

THE QUARRY

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Golden Drachmas

Thasians wrestle with malleable metals. They mine, smelt, mint, and tend to hot furnaces, wrought with much toil. They are iron-willed smiths like Hephastios, forger of the three-forked thunderbolts. They should be equal to other Hellenic cities; but why has Athens seized their markets and a gold mine at Thrace? Why do the Athenians' believe they can rule them? Thasos is the golden island, caved with quarries of gold, marble, lead, and iron. For they are masters of hammers, strikers that can crumble empires, not sooty anvils that tolerate threats.

Sixteen year old Nesaea, an orphaned Abderan now living at Thasos, grabs a silver blank disk inside the minting workshop, and places it in between two blocks of iron, the dies that have carved designs. She raises her hammer, tightening her grip, and strikes down on the first die; the punch made. Yes, she thinks, as she takes the disk out, another great coin for today. She stares at one side, touching its edges, checking that the image of four tiny squares is smooth. Perfect, she thinks, as she then flips the coin to the other side, wrinkling her nose in disgust at the sight of the bald-headed, bearded satyr, kneeling to his right as he carries a struggling nymph. She imagines her master, Aglaophon, that four-plumed monster, carrying her to bed like he does with the slave girls at night. Thank sweet Demeter he does not know about her disguise.

She tosses the new coin to the pile of forty-nine drachmas that she has made on the marble table, listening to slaves outside smelting metal. Out the window, she sees sweating faces, men's short tunics damp, their skin tanned just like her own, and their callused hands with disjointed and purple-bruised fingers holding metal clamps. They pour the molten metal into circular, shallow pits that are narrow at the bottom, and wait for them to cool.

Turning away, she stares at her messy nest of coins. If only these were hers, every piece for her to keep, to help her start a new life away from Thasos. She suddenly feels wetness in her loincloth. She knots her eyebrows, thinking it can only mean one thing. She holds in her breath, her skin tight against her ribs like leather stretched to make a tympanon, a hand drum, and touches the dampness in between her thighs. The god Deimos creeps upon her when she realises with dread what it is. Damn the gods, she thinks, my gorgon has escaped her case.

She hears her friend returning to the workshop and she knows she needs to get back to her master's house and grab a linen rag. Why did she not remember to wear extra rags today? Last night she tried to count on her fingers, to remember the last time her blood flowed, but her mind was empty like her clay cup beside her bed. It has been months, she thinks, so many months since my body has done this.

Wiping her hand on the inside of her brown chlamys, she pins her cloak to her right shoulder, snatches a few drachma coins, hides them in her breast-band, and runs out of the mint workshop.

‘Where are you going, Nireus?’ her friend asks as she passes by.

‘I will be back,’ she says.

‘You cannot leave,’ he says, grabbing her arm, ‘the official will cut your throat!’

She yanks his arm away. ‘I will return in an hour, just cover for me until I get back.’

‘The things I do for you, Nireus. Just think, one day it will be us shitting on the golden hills!’

Yes, she thinks, one day we will be living on solid mountains of gold in our own houses...one day.

She hurries past the three minting workshops and peeps behind the stone wall. She sees her red girdled supervisor with his pot-belly, his long hair tied back in a ponytail, a leather whip in his hand. For a moment she wishes she had her long hair again, braided to the side by her mother’s milk-skinned hands; but once she hears the loud crack of a whip, she’s glad she hacked it off. There is no work for her as a slave girl, besides selling herself at brothels, having older men’s oily and hairy bodies upon her. She remembers what her mother told her that day the Athenians ransacked her home, two years ago, ‘You run, you hear me, Nesaea, you run and take care of yourself.’

She sneaks past the slaves blistering in the heat, and runs out of the back entrance of the metalworking precinct on the west side of the agora, the market place. She passes Thasians ambling near their struggling slaves, and dodges the fresh-smelling stalls of bakers, but it is when she sees a young couple, holding hands, the woman’s stomach swollen, and the man’s hand caressing her belly, that she slows down. Her heart still racing, she watches the woman and touches her own stomach, feeling its hollowness, her body not ripe. One day, she thinks, staring at the woman, rubbing her belly, one day soon enough, I will be like you, with my own husband beside me.

When she sneaks into her master’s house, and hides behind a marble column, both hands touching the cold frame, she sees Aristophon, her dear friend, one of her

master's sons, painting on a wooden board in the garden courtyard, with its cream and brown pebbled mosaic floor. Aristophon, the man whose name she whispers at night in her sleep, wishing to share her bed with him, to feel his hands on her breasts, hands that are stained with pigments and powder that are mixed with egg yolk inside an oyster shell, to bind the colourful paints. How she yearns, longing to tell him every day of her true identity, to have him look at her with those cerulean eyes, like he does with the Thasian maidens at festivals that dine with him, who are dressed in silk, one sash fastened to their waist, another under their plump breasts, their heads adorned with wreaths, their bangles and gemstones shining.

Oh how Nesaea wishes to dress like a girl again, wearing these expensive dresses, and her body, oh how lovely and thick and round it will be, plumped with fine slices of fish that are salted with thyme in fig leaves, and sesame-cakes. Aristophon likes wealthy girls, not scrawny girls that bind their breasts with linen, smelling like foul, muddied swines, and diseased pigeons.

I wish you knew, she thinks, then I could kiss you.

She turns away from the column and sneaks past him, entering the slave quarters. None of them are in sight and the room is crammed with four beds, all the coverlets bedraggled. She hurries to her bed, bends down on her knees and searches through Satorneila's wooden chest. They have to be in here, she thinks, they just have to. As soon as she lifts up a black, tattered dress, she finds the linen rags. Thank you, merciful Zeus, she thinks, standing up and wiping herself clean. She changes into a fresh loincloth and places a rag inside. The bloodied rags are still in her hand.

'Satorneila!' someone calls.

Nesaea slams the chest shut. By the gods, no, she thinks, looking around the room to hide herself. But there is no time. Damn the gods, what is she going to do?

'Satorneila, have you made my oxtail soup?'

The door opens and Nesaea does not move, her body feeling heavy like the stout iron block the slaves hammer metal on.

'Nireus, what are you doing home so early?' Aristophon asks, his hand still on the door handle.

I can lie, she thinks, or I can tell him the truth. Perhaps it is time he knew, but what of the master, what will he do? Will Aristophon tell his father; surely he would not do that to me?

‘I...I,’ she says, looking down at the rags in her hand, ‘I had an accident at the workshop.’ She sits down on the bed, touching her chest. Yes, that will have to do.

‘You’re hurt,’ he says, running over to her and bending down on one knee.

Their eyes lock. Nesaea’s heart beats faster, her palms damp. All she wants to do is tell him the truth.

‘Where are you hurt?’ he asks, touching her shoulder, looking at her legs, her hands, her arms, her neck, and her face. ‘Where are you bleeding?’

It’s his eyes that torture her, those blue depths weakening her heart. ‘Ari,’ she says, smiling inside, thinking about that sweet name she calls him, and drops the rags and grabs his hand, ‘I need you to listen.’ He squeezes her hand. Please, she thinks, please do not hate me.

‘Did someone at the workshop hurt you,’ he asks, shaking her hand, ‘I will have them removed from the place.’

‘No, no,’ she says, taking his other hand as well, ‘it’s not that.’ She looks down at both of his hands, rubbing her callused thumbs against his smooth skin, her back hunched over like a wilted flower, its petals browned, shrivelled and soft. ‘I...I need to tell you something,’ she chokes. Tucking a short strand of hair behind her ear, she holds both of his hands again in her lap, bringing them close to her mouth to kiss. He smells like olive oil, she thinks, mixed with lemons and yellow yolk. When she looks up, teary, and stares into his eyes, her cheeks reddened, his eyebrows are knotted, his mouth agape. It’s her teary eyes that make him see; she is a girl.

He blinks four times, and jerks away.

‘You lied to me,’ he mutters, letting go of her hands and stepping away from her. He holds his mouth shut and turns away.

‘No, Ari, you need to listen to me,’ she pleads, getting up and grabbing his arm, ‘you need to listen to me.’

He moves away from her, and she clasps both hands to her mouth, sucking in a deep breath. He walks sideways, touching his forehead now as he stares at the ground.

‘You are always keeping secrets from me,’ he says, turning around and looking at her.

Nesaea feels like a wooden spinning top that the gods have unwound, her life unstrung, staggering to its last turnings of hope. She squeezes her eyes shut and prays — please, Hera, oh please, help me.

She opens her eyes, still holding her hands together, and rests them under her chin. ‘I need to protect myself,’ she says, looking at him.

‘You always say that!’

‘I know, Ari, I know, but I did not want to die on the streets.’

‘You should have told me,’ he says, ‘I thought we were like brothers.’

‘How can I be that close to you when I was bought by your father?’ she asks, her eyes tearing again. She thinks about his father hitting her over and over again on the head when she drops a tray of fruit.

Silence. The goddess Hesykhia forbids the branches to sway outside, the birds from warbling, and Nesaea’s mouth to move.

Aristophon clenches his fist. ‘Who are you then? Are you really someone from Abdera?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then what is your name?’

Shaking her head, she closes her eyes, her clasped hands in front of her lips now. I want to tell you, she thinks, oh how every night I want to tell you; but you know now. Nothing good will come from this. Nothing.

She opens her eyes and she can see the pain on his face, just like Achilles when he lost his beloved friend, Patroklus. ‘I cannot,’ she says, shaking her head, ‘I cannot tell you.’ She flees from the room and runs into the courtyard.

‘Come back!’ Aristophon shouts.

She ignores him and sprints out of the lion-sized door, never looking back, never wanting to see the pain in Ari’s eyes.

‘Stop!’ he yells, ‘Nireus, come back!’

I cannot, she thinks. Your father will have his way with me now. She keeps running, past the chunky trinketed Thasians, and thin, short-haired slaves holding amphorae and sacks of food. Past the stalls selling corn, wheat, leather and rowlock thongs, jars, and nets of garlic and olives and onions, until she is one in the midst of the sweating crowd at the temple of the god of war, Ares.

Looking around the area, she tries to find a gap to escape through, when she hears a man say, ‘This sacrifice will scare those Athenians away!’

‘Nireus!’ Aristophon calls.

Go away, she wants to yell. She pushes past the Thasians, and trips. Wincing, she looks down at her skidded knees, grimy and bloodied. When she looks up, Aristophon sees her. Damn the gods. Her heart pounding, she runs faster and faster, hearing the pan-pipes and reed pipes pierce her ears as people chant to Ares — hail to the spear-wielder! She sees strangers’ blurry faces of toothy grins, bushy eyebrows, and black-pigmented eyes staring at her. She passes cracked buildings and stalls opened with fresh caught tunnies, codfish, and mackerel. Following the cobblestone footpath, she heads to the docks, listening to the shouts and commands by the boatswains, the sounds of sailors hammering in dowels.

‘Nireus, wait!’

She sprints east to the iron mines that she first worked at disguised as a boy, when she was fourteen, before Aristophon found her.

She pants now, each step thudding with the beat in her ears. Twelve fishing boats at the dock are swaying in the breeze. Once she’s in front of the hollow cave, she touches the bronzed and red-tinged edges of the entrance, her eyes catching sight of the layers of smoky iron rocks with their dark raspberry and ebony spirals at the foot of the entrance. Looking over her shoulder, Aristophon’s running, his cheeks reddened, his eyes determined like a foot runner returning home with an important message from an enemy. The sky above him is turning grey and cloudy by the Nephelai nymphs; they will soon pour water from their pitchers, casting rain across the land and sea.

Nesaea scurries into the iron mine, her feet slugging through the damp dirt, her legs splotched with mud. There are no oil lamps. If she stays quiet, hidden, Ari will not see her.

Further into the mine, she raises her hands to help her move around, going deeper and deeper into the tunnel. When she can walk no longer, scared of losing the light from outside, she turns around and sits down on the ground, the cold dirt freezing her skin. A tiny drop of water drips in the distance. As she huddles her legs and wraps her arms around them, she rests her chin on her knees, staring at the opening of the cave; she listens to the pounding of her heart.

A figure nears the entrance; please go away. Biting down on her lip, she waits. The figure draws near. The body of a man appears, the light from outside framing him.

‘Nireus!’ Aristophon calls.

She squeezes her eyes shut, tightening her grip around her legs. A cold breeze blows her hair away from her face, a gasp decamps her lips. Opening her eyes, she watches him.

‘Please come out so we can talk,’ he says, holding the side of his waist, leaning down and panting.

‘I do not want to,’ she says.

‘You can trust me, you know you can. How many times have I helped you?’

Too many times, she thinks. Even when she bought the wrong grapes one day for her master, he went with her back to the agora and showed her the dark purple ones that were prized by his father.

‘Can you at least tell me your real name?’

But that will mean I will never be able to hide again, she thinks. My name is all I have left from my home.

Aristophon leans against the cave entrance. ‘I am not going anywhere until you come out.’

‘I will be cold by sundown,’ she says, letting go of her legs and rubbing her arms now.

‘Well, my dear little friend, that will be your choice,’ he says, folding his arms.

She knows she has to decide whether to tell him the truth, or to get out of the mine and run. But am I done hiding? What is there stopping me?

She leans forward and sees Ari at the entrance smooth back his brown hair from his face and wait. If he has come all this way, she thinks, then he must want to help me. He must care for me.

She stands up now, taking slow steps towards him. She can see it now. Back to the first day she met him. Here. At the iron mines, deep in the tunnels, when he offered her water, that rich, delicate water that quenched her thirst. 'I am Aristophon,' he had said.

Out in the open where the wind makes her shiver, he turns and looks at her. This is it.

'My name is Nesaea,' she says, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

He ushers for her to come closer, and puts his arm around her. 'A name of a nymph,' he says, kissing her forehead, 'I do not know what I will do without you.'

His words swell her heart, but she sees in the distance a trireme ship sailing towards them with its huge white sails and daunting eyes and its nose slicing through the water. Who are they? How many men are on that ship?

She keeps looking beyond Ari in front of her, her hand on his chest. 'Can you see them?' she asks.

'I see you and only you.'

Thunder cracks in the sky; the rustling breeze is bringing the rain. He needs to look, he needs to see what is approaching us, she thinks.

'Nesaea, speak to me, my girl of golden hope.'

She looks back at him. 'My girl of golden hope,' he called her. I am his golden girl, she thinks.

'I want to be with you,' she says.

'And I want to be with you.' He touches her hand on his chest. 'You are special to me like Aphrodite loving Adonis.'

'What are we going to do? What will your family think of us?'

'We will leave!' he says, 'but I cannot leave the island empty-handed, we must return home.'

'What if we get caught?'

‘How can we when I have you?’

Men chant nearby and Ari turns around.

In one moment, they see the trireme ship with one-hundred and seventy bronzed armoured men row past them on the rocky hill in front of the iron mine, curving west towards the hub of the city. In one moment, one man raises a shield to the sky, the crest of Medusa with her serpent coiled hair, lolling tongue and sharp fangs stare at them; the Athenians. In one moment, Ari rises from his seat, and that’s when Nesaea sees an archer, pulling his bowstring.

‘Holy Hera, no!’ she shouts, pushing Ari out of the way. The arrow pierces her flesh, blood trickles down her arm. No no no, this cannot be!

‘Hail to Athena!’ the soldiers chant.

Four arrows hit Aristophon in the chest, one after the other; he gasps, grabbing one near his heart. ‘Run!’ Ari shouts, pulling the arrow out, ‘run, Nesaea!’

Her eyes frightened, she’s frozen, staring at him as he pulls the other arrows out. You cannot die, she thinks as the rain begins to fall. ‘I cannot leave you,’ she weeps, touching his shoulder. I cannot abandon you, she thinks. ‘You have to let me help you.’

Blood froths from his mouth. She wipes the sanguine smear from his lips, holding his chin. He clutches her wrist, ‘You run,’ he says, ‘you hear me, you run and live your life.’

More arrows are fired at them and Ari embraces her in his arms, protecting her as the sharp-pointed arrows puncture his legs and arms and back and neck and skull.

You are my girl of golden hope, he had said.

Nesaea holds in her breath, thinking, please do not leave me too, as he stirs in her arms.

You came and I was crazy for you, and you cooled my mind that burned with longing. We live, the opposite [lives], daring. Loves new.

— Sappho of Lesbos, Fragments 48, 24A & 59