

# **Gates of Fire Study Guide**

**Gates of Fire by Steven Pressfield**

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# Plot Summary

A captive Greek, named Xeones, dictates his story to a scribe who works for the Persian King, Xerxes. The scribe forewarns Xerxes that the story contains much foul language, but the King wants to read exactly what Xeones has to say. Xeones sustains life-threatening battle wounds, and he had been dead for a short period before the Greek god, Apollo, sends him back to his wracked body in order to tell the story of the Battle of Thermopylae.

Xeones, at nine-years-old, loses his city-state to an invading force. He runs to the mountains with his cousin, Diomache, and an old slave, named Bruxieus. The boy survives and learns to be an archer. Bruxieus dies and the two children head toward Athens. Xeones continues on to Sparta while Diomache goes into Athens.

The Spartans take on Xeones as a helot and give him to Dienekes, an old soldier, as a battle squire. Xeones becomes the sparing partner of Alexandros and a friend to the malcontent Rooster. Against his mother's will and the rules of Sparta, Alexandros follows the army into battle. Xeones accompanies him, and they witness how the Spartans fight.

The Persian army threatens to invade and take Sparta. The Spartans, under the leadership of Leonidas, select 300 soldiers to go on a suicide mission, among them Dienekes. Picking up allies along the way, the total Hellenic force of about 4,000 prepares to fight a much larger force of Persians. On August 18, 480 BC, the Battle of Thermopylae begins.

The Spartans and their allies do surprisingly well against the Persians, who must feed their troops through a narrow mountain pass onto a battlefield that has a drop-off to their rear. The Thespians and Spartans form phalanxes that charge the Persian line from the mountain side of Thermopylae. The Persian line cannot hold against the heavy Greek infantry. Throughout the day, many Persian troops die but only a few Greeks.

On the second day of battle, the Persians lose many more of their number. Xerxes learns of a trail that leads behind the Greeks' position and sends an elite force to encircle them. Leonidas sends a raiding party to kill Xerxes that night, but the effort fails.

Leonidas releases his allies on the third day, but some stay to die with the Spartans. The Persians attack and wipe out the Greeks, but not before many more Persian troops fall. In a fit of anger, Xerxes beheads the body of Leonidas, puts his head on a pike and nails his body to a tree.

Xeones, having completed his story, dies. The scribe continues the account of the war. The Athenian navy wins a decisive battle against the Persian navy. This causes Xerxes to retreat from Greece back to his homeland. The Greeks defeat the remaining Persian army and win the war. Diomache delivers Xeones' ashes to Sparta and visits Thermopylae.



# Book 1: Xerxes, Chapter 1 - 4

## Book 1: Xerxes, Chapter 1 - 4 Summary

A captive Greek, named Xeones, dictates his story to a scribe who works for the Persian King, Xerxes. The scribe forewarns Xerxes that the story contains much foul language, but the King wants to read exactly what Xeones has to say. Xeones sustains life-threatening battle wounds, and he had been dead for a short period before the Greek god, Apollo, sends him back to his wracked body in order to tell the story of the Battle of Thermopylae.

Xeones begins his tale by describing Thermopylae as a destination of travelers to use the hot mineral baths, thought to have healing properties. He briefly mentions that each Spartan soldier goes into battle with at least one helot, a member of the lowest Hellenic social class and a slave. Xeones is a Spartan helot who was once a citizen in the small city-state of Astakos in Akarnania.

After these introductory statements, Xeones flashes back to the time that the Argives treacherously burn and sack Astakos. Both of Xeones' parents die while trying to defend their small farm, but Xeones and his cousin Diomache survive because they are on their way to market to sell ptarmigan eggs. Diomache, a girl of thirteen, loses her parents as well. Xeones is only nine years old.

Diomache decides that trying to find safety within the walls of the burning city is not possible, so she and Xeones strike out toward the mountains and come across a blind slave named Bruxieus, spared by the Argives due to his slave status and blindness. They come upon a group of Argives, and they proceed to rape Diomache. Afterward, they give bread and wine to the refugees without a city-state.

## Book 1: Xerxes, Chapter 1 - 4 Analysis

The author sets up two narrators, a scribe and the dying Xeones. Xerxes had watched the Battle of Thermopylae and develops a great interest in what makes the Spartan soldiers fight the way they do, and why 300 of them fought to their deaths. The King likely wants information on which to base his next move against the remaining Hellenic city-states during his campaign to conquer much of the known world. Xeones gladly accepts the task of storyteller because Apollo has sent him back into life for this reason.

The horror of war descends upon Astakos. The citizen-soldiers are no match for the raiding cavalry from Argives, and the city falls easily. Xeones relates how fire and smoke are always parts of ancient warfare, while citizens who survive go insane from witnessing the gory killing. For Diomache, she suffers from a gang rape, another common factor in war. On top of this, without a city-state, the three refugees are no longer citizens. Their status falls to something more akin to animals. Their only chance for survival is to join the animals in the mountains, which is not much of a chance.



# Book 1: Xerxes, Chapter 5 - 7

## Book 1: Xerxes, Chapter 5 - 7 Summary

Xeones, Diomache and Bruxieus live as best they can in the mountains, eating whatever they can find and begging from local farms. Diomache feels that no man will want her for his wife due to the rape. Bruxieus does what he can to keep the youngsters from going too feral. While stealing lambs from shepherds who use bows and arrows to protect their flock, the refugees collect the arrows shot at them and steal a Thessalian cavalry bow from a sleeping shepherd. Farmers catch Xeones while he steals a goose, and the farmers drive nails through his hands, crippling them forever.

Xeones leaps ahead to a memory of Sparta, also called Lakedaemon. For punishment, the Spartans whip boys with sticks. One boy takes too much of the whipping and dies, which prompts a lesson from Dienekes, a Spartan officer, and Alexandros, his protégé, regarding fear. The idea is to teach boys to endure through the punishment and become unafraid of pain. Dienekes also teaches that fear defeats the enemies of Sparta, and that the shield protects the whole fighting unit, not just the individual soldier. Xeones explains that Spartan soldiers always mentor other men's sons:

"A mentor may say things that a father cannot; a boy can confess to his mentor that which would bring shame to reveal to his father" (p. 35).

During the winter, Xeones falls into depression over his crippled hands because he very much wants to fight with Spartans and use a spear. When Diomache and Bruxieus are out foraging and Xeones stays behind due to fever, he takes the opportunity to walk out into a snowstorm and freeze to death. Xeones begins to freeze while sitting beneath a tree, but he sees a vision of Apollo who tells him that a spear is an inelegant weapon. Xeones understands that he can still fight with the Spartans as an archer. His blood warms up, and he survives.

Taking another leap forward, Xeones speaks of his service to Dienekes of Sparta as the soldier's squire and the first time they see the Persian fleet. Dienekes meets an Egyptian named Ptammitechus who numbers the fleet at sixty squadrons. The two soldiers exchange coarse ribbings and become friends, although they may someday meet as enemies in battle. Having trouble with the pronunciation, Dienekes nicknames Ptammitechus "Tommie" and explains to him that the short Greek sword, the xiphos, is effective in face-to-face combat.

Xeones learns the extent of the Persian army, numbering two million soldiers, and the extent of the Persian empire. Tommie tells the Spartans not to resist Xerxes but to voluntarily join the empire as Egypt has. Dienekes subdues his anger. He tells the Egyptian that freedom must be bought with steel, not gold, strongly implying that the Spartans will never submit without a fight.



Back in Sparta, Xeones describes Dienekes as a warrior over forty-years-old who carries wounds from many battles. Xeones assists Dienekes prepare for training sessions because some joints do not fully work due to the old wounds. Dienekes tells the story about his terrible head wound and of an exceptional young fighting man named Suicide from Scythia, who likes to throw short javelins in battle. He then describes how he came to marry the lady Arete, who had been his brother's wife before he died in battle.

## Book 1: Xerxes, Chapter 5 - 7 Analysis

The author develops character and introduces other primary characters in this portion of the story, along with moving the plot ahead. The time that Xeones spends in the mountains nearly kills him, and he tries to help death along through suicide. The motivation is clear—without the use of his hands, Xeones' life prospects look grim. He wants to fight with the Spartans and perhaps take revenge on the Argivians who had conquered his city-state, but without the ability to hold a spear, this is impossible. The use of the god Apollo to bring Xeones back into life may seem a bit contrived, but since the story is about the ancient Greeks who believed strongly in their gods, perhaps the reader can suspend skepticism through this part. To Xeones, Apollo is as real as the winter cold that almost kills Xeones.

Now an archer upon Apollo's suggestion, Xeones embraces life once again. He has hope for a better future and a means to hunt game in the mountains. Meanwhile, his cousin Diomache has her own problems. She nearly kills herself trying to abort the baby that came from the gang rape, and she has lost hope for her future. The resolution for her crisis comes in an earthly form, the slave Bruxieus. His wisdom preserves her life through the harsh mountain period.

As the main narrator dictates the story to the scribe, plot jumps in time are justified. This is a natural way that people tell lengthy stories from memory. In turn, important characters can easily be introduced earlier than if the plot followed along chronologically. Dienekes, the Egyptian Tommie and the lady Arete all play important roles later on.

King Xerxes overshadows everybody. His empire has grown tremendously large, and if the Spartans had any doubt that they would need to fight the Persians, Tommie puts all those doubts to rest. Dienekes expresses a primary theme in the story: Freedom must be maintained through war, because kings like Xerxes forever try to conquer and subdue free people.

The author gives realistic voices and personalities to the Spartans. Soldiers talk crudely and make gutter humor regularly. They will come straight into another soldier's personal space, chest-to-chest and nose-to-nose in a display of courage. Dienekes does this with Tommy and makes a strong friend while being on opposite sides of a primary philosophical conflict. Tommy thinks it better to submit to Xerxes and live. Dienekes

would rather go down fighting than submit. If Xerxes wants to know why the Spartans fight the way they do, this sums it up.

The lady Arete's character is argumentative and practical. She does not shrink from facing Dienekes, a much older man, when he balks at marrying his brother's widow. Dienekes feels deep love for Arete, and she knows this. However, his sense of ethics stops him from taking what he wants. Arete sweeps his ethics aside and insists on marriage. Her pluck will later change Dienekes' fate and an important fact to remember is that she has born him only daughters.



## Book 2: Alexandros, Chapter 8 - 9

### Book 2: Alexandros, Chapter 8 - 9 Summary

The scribe narrator writes that Xerxes has become impatient with Xeonos' rambling style of storytelling. Xerxes wants to know about Spartan tactics, training and military philosophy, but Xeonos insists on telling the story his way, and so he does, being that Xerxes has no choice. Xeonos talks of Alexandros, the son of a noble Spartan family, and an incident that happened when he and Alexandros were fourteen years old. They had become sparring partners in the Spartan way of training boys into warriors a year before, and they find themselves at the Oaks in the Otona valley for battle games.

The Spartans design the games to simulate actual battle conditions as closely as possible. They must carry 80 pounds of armor, weapons and other necessities over rough and steep terrain. They eat and drink the same rations as if on a campaign and make the same battle lines. Yet the soldiers in the lines are not grim and silent as is commonly believed, but full of joking and banter to keep the spirits high.

The most important part of a Spartan's armament is his shield. A veteran soldier, Polynikes, catches Alexandros handling his shield improperly and puts him through a lengthy and humiliating training drill. Polynikes then makes all the boys in training go through standard shield-handling drills. While not on war games intended to stretch the soldiers to their limits, Spartans train at controlling their fear, running for speed and endurance, and wrestling. Other activities involve sacrificing to the gods, and in Alexandros' case, singing in the chorus. The Spartan army goes on a war campaign and Alexandros wants to follow. His mother tries to stop him, but his will is too strong. Xeonos accompanies him on the forbidden adventure.

### Book 2: Alexandros, Chapter 8 - 9 Analysis

King Xerxes wants straight description, which Xeonos provides along with the personal side of things. This writing tactic allows the author to blend straight historical facts with character development in a manner that puts the demand onto Xerxes, which results in a better story flow than simply going into descriptive narrative.

Spartan soldiers train in war games much like modern soldiers. Other parallels include field rations, carrying full battle loads and stretching endurance. Psychological training against fear, spiritual training in the form of sacrifices to the gods, running and wrestling keep the warriors ready for battle. The life is not as dark and grim as usually thought, but it is tough. The whole idea is to develop a society of warriors, where the very mention of their name causes the enemy to become fearful.

On the human side, Alexandros and Xeonos become best pals through their sparring and sharing in each other's lives. Xeonos fights better than Alexandros and is healthier, but Alexandros improves over time. The adults pay more attention to toughening up



Alexandros, and he decides to go on a bold adventure by following the Spartans into battle. He has something to prove, and Xeonos has something to tell Xerxes about Spartan warfare.



## Book 2: Alexandros, Chapter 10 - 11

### Book 2: Alexandros, Chapter 10 - 11 Summary

While catching up with the Spartan army on its way to take the port city-state of Antirhion, Xeones accounts for the Spartan way of approaching war. Knowing who the enemy is does not matter as the Spartans consider all foes to have no identity. The Spartans consider war to be simply work in the business of killing as many enemy troops as possible. The formation for battle consists of three forward lines arranged shoulder-to-shoulder, and upon engaging the enemy's line, the second two Spartan lines push the first into the enemy. Three rearward lines kill any soldiers still living after the forward lines push back the enemy line. Xeones and Alexandros catch up to the Spartan army at Rhion, where it will cross a narrow part of the Gulf of Corinth to Antirhion.

The two boys hire a boat to take them across the Gulf, but when nearly discovered by a Spartan cutter, the captain casts them overboard and runs back to shore. While swimming to shore, Alexandros asks Xeones about his experiences in the mountains. Xeones explains that he and Diomache become good hunters and find two dogs that they name Happy and Lucky. The dogs make their hunting more efficient, and nobody goes hungry again. Bruxieus teaches Xeones and Diomache from Homer in an attempt to keep the children from turning wild. He insists that Diomache and Xeones must go to Athens and adopt it as their new city-state, because it is the only one in Greece that welcomes immigrants. After Bruxieus dies, the children head for Athens.

Ten days later at a fork in the road called Three Corners, Xeones, now twelve-years-old and Diomache fifteen, decides to join Sparta. Diomache takes the dog Lucky and goes to Athens, where she expects to be taken care of by a fine lady they had met along the way.

The battle takes place on a plain west of Antirhion, where the Antirhion army has set up the Spartan side full of obstacles, while the defender's side is clear. A creek bisects the field. Xeones and Alexandros watch the battle from atop a hill. The Spartans prepare themselves for the battle calmly, as they routinely do this during their continuous training. They form their ranks and wait for the enemy to advance, and the longer they wait, the more the Antirhion forces show nervousness and fear, as evidenced by their shaking spear points. The enemy begins to make noise in an attempt to drum up courage for a charge, yet the Spartans remain silent and calm. The enemy advances, first at a walk, then a trot and finally a run. They cross the creek intended to slow the Spartans, but now it is to their rear and an impediment to retreat. The Spartan lines advance and set their spears to the attack positions precisely in time with a war song they sing, an intimidating sight to behold. The enemy runs toward the front line in an all-out charge, part of its line collapsing before ever encountering the Spartans. The two armies collide shield-to-shield.



The Spartan line surges forward and pushes the enemy backwards. The grim business of war begins as the Spartan phalanx advances, and the soldiers work at killing the enemy in a highly efficient and practiced methodology. The front rank strikes overhead with eight-foot spears. The two ranks behind extend their spears over the shoulders of those in front and push the line forward. Overwhelmed, the Antirhion line breaks. A gory slaughter begins, and the Antirhion king must admit defeat. Leonidas spares the lives of the survivors rather than killing everyone in the city, going against the usual custom. He knows that the real fight will be with the Persians.

In the battle aftermath, the Spartans count their dead in a unique way. Each man wears a crude bracelet made from a twig that had been broken in two and each half marked with his name before the battle. A basket holds all the non-bracelet twig halves. The surviving soldiers match up their twig halves, and those left in the basket identify who has died and how many. A ceremony follows to honor the dead.

## **Book 2: Alexandros, Chapter 10 - 11 Analysis**

Xerxes receives the inside look he wants of the Spartan army. Known as heavy infantry, the army forms a phalanx that resembles a killing machine. The ineffectual Antirhion army, being made up of primarily citizen-soldiers, lacks the discipline and training of the Spartans. The enemy loses the battle before it begins by letting fear infest the line. The left part breaks before encountering the enemy, and the intact line cannot hold the Spartan killing machine.

The ceremonial aftermath of the battle is as important. The matching up of twigs serves more to keep the Spartans occupied and away from the fact that they had, a few moments before, been slaughtering men as if reaping wheat from the fields. Leonidas draws the men together and gives speeches to honor the fallen, thank the survivors and focus attention on the greater threat to come—the Persians.

The author accomplishes several story goals in this section. He draws the characters of Alexandros and Xeones closer together through their shared misery while crossing the Gulf of Corinth. Via the battle scenes, he brings out the true meaning of ancient warfare and how the Spartans gain their tactical edge—men who make their business warfare rather than farming perform better on the field. The preparation for battle is no different than hitching up a horse to plow a field. The battle itself is simply a job that needs to be done. However, the aftermath of the battle must be handled just in the right way, as well.

One part of the plot has a weak resolution. While the boys swim toward shore in the Gulf, they suffer from hypothermia. No matter how much they swim, they seem to gain no headway. Then, after Xeones tells his story, they make shore in another hour as if born by the hand of Poseidon. The reader must assume that headway had been made during Xeones' storytelling and that swimming relieved the hypothermia. This part would benefit from a bit more exposition, especially for fast readers.



The bloody details of battle prepare the reader for the extreme gore that happens at Thermopylae. The faint of heart may stop reading after the battle at Antirhion, leaving the final battle for those with stronger stomachs. According to the ancient literature, two million die at Thermopylae. Modern historians put the figure closer to forty thousand. Either way, the blood flows heavily, and the bodies pile up. The author does his readers a kindness through this lead-in battle. He also sparks interest in readers who enjoy realistic battle scenes and promotes curiosity about the ancient world in language only suitable for fiction, not scholarly works.



## Book 3: Rooster, Chapter 12 - 14

### Book 3: Rooster, Chapter 12 - 14 Summary

The scribe writes that Xeones refuses to narrate any further stories, because he has heard of the mutilation of King Leonides' body. Nothing sways him until Dmaratos, a deposed Spartan king, talks about Xeones' duty to Apollo. The storytelling continues.

On the way back to Sparta from the victory at Antirhion, Xeones receives punishment for following the army. He must follow in the dusty rear along with Dekton, his half-helot friend, who has acquired the nickname Rooster. Rooster continually speaks ill of the Spartans due to his status as helot, even though his father had been a Spartan soldier.

Upon reaching Sparta and after memorial ceremonies for the fallen, Polynikes grills Alexandros about the battle. Alexandros answers honestly that the battle had made him sick, which angers his inquisitor. A harangue follows that brings out Polynikes' hatred for the seemingly soft Alexandros. Meanwhile, an audience of soldiers watches the growing spectacle as it gets meaner by the question. They rap their knuckles on a table to show their disfavor. Polynikes wraps up with a speech to Alexandros about how the Spartans are superior to all other humans because of war and manly valor.

Dienekes gives Polynikes a hard time about becoming so personally involved in the haranguing of a boy in training, which is a custom during the boy's early years. He then gives advice to Alexandros that even though overly harsh, Polynikes speaks the truth. Dienekes assures that at some point in the future, Alexandros will be able to dish it right back into Polynikes' face.

Xeones goes to Dienekes' house. There the mother of Alexandros, the lady Paraleio, asks questions about her son's performance with Polynikes and how he behaved when following the army. Xeones answers:

"There are fourteen hundred boys in the training platoons of the agoge. Only one displayed the temerity to follow the army, and that in knowing defiance of his own mother's wishes, not to say full awareness of what punishment he must endure upon his return."

"The lady considered this. 'It is a politic answer, but a good one. I accept it'" (p. 145).

Lady Arete next questions Xeones about Rooster. She reveals that he is her half-nephew and that he gravitates toward his mother's city-state of Messenia. Lady Arete directs Xeones to protect Rooster all he can while in battle, which she expects soon with the Persians. The next evening, Alexandros and Xeones receive their whipping punishment for following the army to the battle of Antirhion. Rooster helps Xeones to treat his back wounds, and Alexandros smuggles a special salve to them, an action that if found out would result in whipping for Alexandros. Rooster admires his courage.



Dienekes assigns Rooster to be the squire of Olympieus, a Spartan soldier over fifty-years-old, and takes on Xeones as second squire, with Suicide as his first. This means that Xeones gets his confiscated Scythian cavalry bow back and can hunt rabbits around Sparta. In battle, he will carry the bow and help fight the enemy.

## **Book 3: Rooster, Chapter 12 - 14 Analysis**

With the Spartan men well-covered, attention turns to the Spartan women. The grilling of Alexandros does not go unnoticed by his mother, which indicates that the Spartan women know at least the general things that go on with the men. Lady Arete displays compassion for Xeones and tells him that men think with their minds, but women feel in their blood. She believes that he had actually been visited by Apollo during his mountain vision while nearly freezing to death.

Spartan women may not dress fancily or wear makeup, but they have their own austere and fit beauty. Women also run and wrestle, but their main concern is raising children, with their sons to become warriors and their daughters to learn the proper way of interrogating helots such as Xeones. Other family concerns them too, as Arete shows by her request for Xeones to protect Rooster.

The Spartans are unsurprisingly human. The warriors must believe in their creeds and trust implicitly those whom they fight beside. The women must figure out what goes on with the men via indirect means as they are not allowed in the men's meeting quarters. In this kind of social structure, the men provide the minds and brawn while the women provide the children and hearts, although mind and heart are always shared between the sexes. In a warrior society, the lines between sexual roles are more sharply defined than in other human societies.

Most of Sparta knows that war with the Persians is inevitable and imminent. While the mothers worry about their sons, the fathers reassign the field workers to positions of combat. When war comes with the Persians, every able-bodied male will participate.



## Book 4: Arete, Chapter 15 - 17

### Book 4: Arete, Chapter 15 - 17 Summary

Over the next five years, Sparta makes war with other Hellenic city-states that submit to Persian rule. Darius of Persia dies, and Xerxes takes the throne. King Demaratos of Sparta goes into exile and joins the Persian court as a sycophant. The Persian empire expands alarmingly fast as Greeks sell out their freedom. The Spartans know they must fight the Persians in a decisive battle but do not know where this should take place. The Spartan women push for the decision to be made.

The movement starts with refugees from other Greek city-states congregating in Sparta. The refugee women tell of Persian atrocities, and this infuriates the Spartan women. They hound the Spartan soldiers who have returned in shame from an aborted battle at Tempe. The Spartans decide to make their stand at the Hot Gates near Thermopylae.

At first, the Spartans think of amassing 20,000 troops at the narrow Gates, but decide that a smaller party of 300 with their helots will be more sustainable in the small area. The 300 consists of all men with sons, an all-sire unit, and is considered a suicide unit. The men will fight until victorious or dead.

Lady Arete confronts an impromptu court assembled to try Rooster for being a traitor, because he refuses to take citizenship as a reward for valor in battle. This carries with it a death sentence for Rooster and his young son. Lady Arete argues but fails to convince the court to spare the child's life, so she takes him as her own and claims that her husband, Dienekes, is the true father. Alexandros argues for Rooster, proposing that he would serve better alive as a spy, and if he should falter in combat, Alexandros promises to kill Rooster. This saves Rooster's life.

### Book 4: Arete, Chapter 15 - 17 Analysis

The Spartans know that they must stop the Persians at Thermopylae. Letting the army through would mean disaster for Greece, and so a stand must be taken with the only question being how many troops to send. A large force will cause problems due to the usual needs of an army for food, water and other necessities, and in ancient times the land and surrounding communities provide what the soldiers need. The land can support only a small force, and this becomes the logical decision.

The 300 all-sire suicide unit does not initially include Dienekes, because he has no sons. However, the lady Arete's action to take Rooster's young son as her own changes the situation. In the heat of her argumentation with the men, she seems to have forgotten this ramification, but Dienekes knows all too well that she has saved a young boy and condemned him, her husband, to death. An additional outcome, although not so important to Arete or Dienekes, is that Xeones will accompany him into battle.

However, this is highly important for the story by placing Xeonos close to the battle but with the broad viewpoint of an archer.

The story about Rooster and how he snubs the Spartan offer of citizenship lays a plot foundation for a later scene. He does not look like a Spartan and can easily infiltrate the Persian army as a spy. This will cause King Xerxes an amount of personal discomfort.





## Book 5: Polynikes, Chapter 18 - 19

### Book 5: Polynikes, Chapter 18 - 19 Summary

The scribe narrator takes two entire chapters to address Xerxes and his worries. The outcome of Thermopylae is known—two million Persian soldiers die at the hands of only 300 Spartan warriors, their squires and a few allied forces. The King of Sparta, Leonides, dies as well but the Persians decapitate the body, put his head on a spike and nail the body to a tree. Xerxes cannot get this out of his mind and has a dream that his own head ends up on a spike. His dilemma is whether to take Athens or sail home and forget about the Greeks.

Xerxes' advisers convince him to continue the conquering of Greece, even though the Spartans still have 8,000 troops multiplied by armed helots and allies. The Athenians alone have a fleet of 200 ships and intact fighting units. To leave means dishonor. Xerxes decides to go for the glory.

Summoned to the King, Xeonos is brought into Xerxes' tent on a litter where the blindfold is removed from Xeonos' eyes. He identifies the King and points out an axe head still buried in a stout tent upright. Xeonos claims that one of Xerxes' officers, Mardonius, had thrown the axe, and but for the pole being in the way, would have split Xeonos' skull. Xerxes wants to hear more of Xeonos' story.

### Book 5: Polynikes, Chapter 18 - 19 Analysis

These chapters, placed in the middle of the book, would be a plot spoiler in anything but a fictional history. The 300 Spartans will decimate the Persian army and fight to the death, but the reader already knows this. The Persian Empire will never conquer all of Greece, and the reader knows this, too. The information is about 2,500 years old. Nevertheless, important parts of the story come out with this forward look.

Doubt plagues Xerxes after Thermopylae. He has witnessed what the heavy infantry of the Spartans can do to his amassed forces, and he does not want to think of further disasters in his ambition to spread the Persian Empire across the world. However, challenges to his manhood succeed in forcing him to make a foolish decision—to continue the attacks on Greece and disregard the Spartans. He has no stomach to attack them on their home turf as no riches exist there to plunder, but he seems to dismiss the fact that Spartan forces move out of their homeland regularly to preserve Greece. Xerxes' pride, as with many ambitious leaders, will become his eventual downfall.

Besides gaining information on the Spartans, Xerxes enjoys the human interest part of Xeonos' story, thus giving the character more of a soul. Certainly the affairs of war occupy most of his time and attention. However, he also has room for a story about two children who part their ways at the Three Corners, one to Sparta and the other to

Athens. Xerxes also trusts Xeonos to be truthful as telling lies would gain him nothing, whereas the King cannot trust any of his court to be honest.



## Book 5: Polynikes, Chapter 20 - 23

### Book 5: Polynikes, Chapter 20 - 23 Summary

The 300 Spartans assemble as a mixture of ages from early adulthood to over sixty years. Leonidas' strategy is to have the unit fight as a miniature army of green and seasoned soldiers. Two days earlier during a festival, the lady Arete gives Xeones a fairly large sum of money to run away from Sparta and start a new life. He refuses the invitation to leave but accepts the money. Leonidas gives a pep speech to his troops before they embark to Thermopylae.

The 300 pick up reinforcements along the way from Mantinae, Orchomenos, Arkadia, Corinth, Phlius, Mycenae, Thespie and Thebes numbering 3,600. When they arrive at Thermopylae, the place is nearly deserted except for a few looters who scurry away when the army approaches. The residents of Lokris and Phokis, nearby towns, have evacuated.

Leonidas sends out raiding parties to burn grain and drive out animals ahead of the Persian army. He also sends reconnaissance parties to map out the area that the Persians are expected to occupy. Work begins on building a battle wall across the narrows of Hot Gate. The Persians begin to arrive across from the Spartans.

Addressing both the Spartans and allies, Leonidas outlines the war plan. He says that the enemy's strongest forces, the cavalry and archers, are ineffective in the narrows. Only a dozen enemy soldiers can squeeze through at a time, which will slow the attack. Then, the enemy must face the 300 Spartans, with the allies numbering around 3,700 by now—4,000 in all. Leonidas expects a few days delay while the Persians establish their camps, reconnoiter the area and wait for their fleet to arrive.

During the wait, the Hellenic troops finish the battle wall, hunt for game and talk about fear and courage. The Egyptian Tommie arrives with a message from Xerxes calling for the Spartans to lay down their arms and join the Persian Empire without a fight. The Spartans refuse the offer.

### Book 5: Polynikes, Chapter 20 - 23 Analysis

Preparations for the Battle of Thermopylae provide an opportunity to flesh out the characters and describe some of the finer details of ancient Hellenic life. Lady Arete expresses disdain for the idea of fighting to the death now that she is about to lose her husband. An accident of birth traps her into the Spartan way, but Xeones is free to leave. She tries to save him, possibly as an act of mercy to counteract the negative side of her earlier act of mercy that will cost her husband's life.

The men, talking about fear and courage at the battle site, brings out their deep admiration for the women of Sparta. Dienekes rises an hour before his troops in the



morning and makes sure those under his command are ready to fight by constantly encouraging them. Leonidas solves the problem of where to place the battle wall with a simple action and works with his men to construct it. When the Egyptian Tommie brings the message from Xerxes, Leonidas poses as a regular soldier and makes fun of himself.

Spartans carry more than their armor and weapons into battle. They also have various fixtures, bandages and ointments to treat wounds and repair materials for their armaments. They arrive fully prepared for the gruesome business of ancient warfare, fully understanding that they are forcing Xerxes to fight the heavy infantry type of battle — close-quarters combat without cavalry. The Spartans have another advantage in that they defend their homeland while the Persians seek to conquer. Historians speculate that one of the primary goals of the battle is to delay the Persians in order that the Hellenic fleet can damage the Persian supply ships.



## Book 6: Dienekes, Chapter 24 - 29

### Book 6: Dienekes, Chapter 24 - 29 Summary

The first wave of the enemy troops, made up of Medes, filter through the narrows in fancy uniforms. They carry light shields and small spears that resemble javelins. Leonidas decides to hold the Spartans back and send in the Thespians for the first clash of the battle. The Thespians form ranks 64 shields across an area inside the narrows called the "dance floor." On one side is a sheer mountain wall, the longest leg of an obtuse triangle and where the Thespians form. On the other a cliff drops to the sea, and this is where the Medes form their line. To the rear is the battle wall, and behind that the main Hellenic forces. The main Persian forces wait to the front beyond the narrows, but cannot be seen from the battle wall due to the curving path.

Nothing happens for hours until Xerxes arrives and sets up a vantage point to watch the action. The Greeks shout and gesture at him, and Xerxes responds by making an exaggerated bow. The Medes move forward toward the Thespians, whose polished bronze armor glimmers in the sunlight. Their expressionless full-face helmets lend an inhuman air to the killing machine phalanx.

The Medes assault first with archers, and the Thespians raise their shields. The Thespian commander orders the charge. Within a few instants, the two lines clash with a sickening crunch, bronze and oak shields against wicker. The killing begins. The Thespians steadily push the Medes backward with the Spartans forming to relieve the Thespians. Forward progress becomes hindered by the layers of dead Medes, yet more of the enemy continues to join the battle only to be quickly dispatched and added to the piles of bodies. The very weight of their masses pushes the fatiguing Spartans backward behind a wall of bodies, and then into disarray. The Spartans regroup, form their murderous phalanx and again push against the Medes until their line fails. The Hellenic reserves join the fight, the Medes fall back, and their archers start shooting into their own men, then into the ever-advancing Spartans as they break through the Medes' line.

The archery line buckles under the force of the advancing Spartan phalanx, and the rearmost lines begin falling into the sea. The Spartan advance leaves many of the Medes bowled over and passed but still able to fight. They try to rally, but the Hellenic reserves come up quickly and slaughter the Medes. The Spartans and their allies completely rout the first Persian assault. Other attacks from various groups of Persians follow throughout the afternoon, and the Greeks repel each one. As night begins to fall, Xerxes orders his elite troops to attack, those of actual Persian blood. By nightfall, this attempt to break the Hellenic forces also fails.

Early the next morning, Rooster returns from the Persian side and is mistaken for a Persian deserter rather than a spy. Once this confusion is cleared, Rooster suggests that a direct attack on Xerxes himself is possible. The second day of battle involves



more attacks and repels until a mountain of dead Persian troops builds, then collapses back on the Persians. Xerxes learns of a path around the Greeks and gives the order to surround them. That evening, Leonidas gives the ally troops permission to leave due to learning of Xerxes plan.

## Book 6: Dienekes, Chapter 24 - 29 Analysis

The author intersperses the general battle events with the direct and indirect viewpoints of Xeones. The direct viewpoint involves what Xeones sees from his position to the rear of the Spartan phalanx, acting as archer and squire to Dienekes. Xeones' vantage point is better than most of the fighters as they are concerned with only the few feet around themselves. He witnesses the strategies of both sides and the tremendous carnage of a lightly armored force meeting the Hellenic heavy infantry. However, the sheer weight of numbers does prove effective against the heavy infantry and nearly breaks the phalanx. Highly trained discipline saves the Greeks from being overrun.

Stories from others after the battle make up the indirect viewpoint. Xeones hears of actions that happened and reports them. Some enemy units take to the mountain wall, an idea that a few Hellenic squires try, too. The strategy does not work out for either side due to archers turning the men into pincushions. The mountain wall affords little protection, and the cover that is available in the form of large rocks and boulders is also the material that the attackers loose upon the enemy below, thus leaving the attackers open to arrows.

An unforeseen problem develops on the battlefield. With so many Medes falling, their bodies and blood make the field slippery. The corpses mount up into layers and hills, and then a wall that collapses back on the incoming enemy. The grisly sight freezes the Spartans, who have seen much carnage but nothing to compare. This, along with Medes falling over a cliff and into the ocean from the pressure of the Hellenic phalanx, constitutes the most nightmarish of battle scenes.

Graphic violence and massive death fill the first two days of the battle. The Hellenic forces do better than Xerxes expected, causing him to rise to his feet more than once in concern for his army, like a spectator at a football game. Nevertheless, the Spartans know that the Persian army will not be defeated at Thermopylae, but already the fight serves as inspiration for future battles. The Persian army is made up of men who can be intimidated and defeated. No magic supports the Persian Empire but only sheer mass, and size has its drawbacks. Considering this, Leonidas allows his allies to depart on the third day. The remainder of the 300 Spartans will fight to the death, but the allies have future battles to fight. They also carry away the stories that will become legends of the great Battle of Thermopylae, psychological weapons that are as powerful, perhaps more so, than millions of conquering troops.



# Book 7: Leonidas, Chapter 30 - 34

## Book 7: Leonidas, Chapter 30 - 34 Summary

Leonidas allows eleven men, with Dienekes as the leader, to infiltrate the Persian forces and kill Xerxes, an idea that Rooster had proposed to destroy the snake by chopping off its head. Rooster will guide the party into the Persian camp. Two mountaineers, Hound and Lachides, will enable expected climbs. Two Spartans known for their speed and strength, Polynikes and Doreion, join the team. Suicide, Ball Player and Xeones will support Dienekes and Alexandros. The eleventh man, Telamonias, goes because he is also fast and powerful, and he is unhampered by battle wounds. He will serve as the messenger.

Dienekes splits the raiding party into two parts, six under his command and the five others under Polynikes, to increase the odds that one party will get through and accomplish its mission. After Leonidas wishes them well, the men begin their climb up the mountain and toward the Persian camps. Rain starts falling, and Dienekes' party becomes disoriented but makes the first crest. The weather clears and they regain their bearings, making their way toward the Persian camp on game trails. They meet up with Polynikes' party, which had taken a lower and easier route, and discover the trail that the Persians sent by Xerxes to surround the Hellenic troops had taken. Dienekes sends the fastest man, Telamonias, back to inform Leonidas.

The raiding party enters a river near the Persian camps and follows it to Xerxes tent. They prepare for battle. Suicide attacks a sentry and kills him with one of his short javelins. Polynikes takes out another while on the run with a mighty bash of his shield and a jab of his spear. The raiders slash open the tent wall and enter a harem room full of screaming women. They run through the complex tent into another room full of eunuchs, then priests and finally the King's room.

The Spartans immediately charge in and somehow exotic birds leave their cages and cause confusion, which saves Xerxes' life. They lock their shields together just as Xerxes' guards let loose with arrows, and the Spartans collide with the guards, killing with their spears. Hound and Doreion go down, one by axe and the other by arrow. Alexandros tries to throw his spear into Xerxes, but a scimitar slashes his throwing hand off at the wrist. Dienekes protects Alexandros with his shield and calls for everyone to retreat from the tent. Suicide and Xeones cover as the surviving Spartans run for it. Ball Player falls to pike and sword blows.

The survivors run through a paddock and slow to a walk when they encounter soldiers rising for the morning. The soldiers are not aware of the attack on Xerxes. Dienekes tells the officers that the Spartans had been fighting a mutiny, but none of the officers cares as this part of the Persian army consists of all draftees, conscripted against their will. All they care about is getting through another day alive. The Spartans pass unchallenged and make their escape.





The next morning the remaining Spartans, numbering just above a hundred, prepare themselves for their deaths during the third day of battle. Allied forces leave the field of battle as per Leonidas' order, including Rooster, whom Leonidas had made a free man the night before. Rooster reports that Leonidas has freed all helots and squires, meaning that Xeonos is free to go. Xeonos refuses, even though Dienekes orders the departure. Some of the Thespians remain for the fight, raising the Hellenic number of soldiers to around 500.

## Book 7: Leonidas, Chapter 30 - 34 Analysis

The failed attempt to kill Xerxes and thus remove the ambitious conqueror brings out several qualities in men who fight wars. Nostalgia for peaceful times arises while the raiding party regroups in a protected area where a herd of deer had been bedded down. They talk about going on a hunt together, although most know that their deaths are near and unavoidable. Grim humor keeps their courage up during the mission, which may become suicidal itself within the overarching Battle of Thermopylae.

Pacing of the attack moves ahead crisply with a little comic relief. Xerxes' tent seems more like a villa with several outer rooms to hold concubines, eunuchs and priests. The screams and pandemonium add the small amount of comedy, but the idea is to kill Xerxes. Some of the King's court falls to the raiders' blades along the way. Flying birds in Xerxes' room momentarily confuse the action and add to the already absurd situation. Then the Spartans attack and come within a spear throw from their goal, only to be thwarted by a single blade slash. Had Alexandros succeeded in killing Xerxes, the Battle of Thermopylae may have ended on the spot.

The raiding party escapes because the Persian army largely consists of conscripted forces from conquered countries. The men have no love of Xerxes and no will to fight. They only do so because the alternative is death. This plot element not only allows the escape but also alludes to current military thought that an all-volunteer army works better than a conscripted one. The overall story might be interpreted as war propaganda from a particular viewpoint—the glorification of war. However, the author balances the story with enough true humanity that the criticism loses traction. Besides this, the Spartans fight wars to preserve all of Greece, and since war cannot be avoided, the society has decided to produce the best soldiers in the business. Accepting war as a fact of life in the ancient world is not glorification, but rather pragmatism.

Preparations for the third day of battle include the release of Rooster and the freeing of all helots and squires to leave the battlefield. Only the surviving Spartan heavy infantry must fight to the death, yet others choose to share their fate. Xeonos had made the choice years ago when he selected Sparta over Athens. He stays, as do the Thespians, because strong bonds have formed with the Spartans. Perhaps honor motivates or glory, or a sense of friendship deeper than the survival instinct. If, as Dienekes states, the opposite of fear is love, then the fear of death no longer exists among the remaining troops. They have grasped the true meaning of love in its most terrifying manifestation,



from the viewpoint of the enemy—warriors heading into their last battle to preserve their homeland from the likes of Xerxes.



## Book 8: Thermopylae, Chapter 35 - 38

### Book 8: Thermopylae, Chapter 35 - 38 Summary

Xeones, through his narration, chides Xerxes for not being a true king. Using Leonidas' example, Xeones tells Xerxes that a true king does not force his conquered armies to fight against their will, but leads free men into battle. A true king does not watch the battle from the safety of a faraway hill, but joins in the fray shoulder-to-shoulder with his men. As a result, his men fight hard to retrieve his body once fallen.

The Greeks surge and then fall back to the place where they had planned to make their soon to become famous last stand, a rise of land behind the battle wall. Xeones falls to an Egyptian spear, and Suicide hauls him away from the battle. Only sixty defenders remain, including Xeones who has strapped his guts together, as the Persian troops surround them. Arrows fall in a deluge as the men fight to their deaths.

The scribe notes that the day that the Battle of Thermopylae ends is the same date that the Hellenic fleet defeats the Persian navy in the Straits of Salamis off Athens. The implication of this defeat is that the Persian army has lost its supply line, rendering it ineffective over time. For Xeones, Xerxes no longer has any interest in his story and calls away the physicians who were keeping him alive. Xerxes then goes on a rampage and kills a number of his high-ranking officers. General Mardonius tells the scribe to kill Xeones and burn his story, but the scribe and Captain Orontes argues for keeping the papers. Orontes, instead of killing Xeones, asks him to continue with his story.

Xeones explains how Leonidas selected the 300 Spartan soldiers. His decision rests not so much with their fighting abilities but with the strength of their women because the women will represent Greece in the war to come. They must be strong enough to not show their grief in public and instead to inspire with their brave facades. After telling this last story, Xeones dies. Captain Orontes orders the body to be taken to the temple in Athens where Xeones' cousin, Diomache, has taken sanctuary.

The Greeks and their allies defeat the Persians in the battle of Plataea and drive them into Asia. The Greeks almost kill the scribe, but he hollers out all the Spartan names he can remember from Xeones' story, and is spared. The scribe is brought to Rooster, where the scribe begs for his life and accounts for Xeones after Thermopylae. None of the Greeks believes him, but Rooster asks what had happened to Xeones' body. The scribe says that it had been taken to the temple, Persephone of the Veil. Rooster knows this is true because Xeones' ashes had been delivered to Sparta by a priestess of the temple. He spares the scribe's life. The scribe works for the Spartans as a helot interpreter for two years and is then ransomed to Persia. There he rejoins the King of Persia's service.



## Book 8: Thermopylae, Chapter 35 - 38 Analysis

The final day of the Battle of Thermopylae ends quickly, but not before the remaining Greeks put up a good fight. This is an anticlimax, however. Their first day of fighting is the most impressive, and the second follows closely behind on the scale of intense battle action. Nevertheless, the author offers memorable images of the Spartans in the last moments of their lives, riddled with arrows and slashed in various ways.

Xeones' observations on what makes a true king strikes home regarding the continuing fall of the Persian Empire. The Greeks defend home and hearth while Xerxes seeks world dominance. The Spartan king fights with his men to the very end, while Xerxes watches from afar and only joins the battle when victory is assured and without threat to his own skin. This and the wisdom that Leonidas shows by his selection criterion for the 300 warriors, based upon the strength of their women, helps ensure the victory at Plataea. An inspired army of Spartans, other Greeks and their allies, although outnumbered three-to-one, proves unstoppable.

The scribe's miraculous survival of the final slaughter shows the deep regard that Xeones had earned while at Thermopylae, and the fairness of the Spartans toward their enemies. The primary theme of this story is that all warriors of honor, braveness and sincerity love one another regardless of sides taken, because they have reached the opposite side of fear, which is love. Warriors such as these extend their regard to the scribe—a lowly wordsmith—due to the honor he grants Xeones and all Spartans by writing the story of Thermopylae. The author of this book, Steven Pressfield, thereby takes a short, humble bow.



# Characters

## Xeones

Xeones is the protagonist and the main narrator of the story. His city-state of Astakos in Akarnania falls to invaders when he is only nine years old, leaving him homeless along with his cousin Diomache. They survive as best they can, and by the time Xeones is twelve years old, they split up. Diomache goes to Athens to become the wife of some well-to-do man, and Xeones goes to Sparta, where he becomes a helot in service to a Spartan platoon leader, Dienekes.

The Spartans train Xeones in the arts of Spartan warfare. Due to hand injuries, Xeones cannot handle a spear but can shoot a bow. He tends to his master in battle and supports the Spartans when he can as an archer. At the Battle of Thermopylae, Xeones witnesses the fighting from the field and behind the Spartan phalanx. On the third and final day, he dies with the last remaining Spartans.

The god Apollo decides to let Xeones live to tell the story of Thermopylae. Xeones dictates to a scribe under Xerxes, the Persian King. Xerxes wants to learn as much as he can about Spartan training and tactics but also becomes interested in the human side of Xeones' story. Xeones adds his opinions about how Xerxes is not as good a king as that of the Spartans, Leonidas. Other observations involve the beauty and integrity of Spartan women, the brilliance behind the Battle of Thermopylae, the courage of individual warriors, and the deep insights into how men behave within the extreme conditions of ancient warfare.

## Dienekes

Dienekes is a Spartan platoon leader and master of Xeones. A veteran of many campaigns, Dienekes carries wounds that limit some of his movements. He trains Xeones and Alexandros, whom he makes sparing partners. Only having daughters by his wife, the lady Arete, Dienekes is not at first eligible to be part of the 300-Spartan force that is to fight to the death against the Persians at Thermopylae. However, Arete takes the son of Rooster as her own, thus making her husband eligible. Dienekes does fight at Thermopylae, becomes a member of the raiding party that Leonidas sends out to kill Xerxes, and finally dies at the end of the battle.

A philosopher of war, Dienekes expresses a main theme: The opposite of fear is love. He trains the boys under his charge to control their fear and other passions that rise up during a battle campaign, such as blood lust from witnessing and causing too much carnage. His overall attitude toward war is that it is a job to be done, work to be performed. War consists of men doing ordinary things under extraordinary circumstances, and the key to consistently winning is highly trained discipline. When the



Spartan line begins to deteriorate, Dienekes and other officers rally the troops back into an effective phalanx formation that turns the battle tide against the enemy.

## Leonidas

Leonidas is the Spartan king during the Battle of Thermopylae. He chooses the members of the 300-Spartan force, not so much on their abilities to fight, but more so on their women's abilities to remain strong after their husbands' or sons' deaths. Leonidas fights alongside his men and endures what they must—and more. He leads by gaining his men's love, not through fear or intimidation. However, when arguments arise, as they do about building the battle wall at the Hot Gate, Leonidas simply grabs a rock and starts building where he thinks the wall should be erected. His men follow and complete the job without further bickering.

Leonidas also makes speeches for his men to focus them and dispel their doubts and fears. The 300 Spartans and their 3,700 allies face a Persian force of a far greater size. Sheer numbers could overwhelm the Hellenic army, and threatens to do so on the first day of battle. Yet, before the final attack of the day comes, Leonidas makes sure his men and allies know the significance of killing non-conscripted soldiers of Persian blood—King Xerxes will be losing family and friends, and this will hurt him directly.

After Leonidas and all his men go down on the third day of battle, Xerxes makes the foolish move of decapitating the corpse and nailing the body to a tree. Even in death, Leonidas fights against his enemy. Xerxes cannot get the error out of his mind, even to the point of killing those involved. Meanwhile, the action becomes a legend among the Greeks on how very bad Xerxes is. He never lives it down.

## Alexandros

Alexandros is the son of a prominent Spartan family who is not quite cut out to be a warrior. He sings in the chorus better than he fights, but Dienekes knows how to turn the boy into a fighting man. He pairs Alexandros with the better fighter, Xeones, and gives Alexandros special training and guidance. When the battle comes, Alexandros performs well enough and at times magnificently. He almost kills Xerxes with an eight-foot spear, but an enemy soldier cuts off Alexandros' spearhand at the wrist.

## Rooster

Rooster is a half-Spartan malcontent who serves first as a helot but is later offered full Spartan citizenship due to his valor in battle. Rooster turns down the honor, which nearly costs his life, but his potential value as a spy in the Battle of Thermopylae saves him. He guides the raiding party to Xerxes' tent and fights well in the battle. When Leonidas releases the allied troops, he grants Rooster his freedom and releases him, upon which Rooster leaves the battle, but in honor rather than shame. Rooster later



sparing the Persian scribe's life, because he writes the story of Xeonos and Thermopylae.

## Polynikes

Polynikes is the quintessential Spartan warrior. He may be brutal in his treatment of Alexandros, but he is twice as brutal in battle and absolutely loyal to his comrades. Dienekes assures Alexandros of this fact after Polynikes rakes Alexandros up and down during a part of the boy's training that involves a verbal inquisition.

## Suicide

Suicide, one of Xeonos' peers, uses a unique weapon in battle. He shortens javelins, which he calls darning needles, and throws them at the enemy sometimes three at a time. The technique is effective in the closeness of the phalanx style of attack, and he often fights from the rear side-by-side with Xeonos, who shoots arrows in rapid-fire.

## Lady Arete

Lady Arete is Dienekes' wife and widow of his brother. She had always loved Dienekes first, and after her first husband dies in battle, she insists that Dienekes take her for his wife. She unwittingly makes her second husband eligible to be a member of the 300-Spartan force that must fight to the death at Thermopylae by taking on Rooster's son as her own, an effort to save the boy's life.

## Diomache

Diomache is Xeonos' cousin who survives with him in the mountains. When Xeonos goes to Sparta, Diomache chooses Athens instead, where she hopes to marry a good man. This does not turn out, and instead she becomes a priestess in a temple. Diomache delivers Xeonos' ashes to Sparta and visits Thermopylae after the Greeks finally defeat the Persians.

## Xerxes

Xerxes is King of the Persian Empire. His ambition stretches to Greece and Europe, but the Greeks stymie his plans. After the Battle of Thermopylae, Xerxes keeps Xeonos alive to tell the story of the Spartans in order to discover information that can be used against them. The Greek navy defeats Xerxes', which turns the war against him and eventually leads to his downfall.

## **The Scribe**

The scribe takes down Xeones' dictated story and argues to preserve both Xeones and the story after the Greeks defeat the Persian navy. Later captured by Greeks and facing death, the scribe shouts out as many names from Xeones' story as he can remember, among them Rooster. Rooster spares the scribe's life and later ransoms him off to Persia.

## **Ball Player**

Ball Player is a thief who Xeones meets while surviving in the mountains. Ball Player later shows up at the Battle of Thermopylae and becomes a member of the raiding party that tries to kill Xerxes in his tent. Providing a little humor, Ball Player asks for compensation for his participation. He also goes after defenseless priests and secretaries while fighting in the tent.



# Objects/Places

## Sparta

Sparta is a region in ancient Greece known for its fierce warriors and austere life style. Xeonos selects Sparta as his city-state, because he knows it builds men.

## Thermopylae

Thermopylae is an ancient resort area with hot springs that becomes the site of the Battle of Thermopylae. A force of 300 Spartans and 4,000 allies fight a tremendously larger force of Persians and conscripted soldiers.

## Hot Gates

Hot Gates is a narrow pass at Thermopylae bordered on one side by a mountain wall and on the other by a sheer drop-off to the ocean. The Hot Gates gives the Spartans a tactical advantage over the Persians.

## Athens

Athens is an open city in ancient Greece that accepts Diomache. The Athenian navy defeats the Persian navy and turns the tide of the war.

## Astakos in Akarnania

Astakos in Akarnania is the birthplace of Xeonos and Diomache. They must leave as invaders sack and burn the small city-state.

## Shield

The shield is the most important part of a Spartan soldier's armament. Linked together, the shields protect the Spartans and smash into the enemy as a juggernaut phalanx.

## Eight-footer

The eight-footer spear is the Spartan soldier's primary weapon. The soldier holds the eight-footer overhead while striking in the front rank. The second and third ranks rest their spears on the shoulders of the soldiers in front, thus presenting the blades to the enemy.





## Helmet

The Grecian helmet covers the entire face, leaving only dark eye slots. The effect is to hide all expression and thereby terrorize the enemy.

## Darning Needle

Suicide uses short javelins he calls darning needles while fighting from the rear of the Spartan phalanx. His speed of delivery and accuracy makes the darning needles highly effective weapons.

## Arrow

The arrow is the long-distance striking weapon of the ancient world. The Persians darken the skies over Thermopylae with their arrows. Xeonos delivers his arrows very rapidly.

## Lance

The lance is the preferred Persian weapon, but it is not nearly as deadly as the eight-footer in close combat. The Battle of Thermopylae demonstrates the ineffectiveness of this weapon against the Spartan phalanx.

## Sword

The short Spartan sword is a backup weapon to the eight-footer. It is designed for chest-to-chest combat.

## Phalanx

The Spartan phalanx consists of soldiers in the front row with interlocked heavy shields pushed ahead by two other ranks of soldiers. The phalanx proves effective against the Persian ranks, which use light wicker shields, and especially against the archers who stand in a staggered formation.



# Themes

## Patriotism

Patriotism in the ancient world differs from the modern patriotism, which is more nationalistic. To the ancients, the city-state and surrounding region are the foci of patriotism. The Spartans are loyal to Sparta first, their allies second. When Spartans fight for Greece, the idea is not to fight for country but region and allies.

Not belonging to any city-state makes Xeones a boy without a country, that is, an identity. Yet he is free to select among open city-states, those that accept immigrants such as Athens and Sparta. He casts his lot with Sparta and develops his sense of patriotism. Rooster does not. He sides with his mother's region rather than his Spartan fathers' and becomes a vocal malcontent. Ironically, he fights valiantly enough to be offered Spartan citizenship, which he turns down. Leonidas gives Rooster his freedom and apparently, since he continues to fight for the Spartans, his sense of patriotism develops. This could also be from his sense of camaraderie with Spartan soldiers.

Modern Greece still honors the Spartans and Thespians who fall at Thermopylae. The retort that Leonidas delivers to Xerxes upon the Persian king's request for the Spartan arms—come and get them—is used in the current Greek army as a motto. Other famous quotes from the battle are also either used in the military or placed upon monuments. What began as regional pride has expanded into national patriotism over the many years since the battle.

## Fear and Love

Dienekes is historically famous for his statement regarding the sky being blotted out by Persian arrows: Good, then we will fight in the shade. However, in this fictional take on the Spartan nature, he also expresses a deep philosophical thought: The opposite of fear is love.

Many people would say that the opposite of fear is courage, but that is simply a manifestation of love from the Spartan viewpoint. Fear must be controlled through self-discipline, and the Spartans train to master that control. However, battle experience must follow the training in order to understand how love conquers fear. They take the idea of loving one's enemy to the point of loving one's enemy to death. Of course, the enemy would love to kill the Spartans too, but this is using the term in a superficial way, more toward "would prefer to kill the Spartans first."

Conversely, the Spartans do as much as they can to build fear within their enemies. They know that a crisply performing phalanx with brightly shining shields and spears initiates awe. The gruesome killing power of the phalanx builds doubt, and the crushing impact of the phalanx finishes the job—the enemy becomes fearful and wants to run



away. At Thermopylae, just the number of enemy dead intimidates the living enemy in clash after clash with the Spartan phalanx.

## Leadership

Xeones makes a strongly worded statement about leadership directly to Xerxes. He says that Xerxes is no king—he is a despot who rules by intimidation and death. Xeones says that Xerxes is a cowardly despot who joins the battle only at the end when victory is assured. Finally, Xeones gives Xerxes an example of a true king who rules by earning the love of his men—Leonidas.

Leonidas never asks his men to do something that he would not. He expects to die at Thermopylae to fulfill the Oracle's prediction that either Sparta must fall or a Spartan king must perish, so through death Leonidas preserves Sparta. Whether or not the Oracle foretells the future does not matter—Leonidas understands that strong belief can lead to a desired outcome.

Dienekes leads in a similar way. Where the Persian officers must use whips to keep their troops advancing, Dienekes leads his men into battle, and they follow willingly with grim enthusiasm. Soldiers from a conquered nation do not have enthusiasm for furthering their conqueror's ambitions, a simple principle of human nature that Xerxes underestimates or ignores. He seems surprised, then shocked and angered, that a small number of inspired troops can hold back a large number of the uninspired.

## Ancient Warfare

The Battle of Thermopylae takes place in 480 BC during August the 18th through the 20th. The facts can be stated in dry formality, maps can be studied for an overview of arrows that indicate troop movements, and the battle site can be visited, where tourists take photos of the monuments. However, what is not brought to the fore is how a vastly outnumbered collection of Hellenic men holds back the Persian forces for any length of time, let alone three days.

Fiction has the ability to bring the battle to life. The story describes how slings with lead bullets three times the size of a man's thumb are used instead of rifles. Arrows rain down in torrents tipped with bronze points, or steel in the case of Xeones. The Spartans' style of fighting brings the carnage close, chest-to-chest, while the Persians prefer to fight from a distance. This is roughly like a modern tank (phalanx) taking on a line of riflemen—except the engine of the phalanx is the brawn and determination from three ranks of highly disciplined men.

Modern warfare does not equal the proximity of ancient warfare. Dropping a bomb is not nearly the same as stabbing away at the enemy from behind a shield with an eight-foot spear. Becoming bloodied in battle means exactly what it says in the ancient world, not something like taking shrapnel in the modern world. Modern killing has become



impersonal, where the idea of loving the enemy has been reduced to a respect among warriors, if anything.

## Beauty

Spartan beauty is austere, unadorned, healthy and natural. It defies the cosmetologist's attempt to turn the mundane into something more than it is because the beauty is undeniable. Nudity is nothing to be ashamed of, nor is it uncommon. Spartan women regularly wrestle in the nude, as do the men, and for a Spartan woman to show her leg is simply saying, "This is a leg, and it's in great shape."

The Spartan warriors have their own form of beauty, which says, "We are the best warriors in the world . . . mess with us at your own peril." The height of visual beauty comes when the phalanx moves crisply into its attack mode and begins its charge, climaxing with the bone-crunching initial contact. However, both the women and men have internal beauty that goes beyond simple health.

Spartans live disciplined and ethical lives. They have hearts of gold and wills of iron, both carefully meted out as appropriate to the circumstances. Sometimes, such as when Polynikes treats Alexandros more roughly than required, the discipline and ethics fall apart. However, the other Spartan men immediately indicate their disapproval, and Alexandros' mother investigates Polynikes' behavior. The society self-regulates human passions that have gone too far.

Xeones at the last day of battle notices for a brief moment how beautiful the day is at Thermopylae. Between all the death and gore, nature continues its work at creating scenes beautiful beyond human capabilities and wholly indifferent to human struggles. The narrow pass works against Xerxes' ambitions, but nature did not form the narrows for this purpose, and if the gods had anything to do with it, they are not talking.



# Style

## Point of View

Xeones offers the Hellenic point of view to Xerxes, while supposedly giving away the secrets of the Spartans. Ironically though, the Spartans have no secrets. They tear apart the Persian forces for obvious and logical reasons that Xeones freely shares with Xerxes. Had the King of Persia thought a little more and a little more honestly, he could have figured all this out for himself. That he needs to read it from Xeones indicates either the King has buried his common sense underneath his ego or he is a hopeless fool. One may lead to the other, but from Xerxes view of the battle, the Spartans had somehow worked magic. From a detached viewpoint, the Spartans simply played a better war game.

The scribe adds another viewpoint, that of an objective observer. He has no other duty than to report Xeones' dictation accurately, but the scribe does need to keep on the good side of Xerxes. This viewpoint also serves to round out the ending of the story after Xeones dies.

The author swings viewpoint from Xeones to those of others by way of observations that Xeones hears while at Thermopylae. The technique flows naturally without resorting to an omniscient narrator. Xeones is the primary narrator, and what he experiences comes through his perception filters. Little seems to be distorted with hyperbole. Describing the magnificent Spartans needs no hyperbole.

## Setting

The setting begins with the pastoral farm life of ancient Greece, moves rapidly into the harsh mountains and then to Sparta. Training areas, soldier messes and house interiors comprise the settings until the 300 Spartans go to Thermopylae.

At Thermopylae, the setting plays a major role in the battle. Nature provides a narrow pass that slows the advance of Persian troops. A drop-off to the ocean becomes a convenient enemy disposal fixture that the hard-pressing Hellenic phalanxes use to their advantage. The hot springs add an ironic twist—the battlefield had been a spa for tourists. The battle transforms the pastel area into a hellish landscape.

Mountainous terrain presents the raiding party with a physical challenge while seeking to kill Xerxes. The multi-roomed tent affords a dark comical setting as the raiding party traverses concubines, eunuchs and priests on their way to Xerxes and extreme action.

Setting plays an important part while developing Xeones' character. The loss of his city-state at an early age puts him into the position of basic survival, from which he acquires the archer skill that the Spartans find valuable. The Sparta setting makes a warrior out of the boy, and the Thermopylae setting turns the warrior into a hero. Conversely,



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## Language and Meaning

The author lends Xeon a voice derived from Homer, justified by the character's early studies of the Iliad and Odyssey while in the mountains. The prose may seem thick and pompous as a result, but the intent is to create an atmosphere of ancient Greece. Another influence is the scribe, who likely substitutes synonyms for words that Xeon repeats too often. The scribe also admits to problems with certain translations from Greek to Persian.

Cursing realistically peppers the dialog among the Spartan soldiers, and in ways that the ancients may have used. Gutter humor does not change that much over time, and creative cursing seems to be a skill that goes along with military training. If war involves ordinary men doing ordinary things under extraordinary conditions, then cursing the conditions, the gods, the enemy and any other appropriate or inappropriate target is fair play. The bravado is not false, although oftentimes satirical.

Descriptive passages lean toward thickness, where noun and verb modifiers encase ideas that may be more succinctly expressed. Whether this adds or distracts is a matter of taste, as some readers appreciate high-caloric writing while others would rather have the diet plate. In a story touted as epic, language gluttony may be forgiven or at least tolerated. The battle scenes do not suffer from the extra mass, although these might be best read on an empty stomach.

## Structure

The author splits the book into eight sub-books with titles, and the chapter numbers do not break sequence. Time jumps around in the plot, sometimes forward and sometimes backwards, as might be expected from a story dictated to a scribe. The scribe's words are set apart from Xeonos' by the use of italics.

Sub-book titles are, in their order of appearance, Xerxes, Alexandros, Rooster, Arete, Polynikes, Dienekes, Leonidas and Thermopylae. However, title association with sub-book content is loose. The untitled chapters often address plot areas that have little to do with the sub-book titles. Casual readers may find this a bit confusing, along with the plot jumps through time.

An especially effective plot spur is the raid on Xerxes' tent. The men go in and come running out, most of them, in their failed attempt. Yet this gives the author the opportunity to reveal the attitude of conscripted troops. The Spartans pass unchallenged through an enemy encampment of apathetic soldiers. A plot sideline that provides no extra gushing blood but does serve up an emotional impact is when Xeonos finds Diomache at the temple. She has become a woman of the goddess, and this changes her into something untouchable yet loved deeply.



## Quotes

"Every heavy infantryman of the Spartiate class travels to war attended by at least one helot. Enomotarchai, the platoon leaders, take two. This latter was Dienekes' station. It is not uncommon for an officer of his rank to select as his primary attendant, his battle squire, a freeborn foreigner or even a young mothax, a noncitizen or bastard Spartan still in agoge training. It was my fortune, for good or ill, to be chosen by my master for this post. I supervised the care and transport of his armor, maintained his kit, prepared his food and sleeping site, bound his wounds and in general performed every task necessary to leave him free to train and fight" (p. 13).

"I got caught stealing a goose. She was a fat prize, her wings pegged for market, and I got careless going over a wall. The dogs got me. The men of the farm dragged me into the mud of the livestock pen and nailed me to a hide board the size of a door, driving tanning spikes through both my palms. I was on my back, screaming in agony, while the farm men lashed my kicking, flailing legs to the board, vowing that after lunch they would castrate me like a sheep and hang my testicles upon the gate as warning to other thieves. Diomache and Bruxieus crouched, hidden, up the hillside; they could hear everything . . ." (p. 31).

"The marine next began teasing the Spartans about their notoriously short xiphos swords. He refused to believe that these were the actual weapons the Lakedaemonians carried into battle. They must be toys. How could such diminutive apple-coreers possibly work harm to an enemy?

"The trick is'—Dienekes demonstrated, pressing himself chest-to-chest to the Egyptian Tommie—'to get nice and cozy'" (pp. 46-47).

"Under the oaks, in the still half-light before dawn, Dienekes practiced alone with Alexandros. He would tap the boy with an olive bough, very lightly, on the side of the face. Involuntarily the muscles of the trapezius would contract. 'Feel the fear? There. Feel it?' The older man's voice crooned soothingly, like a trainer gentling a colt. 'Now. Drop your shoulder.' He popped the boy's cheek again. 'Let the fear bleed out. Feel it?'" (p. 78).

"Leonidas strode among the men, letting all to see that their king lived and moved unwounded. The men gulped greedily their ration of strong, heavy wine and made no shame to drink water as well and plenty of it. The wine went down fast and produced no effect whatsoever. Some of the men tried to dress their hair, as if thereby to induce a return to normalcy. But their hands trembled so badly they could not do it. Others would chuckle knowingly at the sight, the veteran warriors who knew better than to try; it was impossible to make the limbs behave, and the frustrated groomers would chuckle back, a dark laughter from hell" (p. 113).

"Spartan women surpass for beauty all others in Hellas, and not the least of their charms is that they make so little play upon it. Aphrodite is not their goddess, but





Artemis Huntress. Look at the loveliness of our hair, their bearing seems to say, which reflects the lamplight not by the artifice of the cosmetician's art, but by the sheen of health and the luster of virtue. Look in our eyes which embrace a man's, neither lowering in contrived modesty nor fluttering behind dyed lashes like Corinthian whores. Our legs we groom not in the boudoir with wax an myrtle, but under the sun in the race and upon the Ring" (p. 144).

"In the starlight the elder advanced to my master's shoulder. He took the infant and passed it gently across to Marmonia. Medon examined the little fellow, extending a war-scarred forefinger, which the boy clasped in his strong infant's fist and tugged upon with vigor and pleasure. The elder nodded, approving. He caressed the babe's crown once in tender benediction, then turned back with satisfaction toward the lady Arete and her husband.

"'You have a son now, Dienekes,' he said. 'Now you may be chosen.'

"My master regarded the elder quizzically, uncertain of his meaning.

"'For the Three Hundred,' Medon said. 'For Thermopylae'" (p. 186).

"A terrific storm had sprung up, north along the coast. Bolts resounded furiously in the distance; though the sky above the Gates stood yet clear and brilliant, the men were getting spooked. They were tired. The six days' hump had taken the starch out of them; fears unspoken and demons unseen began to prey upon their hearts. Nor could the newly arrived Phokians and Lokrians fail to discern the slender, not to say suicidally small, numbers of the force which proposed to hold off the myriads of the enemy" (p. 221).

"They wore trousers.

"Pantaloons of purple, bloused below the knee, topping calf-length boots of doeskin or some other precious product of the tannery. Their tunics were sleeved and embroidered, beneath mail jackets of armor shaped like fish scales; their helmets open-faced and brilliantly plumed, of hammered iron shaped like domes. Their cheeks they wore rouged and their ears and throats bedecked with ornament. They looked like women and yet the effect of their raiment, surreal to Hellene eyes, was not that which evoked contempt, but terror. One felt as if he were facing men from the underworld, from some impossible country beyond Oceanus where up was down and night day. Did they know something the Greeks didn't? Were their light skirmisher shields, which seemed almost ludicrously flimsy contrasted to the massive twenty-pound oak and bronze, shoulder-to-shoulder aspides of the Hellenes, somehow, in some undividable way, superior? Their lances were not the stout ash and cornelwood eight-footers of the Greeks but lighter, slender, almost javelin-like weapons. How would they strike with these? Would they hurl them or thrust them underhand? Was this somehow more lethal than the overhand employed by the Greeks?" (p. 245).

"In the crush of the phalanx each man could sense the sea change as the rush of emergency passed like a wave, replaced by the steadying, settling sensation of fear passing over, composure returning and the drill settling to the murderous work of war.



Who can say by what unspoken timbre the tidal flow of the fight is communicated within the massed ranks? Somehow the warriors sensed that the Spartan left, along the mountain face, had broken the Medes. A cheer swept laterally like a storm front, rising and multiplying from the throats of the Lakedaemonians. The enemy knew it too. They could feel their line caving in" (p. 262).

"'Listen,' Leonidas proceeded, 'and I will tell you why. The troops Xerxes throws at us now are, for the first time, of actual Persian blood. Their commanders are the King's own kinsmen; he has brothers out there, cousins and uncles and lovers, officers of his own line whose lives are precious to him beyond price. Do you see him up there, upon his throne? The nations he has sent against us so far have been mere vassal states, spear fodder to such a despot, who squanders their lives without counting the cost. These'—Leonidas gestured across the Narrows to the space where Hydarnes and the Immortals now marshaled—'these he treasures. These he loves. Their murder he will feel like an eight-footer in the guts'" (p. 279).

"My eyes, adjusting now to the lamplight of the court, studied my cousin's face. Her beauty remained, I saw, but altered in a manner both grave and austere. The age in her eyes, which had at first shocked and repelled me, I now perceived as compassion and even wisdom. Her silence was profound as the lady Arete's; her bearing spartan beyond spartan. I was daunted and even in awe. She seemed, like the goddess she served, a maiden hauled off untimely by the dark forces of the underworld and now, restored by some covenant with those pitiless gods, bearing in her eyes that primal female wisdom which is simultaneously human and inhuman, personal and impersonal. Love for her flooded my heart. Yet did she appear, inches from my grasp, as august as an immortal and as impossible to hold" (p. 293).

"Odd as it sounds, the feeling within that cozy copse evoked a hearth of home, a haven. One could still smell that deery smell, the gamy scent of their coats. None of the party spoke, yet each, I will wager, was thinking the same thought: how sweet it would be, right now, to lie down there like the deer and close one's eyes. To allow all fear to depart one's limbs. To be, just for a moment, innocent of terror" (p. 321).

"The Persians within the tent fought just as their fellows had in the pass and at the Narrows. Their accustomed weapons were of the missile type, javelins, lances and arrows, and the sought space, an interval of distance from which to launch them. The Spartans on the other hand were trained to close breast-to-breast with the foe. Before one could draw breath, the locked shields of the Lakedaemonians were pincushioned with arrow shafts and lanceheads. One heartbeat more and their bronze facings slammed into the frantically massing bodies of the foe. For an instant it seemed as if they would utterly trample the Persians. I saw Polynikes bury his eight-footer overhand in the face of one nobleman, jerk its gore-dripping point free and plunge it into the breast of another. Dienekes, with Alexandros on his left, slew three so quickly the eye could barely assimilate it. On the right Ball Player was hacking like a madman with his throwing axe, directly into a shrieking knot of priests and secretaries cowering upon the floor" (pp. 337-338).



"I will tell His Majesty what a king is. A king does not abide within his tent while his men bleed and die upon the field. A king does not dine while his men go hungry, nor sleep when they stand at watch upon the wall. A king does not command his men's loyalty through fear nor purchase it with gold; he earns their love by the seat of his own back and the pains he endures for their sake. That which comprises the harshest burden, a king lifts first and sets down last. A king does not require service of those he leads but provides it to them. He serves them, not they him" (p. 360).



## Topics for Discussion

Describe the style of warfare that the Spartans practice.

How do Spartans train for psychological warfare?

Why might the opposite of fear be love?

In ancient warfare, what is the importance of a navy?

What motivates Xeonos to join the Spartans?

Create a timeline of the buildup to the Battle of Thermopylae and the battle itself.

How do the Hellenic forces defeat the Persians and drive them out of Greece?

Of what importance is the Battle of Thermopylae?

Compare and contrast Xerxes and Leonidas.

Why does Rooster spare the scribe's life?

How has your perception of the Spartans changed from reading this book?