

A Bloody Day at Marathon

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Eretria, Greece, 490 BCE

Ash-blackened streets. Smoke-filled skies. Roaring flames amid the clinging, choking stench of death. A place of despair.

The city of Eretria had once been Theodosius' home; only days ago even. Now all that was gone. In those last moments within the city walls, he had seen things he would never be able to forget, let alone forgive. The memories were forever burnt into his mind and there was no escaping from himself. Even now, he could almost see the flames in the corners of his eyes. He consciously tried to block out the flashbacks, but each time the acrid fumes consumed his lungs once more. Trapped. Suffocated.

In all his eighteen years he had seen nothing like it. As he had walked, staggering onward for many days, stowing away on a boat across the sea to the neighbouring city-state of Athens, he had not been able to remove the terrible images from his mind, nor the hopeless questions of why any of this had happened.

According to a fellow refugee, whom Theodosius had met on the road, Eretria and Athens had defied the Persian King by supporting some far-off uprising on the other side of the Aegean. But what had that got to do with Theodosius' family? His father had been a carpenter, concerned only with looking after his wife, as well as Theodosius and his teenage sister, Eurybia.

Eurybia. The very thought of her brought a sense of overwhelming guilt and abject failure that was almost too much for Theodosius to bear.

He had been at the market when the screams had begun. Unarmed, he had been forced to hide while the Persians, with their long beards and their brightly coloured fabric uniforms, had rampaged through the winding city lanes, slaughtering anyone in sight. He had tried to get to his family's little mud brick house, dodging from street to blood-soaked street.

When he had almost reached his home amid the crushing chaos, between the fleeing, panicking, stampeding sea of bodies, he laid eyes on Eurybia, pinned to the ground by a Persian soldier; his breeches around his ankles as he thrust and grunted on top of her while three others stood by and egged him on. Theodosius ran towards them, forcing his way through the fleeing crowds as they pushed against him, fighting through like a sailor rowing against a ferocious tide. Yet before he had even got close to poor Eurybia, the Persian had stood over the helpless girl, pulled up his trousers, unsheathed his sword and slashed it down at her as she tried to escape, cutting her throat and striking her from the world of men. As he looked on in horror, still running, pushing through the crowds, Theodosius saw another of the Persians come forward with a burning torch, throwing it through the house's open window shutters; running off laughing before Theodosius could even get close enough for them to notice him. It was as if they took pride in their war crime; the indiscriminate slaughter of innocents.

He slowed to a halt as the last stragglers of the street ran for their lives to escape the blades and the flames. Kneeling beside Eurybia's lifeless body, he'd leaned down and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. He'd wanted to carry her far away, somewhere safe enough for him to build a pyre and perform the correct funeral rights,

but he knew that carrying her body would be suicide. She would never have wanted him to risk that. In the few moments of emptiness in the street, its inhabitants all slain or chased away, and with the nearest Persian war bands busy burning buildings elsewhere, Theodosius had taken out his small leather pouch, producing the two silver coins his father had given him to buy groceries from the market and sombrely placed them over his sister's eyes. It was galling that most likely, a Persian would steal the coins from over Eurybia's body, leaving her with nothing to pay the boatman, and she would be left to blindly wander the underworld for all eternity, unable to ever cross the River Styx.

He made a hurried prayer to Thanatos, in the hope that he would keep Eurybia's soul safe from Hades' wrath.

With that, Theodosius had made his escape. He'd thought of finding his parents, but even if they still lived, finding them in the chaos would be impossible. He ran headlong for the city's western gate, praying fervently to Zeus that it was not yet in the hands of the Persians.

The demons of that day were entrenched in Theodosius' mind.

'Theo.'

Theodosius started as a hand gripped his shoulder. Shaken back to the present, he looked around violently, his heart thumping. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the thick beard and amused grin of his friend Diadalos, a local farmer whom he had met and befriended on the road to Athens. Having given Theodosius shelter one night, the big man had taken pity on him when he had heard his story. He had, there and then, promised to guide Theodosius the rest of the way to Athens and once they had reached the great city, finding it in a state of panic at the threat of invasion by the Persians, his muscular, affable new companion had been moved to join the army with him. Together they would stand within the ranks of the infamous, spear-carrying Athenian hoplites.

'It's ok, it's me,' said Diadalos, holding up his palms. He had long since stopped commenting on how easily startled Theodosius was. Seeing their city burned and their family slaughtered did terrible things to even the strongest of people.

A moment of silence held in the air with Theodosius' eyes locked onto Diadalos' as his breathing returned to normal. Looking around him, Theodosius saw that the camp was brimming with quiet activity under the lurid orange, shadow-casting rays of the early dawn.

'Miltiades has given the order to form up in complete silence,' said Diadalos. 'I heard the Persian horses have disappeared.'

'Disappeared?' asked Theodosius.

'Scouts can't see 'em. Come on.'

Moving away from his burnt-out campfire, Theodosius picked up his long, almost gaunt looking bronze helmet and placed it upon his head, then moved to collect his spear and shield amongst the hushed bustle of the camp. Diadalos followed suit, before both of them hurried off towards where the army was being formed up in ranks, much deeper on the wings than in the centre. Situated in the middle of a deep green valley, the camp looked out towards a sea that was littered with Persian ships and a beach that was crawling with invading soldiers, giving the impression of a giant, pulsating insect in the half-light.

Getting into line, Theodosius found Diadalos on his left and a stranger on his right; Plataean, judging by his accent. These men had arrived in support of the Athenians some days ago, receiving a hero's welcome.

The fear that had gripped Theodosius' heart somehow gave way to anticipation as he stood towards the centre of the second rank. Perhaps waiting for battle really was worse than the thing itself? Either way, after five days of stalemate, five days of Theodosius praying to Zeus, Ares and any other deity who might listen that he would have the chance to avenge his beloved kin, the moment was finally here. Anger flared within him.

Officers bellowed, men shouted insults, and weapons were clanged rhythmically against bronze-coated shields.

'Advance! At them! At them!' came the order above the clamour, and Theodosius was carried forward by the current in this river of men. He got up to a slow run, peering through his helmet's long eye-slits, looking over his comrades' shoulders at the massed enemy beyond. His heart was thumping, and yet he almost felt disconnected from his body in this calm, ordered advance, as if someone else had taken control of him; something so at odds with everything he had associated with the violent heroism of battle. He prayed that this strange feeling was the protection of the Gods.

'Charge!'

Theodosius had no idea who shouted the order as they marched within two-hundred metres of the Persian horde, but with a roar, the entire column lurched forward into a full sprint as a dense cloud of shafts rose into the air from the back of the enemy lines. Theodosius couldn't help but watch the arrows soaring above him as he ran, but then his survival instincts took hold and he ran harder and faster, focusing only on the enemy ahead.

A hundred-and-fifty metres.

He almost breathed a selfish sigh of relief as the arrows began to thud down behind him. Men here and there screamed and fell as they were hit, but only in the rearmost ranks from what he was hearing.

A hundred metres.

Theodosius bellowed his war cry as he sprinted onward, forcing all the pain and rage at his loss into one, single, animalistic note.

Fifty metres.

Even in the low dawn light, Theodosius could now make out the individual men standing against them. Tall caps, dark beards, colourful tunics and trousers, long spears and strange, hourglass-shaped shields.

Twenty metres.

Out of nowhere, an arrow took the man in front of Theodosius in the eye with an explosion of blood. He leapt over the flailing body as the injured hoplite went down screaming, and he found himself at the front of the battle line. They crashed into the enemy at a full run, and Theodosius' spear was parried aside by a tall man in decadent scarlet and emerald robes. He raised his shield as the man swung his sword wildly, despite the crush of men. Unable to pull back enough to use his spear, Theodosius threw it down and took out his own blade, thrusting it forward violently, piercing deep into the Persian's thigh before he could lower his shield.

The man cried out in pain, but the sound was quickly cut off as Theodosius slashed across his neck. Throwing himself onward as the Persian fell, he jabbed his sword deep into the chest of the next man, hearing the squelch of muscle and the crack of ribs as the blade pierced his body.

Theodosius pressed on, feeling like he was Ares himself, cutting down every Persian who came within the reach of his death-dealing weapon.

A jarring blow clanged down on Theodosius' helmet. He regained his balance, but he'd taken a step back. He raised his shield under a hail of blows from a snarling Persian in sapphire and gold. Before he knew what was happening, all the Greek hoplites around him seemed to be giving ground to the horde of marauding Persians. What had happened? The invaders had been falling back, but now they were advancing more strongly than ever.

Then he saw it. Under the protection of his raised shield, he glanced to the right in a moment that seemed paused. He saw the tall, black horsehair crest of a Greek hoplite commander's helmet, attacking the Persian left flank with five, no, ten, no, more men at his back.

Theodosius rammed his blade forward with a roar, gutting his opponent. With a look of consternation on his face, the Persian collapsed to the ground. In the moment before another filled his place, Theodosius looked around and spotted more hoplites on the Persians' left. If Theodosius and his comrades in the centre could hold, then those on the wings could come in like the pincers of a scorpion.

He slashed with renewed fervour as the nearest Persian hurled himself forward with a spear. Theodosius knocked the spear tip aside and buried his blade in the man's neck. Within minutes, uncertainty seemed to be spreading through the Persian ranks; enemy men looking right and left with eyes of fear as they fought.

It was then that with a heart of elation, Theodosius saw the first men begin to run.

‘They’re retreating! They’re retreating,’ he heard Diadalos call. ‘Theo, follow me! Charge!’

Diadalos, Theodosius and every man around them bellowed their war cries once more and broke into a run, chasing down the routing Persians. Carnage ensued. This was no longer a battle. It was a hunt; no more than these evil men deserved, Theodosius thought, almost laughing in ecstasy as he ran, cutting into the legs of a fleeing Persian with his sword and felling him.

After what seemed like barely moments, they were on the beach as the desperate, scrambling enemy swarmed back into their own ships, buffeting the great wooden vessels about in the shallows. Fire lit the corner of Theodosius’ eyes as he fought, cutting down retreating man after retreating man, but it wasn’t the memory of his burning city this time. Looking up, he saw that three of the enemy vessels had been set alight, and now they burned with great ferocity.

Looking over his shoulder he saw more Persians routing inland to the north. Theodosius grinned darkly. They would never escape in that direction. Only swamps lay there. High on blood, he gave chase, finding many other laughing Greeks at his side, sprinting onward, almost hungry for more Persian slaughter, eager to punish the invader.

As they chased the group of fleeing Persians, he locked onto one man who looked over his shoulder as he ran. Theodosius felt an irrational yet undeniably intense feeling that this was the very man who had murdered Eurybia before his very eyes.

There were screams from up ahead, and Theodosius could see many flailing Persian bodies sinking into the vast wetlands ahead with all its towering trees and dead logs.

Theodosius’ target attempted to avoid the swamp, running up a small incline of greenery towards higher ground. Theodosius slashed at the man as he chased him down. The fleeing Persian tried to dodge the blow, but as he did, he slipped and fell from the harder ground, down the grassy ledge, and splashed down to waist height in the sludge-ridden water below.

For a moment, as he saw the desperation in the panicking man’s eyes, as he took in how the wretched soul begged for help, he felt a moment of mercy. Then he remembered the lack of such feelings that were shown to poor Eurybia as she was raped so violently, filling her last moments with horror before she was struck from this world. He smiled darkly at the sinking man, then turned and walked away.

Amid the quietening post-battle sounds of metal blades cutting into flesh, the screams of pain and the howls for mercy, Theodosius found Diadalos, breathless, streaked with blood and dirt. A war horn blared in the background.

‘Miltiades has sounded the recall,’ Diadalos said.

‘Why?’ said Theodosius. ‘What’s happening?’

‘Some of the ships got away, but they’re not going home. They’re heading south.’

‘Athens?’ said Theodosius. The thought stabbed through his sinking heart. The battle wasn’t over yet.

‘That’s what it looks like, come on.’

Following Diadalos’ hulking frame, Theodosius made for where the army was reforming back at their basecamp in the centre of the valley. All around them Persians were still being put to the sword as they begged for mercy, but beyond the acrid smoke rising from the burning shipwrecks on the beach, more vessels could be seen sailing away ominously to the south, just as Diadalos had said.

Once they were back in formation, a robust Greek figure strode out in front of them, followed but a troop of four hoplite bodyguards, each carrying shields with the faces of grotesque monsters painted on them. Theodosius had to strain to see him over the heads of the men in the three or four ranks ahead of him.

He wore a hoplite’s uniform like the rest of them, with a helmet whose black and white crest resembled the long flowing mane of a great stallion. His black beard was wild and thick, his nose was visibly long and noble despite the helmet’s bronze nasal guard, and his arrogant bearing was that of a commander. This could only be Miltiades himself.

‘My brothers,’ he declared. ‘Soldiers of Athens and Plataea, freedom fighters of Eretria and Ionia, the day is ours!’ He raised his bloodied sword in the air, and Theodosius cheered along with ten thousand others.

‘But only this day,’ Miltiades said in a lower voice, bringing down his weapon again. ‘Our enemy is not yet vanquished. The Persians are making for Athens. They still hope to burn our homes and take our freedom, imposing the tyrant Hippias back upon us again. So if our beloved city is to avoid such a fate, I must ask one further exertion of you. As many of you know, the need for men here has meant that the city is only a small garrison away from being undefended. If our families are to be saved, we must get back there before the Persians do. We march to defend Athens!’

There were gasps of consternation as Miltiades stalked away, with his armed bodyguard keeping two or three paces behind.

‘All units, get into marching order,’ bellowed the voice of an officer from somewhere close by.

The following hours seemed to go on forever as Theodosius and his comrades marched for mile after painstaking mile through the hills, valleys and fields of Athens' outlying territories.

Finally, they had sighted the city of Athens itself, with Theodosius feeling the same mix of utter exhaustion and sweet relief that he had felt on the first day he had laid eyes on the place some weeks ago. Athens was like nothing Theodosius had ever witnessed; Eretria was so primitive by comparison. The great city walls on which he now stood, as well as the awe-inspiring temples of the Acropolis, had taken his breath away. From up here, he had noticed that there was still space for an even larger temple that, if the Athenians were ever inclined to build it, would take prime position above the others. Judging by the stunning yet imposing beauty of those that already stood, such a temple hardly seemed beyond the realms of Athenian ambition. Perhaps if he survived the coming days, he would suggest the idea to a priest. Surely if Athens survived, the people would be more than willing to see the city coffers used for such an act of gratitude to the Gods.

Now though, such a future was still in doubt, and as much as Theodosius tried to hold back the flashing images of the past with these hope-filled dreams of the future, the flames never seemed far away.

The worst part was the undeniable truth that hung over him and his comrades like a swinging, axe-bladed pendulum that was lowering further with every moment. Despite the elation of reaching the city and finding it untouched by the Persians, the joyous celebrations of marching through the streets that were lined with jubilant crowds shouting 'victory' over and over again, the battle was not yet won. The Persians had been bloodied, but they surely still outnumbered the Greek force, and an amphibious attack was still possible.

Yet as the hours wore on, Theodosius began to convince himself that the Persians had given up completely, only to have that forlorn hope dashed as night fell. Within minutes of starting his second round of guard duty, his pulse rose at the sight of a sail on the eastern horizon, shrouded in darkness as the sun set in the west. Even so, as he tried to focus his eyes, hoping it was just Hermes playing tricks on him, he spied a second sail, and a third.

With the Persian presence now beyond any doubt, Theodosius ran to the nearest war-trumpet-carrying guard.

'Persians,' Theodosius gasped, frantically pointing in the direction of the ships. 'The Persians are here!'

The soldier looked over to where Theodosius was pointing, and a flicker of fear cast a momentary shadow over his face. With a sigh of resignation, the soldier turned back to Theodosius and gave a calm, professional nod, then raised the mouthpiece of the long, straight bronze salpinx to his lips. The low note carried across the ramparts and soon there was a chorus of echoing notes from other salpinges across the city walls.

Within minutes the ramparts began to fill with men hurrying to their positions. All the while the Persians drifted closer like ocean-going bats; great biremes with their wide sails, their elongated wooden bodies, their twin rows of oars on each side, and most notable of all, the all-seeing eyes painted on the bow of each vessel. He had seen Greek ships much like these, but when on the warpath, these Persian giants seemed far more menacing.

Stationed on the walls nearest the coast, every soldier near Theodosius stood in silence, though his moments of quiet thought were broken briefly as some jostling and complaining behind him heralded the arrival of Diadalos, who came to stand next to Theodosius at the head of the crowd. Theodosius gave his friend a brief glance, finding the big man's usually jovial face to be as uncertain as he himself felt, so he turned his gaze back to the advancing lead ship. It was barely a mile from the coast now with at least fifty, perhaps more, following in its wake.

Theodosius blinked as he thought he saw the fleet leader adjust its course. It couldn't be, could it? Yet he was sure he had seen the lead ship swing a little to the south, just a little. Yes, the ship was turning. It was turning away from the city. A roar exploded from the city walls as soldiers celebrated, watching as the first ship, then the second and third, then all behind them slowed and swung their bows towards the south, turning to sail away on mass. They'd done it. They'd lived, and because they'd lived, so did the people of Athens. No, this was not a victory over a vanquished enemy. But in times such as these, simply to survive was the greatest victory of all.