see the prince.

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Cyrus turned to the Spartans at his back, his face fixed and stern.

‘My brother has given orders for me to enter the royal gardens without guards,’ he said. Cyrus seemed about to speak again and shook his head. It was barely a signal at all, though Anaxis felt his heart sink.

‘Perhaps your brother would not mind if I accompanied you,’ Anaxis said.

Cyrus smiled at him.

‘My friend, if there is treachery, one more man would make no difference.’

‘I always make a difference,’ Anaxis said, seriously.

‘That is true, but I must trust in my brother’s honour. He is the heir to the throne and I have given him no reason to doubt me.’

‘We will wait here, until you return,’ Anaxis said, dipping onto one knee. He spoke in the manner of an oath and Cyrus bowed his head before raising the man back to his feet.

‘Thank you. You honour me with your service.’

Cyrus turned to find Tissaphernes watching with a scornful expression, gesturing to the gate that led deeper into the royal plateau. Beyond that long yard lay the first gardens, planted on soil brought up from the plains and tended by a thousand slaves. Trees had been set there, forming shaded avenues, with tiny monkeys chasing birds from branch to branch and the air thick with the odour of green boughs and jasmine.

Cyrus ignored the little seneschal who had come to meet him, not yet sure if the man’s status was an insult or not. His brother Artaxerxes would be found at his father’s side, of course. It meant nothing that he had sent a mere servant to accompany Cyrus through the gardens.

Tissaphernes seemed to shed the cares and strains of their

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trek as he walked, breathing deeply of fragrances he knew well and seeming almost to grow as he stretched his back and stood taller. He had known Cyrus for all his life and been mentor and friend for most of it. Yet they shared a very different outlook. Cyrus loved people, there was no other way to describe it. They were his passion and he collected friends as other men will earn coins. In comparison to the prince, Tissaphernes could hardly hide his dislike of crowds and sweaty soldiers.

They walked for an hour through paths so twisting a stranger might have been lost a dozen times. Cyrus knew them all from his childhood and followed the seneschal with the barest concentration. His father's pavilion lay at the far side of the plateau, surrounded by palms and slaves, all waiting for his final breaths. Cyrus felt his throat tighten as he walked, listening for the wailing voices of his father's women.

Anaxis looked up at the first scrape of a sandal on the stone above. The Spartans had stood in silence for an hour or so, taking their cue from him. Anaxis cursed under his breath when he saw the troop of Persian soldiers walking out, filling the ledges on both sides. They wore ornate black armour and carried bows set with precious stones, like guards in a play or perhaps on the door of a whorehouse. To his eye, they looked like children who had run amok in a king's treasury.

The Persian officer wore plumes of black and white feathers that twitched in the wind, far grander than anything Anaxis had ever seen at home. The man's skin shone with oil and his hands with gems. He carried no bow, but only a short sword in a gold scabbard that had to be worth a small city all on its own. Anaxis raised his eyebrows at the thought. There was plunder and loot in that place. Such things were worth remembering.

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‘Ready shields,’ Anaxis said clearly.

Many of the men had placed their shields on their backs or rested them against their legs. They took them up once more, grim with the same dislike. None of them were comfortable with archers standing in a superior position, while they were crammed into a killing ground below.

Anaxis looked at the stone walls with fresh eyes, seeing how smooth they were. Above his head, three rows of Persian archers halted to the left and right, perhaps as many men in all as watched them sullenly from below.

The plumed officer came down a narrow path at the corner, standing with his sandal half over the lip of the stone, so that Anaxis could see the studded underside of the sole. For a time, no one moved and the air grew still, with no breeze to give them relief. The shadows had crept some distance since the prince and Tissaphernes had gone, but the evening light seemed not to have changed. Though it was warm, Anaxis felt his scrotum tighten. The men looking down on the Spartans were smiling as they fingered their weapons. They had strung the bows, he noted. Though they wore the ceremonial armour of the royal court, they were arrayed for slaughter. He scratched his beard.

‘How hard would it be to get onto that ledge, do you think?’ he said to his friend Cinnis. In more normal times, Cinnis was a bulky man, rightly proud of his strength. Fourteen days of loping along on sand roads had made him leaner and more surly. He shrugged.

‘If two men hold a shield flat, like this —’ he held out his own by the edge — ‘a third could be lifted up easily enough. You think they are going to attack?’

‘I do, yes,’ Anaxis said. He raised his voice to the rest, knowing it was unlikely anyone above them could understand a word of Greek. ‘Someone has decided to strike us

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down, it seems. So. Shields ready to raise overhead. Stand in threes. Make no move unless we are attacked, but if we are, I want men flung up to them. I like this place. I think we should hold it until Prince Cyrus returns.'

'Or fight our way out to the river and away,' Cinnis murmured.

Anaxis shook his head, as his friend had known he would. Anaxis had given his word. He would not suffer the shame of Cyrus returning to find he had abandoned his post. Cinnis hunched his shoulders in rising anger when he saw the first bows bend.

Above their heads, the Persian officer drew in a great breath to give an order. Cinnis held out his shield, the far edge immediately gripped by another. Their eyes met in fury at the betrayal.

The plumed officer shrieked and the Persian bows bent fully, the noise like clattering wings as the first arrows plunged among them. As they struck, Anaxis stepped onto the shield with a dozen others along the length of the yard. Each of those men was thrown upwards, crashing into astonished archers. Anaxis arrived in their midst with his spear and the vicious kopis blade ready, laughing at their panic.

Cyrus paused on a wide path between lime trees. Tissaphernes went on a few steps before returning to his side.

‘What is it?’ the older man asked.

‘I thought . . . Ah, I have been away from home a long time. It was the cry of birds, or the keening of slaves. The empire mourns, old lion. My heart weeps within me and I thought I heard its voice. My father has made the world around him. This place alone! It is a wonder to stand so high above the plain, to feel this breeze and know the shade of these trees, yet to recall this entire plateau was cut from the flanks of a mountain. Kings achieve more than other men, if they have vision.’

‘Your father was always a man of will,’ Tissaphernes said. ‘Though he was not always right, he made a decision and then moved on it. Most men find such an act wearying, whereas your father grew stronger and more certain with every year that passed.’

‘With fewer doubts.’

‘Doubts are for children and the very old. We see too many choices at those times, so that reducing them all to a single act is harder. Yet as men in our prime, we cut away the weak choices and reach out for the sword, or the spade, or the woman.’

Cyrus glanced at the man he had known his entire life, seeing him lost in memory.

‘You were there when he became king, of course,’ Cyrus said, his voice dry.

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Tissaphernes raised his eyes to the evening sky for a moment.

‘You mock me. Yes, I have told it to you a dozen times, but I saw greatness in him even then. His brother was king – and your father accepted that and gave his oath of loyalty. He pressed himself to the floor and all men knew he would follow.’

‘I know the tale,’ Cyrus said, suddenly tired. Tissaphernes went on as if he had not heard.

‘Yet another brother was not so great of spirit. No, Prince Sogdianus was not able to put honour before his own desire to rule. Just six weeks after that coronation, Sogdianus crept into the royal bedchamber with a copper knife. He stood before the court as the sun rose, though he was red and smeared with royal blood, though he left trails and loops behind him, as if he had sported in it. He told them all that he was king and not a voice was heard in complaint. It was then your father stepped out of the crowd.’

‘I know, old lion. He was loyal to the first brother, but he took vengeance on the second. The court acclaimed his bravery and his right. He won the throne for himself.’

‘He loved them both, but he was a man of iron loyalty,’ Tissaphernes said, nodding.

‘As am I.’

‘As are you,’ Tissaphernes agreed immediately. ‘You have your father’s heart, I think. Though he was never so tolerant of Greeks as you are.’

It was Cyrus’ turn to raise his eyes and tut to himself.

‘I have won their loyalty.’

‘*Bought* their loyalty,’ Tissaphernes said with a sniff.

‘No. You don’t know them. There is not enough gold in the world to buy the service of Spartans, if they choose not to give it.’

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Tissaphernes made a hissing noise.

‘Cyrus, my dear boy, there is enough gold in the world to buy anything.’

The younger man shook his head, but they had both seen a great pavilion between the trees. Guards watched them from the roadside and they fell silent at the prospect of meeting a dying king.

Cyrus felt some part of him unclench as his brother Artaxerxes came out to meet him. Older by a year, they were as different from one another as it is possible to be and yet share blood. Artaxerxes had always been the scholar. They had both trained under their father’s stern eye, but it was Artaxerxes who had tripped himself with his own spear. Cyrus had been the one to dance with weapon masters, leaping like a salmon with great cries of joy. The younger brother had not understood the dark looks and bad temper that came his way at first. Even when Cyrus was old enough to understand his brother’s resentment, it had not troubled him. Cyrus knew he had been born loyal, just as he knew he would never be king. All the skill he had earned for himself merely reflected glory to their father’s throne. Even when the king had chosen Cyrus to command the armies and set him learning at the feet of their greatest generals, the young prince had known only that it would make him of more use, would increase his value to his father.

Artaxerxes had been spurred on by his brother’s success and his own ambitions. He had continued his swordwork, that was clear from the wide frame and solid grip as he embraced his brother, kissing him on both cheeks and the lips. Artaxerxes held Cyrus’ head in his hands and the glimmer of tears from the elder prince brought them forth from the younger. Fear overwhelmed Cyrus, so that he spoke as a dry whisper.

‘Is he . . . ?’ Cyrus could not go on. To ask if his father was

alive was to suggest he might not be. He might as well ask if the mountains had fallen, if the rivers had run dry.

‘No, though it cannot be far off now. He has been calling for you, Brother. I thought you would never come.’

‘Stand aside, then. Let me see him,’ Cyrus said, looking past his brother’s shoulder.

‘As you are? Your clothes are marked with sweat. Would you insult him?’

‘Have new clothes brought if it troubles you! I have washed in the river and I am clean. Now, Brother, I would enter. Do not make me ask again.’

A note of iron had entered the voice of the younger prince. Artaxerxes hesitated, then stepped back, indicating the open doorway. Cyrus walked past without looking to see what Tissaphernes would do.

The pavilion was enormous, stretching hundreds of paces from the entrance in all directions. Inside were pools and gardens, feasting rooms and scores of his father’s personal slaves to tend him. Silent young men in neat tunics offered to hold his cloak before Cyrus had taken a pace inside. Yet he did not stop. He was a boy again, running to his father.

Behind, standing at the door to the huge pavilion, Artaxerxes put out his hand as Tissaphernes approached. The older man went onto both knees and then lay flat in the presence of the prince. Raising him up, the heir to the empire bowed his head to whisper into Tissaphernes’ ear.

‘Has he spoken against the throne, against me?’

Tissaphernes shook his head as he came to his feet.

‘Not a word, Highness. I swear it on the honour of my family.’

Artaxerxes became still as he thought.

‘You were my father’s friend. You have been loyal to the king of your youth. Will you be loyal to me?’

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Tissaphernes chose to prostrate himself once more, pressing his forehead and lips to the ground. He waited there for Artaxerxes to touch him lightly on the cheek, giving him permission to rise. His skin was marked with small stones, sticking to his sweat.

‘My loyalty is to your family, Highness,’ Tissaphernes said, ‘to the throne of Persia, to the line of Darius the Great, through Xerxes, to your father – and then to you. I am loyal to death and beyond. Call me in the afterworld and I will come to you.’

Artaxerxes nodded, pleased. He had never grown weary of the adulation he experienced. The capacity of men to give their honour into his care was only what he expected of them.

‘And my brother? You have known him as well, all his life.’

For the first time, Tissaphernes hesitated.

‘Cyrus is one to admire, Highness. I love him as I love my sons. Yet he will not inherit the empire that makes us great. That is what matters, more than my life or his.’

Artaxerxes relaxed a fraction, moved by what he had heard.

‘Enter then, old friend. Bathe and change into clean silks. My father sleeps now for much of the day, but he will want to know that you came at the last. I thought you would be too late. I give thanks you were not.’

‘Your brother . . . brought a guard of three hundred with him,’ Tissaphernes said. ‘Men of Sparta and exceptional warriors.’

Artaxerxes frowned, looking back along the path Tissaphernes had walked.

‘He admires them, I know.’

‘I have heard it said that their legend is much exaggerated,

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Highness. I do not . . . believe that to be the case. They are skilful men. Your brother insisted on bringing them here, despite the trouble it might cause.' He paused, choosing his words and giving them a certain emphasis in his hesitation. 'Highness, I would not let them roam free in our lands.'

With a tight smile, Artaxerxes clapped him on the shoulder.

'They will not. I have made sure of it.'

Anaxis raced along the lowest step, killing as he went. The Spartan stayed low, crouched over, though his legs were strong and he moved in perfect balance. His eyes were savage at the betrayal, so that he went as an angel of death among the Persians, still sending their barbs as fast as they could. Anaxis shoved half a dozen men off the ledge in the first moments, knowing those below would kill them more quickly than he could. He lost his spear in the armpit of one, wrenched from his grip when he would not follow it down. The Spartan officer grinned at the next terrified Persian to face him, showing him the kopis blade at eye level, even as he swept it out at a man on the step above. Anaxis batted away a downward lunge, using it to foul the attack of another. He chopped a stranger's ankle when that man tried to send an arrow into the mad Spartan who had leaped through the air at them. There was no panic then in Anaxis, though a little regret. He knew he fought on his last day and he was very calm. The Persians had expected a slaughter – and they would get one, though they would not enjoy it as much as they'd thought.

On the yard below, the Greeks held their shields overhead, pinned down and unable to manoeuvre. Dozens of them had thrown their spears or used them to stab and hook the calves of the archers. Bodies in dark cloth lay thick on

the ground and there were still a few Spartans among them. The Greeks stood in tight groups, overlapping their shields and peering out between the gaps, yet they were not cowering. In the glimpses Anaxis could steal, he saw Cinnis was keeping them in good order, calling out targets.

Anaxis found himself smiling as he feinted to unbalance the fellow in front of him, a snarling Bowman of huge beard and breadth of shoulder. The man jerked aside to avoid a blow that never came, and in the moment of weakness, Anaxis tugged him sharply by his sleeve and pulled him over the edge to crash down on the Spartans below. They shouted in anger, calling for Anaxis to watch what he was doing. He chuckled in reply as he hacked and slashed, a dervish spattering blood and scales of Persian armour as he went.

So many archers had fallen into the long yard that some of the Greeks had taken up their bows and quivers. Most had shot hares as boys and they could hardly miss Persians who stood without shields, just the height of two men away. Six or eight of them began to return the long shafts. The Persians wavered at facing their own weapons, falling back in knots and clusters rather than continuing the slaughter.

Anaxis gathered three of his men to his side. Those below had thrown shields up and it was a relief to stand behind them as arrows hammered into golden bronze and wood. They were all wounded, Anaxis saw. Two of them wore the black stubs of arrows they had snapped off in their chests. They showed no sign of distress, though they struggled to breathe and blood dripped from them as their strength drained. A great strip of ribs showed white bone along one man's side. He shrugged when Anaxis pointed to it.

'I'll have it bound up after,' he said.

'I'll stitch it for you,' Anaxis said. 'Remember, now. Don't let Cinnis anywhere near it.'

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‘I’ll remember,’ the man said. They were old friends and they did not need to say more.

Anaxis grunted in pain as an arrow thumped between the shields into his side, piercing right through the ridged muscles there. He could see the feathers, but he dared not pull it out. The wound brought a wave of nausea, so that nothing felt right.

‘I would like them to remember us,’ Anaxis said. ‘If you have rested, that is.’

‘I thought *you* were resting,’ one of the Spartans replied, indignantly.

Anaxis grinned. His kopis blade sawed quickly through the black shaft, making him grunt as something turned inside him.

By falling back in fear, the archers had left a space that suited them well. They were desperate not to let the few Spartans who had gained the steps get closer, nor any others to climb or leap up to join their companions-in-arms.

Anaxis and the others rushed them, holding up the shields. The Persians poured shots into that small group even as they howled and plunged amongst them once more. The shields became weapons at close quarters, the edge as useful as a spear to one who had been trained with it. There was panic in the Persian ranks as they fell back in tatters. Down in the yard, the Spartans who still lived began to sing the battle hymn of death, the paean.

Anaxis made it to the highest step before his kopis blade was finally dashed from his grasp. He saw lines of fresh Persian warriors coming out of doors on both sides, an endless stream of them, carrying bows or swords and spears. Spears were more suited to killing those who could not get out of the trap, he thought. That would have been his order, had he been the Persian officer. A laughter with bows was an insult

and there was no need for such pettiness between men. He felt his sight fading and offered up his soul to Hades and Hermes. It would be pleasant to meet King Leonidas, who had stood at Thermopylae. The man had known more than a little about Persian treachery. Anaxis hoped to raise a cup of good red wine with him that very evening, if he crossed the river in time.

In the yard, Cinnis saw those who had been thrown up to the steps cut down, one by one, taking the last hopes with them. The spears were gone, the quivers were all empty, though there were broken shafts everywhere amongst the dead.

The Persian archers no longer sneered. Scores of black-robed men lay dead in the yard and the blood of more stained the steps on both sides. Yet the Spartans had lost half their number and the best chance to break out had come to nothing. One or two still tried to lift colleagues up, but the archers knew it could be done by then. They concentrated their shots on any such attempt, so that the men fell back, spitted through by shafts.

Cinnis shouted orders to pick up the weapons of the dead and throw them. As arrows battered them to their knees, the Spartans did as they were told, with careful aim. The kopis blades whistled well in the air, as did the short swords. One or two shields were sent spinning after those and where they struck, men crashed backwards. A few of them fell into the pit and they were cut to pieces in instants, though the rain of arrows intensified.

Cinnis kept them together in smaller and smaller groups, using shields in clusters, so that they could shuffle across the field and collect fallen weapons, then send them spinning through the air to take a few more with them. On the steps, the Persian regiment kept coming out, fresh men aghast at

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the number of their own dead. They drew swords or strung bows and the last thing some of them saw was a kopis whirling at them.

The Spartans fought until the last four stood together. Each man was covered in blood and badly wounded, so weary they could barely hold the shields as arrows still thumped into them. The surfaces of beaten bronze resembled the plucked flesh of fowl by then, with pockmarks and broken quills so thick it made them hard to lift.

‘Hold!’ came an order from above.

Some of the Spartans knew Persian commands but ignored it. Yet the archers overhead all stopped and stood back, panting. The first Persian officer lay dead on the ground. His replacement came to the edge and peered down at them, shaking his head in amazement at the sheer savagery of the scene.

‘I am Hazar Zaosha,’ he said in halting Greek. ‘An . . . officer of the Zhayadan. You understand me? The Immortals. You cannot win now. Will you surrender, men of Sparta? You are few and we are many. I wonder . . .’

Cinnis threw a sword at him and the man lurched aside from it. With a cry of horror, Zaosha stepped into space and dropped to the yard below. He looked up to see the four bloodied Spartans standing over him with bright interest.

‘Kill them!’ Zaosha roared. ‘Kill . . .’

Cinnis cut him off with a chopping blow from a kopis, then fell across him with a grunt. Arrows stood out in his back. Cinnis breathed into the Persian officer’s face as both of them died, though Cinnis smiled at him to hide his rage. It was bad enough that they had been betrayed by ancient enemies. It was worse that no one would carry the news to Sparta, to let the ephors know they had died well and without shame.

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The pavilion was cooled by the breeze that came down the mountainside each evening, a wonder enjoyed by the king and the court, slave-born or royal alike. When the heat of summer was beyond endurance on the plains, there was nowhere like it. Cyrus felt the sweat dry on his face and breathed in, grief taking hold. He thought he could smell cinnamon on the air, though it was hard to be sure. He had not set eyes on his father for years. For him, the breeze was childhood and home.

He did not have to ask where his father lay. The number of slaves grew as he walked deeper into the pavilion. They clustered around his father's bed like bees, ready to answer his slightest whim. Huge guards stood unmoving at each compass point around the dying king, facing outward against all threats. Cyrus could see the man who lay propped up on bolsters, his brow mopped by a woman dipping a cloth in a bowl of water where petals floated. The odour of roses was sickly sweet as Cyrus dropped to one knee.

The Great King turned his head as one of the male slaves whispered to him. Darius looked for his son and Cyrus came forward, stopping as a servant held out a hand.

'Highness, your sword. Please.'

Cyrus unbuckled his belt and handed it over. The guards stood aside then and he came within arm's reach of the man who had controlled his life from the earliest years.

Cyrus smiled, though it was more in pain than pleasure. The old man had been eaten away by some scourge. Arms that had once held a royal sword were painfully thin, the skin stretched over bones, showing odd bruises and flecks of black.

'I am here, Father,' Cyrus said, sitting as a chair was brought to his side. 'I came as soon as I heard, as fast as I could.'

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‘I waited and waited for you, Cyrus,’ his father said. ‘The voice was a whisper and the prince leaned in to hear. ‘I could not die until I knew you had come. At last.’

Cyrus saw a strange expression cross his father’s face, something that might have been spite or triumph, he could not have said. The king’s eyes drifted closed and the lines on his forehead eased. On impulse, Cyrus reached out and took the hand that had cuffed him a thousand times when he was a boy, feeling the warmth in his. He felt awkward as he searched for words.

‘Thank you, Father, for everything. I wanted you to be proud of me.’

There was no reply and Cyrus placed the hand on the sheet, stroking the knuckles for a time before sitting back. The slave with the bowl of rose water leaned in and wiped his father’s face once again. The breeze rolled through that part of the pavilion, though it seemed less gentle then, more like the scouring winds that came in autumn, that blew hot and unceasing and drove good men mad.

‘Father?’ Cyrus said more loudly. He stood up and watched helplessly as a stranger came in and listened to the king’s breathing and heart, nodding.

‘It will not be long, Highness. He may hear us. He may wake again – or not. He called for you many times. I am glad you came, in the end.’

There it was again, the barb – and from one who would not have dared in normal times. There was something like resentment in that pavilion for the king’s son. Cyrus could sense it all around him.

In that instant, he’d had enough. He’d covered a dozen parasangs a day for fourteen days to reach the old man. Only the Spartans had matched his pace and they had been driven to injury and exhaustion. He told himself to take comfort in

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the fact that he had not been too late, but it was hard. Not a word of thanks or pleasure from the old man, just that strange note of bitterness, as if they had all been waiting for him.

Cyrus felt oddly deflated and at a loss as he stood back from the sickbed. He had feared he would be too late for days. In that impatience, he'd thought of his father's smile, of an embrace he had never known. It was all suddenly tin, the jewels of his imagination made glass. He had never made the man proud before. No matter what Cyrus had achieved, only Artaxerxes had ever mattered to his father.

Cyrus held out his hand for his sword to be returned to him. The servant who held it stared wide-eyed, clutching the jewelled scabbard and strap to his chest.

'Steward. Give me what is mine,' Cyrus said slowly.

He thought the day could not get any stranger, but then he heard his brother approach, with Tissaphernes. Both men looked relaxed and refreshed, Cyrus saw. Tissaphernes had changed his robes for flowing silks and had found time to bathe, his hair still wet. More surprising was the presence of armed guards with them, spreading out as they approached through the gardens. Their intent was unmistakable and Cyrus lowered his head, considering.

Before the steward could do more than yelp, the prince snatched the sword from his grasp and belted it on.

'There, that is better,' he said. 'Now, Brother. What threat brings swordsmen to this pavilion at such a time?'

'You,' Artaxerxes said. He smiled as the guards moved in and surrounded the younger prince. He saw Cyrus consider resisting them, but their father lay dying just a few paces away and events had overtaken him. Artaxerxes saw his brother's head dip and his teeth showed white.

'You are under arrest, Cyrus. On our father's order. To be held for execution.'

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