

## Prologue

It was the dragons of Phyle that defeated us in the end.

They and Thrasybulus, that rebel, that madman. As a general he had dined at our own table in Athens more times than I could count, but after running afoul of the wrong politicians, he had been banished to Thebes. There he had smoldered and fumed, his hate and contempt festering like a boil, and he had gathered about him a small band of like-minded men, Athenian exiles and mercenaries, each with their own debts to collect. Now, in an act of unbelievable gall, he had led his force of seventy picked warriors silently through the gorge, cut the throats of the outposts in the dead of night, and captured the fortress of Phyle that guarded the mountain pass a mere fifteen miles from Athens. To be sure, in the confusion after the city's surrender to Sparta, circumstances had practically invited him to do it—the fort's garrison had been undermanned and demoralized for months. It is of no use to cast blame on the stupidity of others, however, for that is the last refuge of losers. Now that Thrasybulus had taken Phyle, it fell to us to remove him.

Critias was charged with assembling the army and leading us in the assault, but Critias was no soldier; he was a politician, the leader of the extreme faction of the Thirty, precisely the sort of man Thrasybulus most despised. A fine show he made even in the pouring rain, all bombast and bluff, ordering his foot soldiers here and his archers there, posing with a new sword while his fine Carthaginian charger pranced beneath him. Admittedly, the fact that he kept himself surrounded by a squad of silent, scarlet-cloaked Spartans lent him a certain authority. But the canny Thrasybulus had blocked our main road to the fortress with huge rocks, forcing us to ascend through the torrential rain along a winding goat path that at one point veered perilously close to the fortress's outer walls. When iron met iron and leather met mud, this would not be Critias' assault to make; even cavalry was useless on that rock-strewn mountainside, and his own parade horse soon snapped its forelimb, toppling him ignominiously into the mud. Climbing the path up the gorge was a task for soldiers, pure and simple, and while Critias in his bespattered finery railed at us from below, Xenophon dismounted with the rest of his cavalry company, threw aside his woolen cloak, and began slogging up the mountain on foot. Our force was three thousand strong and pissed as hell that we were out there. We would rout Thrasybulus' pitiful gang before nightfall and return home by the next morning, for the war was over now, it was beginning to freeze, and we were weary.

Our first assault was repelled with losses. The ancient fortress's barbican, the single narrow entry passage through the outer wall, was barely wide enough for three men to pass abreast, flanked as it was by two thick towers with sloping bases, squatting toadlike and malevolent on either side of the access.

Window slits pierced the stone walls of the towers fifteen feet above the ground, through which the defenders emitted a murderous hail of arrows across the entry, point-blank into our faces. Grinning and hooting rebels up on the ramparts, backlit by the iron gray sky of the premature twilight and shimmering in the driving rain, heaved bricks and building stones onto our heads, from which we could not protect ourselves because of the arrows sweeping our lines from the front. Even after we turtled up with our shields and rushed between the towers in a box formation, the huge oak and bronze-sheathed door barring the passage stopped us cold, and we retreated in disarray, leaving behind wounded and dead.

Still, we were not discouraged, because we had anticipated such obstacles. On our climb through the driving rain up that miserable mountain path, we laboriously hauled a dozen thick planks of oak, each cunningly worked with a tongue-and-groove joint on the sides and fitted with wrought-iron handles and strap slots. In the shelter of a retaining wall on a slope in front of the fort, the last protected area before emerging into the hell of arrow fire under the towers, the men now assembled the boards with their frozen hands and hurriedly lashed and braced them together into a tight, peaked roof. It had a rain-soaked weight that would stagger five men, but which ten could easily carry when arranged beneath in two columns of five, gripping the iron handles and support braces. Thick wicker screens were hung from the sides to complete the shelter. The structure would protect not only those hoplites actually carrying it, whom we jokingly referred to as “pallbearers,” but also several in the center between them, who rolled the battering ram.

The ram itself was not of cunning manufacture, and in fact was almost comically crude. It would have been impossible, though, to haul the usual bronze-sheathed logs up that tortuous pathway. We improvised with the material at hand—a rounded boulder six feet across which had been blocking the road near the top. With mason’s chisels and ax heads we roughly chipped away its irregular corners and outcroppings, then bored two deep holes into its opposite sides. Into these we inserted stout iron bars to be used as handles, like an axle on an enormous, spherical wheel. This crude contraption we humped up the last few feet of the rise to the retaining wall, and set it on the path that would lead directly to the massive oaken door. Fortunately, the approach to the door was level, even sloping slightly downward. We calculated that with four strong men pushing the boulder from the axles, sheltered from the missiles by the sturdy plank roof overhead, it would attain enough speed to weaken the bar and hinges when it collided—with luck it might even bring down the entire door.

The first pass was made without the ram, as the ten pallbearers dashed out with the roof while another six “pickers” scurried beneath, slipping in the mud and the frozen slush to clear away rocks and obstacles in the path to the door. On their return run, they picked up the dead from our previous attack, whose bodies had been almost torn apart from the arrows and rocks raining down on them. Strangely, the rebels above did not impede us in this task—a few desultory arrows landed on the planks and skittered harmlessly off to the side, but otherwise they limited themselves to shouting out obscene taunts.

This we accomplished by dusk, leaving us time for only one more pass. The rain had now become a driving sleet, and the gloom of the weather and darkness of the approaching night made it impossible to see more than a few yards ahead. As the pushers took their position under the roof, the army massed behind, stretching out far down the hill because of the narrow confines of the space. The stone was given a slight shove from the top of the rise; it tipped ponderously forward, and the hands of the four pushers lent it strength, until it reached the speed of a slow walk, then of a trot. The men carrying the heavy shelter eyed it nervously, lest it veer to the side and crush them beneath its implacable course, but the slope was true and the boulder well rounded. Sweating and cursing, the pushers bent their backs and thighs into the iron rods, relentlessly gaining in speed. The army behind trotted, then ran, then sprinted toward the towers, their voices mounting in a roar that resounded off the approaching walls in a rising chorus of encouragement and anticipation. By the time the boulder neared the gate the pushers were struggling to keep up with it as it leaped and bounded over the path in a fury. Fifteen yards from the gate the pushers released their grip on the axle. The pallbearers skidded to a stop and the boulder shot out from beneath the roof. Behind them stormed the lead phalanx, a crack tribal regiment of Hippothontis who had fought and bullied rival companies for the honor of leading the charge, shields raised above their heads for protection and bellowing the battle cry. The huge stone surged forward, sending sprays of frozen water and mud to the sides, and at the last, just before reaching its target, it hit a small rise and flew into the air, slamming into the door dead in the middle with a huge crash.

The stout bar inside snapped with the force of the direct hit, and the enormous slab of oak was knocked askew on its hinges, opening a gap of a foot on the top and sides, with the outer corner leaning drunkenly against the ground. The impact splintered the wood across the waist of the door and sent an enormous crack running its length from top to bottom, threatening to fold it inward like a caved shield. The collision caused a tremor that dislodged stones from the battlements above, a groan in the walls that could be felt even in the ground beneath our feet. The Athenians emitted a roar of triumph, and the pallbearers tossed away the heavy roof and rushed to seize their shields and weapons that had been stowed in the framing beneath. Howling the battle cry, the phalanx surged forward to throw itself against the weakened door and force it wide before the rebels had a chance to barricade themselves again.

But closing the door was not the rebels' intent. Even before the hoplites reached the entry, the door shuddered and lurched, and with great and ponderous effort creaked open as if of its own accord. The defenders on top of the towers stood silent and unmoving, peering down at us through the sheets of thickened rain, and the cheer from the Athenians rose up even more fiercely at this sign of the rebels' surrender. We raced up to the entrance, half blinded by the sleet and the spattering mud thrown by the thrusting feet of the men in front of us, and the huge door swung wide inward, revealing the shadowy blackness of the vault within the ten-foot thick walls of the Fortress of Phyle. As we rushed into the gap, the dragons came to life.

Horrendous balls of flame leaped out from the darkness, the stench of sulfur overpowering us as the black, stinking liquid blasted onto the men's faces and bodies, setting them afire and sending them screaming and stumbling in blindness. Murderous streams of flame roared out thirty feet, forty feet or more, three in succession across the width of the opening; each paused momentarily in turn like creatures drawing their breath, and then they again resumed their hellish blowing. In the darkness behind we could see the faces of Thrasybulus' rebels, gleaming and ghastly in the light of the flames, their eyes empty black holes in the pits of their helmets, their teeth gleaming yellow and fierce as they threw back their heads and grimaced at the strain of their terrible task.

Screams of agony and the stench of burning meat filled the air as men fell flaming beneath the onslaught, and those foremost in the charge were roasted alive in their very armor, charring black and writhing where they fell. Their hands curled into fingerless claws and their limbs contracted as they fell dead and shriveled at our feet like spiders dropped into the flame of a lamp. Farther back, my throat constricted and I choked and gasped on the sour black smoke produced by the burning of my comrades' flesh. I could feel the heat of the deadly blasts on my face like a furnace suddenly opened, and the thought of what a terrible death lay waiting behind that splintered and broken door was overwhelming. The troops panicked.

The narrow path behind us prevented a clean retreat. The men hurled themselves and forced their way through three or four at a time, as the inferno at their backs threatened a hellish death. Still-flaming victims raced crazily through the ranks, screaming at us to put out their fires, which we were unable to do as the burning substance ravaged without regard to water or dirt thrown upon it. The men were terrified, toppling and trampling one another in their haste to escape, and Thrasybulus' archers on the towers rained arrows down upon us, wounding dozens, further blocking our retreat. I peered back over my shoulder at the towers behind us, and saw the flames abate as the massive oaken door was slid and heaved back into position, the ghastly remnants of the dead and wounded left behind us in writhing, shrieking mounds.

The descent down the mountainside from the barbican was hellish, for the path which earlier we had navigated with difficulty even in daylight was now nearly impossible for troops injured and panicked, fighting downpour and dusk. The men clambered and dropped hand over hand, blundering their way down the rock-strewn hillside made all the more dangerous by the darkness of the shadows and of their own souls. The dead and injured were dragged and pushed, their heads and limbs bouncing over the rocks, while behind them disordered, confused troops bunched in terror. Men clubbed each other with fists and swords to push their way through faster. One terrified wretch leaped onto my shoulders and scrambled forward over the helmets of the soldiers ahead of me. He gained only a few yards before an enraged hoplite cracked him across the ribs with the rolled bronze edge of his shield, leaving him retching in the mud at our feet to be kicked and carried along with the mob. Speed was impossible, and not merely on account of the darkness; the switchbacks were so steep that one misstep in the dark would send a man crashing down onto the helmets, or spear points, of those creeping down the face below.

The route led around the fortress, passing over a shelf wedged between the outer walls and the steep gorge, where we were vulnerable to arrow fire from the ramparts above. Xenophon had been ordered to take over a company of archers whose captain had been lost in the assault, and here he deployed them to cover the army's descent by keeping up a steady barrage of arrow fire on any rebels that attempted to shoot or hurl stones on the retreating troops below. In so doing we killed several of Thrasybulus' men, who toppled from their positions on the rampart to land in a sodden steaming mass at our feet. Before we were able to clamber down the narrow path ourselves, however, Thrasybulus sent a detachment to barricade itself at the narrowest point between the outer walls and the gorge cliff, blocking our retreat and preventing reinforcements from coming to our assistance from below. Our hopes of threading our way past just before sunset were dashed when an enormous rebel wearing flame-painted Boeotian armor leaped out at our lead man from behind a boulder. With a powerful stroke of his long sword the rebel split through the man's helmet to the base of the neck, bursting his skull in a shower of brains and leaving the two halves of his head hanging by the neck tendons onto both shoulders. Xenophon thrust a spear into the throat of the rebel, who seized the shaft and attempted to wrench it out before toppling backward against the wall, cursing silently and spitting blood. He was immediately replaced by a swarm of enraged comrades, who flew at us from behind their barricade, driving us back with spears and rocks. We retreated to the shelter of the retaining wall hard by the towers, where we crouched, sodden and miserable, in the now complete darkness between the two enemy forces.

We were perhaps fifty in number, and we gazed in frustration at the passage in front of the barbican whence we had been routed only a short time before. The path was illuminated by dwindling flames still hissing in the sticky, noxious fluid that pooled among the bodies. So sudden had the initial blasts of fire been that the first victims were clustered in a single heap, some remaining upright and leaning against the mound of their comrades without room to fall, a phalanx still, even in death. One soldier in plain view, his charred head having fallen cleanly off his crispened neck like a withered grape off a vine, stood guard in the rain against a heap of his comrades, his corpse stiffened like a stump in his armor. Those in the ghastly stack who still lived peered at us desperately in their agony, imploring us with weakening voices to drag them from among the broken and bloodied limbs of their comrades before they suffocated or froze to death. There was nothing we could do.

"Lord Zeus," Xenophon muttered weakly as he swigged water from the flask I held out to him, "what the hell are we doing here? How can the entire army be thrown back by only seventy men?"

I glanced at him in the darkness, but was unable to see his expression. "When we get back to Athens you'll be commended for bravery for leading these archers."

He grunted, and was silent. As I reached my hand out blindly to take back the flask, he seized my wrist and I found his grip unnaturally harsh, his hand trembling. I pried my hand away and seized his own wrist, feeling his racing pulse.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked, my concern mounting.

“Nothing. I’m wounded. I can’t see it, I don’t know.”

“By the gods, you didn’t say anything. Where is it?”

“Here—my leg.”

I stretched out my hand and felt the arrow shaft emerging two feet out of his upper thigh, at an angle toward his torso, as stiff and implacable as if it had been fixed to his flesh by roots. On our retreat from the wall a few minutes before, he had been shot by an archer aiming down on him from straight above. I felt the angle of the shaft in the darkness, concluding that it had not embedded itself in the bone or pierced the artery. Neither, however, had it emerged from the other side, because of the terrible angle of entry—it had traveled through his entire upper leg, lengthwise.

My hand came away sticky with blood. He could not walk far, and even if this were possible, there was no place to walk to. We were trapped here until morning at least, and by that time his leg would have stiffened into a club, if he weren’t already dead from loss of blood.

I had no belt with which to make a tourniquet, since we fought naked in our armor but for the stiff skirt of oxhide straps to protect the groin against sword thrusts. Casting around blindly in the mud where our company lay, moans and gasps emerging out of the darkness from men bearing their own injuries, I came upon the leather flask I had just dropped. Seizing it, I pulled out my knife and pierced the skin, slitting it along the seam, then slicing it into a single pliable strip the width of a belt. This I tied about Xenophon’s leg at the groin, placing my foot on his hip bone and pulling to fasten it tight before securing the knot. Xenophon grunted in pain.

“Are you mad?” he asked. “The leather will tighten even further in this rain. I’ll lose the leg.”

“Better that than die of bleeding. We have no surgeon here and I can’t bind the wound with the arrow still in.”

“Then you’ll have to take it out.”

“The hell you say. I’ll do no such thing.”

“You’re a slave. You’ll do as I tell you.”

“I’m Gryllus’ slave—not yours.”

“You’re my battle squire. Now grab the shaft.”

I crouched for a moment, motionless, wondering whether this was truly what the gods had ordained. The men around us had fallen quiet, and I felt their eyes upon me, even through the darkness, though none volunteered to assist. The only sound was that of the enemy sentries on the tower less than a hundred yards away, calling out the watch. The rain had now hardened into a driving sleet, and I slithered through the frozen mud up to Xenophon’s shoulders, facing the fletching of the arrow, then reached down and seized the shaft, again bracing my sandal on his hipbone to give me added purchase.

“No idiot, don’t pull—*push!*”

“What?!”

“Push the fucking arrow until it comes out the other side. You’ll tear the muscle out of my leg if you pull.”

Already his voice sounded weaker, and as I took my foot off his hip it splashed into a puddle beneath him, which was warm despite the sleet. The tourniquet was not stanching the flow.

I sliced off a piece of the leather strip hanging as excess on the tourniquet and gave it to him; he knew what was required. Folding it double he placed it in his mouth between his teeth. I twisted the toe of my sandal into the frozen mud behind me, making a small dent to gain purchase. In a single motion I seized the shaft again and pushed with all my might, in the direction of his knee.

Perhaps I was hesitant, for at first it did not move. Xenophon lunged in pain, arching his shoulders and throwing back his head, and his hand gripped the calf of my own leg like a vice. His chest heaved as he snorted air through his nostrils, and he grunted in agony as the arrowhead slowly cut its excruciating path through his yielding flesh with an audible tearing sound. I prayed that the gods would keep my strength true, that I would not waver or Xenophon jerk his leg, that the head would not break from the shaft. Though his body convulsed in pain he held his leg still, until with a slight pop and a sudden release of pressure the bronze head emerged from just above the side of the knee, slightly askew of the shaft, yet still secure.

I let go the shaft, my grip so tight I almost had to pry my fingers loose, and rolled back on my heels in exhaustion. Xenophon released his grasp on my leg and spit out the leather, panting and groaning. I reached out to touch his head and found that despite the bitter cold he was covered in a sweat.

“Now,” he gasped, “cut the head and pull out the shaft.”

I drew my dagger, and groping in the dark found where the long, narrow head protruded from the skin. The blood flowed unimpeded out the hole, and there was not much time. I sliced cleanly through the wooden shaft in two strokes, allowing the bronze head to drop with a small clink to the gravel between his legs, and then sitting up and resuming my squat in the mud at his shoulder, I grasped the fletching and smoothly and quickly drew the shaft back out the way it had entered. Xenophon did not lunge this time but merely twitched, and was silent despite the fact that he had not replaced the leather in his mouth. I seized a roll of bandage linen and stuffed shreds into the arrow holes, further securing them by wrapping the bandage around the wounds several times. In the dark, I could only hope for the best. The sheer pain had rendered Xenophon unconscious during the worst of it, though if I thanked the gods for this one small blessing it was premature, for they were not finished with us yet.

The sleet turned to hail, and the hail to snow, and when we stood to stamp our feet and bring warmth to our freezing limbs we found that it would not come, and we knew that we could no longer sit down that night. Fire was out of the question, for there was no fuel to be had on the rocky slope. Our jaws seized up in the cold and we found it difficult to talk, so we clopped woodenly up and down the muddy path in silence, our feet devoid of feeling. The entire night we tramped back and forth, blindly shouldering past one another, as the snow built on our helmets and shoulders and blew into treacherous drifts at

our feet. We dared not venture further in the darkness for fear of falling off the cliff, or worse, running into Thrasybulus' men still lurking in the shadows. Xenophon, though awake and lucid, remained in excruciating pain. Throwing one arm around my shoulder he limped along beside me in silence as best he could, as the skies opened up and the gods poured down upon us more snow in a single night than Athens had seen in two generations.

By the time the first feeble gray glow appeared in the east, three of our company were corpses, frozen to the stiffness of boards and covered with a dead man's shroud of white snow. They had been unable to move during the night because of their injuries. Xenophon, too, was in a dangerous state; the bleeding had stopped, but the foot was a terrible blue from the cold and from his inability to stamp it to move the blood. We could feel nothing, we could not grasp our spears, we could not talk, and though our armor provided some shelter against the driving wind and bitter cold, the feeling of the metal against our skin was unbearable.

"We leave now," Xenophon grunted, peering weakly through the thick snow as soon as he was able to make out the narrow ledge of the trail skirting the gorge. He held his palsied hands up to his face, blowing on them fruitlessly to warm them.

"And what if Thrasybulus' men..." I began.

"They'll be as frozen as we. Either we die here in the snow or we die fighting. I prefer the hard way."

Word passed along the line, and in an instant the men had assembled, limping and drawn, ready to depart. Litters were improvised of spear shafts and thongs to drag the dead and injured. We moved off, floundering through the drifts and steadying ourselves against the rocks with our frozen hands until our fingers bled and left bright crimson trails in the white to mark our passage, though we felt no pain in them. The men had left their weapons behind and stumbled along wraithlike, their hands in their armpits in the posture of madmen, peering fearfully through the snow and the semidarkness for any signs of attack.

There were none. Halfway down the mountainside we surprised a wild-eyed young sentry from the army who had hidden behind a boulder at our approach, thinking we were either the ghosts of those massacred, or Thrasybulus' men on a dawn raid. Astonished at learning we had lived through the terrible night on the mountain he slid down the rest of the way to the camp, where he quickly organized a detachment of hoplites to climb up in the blinding snow and assist us in our descent.

Later that morning, as we shivered under thin blankets in camp while the snow continued to fall, several of Critias' Spartans returned from where they had been reconnoitering the fortress, attempting to determine how best we could lay siege and drive the rebels to surrender. They marched silently by our tiny fire, their tattered scarlet cloaks billowing and slapping in the wind, unperturbed by the powder covering their sandal-shod feet. Xenophon raised himself up on one elbow as they filed past to Critias' tent to report.

“Where are the rebels?” Xenophon called out to them. “Have they reinforced the entry? Did you see the dragons?”

They ignored his questions, staring straight ahead with faces as grim and stony as the mountain itself, not even bothering to disguise the contempt in which they held us.

Two days later, after the hellish return to Athens in a commandeered supply cart, during which three of the mules foundered and died in the bitter cold, Xenophon was carried half-frozen and feverish into his father’s house. Upon seeing his son near death for the second time in his life, steely old Gryllus openly wept. Later that night, after offering a libation of scarce wine to the gods and an entire cup to me in thanksgiving, he rewarded me with my manumission. I was a free man, at least in body.

I would later encounter the dragons and their keeper again.