

**Sparta – Gerastios/March**  
**Eponymous year of Lakedaimonias – 448 BC**

Papa said, "All Greece sits uneasy beneath the wrath of Ares, that has these past twelve years ravaged man, beast and land in both near and faraway places. Places nobody had ever heard of until the maelstrom of war swept their way. With the mighty armies and navies of the Greeks intent upon mutual slaughter, the hated Mede ponders in patient debate the fate of we, who he will have cowed at his feet. And yet the war goes on, Hellene killing Hellene."

These were great matters of which Lysander, a mere child of seven, had no understanding. But he listened to his wise father, because he knew that one day he would understand. Papa knew that too.

He looked into his sons beautiful wide green eyes, glowing like gems in the lamplight. He was special, he knew it when the wolf sang upon his birth, and he knew it now.

Lysander could hear his baby brother Libys crying for his mother's breast from his crib. It was annoying him and making it difficult for him to concentrate on what his father was saying. His mother's soft humming enjoined as she went to fetch the babe who was pacified the moment she picked him up.

Lysander tried to look grown up, giving his father his uttermost attention and his most serious look, knowing the importance, if not quite grasping the value of his wisdom, on this the eve before his induction to the Upbringing.

"Soon," said Aristokleitos at length, "I must return to the morai and march into Attica, where we will put our armies before the walls of Athens and command them to battle. This by the will of Ares and duty to Sparta, I must do unquestioningly. For this, Lysander, is the purpose of all Spartans. We are raised to war's command. And as I must go to *my* duty, so too, you must go to yours. This our ancestors bequeath: There is no greater, more noble, nor more terrible a might upon the earth than we who don the crimson and the bronze. This destiny and deathless gods bequeath us. And as I must be brave before the hated Athenian, so you must be brave before the hated gymnasiarchs who will teach you the ways of our ancestors. So hate them if you must, but remember always, if not for them, you will never be worthy of the crimson and the bronze."

The fearless boy, the fiercest fighter of any he knew, the intrepid chancer, now felt the curse of fear upon him as never before. "Yes, papa."

"The trials of your boyhood will best prepare you for the trials of your manhood. And should glory call upon me to go with him to the Beautiful Death, I go knowing my parting words to you will put you in good preparation."

Libys suckled hungrily at his mother's breast as she cradled him in her arm.

"You will be brave, Lysander. Remember everything I've taught you in your short life."

Lysander nodded warily, his father's words did little to comfort his anxious heart. "Yes, papa."

"Now go to your mother, and kiss her goodnight, and go to your sleep, and tomorrow, I will bring you to Sparta and deliver you to the Paidonomos."

The prospect chilled the boy like ice. All his life he had been preparing for this day. He had longed for it. But now that it was upon him, mere hours away, he dreaded it as he dreaded nothing else in his life before. Tomorrow the years of pain, hunger and

hardship would begin, and he was under no illusion that what awaited him was nothing less than the torments of the Kêres. He feared he would fail and flounder from his first test to the last and bring shame and disgrace to his heroic father, and his famous ancestor.

His mother Penelope was sitting on the stool by the shuttered window, the lamp flickering in the icy winter draft that seeped through the gaps as the wind battered the house. With only a shawl draped over her bare shoulders, Libys, cradled in her arms, wrapped snugly in a blanket, had fallen asleep at her unfettered breast. Lysander stared at the baby, and for a moment he despised him and envied him. He despised his helplessness, and he envied the coming seven years Libys would live in their mother's loving care.

Lysander had tried to sleep, but with so much racing through his mind, his thoughts jumbled with war and education and fear of the gymnasiarchs and the evil Paidonomos, who they say is a hideous one eyed monster. He found no doorway into Hypnos' kingdom of dreams, but stared instead into the gloom of moonlight seeping between the gaps in the shutter. He could hear his mother and father making love behind the curtain that partitioned their modest home. The groaning, the thrusting, the panting. Eventually a gasp, some whispers, then silence.

"Fear will wither you upon its vine," the Paidonomos slurred from the corner of his deformed mouth, saliva dribbling from his lip. He forced his words into comprehensible forms from somewhere deep inside himself, almost bypassing his throat altogether. "You must endure in silence and without complaint. This is the Spartan way. You will endure and flourish, or you will fail and perish." He limped along the rank of shivering seven-year-olds, voiceless with fear as the Cyclops' malevolent eye slowly roved their terrified faces. They dared not look at him ... one look and they would be turned to stone.

The boys were already enduring the freezing cold, shivering with chattering teeth, with nothing to keep them warm but the coarse homespun gray tunics and blankets they had been given this morning when they arrived from their warm homes. Away from their mothers who exchanged their tears for pride, and away from their warrior fathers who had prepared them as much as they could for the next thirteen years of the Upbringing. An eternity to Lysander and the others who could not comprehend such a span of years that stretched far beyond the years they had thus far lived.

Their mothers had raised them the Spartan way, clothing them in coarse homespun, making them go unshod in spring and summer. Their fathers and uncles, cousins and older brothers had taught them discipline, how to hunt, how to march, how to fight – how to obey. But with all their learning, nothing could prepare them for the trials that now lay before them.

"Fear is the fire in which all tremblers burn," the Cyclops went on, his good eye, black as pitch, moved along the rank from boy to boy, the eye of a hunter seeking prey. "Fear is the mother of all cowards and traitors! But do not worry, children, *here is the place where Fear is tamed! Here is the place where Spartans are made!*"

Here is the place where Spartans are made! The words hung in the air like the words of God.

The snow was still thick on the ground along the upper foothills, at least knee deep in some places, and drifts to the height of two story houses in others. The snow-daubed limbs of defoliated trees reached out like the clutching grasps of an

army of Hundred Handers, those one eyed monster warriors of Tartaros. Ascending the rocky slopes, their startled forms appeared frozen in Medusa's deadly gaze.

Lysander looked up to the sacred Five Fingers peaks of Mount Taygetos, like an ivory crown round its Pyramid summit, hewn by Apollo millennia ago and piercing the leaded sky. Fear is the fire in which all tremblers burn, he thought, the gnarling of his own fear rumbling deep in his belly. Here is the place where Spartans are made.

His eyes followed the dark jagged fissures in the snow, like open veins marking the courses of the streams, rivers and brooks that snake down the mountains and foothills he knew so well. They flowed like veins into the tranquil Eurotas River just three stades to the east. There, on the other side of the sacred mount, is the sanctuary temple of Artemis-Ortheia, and the mysterious ephebeion. The older boys train behind its high walls, forbidden to all men but the gymnasiarchs who oversee them, the whip-bearers who beat them and the Paidonomos who commands them. The sanctuary and ephebeion would become an island when the snows melt, swelling the Eurotas and feeding the valley plains as it has always done since the beginning of time.

The Paidonomos, Kleisthenes the Cyclops, was by far the scariest, ugliest man who ever walked upon the world as far as the boys were concerned. Almost all the right side of his face drooped down in fleshy folds of hairless pink skin that resembled melted wax when it solidifies. His dark boggle eye bulged from its socket, sharp as a needle. The boys stood as rigid as planks of wood, ankle deep in icy mud, speared by the eye's unblinking stare.

Kleisthenes clung to the shaft of a Persian spear. He had taken it in battle from the dead hand of a Persian immortal he had decapitated in single combat in the plain of Thebes. Now it served for a staff and his trophy. He drawled from the right corner of his drooping bottom lip, like a slaving wolf among lambs, eyeing the flock with calculation and care, picking out the weak and marking the strong.

Lysander's father had told him that, as a hebóntés of just twenty, Kleisthenes had been burned when a flaming arrow found his eye through the slit between the nose and face-shield of his helmet. Imbedded in his cheek, it smashed the bone and punctured his eyeball during a battle in Egypt towards the end of Sparta's involvement in the war against the Persians. The fire had set his hair and face alight, leaving the blackened and scarred face he now wore with immense pride. In place of an eye in his right socket, he had a polished red bead of white veined Persian marble with a round white spot slightly left of center which served as its hideous pupil, making him all the more frightening to behold. His big broad body was just as mangled as his face, the two middle fingers of his right hand had been shot off by an arrow, and he walked with a pronounced limp in his left leg. He was flanked by two gymnasiarchs and a trusted ephebe, a youth of the ephebeion, wearing a chiton, over which was draped the coveted crimson cloak given to boys when they enter the ephebeion in their fourteenth year.

Facing the boys were four whip-bearers holding long tendrils of birch, ready to pounce on any who trembled, spoke or stepped out of line, and to deliver a harsh beating.

Lysander watched the Cyclops limp slowly through the muddy slush, stepping from one boy to the next. He glared at them like some hideous creature from the Plain of Judgment, that vast and uncharted region of Hades. All souls must pass through the Plain on their way to either the Elysian Fields or to the dreaded pit of

Tartaros where untold evils dwell. The Paidonomos would fit in very well down below, Lysander thought. Watching him drawling and salivating, leering with that supernatural eye bulging from his cratered face, terrorizing with a simple glance, Lysander shuddered.

He was relieved to see his human eye was quite normal, big and brown with a bushy gray brow. No hair grew over his Medusan eye, only folds of melted flesh.

Kleisthenes considered the new boys, wagering each one of them, if they could, would crawl back up between their mothers legs from whence they came. From now on, until they leave the Upbringing or die, they would belong to him and in that time *he* would mold them into warriors. “The weak will wither,” he said. “Only the strong will prosper. This is the simple truth.” Some will fail, he thought as he spoke, some always failed, and they would be cast out among the hypomeiones – the inferiors. But most would not.

Eventually Kleisthenes took several steps away from the boys and turned back to them. Then without preamble, he began: “Today your lives change forever. Today you join a sacred fraternity ... the fraternity of Ares, and you will honor him and your brothers through strength, courage and obedience.” His human eye moved across the front rank of shivering children. “Know this,” he began again in a low cautioning tone. “The arrogant shall know only the hunger of whip’s keen kiss, till that arrogance is driven from him...”

A sudden gush of icy wind stung Lysander’s ears as it blasted them from the north, funneling through the open sides of his tunic. It chilled him in every extremity, his joints ached with the cold and his toes grew numb in the freezing mud.

Kleisthenes went on: “The idle shall know only the hunger of the whip’s keen kiss, till that idleness is driven from him. The weak shall know only the hunger of the whip’s keen kiss, till that weakness is driven from him.” He dabbed the corner of his dribbling mouth with a rag, his breath fogging his face. “The disobedient shall know only the hunger of the whip’s keen kiss, till that disobedience be driven from him.” His marble eye lingered torturously on Lysander as he turned his head to look at the boys at the other end of the file with his good eye. Lysander could feel its preternatural presence upon him ... even if reason did tell him it was just a polished pebble; it was still somehow endowed with a life of its own.

“The trembler shall know only the hunger of the whip’s keen kiss,” the Cyclops went on, “till his trembling is driven from him ... or truly, I tell you,” he warned ominously, “*that boy shall die under Sparta’s disgrace.*”

Lysander glanced at Gylippos standing next to him, just as frightened as everyone else and feeling a longing ache for home. Why could he not have been born an Athenian or a Corinthian, he asked himself as he contemplated the untold cruelties that awaited them.

“Sparta loves you,” Kleisthenes went on. “But Sparta’s love is a cold love. He loves you because you will endure without complaint or question ... he loves you because you will pass his tests and fulfill your duties to him. You are Sparta’s sons.” He looked at his whip-bearers and the gymnasiarchs as he beckoned to an ephebe standing behind him. “This is Kleomenes,” he said as the youth stepped smartly to his side. “He is your herd leader, and you will obey him in all his commands, or you *will* face his wrath. Your failure is *his* failure, and he has come a long way to fail over the likes of *you*, who are more than shit, yet less than worms.” His human eye shifted as he

surveyed them. "You will pursue your education with the vigor for which we are known, or I shall want to know the why of it."

Terror comes in many guises, one of them is the Paidonomos, Kleisthenes the Cyclops, and once his red marble eye is upon you, you are marked for life.

Kleisthenes was surprised when he saw Tellis loping spritely along the track to the training field. He stopped his talk to the children and turned to the king's cupbearer. "Tellis. This is an unexpected pleasure. You honor us."

"Please continue, Kleisthenes. Pretend I'm not here."

The Cyclops turned back to the boys and ordered them to divide into eight pairs and commanded them to fight one another, with the promise that the last boy standing would receive his reward, though just what that reward was the Cyclops did not say. "There are but two rules," he told the little boys. "The first is that each boy will put his best effort to the task of defeating his opponent, or he will be punished, and when two boys fall, the two still standing will fight one another until only one boy remains standing."

As they divided, the Cyclops stepped to Tellis' side. "In all the years I have herded boys, I have not once seen you here. Not even when your own sons were here, and I have known you too long to know that you do nothing without cause, Tellis. So tell me, what brings you here?"

Tellis pulled a face. "I fancied I would see a wolf here today, Kleisthenes," he said cryptically.

The Cyclops gave him a careful look. "There are many wolves here."

"Indeed, and fine wolves they'll become I'm sure, but I'm interested in only one wolf today, Kleisthenes."

Kleisthenes gave him another careful look.

Lysander threw the first punch at his opponent Daemonios, striking him square on the nose with his right fist. Daemonios recoiled back with a cry of pain, both hands pressed to his face – Lysander pounced on him, wrestled him to the ground, rolled on top of him and squatted on his chest, his little fists pounding Daemonios' face with merciless abandon like a thrashing scythe.

Even Kleisthenes was taken aback by the boy's unexpected ferocity. "He has Ares in his blood, that one. What's his name?"

A gymnasiarch stepped forwards. "Lysander son of Aristokleitos, Paidonomos."

Tellis raised his brow.

Daemonios was out of the contest, Lysander had defeated him and the boy lay in the mud moaning and sobbing, battered and bleeding.

Lysander jumped to his feet and looked for another opponent, but all the other boys were still fighting. A gymnasiarch pointed with his birch for Lysander to wait.

The remaining seven pairs of boys viciously fought one another, punching, kicking, wrestling, biting and scratching, running and leaping at one another in a chaotic scene of brutal and infantile violence. Hot blood splattered the snow and turned it pink where it splashed.

"Aristokleitos is a poor man," Tellis said. "But a good man nonetheless. A Herakleidai. Brave and honest, in these virtues he is a very rich man."

"Indeed," Kleisthenes agreed, looking into Tellis' shadowy eyes.

"He has many other virtues besides."

"I'm certain of it," Kleisthenes responded vaguely, keeping half an eye on the fighting boys.

“But these virtues do not train a boy’s intellect so well as the Upbringing trains his body,” Tellis said. Training the intellect was a reference to the Grammata, where Sparta’s wealthy sons attend the waged sophists to learn philosophy, discourse, mathematics, reading and writing, science, oratory and tactics.

“No, Tellis, they do not.” Kleisthenes dabbed his mouth with his soggy rag.

Tellis stepped closer to the fighting boys, watching Lysander, still waiting for his next opponent. The air was filled with the sounds of little fists striking blows and cries of pain, exertion and rage as the boys ripped into one another like little savages.

The gymnasiarchs and the whip-bearers went among them, yelling encouragement, billowing and slapping those they thought were slacking.

Finally another boy fell and Lysander immediately engaged the winning opponent.

“I am curious, Tellis, do you know this boy?”

“In a way I do, and that is why I will sponsor his education at the Grammata,” he said.

Kleisthenes was surprised. “That’s very generous of you.”

Tellis looked him in the eye. “But I would prefer to keep it a private matter between his father and ourselves.”

“This is highly irregular. What has he proved here today to make you decide this.”

“Nothing. It was decided seven years ago at the Deposits, Kleisthenes,” he said ambiguously, adding even more mystery to his interest in the boy. “I bid you a good day, Kleisthenes.” He looked one last time at Lysander before he turned about and started back towards the sprawl of Sparta.

The hillside looked like the aftermath of a battle, littered as it was with the fallen children, bloody and bruised, moving painfully in the mud like worms.

Two boys were left, caked in mud and blood, barely recognizable and hardly able to stand upright, black eyed and thick lipped. Lysander shuffled his body heavily towards Gylippos, blood dripping from his nose. He swiped it away on the back of his hand, fighting back his tears, giving Gylippos his fiercest, most determined face.

Gylippos too had tears welled in his eyes, every part of his body hurting as it had never hurt before.

The adults glared severely at them, awaiting the final conflict.

They were spent and the Cyclops could see it. He gestured to the gymnasiarchs and the fight was stopped. “Nike is deprived of her prize,” he said as he limped towards the breathless boys. “And in single combat as in war, it is often the way that a battle is neither lost nor won. For when two great powers of equal measure meet as enemies, a war is long waged and battles indecisive. And so today both stand as trophies to conflict and endurance. And where there is no victory, no reward can be given, except that you have both fought well, and you have both endured to the last. So go then to your herd, Lysander son of Aristokleitos, and Gylippos son of Kleandridas, and know that today, you are the finest of them. But beware tomorrow, when others may be the finest of you,” he warned, and then he turned and nodded a signal to Kleandridas to take the boys to their barracks.

Lysander was physically exhausted. His mind, however, was too alive with thoughts and fears verging on terrors that jilted him wide awake like sharpened spear tips every time his eyelids grew heavy. His bruises hurt, his joints ached, his knuckles were scuffed, his right eye swollen shut, his temple throbbed. But all that paled to insignificance when set against the ordeals yet to come. And what if, for all

his brashness, his bravado, his fierceness, he was still the least of them all? How could he bear such a shame, how would he ever look into his father's eyes without seeing the disappointment and disgrace in them? To be the best, he must endure the worst; to endure the worst, he must be the strongest.

"Are you awake?" whispered the boy curled up under his blanket on the mat next to him.

Lysander sniffed and gulped. "Yes."

"I'm too cold to sleep." He really meant he was too scared. Like the rest of them.

"Me too," Lysander whispered back.

"Who taught you to fight?"

"My papa," said Lysander.

"He taught you well."

Lysander smiled and the scab on his split lip cracked open and it started stinging.

"What's your name?"

"Phrynikos."

"I'm Lysander."

Suddenly their fears seemed to ease a little.

"I'm Gylippos," said the boy the other side of Lysander.

"I'm Mopsos," said another boy, and suddenly, everyone was saying his name aloud.

"We have to be brothers now," said Lysander. "Because we're all we have. Beyond this hut, all are our enemies."

"Brothers," said a boy and the others followed.