

Patrida

Peter Katsionis

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In writing this novel I rediscovered my “Greekness”. I encourage everyone, regardless of ethnicity to rediscover your roots. Every culture contains unimaginable wealth. Don’t let yours pass you by.

Peter Katsionis

A Guide to the Characters

PIROS freeborn son of slaves; raised and trained in Thebes in the pankration

DIOXIPPUS born a slave but trained to be a pankratiast; an innovator in the martial arts

FOTIS formerly a Helot slave for the Spartans, freed by and now serving Piros

DELIA Hebrew princess captured and sold into slavery, mother of Piros

TSAKA African medicine man of royal descent, captured and sold into slavery, father of Piros

KRUTZIOS master of Tsaka and later Delia

PHYLIA/IYEA twin sisters who were enslaved by Dionys

DIONYS master of Phylia, Iyea and Dioxippus

DEMOSTHENES Greek orator

ISOCRATES Greek orator

TYSOS/ HAGLIOS/HELEN athletes and friends of Piros

YEMESTOS/ XADROS Theban regulars who were part of Piros' scouting party

PAUSANIAS high-ranked officer in the King's Companions, friend to Piros

PHILIP Macedonian king

CLEOPATRA one of Philip's several wives, niece of the general Attalus

OLYMPIAS Philip's first wife, mother to Alexander

PATROCLUS a eunuch slave owned by Cleopatra

ALEXANDER son of Philip and Olympias, heir to the Macedonian throne

KATHOS a paid assassin used by many royal families

PETROS opponent of Dioxippus in the Olympiad

PANTHEA daughter of Helot slaves

CLYTEMNESTRA mother of Cleopatra

MISTOPHANES one of the ten Hellanodikai, and the one responsible for the draw in the pankration

YIORGAKAS opponent of Dioxippus in the ring

LYNCESTIANS brothers from one of the royal Macedonian families

Athens, 338 B.C.

Piros

The dust.

It swirled in fine circles, filtering the harsh brightness of the sun. To the spectators, the dust appeared to almost caress the contestants as it gently enveloped them.

Entangled within this ephemeral cloud, two men, strong, fierce warriors, struck, grabbed, twisted and kicked with a bestial fury. Yet as clenched fists exploded on the battered heads and naked bodies of the combatants, the dust, ever present, tenderly settled on the oil and sweat streaked torsos of the pankratiasts.

The surreal calm presented to the spectators contrasted sharply with the accelerating action within the dancing dust cloud. Slashing with a kick to his opponent's thigh, the taller man grimaced with pain as the other man dropped to one knee bringing his elbow axe like on the extended shin of the kicker. Then in a sweeping motion the shorter man swung his own leg and kicked out the other combatant's supporting leg, bringing him crashing to the ground. For the taller one, desperation raised the bile to his mouth as the growing panic struggled to gain control over the screaming muscles of his body. Relentless, the compact man seized the wounded leg of his opponent, twisting the ankle and forcing the taller man to slam, chest first onto the dry, hardened earth. The dust, to the spectators still a billowy, benign entity now seared the lungs and nasal cavities of the fallen pankratiast. Unable to breathe, his vision a blurry morass of dust, tears and blood, Dioxippus thumped the ground with his right hand. At the sign of surrender, the compact man released his hold.

As both men slowly rose, the twenty or so spectators broke into laughter and good-natured banter. A few exchanged some coins as bets were settled. Slowly turning to leave, one old man looked over his shoulder at the pankratiasts, by now on their feet, and yelled out a disparaging epithet to the defeated Dioxippus. Despite being covered in bruises and welts with tendons and muscles stretched to the point of snapping, Dioxippus felt the harsh sting of the insult far worse than the assault on his body. Embarrassed he turned to Piros.

To those who knew him, Piros exemplified the Greek ideal of mental and physical aptitude. Known for his understanding of the mechanics of the body, as well as the medicinal herbs that provided relief to all sorts of ailments, he was widely construed as a man gifted by Olympus. However, his extremely muscular physique, welded onto a broad, compact frame created an aura of raw, uncontrolled power around which even campaigned warriors trod warily. While known for his fanatical devotion to the Macedonian king, Philip, demonstrated in battle after battle, his skills as a soldier paled in comparison to his prowess in the pankration ring. Winner of two Olympiads and countless regional games, Piros was revered as the foremost athlete in the most important, most dangerous contest in Hellas. But reverence was tainted with fear, for Piros, son of slaves, had suffered torturing denigration at the hands of the Thebans. The furies from his tormented youth would rush forth whenever he felt angered or betrayed and to those who dared to challenge Piros these eruptions of violence were as unstoppable as a force of nature. For this reason, no man would risk suffering the wrath of a creature whose soul was said to be as black as his skin.

In sharp contrast stood Dioxippus. Younger by ten years but taller by six inches, the light skinned, blue-eyed teenager with the long, straw-coloured hair, was anything but fearsome at this moment. Slightly stooping, more out of shame than pain, his lanky frame appeared almost shriveled while his disheveled hair, matted with dust and oil stuck to his scalp in clumps. He resembled a whipped cur who had been tied to the back of a chariot and dragged through the dirty, overcrowded alleys of the slave districts. Yet, even in this state of discomfiture, he looked searchingly at Piros. To Dioxippus, the dark-hued soldier did not inspire the bowel-quaking paranoia of the other pankration trainees. Piros had taken a paternal interest in Dioxippus that in spite of the beatings he administered to the youth in the training ring, was truly born of love. And to Dioxippus, a boy trapped within a man's body, the knowledge, the dreams, the ambitions, even the violence, shared by the unlikely coupling with the freeborn son of slaves, was to him the embodiment of caring, guiding love.

Piros raised his coal-black orbs until they met with Dioxippus' sea-blue eyes. Staring, his face as expressionless as a

slab of weathered granite, he let no emotion escape from the confines of his body. Dioxippus, by now desperate for a reaction, any reaction, parted his cracked lips as he struggled to maintain a deferential. But Piros remained motionless. No words issued forth from his lips. No encouragement. No disparagement. Just a gaze.

Then slowly, so slowly that Dioxippus did not at first notice any movement, the corners of Piros' mouth began to move, millimeter by miniscule millimeter upwards. Piros tried to fight the growing smile as a rush of emotions surged against the barriers erected by his disciplined mind. But enough of his good will had escaped to catapult Dioxippus across the training ring to Piros. Relieved, happy, proud, sad, frightened, Dioxippus would have found it impossible to catalogue his sentiments at that moment. Jabbering incessantly, the teenager assaulted the ears of his mentor. Piros, forcing himself to retain control of his demeanor was swept along, a leaf in a torrent of adolescent garrulity. His teeth flashed white; his head rolled back as he began to laugh, slowly at first but rising into a crescendo of guffawing. To Dioxippus, Piros' laughter was something almost spiritual as his affection was manifested so obviously.

"Master Piros. Master Piros! Have I done well today? Or are you moved to mirth by my ineptitude? Please answer me." Dioxippus' entreaties appeared to fall on deaf ears. "Master!"

Piros, who could be so violent, so angry, so feared, looked at his training charge. Why did he feel such a paternal instinct to a lad who was tall enough to look down on him? Why did he feel protective of this blonde slave? Why did he want to guide the body and soul of the person whom ten minutes earlier he could have crippled? These and other thoughts careened around in his mind.

"Calm, Dioxippus. You did well today. Come, let us bathe and I will review your efforts of today". And with that, Piros beckoned Dioxippus to the low retaining wall, where a balding, aged man stood beside a terra-cotta, oval-shaped pot. In his right hand, the old man held two square-edged instruments.

"Barba Fotis!" The old man grinned or grimaced (depending upon one's affection for teeth or in this case, lack of them) upon hearing Piros' call. Although his personal slave, Fotis

was treated like a respected uncle, obvious by how Piros addressed him and it never failed to elicit a smile. Smiling was something that had been alien to him ten years earlier. As a Helot in Sparta, he had worked for the warrior elite of this military city-state. With no rights, subject to the predation of the Spartan youths, his life was a constant struggle for survival. But when the Macedonian king, Philip, started "negotiating" with the Greek city-states, the Helot slaves of Sparta, instead of banding together with their Spartan masters to repel this scourge from the north, aided the enemy by supplying foodstuffs, water and other supplies to the occupying armies. Although many remained in Sparta after the "assimilation", others such as Fotis were taken as slaves by the Macedonian army. Piros, who single-handedly savaged three Spartan soldiers who had discovered Fotis' complicity with the Macedonians and who were exacting revenge for it, took Fotis with him when the occupying forces left Sparta. To go from a life scratching ground as hard as the marble of the Acropolis merely to have his crops ravaged by Spartan youths eager to demonstrate their survival skills to their elders, to the life of a trainer with one of the finest pankratiasts of history was the fulfillment of a fantasy he was not even capable of having before Piros effected his rescue.

"Barba Fotis!" called out a now frustrated Piros.

Fotis snapped out of his reverie and sheepishly moved toward the two men. He handed Dioxippus one of the strigils, the sharp-edged instrument he would use to scrape off the oil and dirt from his skin.

The naked Piros sat down on the edge of the retaining wall with his back towards Fotis. Slowly, with the care of a barber performing a shave, Fotis scraped off the layers of the by now caking grime, from Piros' skin. After a sectioned area had been cleaned, Piros would lift the terra-cotta pot and with extreme care, further cleanse the now sensitive skin with cooling water.

As Fotis executed his duty, Dioxippus performed his own ablutions. Although a relaxing, serene activity, the young pankratiast was so tired from his earlier exertions that he had trouble controlling the path of the strigil. His fingers numbed, his lower back and legs rapidly stiffening from sitting, and his bruises, blackening as the blood rushed to the battered areas further

precluded the smooth operation of the edged tool. Consequently, he nicked himself, drawing blood and eliciting a yelp.

"Well, well, well, young warrior. You suffer the pain of the ring in silence but the slip of a piece of metal makes you cry out!" laughed the watching Piros. "What will your master say if I return you to him not only blemished but tattooed."

"My master seeks only to win the youth tournament at Marathon. I have been promised freedom with a victory at the next Olympiad but I feel there has been little progress. Today I failed to press my advantage," replied an obviously dispirited Dioxippus.

"Rather than dwell on your failings, focus on that which has proven successful. Your boxing skills are formidable. Your left hand in particular, is confounding, and my swollen cheeks will attest to that. As for your kicking, from where did you learn to raise your kicks above the waist. I have not seen or felt a kick such as the one you caressed my thankfully hard head with," continued the suddenly jocular Piros. "You are forcing me to study these aberrations of combat techniques with the soles of your feet."

"Yes, Master Piros, I did manage a successful blow or two but that last time..." Dioxippus grimaced at just the thought of the agonizing block on his shin. In fact, the throbbing started anew on that portion of his shin that was now covered by the blue-black of the burgeoning bruise. Reflexively, his hand moved to rub the sore spot. Looking up, he saw Piros swaying, ever so gently, the movement barely discernable. Piros had his eyes closed and was humming a chant. Leaning a shade forward, trying to hear the almost inaudible tune, Dioxippus momentarily forgot his pain as he stared at this man; this enigma whose fearsome reputation he had never been witness to but of which he was assured was true.

Fotis had now moved down to the legs of his master. The dark skin, glistening like slate as the water droplets caught the last rays of the afternoon sun, could not conceal the muscles or tendons. In fact, the internal forces driving Piros appeared to manifest themselves in the physical part of his being and these parts were ready to explode through the thin barrier of his derma. Fotis, for all his age and experience could not help but marvel at the statue-like form of his master.

Piros, oblivious of the awe his student and slave had succumbed to, stood up as Fotis rinsed the last traces of the day's dirt from his body. Stooping, he picked up a rectangular cloth and a black, leather-braided belt and with a few quick motions, had created an ankle-length tunic. The chiton, a resplendent royal blue, dignified the fighter and in fact lent him the air of a scholar. And as befitting an athlete, he walked barefoot.

Dioxippus, not yet a man, and still a slave, dressed himself in an oft-washed basic white chiton that came down no further than the knees. He also walked barefoot as he turned to follow the leaving Piros and Fotis.

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows on the three men as they made their way up toward the city. The chaotic rush of humanity that crowded the narrow streets and alleys was conspicuously absent. Ensnared in quiet, the city of Athens resembled more a glorious tomb than the vibrant, almost living thing it normally was. But as the three men negotiated the complex system of paths, lanes and thoroughfares, the muffled scratching of their bare feet on the dried-out, hardened earth was the only significant sound cracking the mantle of silence.

"The heat. It has driven everyone off the street," commented Fotis, to no one in particular.

"What? Oh, yes, you are right. The city sleeps," replied Dioxippus, he too to no one in particular.

Walking slightly ahead, to Piros, immersed in his own thoughts, the conversation between his charges was as the drone of insects, insignificant and inconsequential. He barely noticed that the Athenians had en masse decided to seek shelter from the sweltering heat. He barely noticed the way the receding sun coloured and reshaped the marble forms of the city's larger structures. In fact, he did not even notice how the Acropolis, high above the city, glowed in colours of gold, azure, ivory and scarlet, or how the Parthenon, the magnificent temple crowning the Acropolis, unmatched in the beauty and intricacy of its design, was even more glorious wearing a cloak stolen from the exploding lights of a prism. Piros was oblivious to all of this.

"Is he bewitched?" asked a concerned Dioxippus.

"No, young lion," answered Fotis. "He thinks of revenge." The old man looked concernedly at Piros then turned to Dioxippus. "I advise silence. His soul is possessed by a force from Hades. Come, we approach the road to your master's. He will be angered if we delay any longer. Leave Master Piros, he will walk until he can walk no longer then he will return to his villa." And with that, the old man and the young slave, turned from the main road. Glancing over their shoulders, they watched the dark shadows cast by the buildings wrap themselves around the black form of the fighter until he too was no more than a shadow.

Piros remembers...

Hard, calloused and so big they could cradle a melon in the palm. These were his father's hands. After so many years, his father's face had become an agonizing blur that drove him to tears as he, with tightly shut eyes, attempted to reconstruct in his mind's eye, the visage of the man he loved, even worshipped. But the hands, so unique in size and shape, he could never forget.

Piros had tried to erect obstacles to his past but his memory, like a lichen attaching itself to the rock it will eventually crack, refused to be subjugated. He had long ago realized that his parents' faces would never again be revealed to him. At times he had forced himself to forget. At other times he offered sacrifices to not only the gods of the Greeks but to the God of his parents, as he begged for one more last look at those faces he so cherished. Yet, only those hands, massive, powerful could he see. And it was not the dirt, or the fine, silvery dust that would line the cracks in his father's hands like fine sown seams that he would recall. To Piros, his father's hands were as soft as a newborn lamb's fleece. Those hands that could with a single downward blow of the bronze pick, reduce a rock the size of a man's head, to rubble, were remembered for the way they would caress his cheek, tousle his hair.

Other tantalizing flashes careened through his aching head at the memory of his father. Smells, colours, sounds united into a cacophony of faces, voices and images. Piros raised his hands to his temples as the struggle to remember shot bolts of pain into his brain. His eyes teared, and suddenly angered, his teeth bit down hard, catching the edge of his tongue and drawing the salty taste of his own blood. Hardly noticing he spit it out.

Now he could see what earlier had been a kaleidoscope of colour. Over there, by the far wall, he could see his mother Delia, a tiny, delicate woman with an almost coppery complexion. Her black hair, luxuriously long, was braided and arranged on her head in a circular pattern. Clothed in a long, flowing chiton, her arms bare and devoid of any jewelry, Piros' mother still presented an aura of confident pride.

Captured by Egyptians during an inter-tribal war, Delia had entered slavery as a young adult. Coming to Memphis in

chains had been the ultimate humiliation for this daughter of a rabbi or holy man. Her diminutive stature had sparked a great deal of interest amongst the Greek, Persian and Phoenician traders and a life in a harem or brothel appeared imminent. Thus, it was with fear and trepidation that she observed the auction from her holding pen. Admittedly, she had been treated fairly well by her captors but that was almost to be expected in a world where anyone at anytime could be on the losing side of a war and have to serve the rest of their lives owned by another.

As Delia was led up to the auction block, the crowd shifted forward. Among the jostling, shoving mass of traders, soldiers and curious observers, stood two men: one, a wizened little man of obviously great age; the other, a black giant, proud and unyielding. Together they formed an odd duo. Even from the dais Delia spotted the two men. The black man stared right at her, implacable in his expression. She in turn lowered her eyes and turned her head to one side although she demurely observed him out of her peripheral vision.

"Come now! What do I hear for this lovely desert flower? She is of a size and delicateness rarely seen in this world of cows and other beasts. You, yes you, the Greek with the robes of red. What do you bid for this delicacy?" barked the round-bellied, shaven-headed Egyptian in perfect Greek.

The target of his jibe, a Greek trader from the island of Mykonos, gave Delia a long, searching stare. Then with his hand raised he flashed his first two fingers.

Responding immediately, the gnome-like man with the black behemoth for a companion thrust three fingers into the air. The big man beside him stood immobile, his face frozen. However, if one had looked a little closer at him, he would have noticed a barely perceptible arching of the right brow.

Suddenly excited by the competitive bidding the Egyptian trader's voice rose an octave as he continued his hyperbole.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen. Why bid so low? This gem will bring you pleasures unimagined in your native lands. Come now sir, are you willing to let this young thing fall into the hands of

another," barked the trader to the scarlet-clad Greek. "You look like a man of good breeding and exotic tastes. Surely you can better the paltry sums offered thus far."

The Greek, succumbing to the entreaties of the Egyptian, uncurled four fingers and held them in front of his face. A murmur rose from the crowd.

Again, without hesitation, the little man flashed five fingers. The crowd's murmur dissolved into gasps, cries and protests.

The Egyptian, almost bursting with orgasmic delight, started sweating profusely. The drops on his head made a slow descent downwards leaving a silvery trail of moisture on the skin of the head and neck. Yet it went unnoticed as he again urged on the bidders.

"Now we have somebody who shows serious intent. Five hundred dinari is a price that is beginning to approximate the true value of this fine creature. You, friend Greek. Have I told you that this lovely girl is untouched by any man. Have I told you that she comes from a holy family where chastity and good manners are stressed above all else. Look at her. Yes, look at her closely. See how finely she is formed," described the Egyptian. He then reached over, grabbed the upper portion of her garment and attempted to tear away the bodice. The girl, diminutive, raised to obey men, nevertheless reared back then jerked forward to bite the grabbing hand. Almost instantaneously she kicked the shin of the trader.

The crowd exploded in laughter. The Egyptian snapped his wounded hand back and took a couple of hops on his unhurt leg. His first reaction was to beat the now thoroughly frightened girl senseless. But his mind raced ahead of his emotions and his sales instincts rendered a potentially harmful situation to his benefit.

"Yes, yes laugh my friends. It seems my princess of the desert intends to keep her treasures intact. Quality control such as this is impossible to find. I add another hundred dinari to the price from my own pocket!" yelled out the Egyptian.

The gathering had by now swelled to triple the proportions of the opening trades. But with the Egyptian's last comments the crowd was silenced.

Completely dumbfounded, Delia stood with her hands crossed over her breasts, staring out of the corner of her eye, at the man trying to sell her. She was completely confused as to his intent. Was he going to keep her? Was he asking an impossible price for a purpose? Who would get her? Both bidders were aged and appeared Greek. A harem seemed unlikely but a brothel...

Silence permeated the auction ring. Nobody seemed to know what to do, say or think. The Egyptian had raised the price to an unheard of level for a female slave. The Greek clad in red shook his head and abruptly turning his back on the podium, left.

The Egyptian was now sweating even more profusely. Little rivulets of perspiration streaked the oak coloured skin of the trader. He had taken a chance raising the price so abruptly. He wondered if the mass watching knew he was bluffing. Another trader may have been worried about losing a sale of this magnitude. But the Egyptian began to feel a heightening of his senses and he could feel the blood coursing through him as even his skin began to tingle with the adrenalin rush precipitated by the dealmakers' ultimate pleasure. Not the sale, not the girl, not the loss of the money made incursions into his mind-state. He wanted that crowd to know that he was controlling the situation; that he was the person responsible for bringing some life to this dreary port. At this instant, he felt omnipotent.

"Six hundred and fifty," a low voice spoke.

The people massed together looked around them, unsure of the identity of the speaker.

Dioxippus

As the troubled Piros ruminated on days long passed, Dioxippus and Fotis stood on the stoop of the whitewashed building.

"I had better go. My master's generosity stops when his meal awaits," said a now thoroughly tired Dioxippus.

"Here. Take this," said Fotis, handing the teenager a palm-sized leather sack. "Master Piros told me to tell you to crush the leaves and herbs and to add a small amount of water. Make a poultice and apply it to the bruise on your shin. You will be thankful tomorrow." And with that the old man turned and left.

Opening the heavy oak door, Dioxippus entered the building. Immediately, the rush of cool air to the door fanned his sweating body providing a cool relief from the fiery oven outside. He walked down the narrow hallway, approximately 15 paces long, and entered an expansive courtyard. The glimmering sunlight cast intricate patterns on the tiled floor as it negotiated its way through the leafy barriers of the olive and fruit trees ringing the courtyard. The pollen-thickened air lent a perfumed-heaviness to the open space but combined with the shade and the breeze circulating throughout the villa, it proved calming, peaceful, begging to embrace the weary body and soul.

Moving about the courtyard, slow but purposeful, were two young girls of approximately 10 years of age. The fair-skinned one was dressed in an ankle-length tunic of dyed-yellow cotton. Her darker counterpart wore a similarly styled but off-red tunic. Both were cleaning the yard by sweeping away fallen leaves with straw brooms. The boredom of the work, combined with the heat and time of day, made their movements appear slowed although the preciseness of the methodical motions lent an air of gracefulness to the whole procedure.

Dioxippus, warrior-trained, had made no sound upon entering and his presence went unnoticed by the young girls. Even though he had witnessed this or similar scenes many times, he could not but marvel at the aesthetic beauty of this life tapestry. And even more surprising was the fact that Dioxippus knew that his master

intentionally bought things (including slaves) that would satisfy his craving for the beautiful, the handsome and the different. The two girls, matched in size and build but contrasting in colour, fit the courtyard as well as custom-ordered statues.

"Dios, Dios!" The excited squeals of the little girls upon spotting Dioxiippus echoed joyously as the voices bounced off the walls of the courtyard bringing a smile to Dioxiippus. Their hugs and kisses as they leaped into his arms brought him further joy. Such an exhibition of unadulterated love and affection may have shamed some of his peers but to Dioxiippus, these innocent children provided a beacon to his emotions ...and he liked what he saw.

"Dios. Listen, listen...we went to the market today and we saw a camel and an animal that was so big and and..." gasped Iyea as she tried to squeeze a dayful of excitement into one breath.

"And we saw a man with a robe on his head and a big beard who was selling carpets and..." interrupted Phylia.

"A woman from far away in the ocean who had made these pretty dolls and she would let us buy two for the price of one but we had..." countered Iyea.

"No money!" and with that Phylia ended the see-sawing narrative that she and her lighter sister Iyea were trying to convey to Dioxiippus.

Laughing, Dioxiippus asked, "Is Master Dionys here?"

At the name of their owner, the girls' joy vanished. "No," they replied in unison. "He is on his way to the square for the debates tonight."

"Then let us eat together for a change. Bring bread, fruit and meat. Bring wine and water too," gently ordered Dioxiippus. The rare treat of supping with their beloved Dios lit fires under the girls' feet as they ran to get the late meal ready. Dioxiippus could hear their giggling and smiling arranged himself lengthwise on the small couch. Propped on his left elbow, legs extended along the seat, he rested comfortably while awaiting his meal.

The Philippics

Filing slowly into the agora or city center, the procession of distinguished, older men walked with an authority obvious to even the most ignorant of observers. The quiet talking amongst the men seated upon the rising marble tiers of the small amphitheatre tapered off into silence as the procession was sighted. Everybody watched as the council sat themselves in a semi-circle.

"Friends!" a voice boomed out. "Why are we gathered here? Are we so afraid of our benefactors that we must meet to discuss how best to usurp them? Have we succumbed to that dreaded disease, cowardice? Hear me. Listen to me. Obey me! This gathering is within your rights as free men in a democracy. But to let ourselves be worked to a frenzy of desperate, irrational action is not acceptable to the reasoning mind. The Macedonians, led by their King, Phillip, have not made threatening overtures to Athens. Phillip has not marched on us even though we are closer to Macedonia than many of the other Greek city-states that he has seized. He respects us. He respects the Athenian way of life. This is no secret. Phillip has even retained Aristotle, surely one of Athens's greatest thinkers and most reasonable and aware men of our generation in his court to instruct young, Prince Alexander. The court of Phillip follows not Greek custom but Athenian. It is our knowledge, our way of life, our philosophical beliefs that he seeks to make a part of his empire. I have been assured that Phillip does not seek to conquer but to become a part of Athens." With that, the eminent head of the council, Isocrates, sat down.

Murmurs of agreement rose into a cacophany of yells and shouts as hundreds of the observing Assembly roared their approval. And slowly but building up to a crescendo of unified voices was the call for Isocrates to speak again. The robed patriarchs of the Council urged him forward. Looking around him, immeasurably pleased by the reaction to his speech, Isocrates could not suppress the pride within as he broke into a triumphant grin.

"My friends. You do me honour with your calls," said the rising Isocrates. Amidst shouts of order and requests for silence the old philosopher's voice was barely heard. Miraculously, within seconds of the old man's statement, complete silence enveloped the massive throng of the Assembly.

"Too long have we Athenians adopted a policy of isolation. We are first and foremost Greek. By continuing to exist as an entity unto ourselves, we risk the antagonism and ill-will of our brethren..." Isocrates' voice, always weak, was now hoarse from the inflamed oratory he had given. His shoulders, noticeably slumping, indicated to the observing Assembly how the ravages of time had affected Isocrates. Yet he continued. "I am old. I am tired. I have outlived too many good friends, too many loved members of my family. I have been witness to too many wars amongst people of our own blood. When will this fratricide end? When will we come together as a nation, as opposed to a pack of scavenging hyenas fighting for a single piece of meat? Yes, we are Athenians. But the Gods made us Greek first. Let Phillip provide the leadership for a Panhellenic confederation. His vision should be ours. Let us welcome him. Let us strive for peace."

The applause was deafening. Many rose to their feet. Isocrates, by now sitting, bowed his head in acknowledgement. The euphoria of the Assembly was almost palatable. Nothing could diminish this moment. It seemed.

Nobody noticed him at first. After speaking against Phillip at the last two meetings of the Assembly, he had decided to stay out of the public eye. So harangued had he been for expressing his opinions on the Macedonian king that many thought that the shame and derision heaped on him would drive him out of the city. Nobody expected him here. When he was finally noticed making his way to the center of the amphitheatre, the surprise shocked the Assembly into a grudging silence.

Inwardly, Demosthenes smiled at the discomfiture of the audience. Belittled, his reputation for sane, well-thought out presentations shattered, he nevertheless knew that his gift of oratory would transfix even those who criticized him. Looking at the Council, at the center of which sat his nemesis, Isocrates, Demosthenes noted the tension lining their faces. He also noted the nervous twitching of some of the others. Demosthenes knew, with the knowledge gained from many oratories that an audience uncomfortable with a speaker was an audience that would sit rapt with attention.

"Many speeches, men of Athens, are made in almost every assembly about the hostilities of Philip, hostilities which ever since the treaty of peace he has been committing as well against you as against the rest of the Greeks; and all (I am sure) are ready to avow, though they forbear to do so, that our counsels and our measures should be directed to his humiliation and chastisement: nevertheless, so low have our affairs been brought by inattention and negligence, I fear it is a harsh truth to say, that if all the orators had sought to suggest, and you to pass resolutions for the utter ruining of the commonwealth, we could not methinks be worse off than we are..." so came forth the harsh indictment of the Assembly from Demosthenes. So many were aghast at this attack that they could issue no comment. As Demosthenes' continued his oratory he noted with a sharp appraiser's eye that many were shaking their heads yet not a soul sat disinterested.

"...If now we were all agreed that Phillip is at war with Athens and infringing the peace, nothing would a speaker need to urge or advise but the safest and easiest way of resisting him," continued Demosthenes. His voice, so carefully modulated, made his last statement sound like a reprimand. The sarcastic bite of the comment stung his listeners. But Demosthenes did not let the wound fester. With scarcely a break to draw a breath, he forged on but this time in a more conciliatory tone.

"...there are men so unreasonable as to listen to repeated declarations in the assembly that some of us are kindling war, one must be cautious and set this matter right: for whoever moves or advises a measure of defense is in danger of being accused afterward as author of the war."

As Demosthenes explained the process which Phillip had used to gain control over most of the Greek city-states, Pliogras, an old friend and advisor to Isocrates, leaned over and whispered to his compatriot. "His words flow, his voice enchants. A truly blessed orator and a master of rhetoric. It is unfortunate that he is incapable of foreseeing the good an alliance with Phillip would be for the Athenians."

Isocrates gave no indication he heard or was even aware of Pliogras' comments. Although a gifted orator himself, he knew that he was experiencing an event that had historical significance. Never

had he listened to such beautiful language, such compelling arguments. He looked around him at the Assembly. All were leaning forward, eagerly awaiting every word, like sheep awaiting access to a lush field. Isocrates feared Demosthenes as he feared no other.

"People who would never have harmed him, though they might have adopted measures of defense, he chose to deceive rather than warn them of his attack; and think ye he would declare war against you before he began it, and that while you are willing to be deceived? Impossible." The obviousness of Demosthenes last statement caused a ripple of murmuring in the Assembly. Some took the opportunity to nod knowingly and seek approval with their friends.

"Defend yourselves instantly, and I say you will be wise: delay it, and you may wish in vain to do so hereafter. So much do I dissent from your other counselors, men of Athens, that I deem any discussion about Chersonesus or Byzantium out of place." And with that Demosthenes outlined his plan to combat the Macedonian king.

As Demosthenes spoke, Piros, sitting in the lower rows with the most honoured Athenians, began to tense with anger. Snapped out of his earlier melancholy, he was now struggling to control his temper. As a loyal subject and valued soldier to the Macedonian king, Piros could not accept what he interpreted to be blind stupidity in Demosthenes. The speech, melodious, nevertheless preached half-truths. If an orator less-gifted than Demosthenes had been delivering it, he would have been removed from the Assembly. Piros however, had no intention of sitting idly while Demosthenes roused the Athenians to an ill-conceived, poorly organized and morally wrong military action.

"...Many rights did the people surrender at last not from any such motive of indulgence or ignorance, but submitting in the belief that all was lost. Which, by Jupiter and Apollo, I fear will be your case when on calculation you see that nothing can be done. I pray, men of Athens, it may never come to this! Better die a thousand deaths than render homage to Phillip..."

The Assembly erupted into a chaotic orgy of nationalism. All were on their feet, waving their arms or raising their fists in military salutations. Nobody could hear another talk. Demosthenes stood watching. He gave the appearance of disinterest but his mind marveled at the effectiveness of his speech thus far. But he could not stop yet. He raised his arms outwards, imploring through this action for silence. Within moments, the Assembly returned to its former attentive state.

Again Demosthenes outlined a plan that would unite the disparate Greek states into one political and military body. The systematic aligning of the Greeks was laid out in a logical, orderly fashion and the Assembly paid very close attention.

"...Prepare yourselves and make every effort first, then summon, gather, instruct the rest of the Greeks. That is the duty of a state possessing a dignity such as yours." continued Demosthenes. But by now, the Assembly was in such a state of agitation that even Demosthenes could not keep them controlled. Sensing this he concluded, "Such are the measures which I advise, which I propose: adopt them, and even yet, I believe, our prosperity may be re-established. If any man has better advice to offer, let him communicate it openly. Whatever you determine, I pray to all the gods for a happy result."

And with that Demosthenes sat down.

The Assembly again exploded in applause. Their patriotic fervor was as intense as the blast furnaces of the Lythian smelters. Everyone was on their feet. Except Isocrates. Silently as a ghost, he left the cheering mob and made his way back to his villa.

Piros meanwhile had stood and was trying desperately to speak. The cheering mob however took no notice. Having no recourse to other methods, Piros shouldered his way into the center of the amphitheatre. Royal in his dress, with a physique emanating strength and purpose, Piros' instantly attracted attention. Most of the Assembly of course recognized the Olympic hero, and many others had heard him speak before. Out of deference to his accomplishments and knowledge, the members of the Assembly stopped their raucous behaviour and waited attentively for Piros to address them.

"Fellow Athenians. Today you have heard truly gifted orators. I will not assume to match their eloquence. However, it is my duty to expose to you the failings of Demosthenes' arguments. He has continually warned us of Phillip. In fact, I have even heard his speeches referred to as Phillipics. Why is Demosthenes so vehemently opposed to the Macedonians? Why does he wish to plunge us into yet another war? Why should we trust the other Greeks who not 20 years ago were our sworn enemies? Macedonians are our brothers and have always been so. Now they seek to reunite the family of Hellenes into one cohesive nation. How is this bad? How will Greece not benefit? Why must we fight yet another war amongst ourselves when the enemies in Asia are ready to devour us lions would cattle? These are questions that Demosthenes has not answered." Piros' voice rang out through the Assembly.

But his pleas were ignored. Demosthenes had succeeded in his mission. The Athenians were going to war.

Dioxippus

Oblivious to the resurrected martial spirit of the Assembly, Dioxippus lay resting. The dinner he had just had with the girls had been wolfed down as his fuel-starved body replenished itself. Watching this ravenous youth, Iyea and Phylia had unabashedly giggled as Dioxippus gulped huge chunks of bread and lamb, scarcely taking a breath. Yet in spite of the meager, if any, conversation between the young people, the silence only broken by Dioxippus' odd grunt or the girls' muffled laughter, the mood was buoyant as they revelled in each other's company. Now satiated, Dioxippus craved only sleep and quick digestion.

"Why are you closing your eyes?" asked Iyea and Phylia, almost in unison. "Tell us about the games. Are you going to win. Yes, you will win. But. Maybe...no, you will win," commented the indecisive Iyea.

"Oh, you are so silly. No teenager is going to beat our Dios. He is stronger, and better, and..."

"Meaner, and tougher and about to tell you to go to your cots so that you may sleep," a grinning Dioxippus interspersed.

With hugs that almost crushed their Dios, the two girls said their goodnights and ran off to their room. Looking after them, Dioxippus felt a tinge of loneliness but that was quickly dispelled as he re-oriented his thoughts to the subject that had haunted the back of his mind all day.

His mind kept returning to the pankration ring. Earlier today he had almost had his leg broken. Most would consider this enough justification for retirement or at least a temporary reprieve from the ring. Dioxippus however had no intention of retiring or suspending training. He could not: pride, ambition and most of all freedom, depended upon his success in the dusty circle.

While he supped with the girls, Piros' earlier comment pounded in his brain. He had stunned, albeit very, very briefly, the almost immortal Piros with a kick to the face. Dioxippus, in the heat of battle, had introduced a technique that even Piros had never seen. Unfortunately, Dioxippus was not really sure how he had

done it. True, kicking was an accepted weapon in the pankratiasts' arsenal, but it was never executed above the waist and in most cases was used to immobilize the opponent's legs just before the grappling began. To use one's foot as a striking instrument in the same way one would use one's hand or fist was a concept too abstract for the brutally simple sport of pankration. Dioxiippus knew that without exception, all contests were decided on the ground. Consequently, the roll call of champions was dominated by shorter, stockier men with great strength. Piroos was the embodiment of a pankratiast. Dioxiippus was not.

As of late, despite Piroos' encouragement and unflagging support, Dioxiippus had begun to feel that the disadvantages of his above average height, coupled with an admittedly weaker upper body, were working in unison against the success he so craved. He knew that the other youths were good wrestlers who would salivate at the ease with which they would bring down a gawky lad with so much leg to trip up, so much arm to twist. And in spite of the fact that his hand speed was formidable and he would probably succeed in the boxing ring, Dioxiippus was determined to win at pankration, the hand to hand combat that passed for sport.

Which returned him to his original thought; using the kick to his advantage. Getting up from his couch, Dioxiippus moved to the sandy area near the wall that bordered the tiled courtyard. Most of the area was cloaked by shadow as the sun gradually set. Out of the searing heat, fed, refreshed and rested, Dioxiippus felt fit and able. Not worrying about his fatigued muscles he prepared to first stretch to be then followed by the more strenuous exercise. Dioxiippus bent at the waist, started to rotate his trunk in a clockwise direction, stopped and began to rotate it the other way. The day's earlier stiffness eased itself out as he slowly limbered up. The bruises, with the onslaught of circulating blood, started to throb but the pain was minimal.

Positioning himself with his back to the waning light, Dioxiippus was able to use the long shadow cast by his body as a guide to his movements.

Assuming the wrestler's open stance, trunk facing forward, legs braced shoulder-width apart and arms bent at the elbows with the open hands extended, Dioxiippus thrust his right leg out in a

kicking motion. The leg rose quickly but reached its apex at approximately chest height. At that moment, Dioxiippus felt a sharp, painful pull in the back of his thigh as his hamstrings screamed in protest. Immediately he dropped his leg and in one motion he was curved over it, massaging the muscles deeply. Dioxiippus, trained to appreciate the mechanics of the body, knew without hesitation that he had not hurt himself but he had been warned. What was he doing wrong? Dioxiippus let the pain subside and decided to shift his attention to another of his extremities.

He looked carefully at his foot. He started to run his hands over it, feeling, pulling, massaging the toes, the arch, the ball and the ankle. Dioxiippus studied his foot as if a surgeon about to perform surgery. If he was going to use his feet as weapons he had to know what parts would be most effective. He knew that the small bones in the foot were prone to breakage and he was well aware of the risk to the tendons of both the foot and ankle from the grappling holds Piro had taught him. Dioxiippus continued his ruminations. Now cradling the foot in his hands, he felt the ball and the edge of the foot. These were very hard with few bones in the immediate vicinity. This decided Dioxiippus would have to be the impact points of his feet. Now to design a kick or kicks that would utilize these point effectively.

Standing up he prepared himself for another kick. From the wrestlers' position his foot could only come straight up the front. Only the ball of his foot could follow the trajectory of his leg and hit the target with any force. Gingerly extending his leg, with the toes curled back, Dioxiippus rested the kicking foot on the wall of the compound. The gritty surface barely made an indentation on the calloused ball of his right foot. He retracted the leg about a foot length and then sharply extended it again. The ball of the foot smacked against the wall. A little of the mortar grit was loosened upon impact but that was the only damage that occurred. Dioxiippus was very pleased. This kick, with a little practice, was capable of transmitting real force to a target area.

His spirits buoyed, albeit by a small success, Dioxiippus tried a few more kicks from the facing position. Each time he was able to exert more snap into his kick. The immediate results indicated that the greater the speed, the greater the impacting force. He made a mental note.

By now Dioxippus was snapping out the kicks at a pace faster than the beating of a heart. The area on the wall absorbing the kicks was beginning to wear smooth as the hard pads of Dioxippus' feet attacked the mortar like an abrasive polishing brush.

Continuously alternating legs but still focusing on the one spot on the wall, Dioxippus was ensconced in a cocoon of concentration. He failed to notice that the rhythmic thumping of foot against structure gave the garden an eerie vitality, almost as if it were alive. The long shadows, the muffled sounds of scurrying animals, the trees creaking and groaning with age; all contributed to the almost mystical atmosphere that permeated the space that Dioxippus chose to create an artform in. He was of course oblivious to it all.

Now huffing like a marathon runner at the end of the course, his sweat no longer a moist glow but a rash of salt-laden streams, Dioxippus' exhausted body at last rebelled. The legs refused to rise with any sort of determination. The knees were quivering so much that Dioxippus was forced to kneel in the dirt to prevent himself from falling. Even the soles of his feet, normally as tough as Phoenician ship leather, were bruised and sore. He was finished for the day.

As he lay resting, the sound of voices intruded into the serenity of the garden. Although Dioxippus could not decipher the conversation, he could tell that the speakers were very agitated about something. Thinking it better that he not be caught prone in the dirt, he got up, shook himself off and made his way to the main building. Behind one of the outlying wings was the lavatory. Taking a large, unadorned urn, Dioxippus relieved himself into an opening at the top of a clay pipe and then rinsed his body with the water from the container he was carrying. Now he was ready to retire to his sleeping quarters. Even though the need for sleep tore at his eyelids he could not help but feel guiltily smug over his new discovery. One day they would all see.

Piros questions the Athenians

"I tell you, we've all gone insane. Who in Hades' controls the minds of the assembly? I cannot believe that enlightened, intelligent men, veterans of who knows how many wars and skirmishes let themselves be sucked into a morass of yet more conflict, more fighting..." The obviously angry Piros was ready to explode. His audience, four assemblymen loyal to Isocrates, shrunk away from Piros' vehement tirade. "And if that was not enough, we are expected to take up arms to fight what is now a non-existent enemy. When Philip hears about tonight, which he will, he will systematically destroy this city. Ignore his army, (unmatched believe me). Ignore his leadership qualities, (none of which are matched in Athens). Ignore the skill of the Macedonians in combat, (battle-tested for years). Ignore all of this. We are still the most self-centered, untrusting, disloyal race on earth. Greek will most assuredly turn against Greek for whatever reasons. Alliances built upon mistrust never ever succeed. This city I fear is doomed. I see little recourse but to leave."

Piros' companions stood aghast. This talk was treasonous, even from an avowed Macedonian loyalist.

"Wait, friend Piros," called out one of the men walking with the angered pankratiast. "Surely there must be an alternative to anything so rash as to leave Athens. Let us discuss this. Possibly the threat is not what we perceive. I ask, no I implore you to reconsider."

Half-turning to face the speaker, his eyes only partially open, Piros fixed a searing glare on his companion. His anger was compounded by the inability of these Athenians to see what a decision to go to war meant. The last generation to go to war had by now been decimated by long-forgotten battles, punishing diseases and worst of all, debilitating old age. Few of Piros' peers had witnessed much less taken part in any conflicts. For them the old Spartan axiom, 'Come back with your shield, or on it' echoed romantic adventures full of the promise of wealth and glory. The realities of war were simply not part of the consciousness of these naive hanger-ons. To Piros, this was the ultimate tragedy about to befall Athens.

Piros remembers...

During the few seconds that Piros' fiery gaze castigated his young companion, thoughts and images raced through his mind. He remembered, with surprising distaste his first "kill" (as the Captain of his unit had referred to it). It happened while he was on patrol with the Theban scouts, long before he had even heard of Philip, much less served under him. The scouts, numbering eight, were searching for a raiding party of Spartans. What they were doing so far from their homeland was a mystery but there was no doubt that the men killed outside of the city's gates were Spartans. The Theban regulars had lost the trail of the escaping raiders, consequently, the scouts had been sent after them. They were to locate the Spartans, hold them if possible and/or contact the battalion for help. Piros, on his first foray into the countryside was excited and eager to right the wrong the Spartans had perpetrated on the Thebans. Visions of besting a warrior in battle dominated his thinking. He almost salivated at the thought of testing his knowledge of hand-to-hand combat in a real situation. The pankration had readied him and he wanted a taste of the enemy. With the adrenalin pumping, his skin felt incapable of containing his flesh. And, coming upon a fresh spoor, Piros was ready to explode with the anticipation of meeting his enemy face to face.

Thinking his silence was a signal to be left alone, Piros' companions spoke no more. They did however continue to walk beside him. Piros meanwhile was unable to shake those images from his head.

Focusing again on that day long ago, Piros was on the trail of the raiding Spartans. Treading carefully, lest any sound give away their position, the Thebans, now the hunters, could sense the proximity of their quarry. Working their way through the olive grove, the faint yet tantalizing smell of a newly lit fire wafted towards them. Using a discreet hand signal to halt the party, the captain and leader of the group stood immobile. It was not discernible at first. The rustling of cloaks and skirts almost disguised the sounds. But it was unmistakable. Human voices.

The captain ordered his men to remove their cloaks and to place their pikes, short spears, on the ground beside them. Using hand signals again, the eight men passed through the grove with

nary a sound. Even the night animals were part of this conspiracy as absolute silence enveloped the Thebans. Their unsuspecting quarry was as a deer struck dumb before the wolves tear it apart.

Piros could hardly breathe. His pectoral muscles were so constricted his lungs could barely function. And how could he keep quiet when his heart beat with the force and power of his ancestors' war drums. The earlier bravado, where was it? Piros was genuinely frightened now. What if his body refused to cooperate with his mind? What if he was killed? Or even worse, what if his inability to fight caused the death of somebody in his group? Oh, Gods of Olympus, how he wanted to relieve himself!

By now the avenging Thebans could see the Spartan encampment. But it was not what they expected. This was not a group of highly trained warriors on the hunt for glory. These people were nothing more than escaped Spartan slaves or Helots. There were only three adult males visible. The rest of this miserable party consisted of four adult women and some young children. The goods they had stolen from the Thebans had been placed at the edge of the clearing and were really nothing more than a couple of terra-cotta urns and a few horsehair blankets. In fact, thought Piros, this whole situation was quite pathetic and he turned to leave. There would be no battles fought tonight.

Suddenly a shriek shattered the night. Whipping his head around Piros caught the briefest of glimpses at the Theban charging into the small encampment. Dismayed, Piros turned to his fellow soldiers but they too had leaped up and were running like hunting dogs to a treed quarry. He could not believe what he saw. He rubbed his eyes fiercely; to no avail as the Thebans crashed into the camp scattering its inhabitants in four directions. Piros had never seen such savagery. Within seconds, the poorly armed Helot men lay butchered. The efficiency of the Thebans was so starkly brutal, Piros lost control of his stomach and began to vomit. Within seconds he was dry-retching as his body tried to punish the mind that was accepting this abomination being perpetrated by the Thebans. Shivering uncontrollably, even though the sweat poured off him, Piros stood watching the rest of this tragedy.

The Thebans had by now captured the women and children. Placing them in the middle of the camp they gathered

around them in a rough circle. One of the soldiers, Yemestos, sported a carnivorous grin as his gaze focused on the youngest of the female prisoners. Piros noted, with considerable consternation that the girl was still a child, probably no more than ten years old. And although no words were spoken, there was absolutely no doubt that all the captives including the girl knew what Yemestos' intentions were. As if by telepathy, they huddled closer together, never lifting their eyes to meet those of their captors. Their terror was tangible. Piros felt a bitter taste in his mouth. He did not know if he was imagining it or not.

Piros causes concern

"I wonder if he has the sickness...he is mumbling again and I do not even think he knows we are here," commented one of Piros' companions to the man walking beside him.

"He frightens me when he enters this trance. I think that our good friend is marching beyond the boundaries of sanity. He constantly talks to himself and appears immersed in these fantasies. Piros no longer appears to know what is real and what is not. This alone makes him most dangerous. Look at him now, walking not more than ten paces from us and he is completely unaware of our presence...and he invited us to walk with him! Look, his head jerks once again. It is as if his brain is waging war on his soul. Gods protect us from that man's past." With that, the two companions dropped further back until a side street intersected the main thoroughfare and they were able to leave this temporary fellowship forged by the brooding, self-removed Piros.

The two remaining associates were slightly askance to their leader so they were well aware of Piros' self-absorption. They however had known the pankratiast since he had first come to Athens five years earlier. Their analysis of Piros focused on his strengths, of which there were plenty. The apparently random ponderings that Piros' mind often engaged in did not bother these two. In fact, they stayed even closer to him, both to protect him from others who would take advantage of this mind-state and from himself, who during this time was incapable of observing even the most basic cautions.

"It appears I have been deserted."

Tyos and Haglios turned immediately at the sound of Piros' voice.

"My apologies good friends. At times I feel compelled to examine the life I have come from and compare it to the life I now enjoy. Again, your forgiveness," spoke the now calm Piros. "Our other compatriots have obviously decided it not prudent to walk with not only a Macedonian loyalist but a possible lunatic. I venture that their analysis is probably correct. You, however, have chosen

to remain. I trust that your decision is not fatal for you or your families."

Piros' resigned tones somewhat alarmed Tysos and Haglios. They were expecting a vehement attack on the foolishness of the Athenians and they were receiving a self-pitying introspection. This was not the Piros they knew. Where was the athletic demi-god of the games? Where was the orator with the voice that boomed across the amphitheatre? Where was the warrior whose feats as a soldier were almost legendary? Tysos and Haglios were not prepared to risk their lives for a man whose leadership was suspect. They wanted the warrior. Piros was giving them the peace-monger.

"Piros, when you speak like this you alarm us," stated Tysos. "Why this depression...why this self-deprecation? Whom are you trying to convince of your perceived failings? Not us surely. Haglios and I have stood by you through all arenas. We need not be convinced of your aptitudes. We do need however to formulate a course of action that will serve our people best. If they refuse to see the obvious, then we must make plans that will benefit those loyal to the greater good. You Piros are the only one amongst us who has traveled and served throughout Hellas. You are the only one who knows what Philip truly wants. And you Piros are the only one who has an idea what might best serve Athens in the future. So break this melancholy and have supper with two loyal friends and their families."

Succinct, honest and eloquent, Tysos' few words snapped the cord binding Piros' spirit. "Come my friends. I am starved from the ravages of the ring and the assault of the assembly. I hope your cooks have made enough food for three hungry men...oh, and what will you eat?"

With the reference to Piros' prodigious appetite, all three men broke into laughter. As they walked away, the now animated conversation, interspersed with bawdy jokes, reverberated down the narrow street.

Dioxippus fears for the twins

Lying on his cot, straining mightily to pick up the faint pieces of conversation wafting in with the evening breeze, Dioxippus' futile effort at eavesdropping proved frustrating to the young man. From the odd word he did catch and from the tone of the speakers, Dioxippus knew something momentous had occurred. Still young, the excitement was a tangible entity that sent the adrenalin coursing through his body. Realizing that sleep was probably not forthcoming tonight, he sat up on his cot and stared at the intricate pattern formed by the countless hairline cracks on the wall. But before the patterns burned onto his retina, the hex was broken...the master was home.

The tap tap tapping of the cane against the courtyard tile sounded like a stonemason chipping away with his iron tools on the stillness of the night. Dioxippus' breathing began to grow shallower with the apprehension of what might next happen. And as a slave, he knew he would remain rooted to the cot, no matter what he heard transpiring.

The tapping assumed the rhythm of a heartbeat or so it seemed to Dioxippus. Now the sound moved off in a direction tangent to where he was sitting. He knew too where the sound, like some insidious creature, would end up. And he also knew what he would do when the tapping stopped. Nothing.

For a few stolen moments, silence enveloped the compound. But before Dioxippus could even exhale in relief he heard a door squeak with such force that for a split second he thought it a small animal twisting in its death throes. The analogy made him morose. Any instant he would hear...

The first scream scalded him. His body was rigid. His breathing was labored. The pounding of blood in his eardrum shocked and disoriented him. He felt dizzy and the nausea threatened to spill his internal pollutants all over himself and his sleeping quarters. The second scream, now accompanied by hysterical sobbing, invaded his very soul. But Dioxippus refused to beg for help or to seek relief. He wanted the pain. He needed to feel wretched agony. He wanted to die. For the rape and

sodomizing of his beloved Iyea and Phylia would go on uninterrupted by him.

But the Gods were not finished. The brutality of Dionys' attack on the slave girls was of such savagery and hatred that any man or woman with even the flicker of a soul would have found a way to intercede. But Dioxippus was young, frightened even stupid. He equated his master with freedom. For this and this alone, he would let the beast finish his monstrous lusts. And he would remain in his room.

Time is a relative entity. When pleasure runs rampant, time is never long enough. But when the spirit is being desecrated by miscreant logic, time never ceases. The comparatively brief time that Dionys subjected the innocent children to his bestial lechery was to Dioxippus an eternity. Every second dragged, exhausting his body, his spirit and his morality. By the time the wailing subsided, to be replaced by bone-racking sobs, Dioxippus was numbed.

He heard the door open again. This time there was only a barely perceptible creak, as if the door itself was ashamed of what it had let into the room of innocents. The tapping of the cane resonated across the courtyard, the triumphant pulsation of a child molester reveling in his abusive behaviour. No other sound cracked the mantle of shame enveloping the courtyard. Even the night creatures had turned their heads while the moon, glorious this time of year, had pulled a veil of clouds over her face. Only the darkness tried to throw a shroud over this repeating tragedy. But the silence and the dark failed to hide the smirk on the now satiated Dionys' face. His countenance suggested a perverse pride, not a justifiable guilt. And as he opened the door to his sleeping chamber, he knew sleep would come easily.

With the closing of his master's door, Dioxippus forced himself off the cot. It was then that the shivering started. Dioxippus had sweated so profusely that he had soaked his sheets and his body had cooled itself so much that the mere brush of air against his skin chilled him. He reached over to his chair, grabbed the chiton and threw it over himself with such violence that one of his fingernails left a welt across his chest and ribcage. The superficial wound angered him. And with that anger his sense of justice returned. Unlike the other nights, this time he was going to

go over to the girls' quarters and offer what meager support, care and love he possessed.

There was no danger of Dionys' hearing Dioxippus. His desires met, his sleep would be deep. Nevertheless, the barefoot Dioxippus walked as Piros had taught him, as furtive as the jungle cat. When he reached the girls' room, he stood outside the door, listening for the voices of Iyea and Phylia. Initially, he heard nothing. As panic began to manifest its ignorant self, Dioxippus heard something. It was not conversation but rather the pitiable moaning of a wounded creature. Interspersed with the whimpers was the soothing voice of one of the girls although Dioxippus could not recognize its owner.

His mouth almost touching the door, Dioxippus tapped gently and whispered forcefully, "Iyea, it is me, Dios. Please, open the door." No response. "Phylia, it is Dios. Come, open the door. Let me help you. Please."

A faint shuffling. A voice choked with tears. "Dios...Iyea is hurt. I do not know what to do. Please help her. She will not talk to me. There is blood everywhere. Ohh, Dios." The sobbing started anew and Dioxippus did not hear the last few words. But the door opened.

A dinner for Piros

Piros was enjoying dinner. His friends and confidantes, Tysos and Haglios, were good company and had managed to finally relax him with their banter and humour. Tysos' wife had set a bountiful table and as Tysos possessed no slaves, his wife had dutifully served them the meal. Piros noticed that Helen (Tysos' wife) had not adopted the servile attitude of many of her peers. Her posture, straight, emanated confidence tempered by discipline. Her movements were graceful, like a dancer's. But her wit, as honed as a barber's razor, most impressed Piros. He noticed that Tysos did not exclude Helen from the conversation; in fact he encouraged her participation. This was so unlike the Greek custom that Piros was at first taken aback...from surprise rather than disapproval.

"I hope this mess with Philip is taken care of soon. The Theban Games will take place within 3 weeks and I am eager to add my name to the victors' list," said Tysos.

"I am sure you are," replied his wife Helen. "But tell me, will the winner's garland repair the damage to that face."

"What damage could possibly hurt that face any more," interrupted Haglios, who barely finished his sentence before roaring with laughter.

"I would not be so quick to comment Haglios. Your head looks like the deflated pig's bladder the street urchins are even now kicking outside," retorted Helen. Scarcely taking a breath, all three men pounded the table good-naturedly and began their convulsions anew. "And why are you laughing like some hysterical child, Piros. You think that because you are in the pankration that you are any better than these so-called boxers. The only damage they do is to their heads and hands. I am not sure which should be deemed more valuable. But you, you roll around in the dirt, trying to tear off your opponents' limbs. That is sport? Look at you three. Why do you not concentrate on having families and leading productive lives?"

Helen's suddenly serious tone caught the men unawares. Their involvement in two of the most dangerous of the Olympiad events had never been questioned. The boxers were past champions and had never really suffered any serious injuries. Piros had been a

loner for so long, any life outside the ring was strictly on the periphery of his existence. Consequently, the responsibilities of family and friends had never been considered. As the only wed one of the three, Tysos' duty to his wife had not manifested itself in his lifestyle. But it was now painfully obvious, that Helen's teasing sarcasm was couched in fear, for her husband and for his two friends. She had seen good, young men killed in the Games. And for what, a garland of olive leaves?

Trying to inject some levity into a conversation turned dour, Haglios, feigning sorrow, opined, "Helen. All you have said has been taken under advisement. But look at us. Piros over there is a parody of the human body. He has far too many muscles for one human being. And that head. If his brain was as small as its container, he'd be pulling a plow, not giving oratories at the assembly."

Tysos held up his forefinger to his thumb and pretended to measure the circumference of Piros' head. With that they all broke into laughter again, including the now-frustrated Helen. Piros responded to this latest attack on his person with a slap to the back of Tysos' head. He responded by jumping on top of the pankratiast. Overturning his chair in his eagerness to partake in this childish romp, Haglios dove for Piros' legs. Within seconds all three were on the floor, rolling around and acting no better than a pack of dogs worrying a bone. The three friends wrestled good-naturedly, their grunts and groans punctuated with laughter. Helen just stood back, a look of resignation chiseled into her countenance. She realized that the man she called husband, still possessed that selfish characteristic that marks all men of achievement. By intruding in his world she was forcing him to reassess his priorities which if done incorrectly, could distract him enough to imperil his safety in the ring. Rolling around in mock combat, tittering between gasps of breath, Tysos was no more than a child. By assuming a simplistic outlook to life in general, Tysos was able to focus unwaveringly on the simplistic task he was considered one of the best at, beating another man senseless using only his hands. Grudgingly, Helen admitted that for her long-term interests, it was best to encourage rather than denigrate Tysos' involvement in the ring. At least with friends such as Piros and Haglios, a certain degree of safety was assured. So, forcing a smile, she scolded the three by now exhausted athletes, who like meek children got up

from the dirt floor and sat again at the table. While Helen went to bring some wine, they engaged in a discussion on ring strategy. And in this way they continued the evening.

Dioxippus confronts his worst fear

The stench assaulted his olfactory nerves. Blood, excrement, urine, combined in a pungent symphony, flowed like notes from a stringed instrument, entering through the mind and body's receptors but unlike the sweet sounds of gently played music, the acrid odor of the bedroom seized the throat and crushed the logical mind. Dioxippus' senses were numbed. His mental faculties refused to function. His limbs paralyzed. Man is a visually-oriented creature. Dioxippus was rendered immobile by the fear of his eyes confirming what his sense of smell had already told him.

Phylia, who had opened the door, was extremely calm. The violence perpetrated on her by the bestial Dionys had not been forgotten but the urgent necessity of tending to the wounded Iyea had precluded attending to her own injuries. Grabbing Dioxippus firmly by the wrist, she led him into the room.

At first, nothing was visible. For the span of less than a single heartbeat, Dioxippus felt the dreaded apprehension begin to alleviate. The bedroom, veiled by night, had only a small lantern in a far corner trespassing on its murky domain. The beatific glow it cast on the body in the unkempt cot, lent an almost holy cast on this surrealistic scene. And, incredibly the violence of what had transpired within this chamber appeared somewhat mitigated by the sheer serenity of the physical setting.

As Dioxippus' eyes adjusted to the low light, his other senses began to gather, assess and transmit their findings to his brain. His barefoot feet relayed the first of what would be a torrent of sensations; the soles of his feet were becoming encrusted with a mixture composed of sand and blood. He felt a cold shiver and he involuntarily shook his head from side to side, trying desperately to keep from disgorging what little was left in his stomach. Without realizing it he had continued to move closer to the cot. The child on the bed was curled up in a fetal position and had been covered by a ragged cloth of an indeterminate color. There was now no sound coming from Iyea. In the poor light, Dioxippus could not tell whether or not she was even breathing. One last step and he was by her bedside.

Dioxippus slowly reached out his hand to caress Iyea's temple. He expected her to cringe at the touch of a male hand. What he did not foresee was Iyea suddenly galvanized into action as she simultaneously grabbed his wrist with both hands and sat upright. The abrupt motion caused the sheet to fall away, exposing her upper torso. Even the modest light could not hide the carnage.

Dioxippus sat transfixed. Amidst the contusions littering her neck and chest were several broken bones. Iyea had not been the object of a deviate's perverted lust: she had been the victim of a brute's misdirected hatreds. Dionys had tried to kill the child in the most horrible manner possible. What had staved off the attack...no one could answer. But the shattered ribs marked the intensity of Dionys' criminal actions. And without even examining the genital or rectal areas, Dioxippus knew that Iyea was near death from this most severe of assaults. Slowly, he eased Iyea back down into her cot. He covered her again to prevent any chill complicating her condition even further. He turned to Phylia who had by now come up beside him.

"Go to my room. On the table you will find a bowl containing a paste. Bring it back here and make a poultice. Put it on Iyea's bruises and wash her gently with a dampened rag. I must get Piros. He will know what to do. Do not be frightened. I will be back shortly," and with that Dioxippus got up to leave. He turned once more to Iyea and whispered, "Iyea. Forgive me. I am a coward."

Dioxippus ran through the courtyard, his path unlit by the still shamed moon. Approaching the wall, he increased his speed and hitting the wall with first the right then left foot he vaulted to the top of the structure. Scarcely stopping, he jumped, landing noiselessly on the other side. He was now further hidden by the night of the city. Dioxippus, effectively blind because of the darkness, experienced the heightened senses of some nocturnal creature and he ran down the path unerringly to Piros' villa. Panic, fear, love, guilt created a complexity of emotions that pounded his brain but increased the speed of his feet.

Piros remembers....

Piros' night of revelry had come to an end and he had bid his friends a gracious farewell. As he walked, a little unsteady after the libations imbibed, he let his mind slide into the nether world of his subconscious. And into this realm of images, thoughts, dreams and desires he searched for he knew not what. He cast about, looking, as would a man with a lantern on the docks of Pireaus strangled by the mists of low-lying fog. And what would his mind permit him to see? Ghosts, shadows careening past in an orgy of frenzy? Smiling, happy faces twisted into leering ghouls? Love, joy, hope fused and transformed into despairing pain. And fear. An alien entity to a man disdainful of physical threats. Nothing more than asinine superstitions to a man hardly in awe of the supernatural. But madness...it was to be feared. And as reality slowly eroded into the unconscious Piros became more and more frightened.

He was back in the clearing now. He looked down. No he was still walking in the street. The scream snapped his body like a bullwhip. Piros looked around. He turned around. Nobody was there. He was aware of the fact that he was walking. He was alone. He was in the clearing again. Piros' eyes froze. A heaviness on his eyelids forced them down, making him blink repeatedly. He felt himself leaving. Somewhere, far away, he heard a voice calling him...but he could not answer. With agonizing slowness, he began to focus on the blurry image tantalizing his sanity. It was him.

By now, the Theban, Yemestos, had unbuckled the belt supporting his sword. His compatriots stood over the rest of the captives but their vigilance was lessened in anticipation of what was to transpire.

The captives were sobbing quietly. With their men dead, the women had resigned themselves to their fates. As slaves, they expected no mercy. After the men's lusts were satiated, they would be executed. They knew that and accepted it.

On the periphery of the unfolding tragedy stood the young Piros. This adventure had turned into a repugnant task. He wanted to return home to his friends, his relatives and his parents. He felt himself nothing more than a little boy.

In one swift motion, Yemestos seized the young girl kneeling at his feet by the hair and yanked her to her feet simultaneously letting his leather skirt fall away, revealing an erect monstrosity. The hair covered, blood-engorged creature shocked the onlookers and thoroughly cowed the female captives who immediately averted their eyes. The soldiers burst into laughter and shouted raucous encouragement to the half-naked, sneering Yemestos.

Suddenly, with an economy of violent motion usually the domain of trained fighters, the young girl pulled a blade of some sort from her undergarments. With one gliding motion she stabbed Yemestos in the groin. The blade ripped through the scrotum, severing skin, tissue and veins. With a slight turning of her wrist she continued the savage thrust up into the pelvic area, almost severing the now bloody pulp that mere moments ago was ready to split her asunder. The splattering body fluids covered her yet nonplussed she drove the blade up into the abdominal muscles now breaking ribs and puncturing internal organs. The almost disembowled Yemestos sunk to his knees gently, as if lowered by a spirit...in this case the spirit of death.

Within the few heartbeats it took for the young girl to thoroughly destroy her would-be attacker, the other captives broke and fled. Pandemonium erupted in the camp. The Thebans ran about in confusion, some deciding to avenge their fallen countryman; others giving chase to the escaping slave-women.

The young girl meanwhile, found herself trapped. Even though mortally wounded, Yemestos had not relinquished the hold on her hair. As his body sunk into the final paroxysms of death, his by now unconscious grip on her hair had become solidified into a cast claw. The young girl, so calm in her expert murder of the rapist, now began to cry as the other Theban soldiers rushed towards her.

But springing to the child's defense were two of the slavewomen. Galvanized by the death of Yemestos into defending themselves, the women seized still burning firebrands, and warily waving them in figure eights in front of them, kept the Thebans at bay long enough for the young girl to cut through some of her own tresses and free herself from the corpse. Released, she begged the

women to run and they broke for the grove where Piros was standing.

Not realizing that he stood directly in the path of the escaping women, Piros made no effort to move. But as they charged upon him, the women began to scream out profanities. Not seeing Piros move, they assumed that he was preventing their flight to freedom. Within a space of a few running steps, the Spartan women raised their firebrands and as they approached Piros wielded them not unlike cudgels.

Attacked, Piros responded reflexively. As the first woman swung downward with the still flaming fagot, Piros moved, not in an evasive manner but forward. Crossing his wrists he was able to trap the offending arm before it could complete its downward journey. Using the attacker's own momentum, he turned his right wrist in a tight arc outwards and grabbed the woman's wrist. In an almost delicate movement, he brought her whole arm around and in less time that it took to blink, he locked it into a controlling hold. But the adrenalin that had been subjugated so long poured forth rebelliously. In one quick snap, Piros' left elbow crushed his prisoner's skull.

The second escapee, mere steps behind the first, saw her companion destroyed. But she was following so close and running so fast she could not stop. Piros, perceiving another threat, stepped slightly to his left and in one motion swung his right forearm up and out, rotating the clenched fist downward. The sudden crack sounded like nuts being crushed. The Spartan woman did not see or feel the impact of that club that passed for an arm. Nor did she know or care that her thorax had been crushed and her neck broken. She died still holding the smoldering piece of wood in her hand.

The young girl, mesmerized by the devastation had slowed to almost a walk. She said a quick prayer and prepared to die. Piros however, made no effort to prevent her escape. Sensing rather than knowing it, the young girl did not fear Piros and as she approached this black creature, more brute than man, she felt almost safe. In two steps she was by him and with that immediately bolted into the now dark woods. Piros did not even turn to look.

The pursuing Thebans had now surrounded Piros. They too had witnessed the shocking efficiency of the Spartan women's executions. In fact, they were in awe of this young warrior. No one said a word as they stared at the two bodies. The escaped girl and the other escaped women were temporarily forgotten. But not by all.

"What in Hades name do you think you have done? Are you an idiot? Speak to me, bastard slave!" The troop's captain was livid. He had seen a mere child castrate then kill one of his fiercest warriors with the ease of a battle-scarred veteran. He had seen what was going to be a night of lascivious revelry degenerate into a tragic comedy. And this strangely coloured child disguised as a pankratiatist let the murderous little bitch get away. "Woman-killer. Warrior. Are you proud of yourself? The soon-to-be-great Olympian. Slaughterer of defenceless females. They will sing great songs about you slave," spit out the now thoroughly disgusted captain. "The one you should have stopped you let go. Are you happy, noble one? That shrew you let fly free killed one of our own. Your brother-in-arms. Your compatriot. And the man who would have sacrificed himself for you in battle," continued the captain, Xadros. "I should kill you myself," spit out Xadros in a spray full of venom.

Piros just stood. The invective from his superior did not shame him. He did not feel any loyalty to this troop of mad baboons. Xadros' accusations were so hypocritical they made no sense. Piros was glad he let the girl go. She truly was a warrior.

But Piros was far from satisfied with himself. He was deeply shamed by his murder of the women. All his life he wanted to be a warrior and his first kills were two Helot females. In this the captain was right...he really was nothing more than those he disdained. In fact, he was worse. He cold-bloodedly snuffed the spark of life from two innocent people: people who had lives, family...children. In light of this, he deserved the castigation from his superior.

"Piros, you will pay when we return to Thebes. Soldier...Huh! You are not part of this troop. You are an outsider. Understand...understand! Piros! Piros!"

Dionys

"Piros. Piros. I have been calling you. Oh, gods of Olympus answer me. Piros!"

Piros looked up but he did not see Xadros. Standing there, flushed with excitement was Dioxippus.

"I have been searching for you. Come quickly...please. My master..." Dioxippus took a moment to discharge a large gob of saliva in the general direction of Dionys' villa before continuing. "He has hurt Iyea. He has hurt her badly and we need you. We need your medicines. Please hurry," cried the panicked Dioxippus simultaneously pulling on Piros' arm.

The urgency of the youth was obvious. Grabbing Dioxippus by the wrist he urged him to run beside him. Falling into a practiced rhythm almost immediately, the two men, different in age, size, race and upbringing trotted together in such unison that only one set of feet striking the ground could be heard in the dark, late night air.

Arriving at Dionys' villa, after a short stop to pick up Piros' bag of medicinal herbs, poultices and plants, the two men decided to forego entering through the main gate. They circumvented the wall until they found a place where they could not only climb over with the least amount of effort but where their arrival would be concealed from a suddenly wakened Dionys. With a boost from Dioxippus, Piros gained the top of the wall where he quickly turned around, reached until a jumping Dioxippus could grab his outstretched hand, and pulling sharply brought the young man up beside him. Cat-like they crouched on the wall, their silhouettes barely visible to a roving eye. Ears attuned to the slightest sound alien to this nocturnal world, their eyes adjusting to the low light, Piros and Dioxippus looked at each other assuredly. The two men then shifted slightly and with apparently no perceivable movement alighted noiselessly on the tiled courtyard below.

Bent at the waist, their heads no higher than their chests, the two scampered across the courtyard to the girls' lodging. Cautiously rapping the door, Dioxippus called out to Iyea to open the door. The passing seconds seemed an eternity, but the battered

old oak door finally yawned open...once again admitting intruders into its violated confines.

Positioned directly in front of them, what meager light there was at her back, was a forlorn Phylia. No utterance came from her. To Piros, she was dead. Only her body had not decided to finalize the decision of her spirit. The twin had died. Piros was as sure of that as he was of the dawn. He had seen it before...this strange incorporeal bond that possessed no physicality but tied the thoughts and emotions of its owners stronger than the heaviest chain. The passing of one doomed the other twin to a life void of wholeness, of completeness of the right to live as an independent entity. Piros knew the shock would wear off. The girl however would always remain the shell of the unit destroyed.

Dioxippus of course did not possess his mentor's perception so he did not recognize the change that had transpired in this tragedy during his absence. He cast a cursory glance at Phylia as he hurriedly stepped past her through the antechamber into the sleeping room. Even with the now shrouded body directly in front of him Dioxippus did not or could not believe that the child he loved was dead. Kneeling by the cot, his hands, as gently as a fanning breeze, drew back the homespun cotton sheets to reveal not the soft, vital, pink-tinged kukla or doll he adored but a pummeled carcass. Shocked, he gasped for air, almost hyperventilating in his anxiety. No words. No tears. Just a rasping struggle to inhale as quickly and as often as possible.

Piros kneeled beside Dioxippus. He reached over the grieving youth and almost mechanically laid his middle finger over the carotid artery in Iyea's neck. He did not expect a pulse; he did not feel one. He squatted back on his haunches, the movement putting him slightly back from Dioxippus. The grieving youth was thus left alone. Glancing over his shoulder Piros noticed that Phylia had not moved from the narrow hallway. She too was grieving alone. Piros felt no anger but the sorrow was devouring him. He had once saved a young girl. This time he had not.

"Do slaves never sleep?" reverberated the booming voice in the tight confines of the sleeping room.

Startled, shocked, Piros almost fell back off his haunches. His fumbling to right himself lent an almost comic air to this dire progression of events. He did however see the two men.

Phylia was being held by a young behemoth of a man. His great size, barely contained by his clothing belied a mass of musculature reminiscent more of a rock quarry than a human being. Buried under this avalanche of bone and sinew was the barely visible Phylia, her mouth covered by one saucer-sized hand.

"Well, the revered Piros worships a mound of flesh. Do you always pray thus?" drawled Dionys sarcastically. "And you boy...Dioxippus. Do you not have training tomorrow? Why are you here, beside the bed of a little harlot?"

Dioxippus' first reaction was to leap up and rip the head off of this evil. Piros must have sensed it also because he had grasped Dioxippus' calf with his right hand, preventing the teenager from rising. Feeling Piros' hand, and remembering the battle strategies of his mentor, Dioxippus narrowed his eyes into a glare but otherwise made no movement.

"Is there nothing to be said? No cries of indignation? No wailing? No laments?" asked Dionys, his sneer devoid of pity, of mercy. "Did you think that two little sluts could satisfy a man of my needs, my desires? What, one die? I'll replace her tomorrow. What are you looking at boy? Piros, tell the slave that I, and I alone control his fate and he had better accept that. Piros, tell him how it is to work in the mines...like your father. Or better yet, tell him how pleasurable it is to have your manhood chopped off with a pair of shears so you can be a guard for some rich noble's wife or mistress. Or tell him how fortunate he is that he can hide in the pankration ring while others his age are sticking their asses in the air in the hope of being poked by someone rich enough to satisfy their petty wants," proselytized Dionys. He turned to Dioxippus and said, "Get back to your quarters Dioxippus. I shall forgive this transgression. You will however say nothing. And as I promised you, win at Marathon and you walk free forever. Do not waste your future because of this. The girl probably had a weak heart...a defect I should have been warned about on purchase. Go now...go," a suddenly conciliatory Dionys said to Dioxippus.

"You have committed a crime." Although Piros' voice was low it carried as well as the boom from Dionys. "Slave or not, you have killed a child. The council will not be predisposed to believe that a ten year old brought this upon herself. You are a rapist and murderer. Even for you the punishment will be death."

"Piros, your black countrymen may be subject to your pathetic attempts to frighten or cajole me...but I am a Greek, by blood. I will be the one that will be innocent. It was you Piros that will pay for the death of that child. You killed her...after you subjected her to your bestial lusts. And in the process you attacked me. During the ensuing fight, Dioxippus and the other girl were killed. That is the story the council will hear," stated the extremely confident Dionys.

Embroiled in this verbal exchange, Piros had not noticed that Dionys had been slowly retreating into the antechamber. By the time he was aware of the shift in positions, Dionys and his bodyguard were almost outside. Vaulting forward, Piros and Dioxippus cleared the space separating them from their enemies in an instant but their quarry was even faster as the door leading outside was jolted open. Piros and Dioxippus charged through the door not an eye blink behind Dionys.

Piros had taken less than two steps before the cord stretched tautly across the front step of the room tripped up his feet and sent him flying into the hard marble tile of the courtyard. Immediately, a net was thrown over him and he lay trussed like a prize piece of meat. He nevertheless fought the lines binding him, grunting and growling with effort as he twisted back and forth in paroxysms of fury.

In the few seconds it took to trap and immobilize Piros, Dioxippus was able to sidestep the ambush. He spotted Dionys' other "friend" just as the net was released. Before Piros' attacker had even recovered from the throwing of the net Dioxippus was on him. The now startled man swung his right arm in a wide arc, his hammer-like fist whistling through the air toward the fragile temple of Dioxippus. The young pankratiatist dropped onto his right knee and with the now bent left leg pulling him forward was not only able to duck the punch but was able to slide his body toward his opponent and with that momentum slam the heel of his open palm

into the floating ribs of his enemy. The force of the blow cracked the ribcage forcing the victim to bend over at the waist. With no hesitation, Dioxippus who had positioned himself behind the net-thrower reached over the now horizontal back and grabbed a handful of hair. Yanking upwards, the torso of Dionys' confederate was wrenched brutally, causing excruciating pain from the shattered ribcage. The resounding scream petrified all those witnessing the systematic slaughter. Dioxippus finished the attack by seizing his foe's chin with his left hand. Pulling with his left hand and pushing with his right, Dioxippus twisted his adversary's neck in a quick jerk, simultaneously breaking the neck and killing his enemy.

The blonde giant released Phylia. Sporting a salacious grin, he approached Dioxippus. Although he moved slowly, deliberately, he could not conceal the power locked in his limbs nor could he reduce the energy emanating from his being. If Dioxippus were not so overcharged with fury and vengeance he might have been fatally awed by this descendant of Herakles. As it was, his martial skills were heightened by a cautionary awareness.

As the distance between the two fighters lessened, Dioxippus moved both his feet forward simultaneously, almost gliding across the tiled floor. The loosely curled fingers of his left hand suddenly contracted as the arm shot out of its bent position like an arrow out of a bow. The impact of the fist over the right eye of Dionys' bodyguard split the skin. Blood, seeking escape from the confines of the body spurt forth in a fine crimson-coloured spray while the resulting flow started its cascade into the eye. Barely had the fist struck when it was retracted and released again. This time Dioxippus hit his antagonist on the bridge of his nose. As the bodyguard was moving his head from the first blow, the second jab had its force dissipated over a larger area. The nose stayed intact but the eyes welled up in tears further confounding the vision. Sensing rather than seeing his opponent stunned, Dioxippus planted his feet, pivoted his hip and swung his right fist in a tightly controlled, slightly curved trajectory. His whole body was concentrated in that one blow and he knew there was no escape for the blonde leviathan.

Absolutely no effort was made to avoid the blow. Dioxippus hit his adversary so hard that the force rattled the tendons and ligaments in the back of his hand and his wrist. Sharp pain

stabbed into the sensitive areas of his forearm and for a flashing moment he feared he had broken his arm. The recipient of Dioxippus' thunderbolt staggered back, eyes rolling and breathing spasmodically. His massively muscled quadriceps trembled like leaves in the wind throwing his balance off so much he appeared ready to crumple. Dioxippus, a land-shark smelling blood, lunged in to tear his victim apart.

But the shark underestimated the victim. As Dioxippus pressed his assault, the pummeled enemy seized Dioxippus by the torso and effortlessly lifted him to his shoulder. Turning him in mid-air, he leaped up then downwards crashing on top of the now shocked and very frightened Dioxippus.

The worst had happened. Dioxippus was now forced to wrestle with someone who was much larger, much stronger and much more accomplished. All he could think of doing was twisting like a hooked fish in order to prevent his opponent from gaining a strong hold on him. The behemoth on top of Dioxippus was attempting to control him by using his weight until his head cleared from the vicious blow he had just received. Consequently, he did not press his advantage. Freeing his left hand, Dioxippus spiked his left thumb into his would-be executor's right eye. The thumb drove into the eye. Amid the blood, torn skin and fluids were flecked tiny hairs from the eyelashes. The searing pain forced a shriek that rattled the eardrums of the prone Dioxippus. But the momentary paralysis caused by the spear-like thrust allowed Dioxippus to roll free and to get to his feet shakily.

Dionys' bodyguard, on one knee, right hand trying to contain what was left of the eye structure, turned his head slowly toward Dioxippus. The rage and the hatred in that baleful stare whipped through Dioxippus like a damp, cold wind. He found himself shivering. His knees felt incapable of supporting his legs. And he could just feel a trickle as his bladder began to lose control.

Suddenly, his antagonist charged. Dioxippus stood immobile. The bloodied, severely wounded bull was almost upon him. From the doorway, Dionys finally smiled. Piros, almost free of the entangling net shouted a warning. Dioxippus still did not move.

Four steps, three, now two...a blur from the ground. Dionys' bodyguard stopped as if impacting a wall. The head snapped back as the vertebrae separated, the shutting jaw fragmented teeth forcing the shards into the bloodied tongue and gums and the big man staggered back, standing but already dead.

As the body crashed to the ground, an oak felled by a single cut of an axe, Piros threw off the last strands of the net and got to his feet. He was speechless. In less than the span of time it took for a stone to hit the ground after being dropped, Dioxiippus had unleashed a technique so fast, so furious, that Piros thought it otherworldly. How could a foot move from the ground to the height of a tall man's chin so fast?

Dioxiippus' master meanwhile had taken a step or two back. The bluster was gone. The braggart was humble. The master was now the slave and one soon to be sentenced to death. Dionys began to cry. Then he began to scream. Piros yelled at him to stop but Dionys bellowed even louder. Piros moved toward him and Dionys raised his cane in a poor mimicking of self-defense. Before the cane could even be moved, Piros slipped in and with one quick twist wrested it away from the now terrified and extremely agitated Dionys. Piros raised his left hand until it lay on Dionys' collarbone, approximately a finger length away from the throat. It was almost a lover's caress.

From the moment his hand touched the collarbone to the second it seized and crushed the larynx, less than the time it took for one breath to be inhaled passed. Dionys' face turned white, then red and finally blue as all the air passages to his head were crushed together like eggshells. And so great was the strength of Piros, that Dionys' ability to resist was completely obliterated. Dangling like a broken doll, his beautiful robe soiled in much the same manner as the child that he had destroyed Dionys was now nothing more than a cadaver. But the screams had alerted neighbours. Voices could be heard outside the compound walls. Occasionally a beacon of light would slash through the darkness as one of the neighbours swung one of the fat-burning lamps being used in the search for whatever or whoever had screamed. As more and more light rays cut through the night it was apparent to the huddled group within the villa that the numbers outside the wall were increasing quickly.

Dioxippus and Phylia were mute. The shock of the night's events was just beginning to manifest itself in the adolescent boy and the prepubescent girl. Piros looked at them. He could see they were now next to useless and the first priority was to get them out of Athens. That thought upset him. He adored this city. It was the first place that had treated him as a human being not a slave, and he did not want to leave. Yet, he knew that regardless of what had just transpired in the courtyard his remaining days in Athens would have been few anyway as political allegiances changed. The tragedy tonight merely hastened the move. They had to gather their things quickly and flee Athens.

