

David J. Greening

THRAX

Book Three
Soldier of Fortune



Kostas Vekas
2020

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A SCHREIBSTARK BOOK

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Thrax: Book Three

Soldier of Fortune

David J. Greening

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David J. Greening was born in Karachi in 1969 AD, briefly went to kindergarten in Malta and grew up in Germany. After cleaning dishes in a delicatessen, working on building sites, flipping burgers and other assorted odd jobs he trained to become a landscape gardener before studying Ancient History. Completing an MA in 2004 and a PhD in 2007 he currently works as a school teacher and part-time lecturer of ancient and medieval history. He lives in a small village in a house built in the year 1615 with his wife, three sons and a dog.

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For my wife Inka

⊕

Also by David J. Greening

Thrax Book I: Warrior's Dawn

Thrax Book II: Mercenary of Sparta

The Sea People Book I: Children of the Sea

The Princess and the Key

The Prince and the Key

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Whatever mistakes remain, historical or otherwise, are mine alone.

Asia Minor





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David J. Greening
Soldier of Fortune

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Bithynia

It was cold. When Bryzos had still been a prince on the Thracian Chersonnesos peninsula, he had always imagined Asia to be warm, or at least warmer than home. But now he was in Asia, standing in the middle of a field ankle-deep in snow, covered in tents and men, with the occasional campfire scattered in between. Bryzos looked about: Everywhere around him were soldiers, their breathing visible as dense clouds in the feeble early morning sunlight. Still, even these hard, battle-scarred men appeared lost in a landscape covered in white all around them. Wrapping their cloaks tightly around themselves against the cold or attempting to warm themselves at one of the small fires, the men waited patiently for their commander to deliver a speech.

Of course, he was now no longer Bryzos, the Thracian prince, but Thrax, the Thracian. He certainly was the only Thracian in his unit, a lochos of light-armed infantry, Arkadian peltasts, currently about two hundred strong. Not that he had been given a choice at the time about joining the army or not. Still, for Thrax matters could also have been a lot worse. He had managed to escape the hands of his murderous brother who had made himself king after putting the rest of his family, including his father King Ozrykes, to the sword. And here, in Asia, he had found both new friends and gainful employment with these strange Greek mercenaries.

Thrax shivered, diverting his attention back to the officer who was about to address them: Megalias, the 'Old Man', commander of a unit of light-armed mercenaries currently employed by the 'Greek Expeditionary Force', the Spartan

army campaigning in Asia Minor against the Persians. Initially, the campaign had been a success: The Spartan command had been able to not only secure a truce with the Persians over the winter, but had also made allies with the Odrysians, one of the most powerful Thracian tribes against their arch-enemies the Bithynians, another local tribe. Several villages and homesteads had been raided and large amounts of plunder had been made. Then, however, the foragers had been betrayed and their camp sacked, with over two hundred men slaughtered while sleeping in their tents. What would happen next was anybody's guess, but right now at least both morale and supplies were at an all-time low.

He sighed, shaking his head, his musings interrupted by their commanding officer.

"Men," Megalias said in a calm carrying voice loud enough to reach everyone present, "I won't try to mince words here: We're in deep shit."

At this conversation immediately erupted everywhere. Thrax nodded to himself, shrugging and pulling his cloak tighter around his shoulders against the cold. The campfires were only small as the army had started to run out of kindling, while food supplies had dwindled to two helpings of porridge a day. There was no denying the fact that he men, the army and possibly the entire campaign had run into severe trouble.

"This enterprise," Megalias went on, raising his voice and causing the conversation to quickly die down, "didn't exactly work out as well as the Boss had thought."

'The Boss', that was Derkylidas, the Spartan supreme commander of the Greek Expeditionary Force. The men

around Thrax mumbled and nodded their assent, waiting for Megalias to continue.

“It’s the middle of winter. We will run out of supplies soon, our allies seem to have deserted us, most of the spoils from our campaign are lost and...”

This time, Megalias was unable to finish his sentence in the uproar of the crowd around him. This was a bad surprise indeed, Thrax thought, shaking his head. A tough mercenary unit such as that of Megalias’ was used to bad weather, bad food and bad company. But with the plunder from their campaign lost the men now had nothing at all to show up for their troubles. Thrax wondered what had happened to their supposed Odrysian Thracian allies, but Megalias was already continuing.

“An Odrysian envoy arrived yesterday and there will be a meeting with them this evening.”

“Fuck all Thracians!” someone shouted, receiving several jeers and grumbled approval from a number of those present.

At this, several of the bystanders turned their eyes towards Thrax, who was instantly recognisable as a Thracian due to his brightly patterned coloured cloak.

“Despite this meeting, the Boss summoned me and the other officers yesterday evening to consult and it was decided that the sooner we left for the coast, the better,” Megalias went on, ignoring the interjection. “We were told the inhabitants of the fine city of Lampsakos are looking forward to shower their Greek liberators with cash, and are only too willing to fulfil any other desires we may have,” he continued, pausing for effect. “I tell you, men, I don’t believe a word of it! But at least we’ll all be out of the snow

and back someplace we won't have to deal with the natives showering us with javelins in the night!"

At this everybody started talking all at once, and Megalias gave the men some time to mull over the matter, as the situation of the army was only too clear to everyone present.

"I don't even know where bloody Lampsakos is," a young man beside Thrax muttered, turning towards him.

This was Smiler, his tent-mate, nicknamed for the scar running from the corner of his mouth upwards across his left cheek nearly all the way up to his eye, forcing his face into a permanent grin.

"In the north of the Troad, on the southern coast of the Hellespontos just opposite the Chersonnesos," a girl replied, scowling at the incredulous look this gained her.

This had been Zenia, Thrax' personal servant, a Persian girl he had acquired during the army's occupation of Gergis several months back. While she was indeed a sight for sore eyes, she mostly refused to actually serve or do chores, was a rotten cook and overall poor company.

"How do you know where..." he began, but he was interrupted by Megalias continuing to speak.

"I know we had hoped things would turn out more profitable for us all, but there it is, men. So, eat well and prepare to pack, when we move tomorrow the Arkadians will take the van. Dismiss!" the Old Man finished.

Immediately, the men around them began to disperse to their respective tents, campfires and the hope of a decent breakfast until they received orders to strike camp. Thrax

noded to Smiler and the two of them trudged through the snow back to their own tent.

“What about the Odrysians then?” Smiler asked, “What’ll they do if we all simply move off? You know, without even saying good-bye?”

Thrax shrugged his shoulders darkly at this remark. Indeed, what would the Odrysians do? Nobody had heard of them for some time after all until now. He himself had been in the middle of the fighting when the foragers’ camp had been attacked at night, the plunder lifted and the men put to the sword in their sleep. He still had to limp from the javelin wound he had sustained in the attack. Not only that, he was fairly certain that one of the commanding Spartan officers together with one of the Odrysian officers had in fact been responsible for getting them into this mess.

Thrax opened his mouth to answer, but was silenced by a slap on the shoulder.

“Not you, Thracian,” Megalias said, appearing out of nowhere, causing the two to stop in their tracks. “Oros wants a Thracian on his team when they ride out.”

Thrax glance sidewise at Smiler, while Zenia merely shrugged and left the three of them standing there. Oros was the cavalry scout master. He opened his mouth to speak, but orders were orders after all. Instead he nodded, at which Megalias returned the gesture, turned about and, without a further word, left them as suddenly as he had appeared.

“So, the cavalry scouts, eh,” Smiler said. “Well, at least you’ll get a decent breakfast instead of Zenia’s burnt porridge, I suppose.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll see to the packing, mate,” he finished, grinning broadly, the scar on his left cheek turning his face into a grotesque grimace.

They clasped forearms and Smiler left for their camp site, leaving Thrax standing in the snow by himself. For a moment, Thrax stood there looking around. Everywhere men were either eating, packing or both, preparing for the army’s march to Lampsakos as soon as the order was given. There were still about five thousand men in the Greek Expeditionary Force and it would take some time for all of them to get going. He shrugged, his left hand instinctively going to his lucky knife he wore sheathed on his left hip, and nodded silently to himself. He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, readying himself for what was to come. At least he’d be on a horse instead of having to plough through the snow on foot, he thought. As Thrax took a deep breath, turning around in the direction of the horses’ paddock, it once again began to snow.

“Mmmh,” the rider to his right said quietly, pointing in the direction of a small copse of beech and oak trees just in front of them.

Thrax looked about, nodding in response and rode forward to investigate as noiselessly as possible. ‘Silence’ was the word for these men. Thrax himself had acted as a cavalry scout in the army of his father, but these men... well, they were the real stuff, he had to grudgingly admit. They hardly ever spoke and only when absolutely necessary. He and Erimanthos, among others, had been appointed to act as outriders, scouting the area even before Oros and the other scouts and riding far ahead of the actual army. The man on horseback beside him was one of Oros’ senior scouts. He

was considerably older than Thrax, but damned was he good at his job. While Erimanthos stayed put, gently – and silently – patting his horse's neck, Thrax rode towards the trees. As it had been gently snowing all morning so far, any traces of other men, be they friend or foe, were quickly obliterated, covered by a dense, white carpet. Underneath the trees, however, there was no snow, of course.

What had he seen? Thrax asked himself, slipping from his mount and crunching into the snow underneath. He looked around. Nothing. There were no foot or hoof prints visible in the snow, nor had anybody passed along this route, their tracks would have long since been covered. Stroking his horse, he looked back to Erimanthos, but the man simply nodded and once more pointed to the trees in front of Thrax. Shrugging he advanced as quietly as possible. The snow drift here came to the middle of his knee-high riding boots, good Thracian embades that would remain dry and warm even in this weather.

The branches of the beech trees were largely bare, while the oaks still retained most of their brown, shrivelled leaves, now covered in snow. He came right up to the lowest boughs and looked about, but still failed to see what Erimanthos had spotted. Turning around he looked back at the senior scout and shrugged. Instead of answering, the man simply shook his head in disgust and rode his horse a couple of paces nearer. Taking hold of the bow and quiver hanging Scythian-style from his belt, he elegantly slid off his mount. There was no noise, even as the man's feet hit the frozen snow. Erimanthos approached, wordlessly walking past Thrax and headed for... and now Thrax could see it too. On one of the lower oak branches, at just about chest level was something that looked a bit like a torn spider's web. But instead of being white and covered with snow, it was a drab, reddish brown.

“Horsetail,” Erimanthos said, carefully picking the tuft of hair from the branch. “Tie up our horses,” he added, ducking to move in between the trees without waiting for an answer from Thrax.

Exhaling frustratedly at having been weighed and found too light in the eye of the senior scout, Thrax turned, took the horses’ reins and tied them to the nearest branch. Pursing his lips, he then followed his superior in between the trees. At first there was nothing to be seen: Fallen leaves, some snow that had managed to make its way to the ground through the maze of half-empty branches up above, patches of frozen mud here and there.

“There,” Erimanthos said quietly, pointing to a pile of horse droppings underneath a tree. “Spoor. Bastards thought we’d miss it. They were wrong,” the scout continued in an unaccustomed fit of verbosity that made Thrax raise his eyebrows in surprise.

To his further surprise, the man now gestured impatiently for him to approach, as he crouched down beside the small pile of manure. Thrax came closer and squatted down beside him, waiting for orders. When he remained there, waiting idly, Erimanthos simply looked at him quizzically, at which Thrax was merely able to return the look. What the hell did the man want him to do now? Fondle bloody horse shit?

Instead of wasting any more words, Erimanthos rolled his eyes in disgust and carefully dug his fingertip into the centre of the pile of manure. Thrax shook his head. As a stable hand and later as the most junior of all junior members of the Greek army, he had spent enough time shovelling shit, feeling no compulsion whatsoever now to actually touch the stuff. And so, he was utterly astonished,

when Erimanthos simply took his left hand and shoved his fingers in between the fist-sized spheres. Thrax flashed the senior scout a look of disgust, instinctively wanting to withdraw his hand, but found himself interrupted by Erimanthos speaking.

“Learn, lad. How warm is it?” he said sternly and even more quietly than before, keeping Thrax’ hand inside the pile with an amazingly strong grip for a man of his age.

Thrax decided not to push the issue and re-focussed his attention on the temperature of the dung. Only to suddenly open his eyes wide in realisation. It was still warm.

“Yes, lad. They’re still around here somewhere.”

Fuck, Thrax thought. How many, friend or foe, Odrysians or Bithynians? And would it actually make any difference which tribe of Thracians they encountered? And how many of them were there, and...

Letting go of Thrax’ wrist, Erimanthos rose from his haunches in a fluid gesture, wiping his right hand on the leg of his riding pants, interrupting any further contemplation for the moment. He looked around and Thrax quickly pulled his fingers out of the pile of dung, wiped them in a patch of snow and also got up. In the muddled light beneath the trees, he now could see a hoof print here and there, but nothing more.

“How many do you think...?” he began, but Erimanthos was already holding up his hand for silence.

Thrax nodded, instantly quiet. For a moment the two of them stood there, listening. The senior scout remained silent, evidently focussing on the sounds about them. Thrax tried to follow suit, breathing as shallowly as possible until

he felt he could hear his own heart beating, but he was unable to make out anything else. Wordlessly, Erimanthos inclined his head and walked back to their mounts. Thrax swallowed, wondering if the man could possibly have heard something he had not, but decided better to follow quickly. They were just about to leave the cover of the trees, when one of their horses whinnied.

“Fuck,” Erimanthos exclaimed, baring his teeth, instantly going down and crouching behind the nearest beech tree.

Without any obvious sign of nervousness, he took his bow from its case and nocked an arrow, making it once more obvious to Thrax that he was once again inadequately armed. While he was a good targeter, a pack of javelins slung across his back was hardly anything to be transported easily on scout duty without getting caught up all the time if he was going to ride silently through the woods. At least Oros had loaned him a decent sword, so he was not merely down to his lucky knife for a change.

They waited. Thrax looked out and saw it had stopped snowing. Their two mounts stood idly, just beyond them, hardly a stone’s throw away. One of the horses began to scratch away at the ground below with its hoof, looking for some leftover grass. While the surrounding branches would hide them from anybody looking in this direction, their two mounts not only made it quite clear to any enemy scouting parties that somebody was hiding behind the trees, but also how many men they would have to deal with. Nothing happened for some time. Erimanthos just crouched there, his eyes scouring the snow-covered hills they had crossed on their way here, as well as the line of trees atop a hillock to their left, maybe a bowshot away. There was no further sound. Erimanthos took a deep, quiet breath, then rose and beckoned for Thrax to join him.

He approached as silently as he could, attempting not to trip over a branch in the growing tension he was feeling. They peered through the branches, but there was nothing to be seen. This is ridiculous, Thrax thought, the sound they had heard had been from one of their mounts. There was no-one anywhere near, neither enemies nor friends, neither on foot nor on horseback. The senior scout was evidently getting a bit too senior for the job, Thrax thought, shaking his head and suppressing a grin. Erimanthos nodded to himself, looked sidewise to Thrax and gestured forward with his chin. Thrax noted that the scout still held his bow and an arrow in his left hand, but simply nodded and the two of them approached their horses. The two beasts had by now cleared the snow from a small patch of ground and were both peacefully munching on the dry, frozen grass they had found. Thrax untied the reins, handed Erimanthos his and patted the neck of his horse, which gently snuffled his hand in response. Erimanthos swung onto the back of his own mount with his usual, quiet elegance and Thrax was about to do the same, when all hell broke loose.

Without any warning whatsoever, a number of arrows suddenly came down on them. Instantly, Erimanthos' horse began to scream, throwing the senior scout clear. Thrax' mount whinnied loudly, bucking, instantly tearing the reins from his hands. He had to get hold of the beast somehow, or else he'd be next. The panicking horse began to rear and shake, and the flailing reins caught him squarely on the side of the head. He doubled up in pain, tears filling his eyes, his cheek stung and the taste of blood filled his mouth.

"Will you fucking get on!" he suddenly heard Erimanthos' voice from above.

He straightened up with trembling knees, only to feel himself being hauled upwards by the nape of his cloak. Somehow the senior scout had managed not only to steady Thrax' horse, but also climb onto its back.

Without thinking, Thrax swung himself onto the animal, which immediately kicked out backwards at the unaccustomed weight. But before either beast or rider had any chance to settle down, Erimanthos was already spurring the horse forward. As Thrax glanced about, he saw the other horse go down with several arrows protruding from its flank, with a new volley already coming down on them. Without further hesitation, Erimanthos directed their mount into the trees.

An arrow thudded into a branch to their left, another smacking into the frozen ground at their feet, but they were already among the first trees, nearly out of reach. Erimanthos spurred the horse on, allowing it to buck and kick at will, attempting to make it as difficult for the enemy to hit him as possible. And then he had it under control and they were galloping at full tilt through the grove. Only then did he notice that Erimanthos had a broken arrow protruding from his left shoulder blade.

"Down!" came Erimanthos' voice from ahead.

Before he could react, an oak branch smacked across the top of his skull, tearing his cap from his head.

Stars exploded before his eyes and he felt dizzy. The horse jumped over some unseen obstacle beneath them and Thrax felt his fingers slip from Erimanthos' belt.

"Hold on, damn you!" the scout yelled, causing Thrax to tighten his grip.

He shook his head and looked over the man's shoulder: Snow was clearly visible through the trees. In moments, they'd be beyond the trees and out in the open again.

"Where are we going?" he shouted.

Instead of answering, Erimanthos turned the horse left and the snow-covered hill country opened up before them.

The next thing Thrax felt, was the two of them being catapulted from the back of the horse, while the beast itself crashed into the snow to the left as they were thrown clear. Thrax crashed into the frozen ground face-forward, unable to catch his fall with more than an outstretched elbow. Snow filled his mouth and nose, covering his eyes. Luckily enough, he had hit the ground with his right hip instead of landing on top of one of the two blades he had slung onto his left.

The pain was intense, but he forced himself up, wiping the snow out of his eyes to get his bearings. Only to see that the senior scout had once again somehow managed to take the fall better than him. In fact, although he was still lying in the snow, Erimanthos was aiming an arrow at something. Or better someone, Thrax realised, looking to their right. There stood an archer, aiming directly back at the scout. He held his breath. If he moved, he would be this man's target, even though this would mean Erimanthos would shoot him next. Motionless, the two archers held their bows at full tension, daring one another to blink, flinch or look the other way. But Thrax could already see Erimanthos trembling, the arrow in his shoulder blade quickly taking its toll.

"Fuck all Thracians," he said matter-of-factly and released his arrow.

But the quivering in his bow arm made the shot go awry and the enemy archer simply stepped aside, avoiding the missile.

"You, you be Greek," he replied, his Greek slurred by a strong Thracian accent.

"Yes, you bastard. Now get it over with," Erimanthos answered, giving in to the pain and letting himself fall back into the snow.

"But you, you not Greek," the man said, nodding and turning to aim at Thrax.

He swallowed. This man was Thracian, obvious not only from his accent, but also his clothing, the brightly patterned cloak, the felt cap, Thracian embades of the same type Thrax himself wore, he realised. Was he a Bithynian or an Odrysian? And would it make any difference? As he looked around, he could see several other men approach on horseback, while their own horse stood there, snorting and shaking, a rope sling of some kind hanging from its neck.

"What tribe are you from then, lad?" the man asked, without relaxing his bow arm in the least.

Thrax inhaled deeply.

"Dolonkan," he said, "I'm Dolonkan," he repeated, balling his hands into fists as he prepared for the worst

For a moment the archer merely stood there motionless. Then he nodded and slowly relaxed the arm he had been drawing his bow with. Only then did Thrax notice he had been holding his breath.

“Sorry about the horse,” he said, spat into the snow and returned the arrow to its quiver.

As a Spartan, Derkylidas was of course a good soldier. However, he was also an efficient commander and so by no means a man to spurn a good ruse, if it was to his own, and thus the army’s advantage. Therefore, he had installed a small, hand-picked group of foreigners in the army who had been trained as Spartan guardsmen, a unit referred to as the ‘Native Speakers’. By merely standing guard when foreign dignitaries visited, these men were capable of listening in on their conversations. More than once this had given the Spartans an edge over both potential enemies and allies.

After his adventure in the Bithynian woods, the situation still felt somewhat unreal to Thrax. Shortly after the Odrysian scouts had escorted him and Erimanthos back to the camp of the Greek Expeditionary Force, Thrax had been summoned to join the Native Speakers, as he was their only Thracian member. And so, while Erimanthos had been given immediate medical attention, he had been forced to limp off to the command quarters. There, he and the other Native Speakers had been hastily ushered into a tent by a Spartan named Nikandrippos, the commander of the guard and Derkylidas right-hand man. They had been ordered to quietly and quickly change into full Spartan regalia and were then immediately marched back out into the snow to stand guard in front of a row of officers’ tents.

And so now, not even an hour after his return to the Greek camp, Thrax found himself standing to attention together with the other men, trying his best to look like the elite Spartan guardsman he was not. He was in pain. His head

hurt from encounters with more than one branch, whereas his hip made standing upright caused him continuous pain. But as Spartans did not believe in secret dealings, he and the others would have to remain standing there until the Odrysian delegates would have left, or at least until matters had been resolved, whatever occurred first.

Servants had set up a square of several trestle tables under a canvas awning, with benches on two sides. The two delegations would be sitting opposite each other and the guardsmen had been stationed on the left and right-hand sides of the arrangement. As their only Thracian, Thrax was of course on the far left of the line of Native Speakers, so he could listen in on any conversation in his mother tongue.

“Don’t want them to think we’re their enemies, do we after all,” Nikandrippos had replied as they all waited when one of the Native Speakers had remarked on the lay-out. “Stupid Thracian bastards may even fall for it, who knows. No offence, Thracian,” he had added, slapping Thrax on the shoulder.

More servants came and went, seeing to this and that, when Thrax heard a horse neighing somewhere beyond the rows of tall officers’ tents blocking their view of the rest of the camp.

“There they are, lads,” the guardsman said, “look sharp!”

Had it been possible to stand even more rigidly to attention than they were, the men would have done so. Even so, several of them at least attempted to stand up straighter still. To his right, Thrax saw the flaps of a tent being opened and a number of men march across the hard-packed snow past the honour guard. Wordlessly, the

officers began to take their seats, all grouped around Derkylidas in order of seniority.

From his previous duties as a Native Speaker, Thrax easily recognised the senior officers present: At the head of the table of course sat Derkylidas himself, the Boss, commander of the Greek Expeditionary Force currently consisting of five thousand men. As Thrax knew from last summer, this number would rise to at least fifteen thousand during campaign season, with many towns in Asia Minor providing soldiers, as well as several mercenary contingents joining the army which had been dismissed over winter. A huge force, more fighting men than he had ever seen while he had been in Thrace. To his left sat Kleitos and Laios, senior staff officers and fellow Spartans. Beside them were Athenadas, the army's main hoplite unit commander, Megalias, Thrax' unit commander and Oros, the cavalry scout master; all of them Derkylidas' loyal retainers.

To his right, however, matters looked very much different. Directly beside Derkylidas, but still sitting as far away from him as physically possible was his Spartan second-in-command, Onomakles. The dislike they shared for each other bordered on hatred, and Thrax knew he was not the only one present suspecting the man of some form of treachery. So far, however, none of this had been proven and he continued to enjoy strong support from Sparta, forcing Derkylidas to have to deal with him.

On his right-hand side sat Xenophon, the pompous Athenian commander of the 'Kyreians', a mercenary band notorious both for their prowess on the battlefield and their penchant for the indiscriminate murdering of civilians, enemies and allies alike. In fact, their former commander had been recalled to Sparta, where he had been found

guilty of aiding and abetting numerous war crimes and subsequently disgraced. These men had not only fought for their current enemies the Persians, but also the Thracians and now the Spartans – whoever paid most. Mercenaries. Thrax shook his head in disgust.

And to the far right sat Polykritos, commander of three hundred Athenian horsemen. Thrax swallowed hard. While Polykritos' Athenians liked to style themselves as gentlemen-adventurers, Thrax knew him and his henchmen to have raped, tortured and killed friend and foe alike. But one day there would be a reckoning, he thought grimly. And then men like him and his cronies would be called to answer for their crimes, and he would be there to...

“Attention!” bellowed Nikandrippos, instantly tearing Thrax' away from his contemplated revenge and back to the here and now.

Maybe two dozen men or so were approaching on foot, led by a servant and escorted on either side by a small honour contingent of actual Spartan guardsmen, looking both taller and sharper than the Native Speakers present. Derkylidas rose silently from his seat, prompting all those present around the table to do likewise.

“Dismiss,” Nikandrippos said in a quieter voice, at which the escort marched off to vanish somewhere between the officers' tents, leaving their Odrysian charges in the hands of their Spartan host.

The Thracians approached the table, casting suspicious glances here and there. About half of the men remained standing to take up position behind their side of the table, obviously providing some sort of personal bodyguard to the Odrysian dignitaries present. When everyone finally

seemed to be where they were supposed to be, Derkylidas nodded.

“Welcome,” he said in his typical curt Spartan manner and simply sat down again, causing everyone present, Greeks and Thracians alike, to do the same.

As they were sitting directly in front of him, Thrax was able to take a closer look at the Thracian delegation, but he was only able to recognise one of its members, a man called Skreta. He was in charge of the Odrysian forces operating in Bithynia and only reported to King Seuthes II himself. At first, all had appeared to go well, until the night raid on the joint Greek and Odrysian camp which had lost them most of their prisoners and plunder, and costing the Spartans nearly an entire unit of two hundred and fifty men. One man, however, was notably absent: Pytros, their Odrysian liaison officer. First befriending Onomakles, the man had vanished after the raid, together with two large, heavy wooden chests. For some reason neither Pytros, nor the chests had ever been mentioned after the attack.

There was an uneasy silence as a number of servants appeared from the tent behind them, carrying trays with steaming jugs of what had to be mulled wine and simple, unadorned beakers. Wordlessly, the men began to pour beverages, mixing both the contents of the jugs and the mugs to allay any possible suspicion of there being any poisoning. Thrax didn't think the Spartans capable of poisoning even their enemies, let alone possible former allies, but the gesture was both noted and approved of by their guests. The smell of the spiced, hot wine wafted over to where he stood, causing his stomach to rumble quietly. This earned him a stern look from Nikandrippos, who always seemed to notice anything that went on under his command.

At last everyone seated had been provided with a hot beverage and the commander decided to begin with the proceedings.

“So,” Derkylidas said, taking a sip from his cup, “thank you for agreeing to meet me. I hope we can...”

“We have been betrayed,” Skreta interrupted him, and Thrax noticed that none of the Odrysians had so much as touched their wine. “And we will punish those responsible,” he continued, looking at each of the Greek officers opposite him in turn.

“Indeed. I had the same thoughts,” Derkylidas replied, apparently unfazed by his guest’s outbreak. “May I ask you to share your information with us, so we...”

“I know the traitor to be one of your men,” Skreta interrupted the Boss once again, causing murmurs of assent from the Thracian envoys present. “In fact, I know him to be sitting at this table right now.”

At this, the Greek side of the table erupted in chaos. Before Derkylidas was able to even phrase a reply, Xenophon was on his feet hurling threats and accusations at the Odrysians with Athenadas joining in, while Polykritos merely laughed at the supposed absurdity of such an accusation. Unsurprisingly, several of the other Odrysians were also on their feet, returning the sentiments of the Greeks. The Spartans on the other hand remained quiet. Derkylidas, Kleitos and Laios slowly but poignantly turned their heads towards Onomakles. Betraying no outside emotion, the second-in-command simply sat there returning the stare.

“Attention!” barked Nikandrippos, his voice instantly silencing most of the diatribe crossing from one side of the table to the other.

Derkylidas nodded silently as the men quickly quietened down all around him.

“Do I take it rightly that you are accusing someone under my command of betraying not only our men, but also yours to our common enemy, the Bithynians?” the Boss said flatly.

“I do,” Skreta answered.

And to underline his words, he lifted the cup of wine before him and poured its contents into the snow beside him, leaving a steaming, blood-red stain on the ground.

Thrax could hear one of the Native Speakers inhale sharply beside him. Everyone present seemed to hold their collective breaths for the moment. This was unheard of. Not only had the man accused his host of treason, he had even refused the gift of sacred hospitality.

“Do you have any proof for this allegation?” Derkylidas asked, the tonelessness of his voice betraying the fury rising inside of him at this behaviour.

“I thought you shared my suspicions,” Skreta sneered back. “Why then, do you think I would require proof, when it is evident only one of your men could have performed such a deed?”

Derkylidas opened his mouth, but whatever he had wanted to reply went unsaid in the ensuing commotion. All of the men were now standing and shouting at each other across the table, with the exception of Derkylidas and Onomakles. For a meeting called up to settle matters between the former allies, things had gone wrong remarkably fast. Thrax could see several of the Odrysian guards assessing the possible opposition, causing more than one of the Native Speakers to fidget nervously. This isn't good, he

thought to himself. The spear in his right hand would only present an obstacle and get caught in one of the guy ropes of the awning above them if he tried to use it, whereas the heavy shield on his left arm would simply be dead weight if it came to a fight in such an enclosed space. Not that he was in any state to give someone a decent fight with the pain in his hip. He would have to quickly drop both if it came to the worst and...

“Quiet!” Nikandrippos shouted, but instead of managing to silence the men around him immediately, the barked order was only gradually able to subdue them into murmuring and mumbled curses.

Gradually matters died down and the guardsmen on both sides relaxed. Only now did Thrax realise he had been holding his breath and exhaled as quietly as he could.

“As I said,” Derkylidas began, looking at his own men and daring them to raise their voices for the moment, “I agree: There has been treason. Why you suppose it to have originated in our ranks, however, I find hard to understand.”

One of the Odrysians quietly said something in Thracian to the extent that Spartan denseness was only matched by their treacherousness, but only Thrax seemed to have caught the remark. Several of the Greeks nodded their heads at this, leaning forward to find out what arguments Skreta would put forward now.

“The camp was enclosed by a palisade wall and was heavily guarded,” Skreta answered. “Some of the guards on duty had their throats cut before the attack. They were found face down in the snow, with no other wounds on their bodies.”

These were both true, Thrax nodded to himself. In fact, he had discovered one of the murdered guards just prior to the attack.

"We are Odrysians, Spartan. We are the sworn enemies of the Bithynians and none of my men would have anything to do with them, let alone ally themselves with them to betray us!" Skreta continued heatedly.

"This still does not..." Xenophon began, but was silenced by a raised hand from Derkylidas and a stern look from Nikandrippos.

"I understand," the Boss said. "So, in your opinion it had to be one of my men who killed your guards and let the enemy in. Killing most of the men we had stationed with you, as well as losing us most of the plunder from our raids in Bithynia. Besides driving a wedge between allies in enemy territory. And all of this in the middle of winter."

Skreta had begun to nod at the initial remark, but had balled his fists and was frowning by the end.

"Does such behaviour make any sense to you? Because it makes none to me," Derkylidas replied in a cold voice, turning first left and then right, looking each of his officers in the eye except for Onomakles.

Nodding at the heads shaken in reply, he turned his attention back to Skreta.

"Neither I, nor any of my men," and here the Spartan commander put a strong emphasis on the word 'my', "has anything to gain from such a cowardly act. Does one of yours?"

Several of the Odrysians jumped from their seats to shout replies at this supposed allegation, but to everyone's surprise, Skreta remained seated, spreading both arms and quickly silencing his men.

"And there is one more thing," Derkylidas continued, leaning back, "where is your man Pytros?"

"So, what happened then?", Smiler asked as they tightened the pack saddle on the second of their donkeys, a mare named Gala, 'milk' for her light grey pelt.

"Well, that's it," Thrax replied, shrugging. "Nothing. The Boss dismissed everyone and he and Skreta vanished inside a tent. Alone."

"Alone?" Smiler guffawed, shaking his head, "you're kidding me. Since when do the Spartans go in for secrecy? I mean, what do you..."

"Am I disturbing you fine young gentlemen by any means?" Neodamos the purser interrupted their conversation. "Stop bloody babbling and get a move on!" he added tensely and shook his head.

But just as he was about to turn about and leave them to find someone else to bark at, he stopped.

"And before I forget, Thracian, the Old Man was looking for you," at which he left them to finish their chores.

Hastily and silently, Thrax and Smiler finished lashing up the donkey's pack.