

THE QUARRY

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Taras' Parthenians

They would have their revenge one day, these bastard children, sons of bitches and *Helot* slaves, they were filthy mutts, unworthy of Spartan rights and citizenship. Their *Spartiate* fathers had disowned them after the First Messenian war, their *Helot* mothers tried to protect their puny sons, but they were better off to be thrown over Mount Taygetos, down into the chasm of the *Apothetae*. They were named, the Parthenians, the sons of virgins, born out of wedlock, and wherever they went, they were attacked with cacophonous insults from the Spartans, that scathed their hearts. For they were inferiors, half-bloods; but they would have their rancorous vengeance, oh yes they would, for the gods themselves willed it.

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In the month of *Hekatombaion*, Neophytos the Parthenian was at the Amyklaion sanctuary celebrating the *Hyakinthia* festival among the Spartans, Periokoi and Helots. It was the second day of the festival. Neophytos was lined up behind other men on the right side of Apollo's temple, waiting for the sausage contest to begin. There were six older men in front of him, wearing the red cloaks of Spartan men. He looked above them and gazed at the almighty, towering statue of Apollo; he wore the Corinthian helmet, held a bow in his left hand and a spear in his right that pointed down towards the entrance of his rectangular temple. Neophytos could see through the marble columns the priestess offering a chiton the women had sewn for the festival, and watched as she placed it down on the pedestal shaped as an altar that the statue was built on; a gift to Apollo, rejoicing in honour of him and his lover Hyakinthos. May they be blessed, he thought, looking away and staring at the cooked pieces of pig intestines filled with pork mince in front of him, hanging on the wall. Each sausage was pierced with a spear to keep it in place – by the gods, they looked delicious to eat. Neophytos licked his lips as he heard someone laugh beside him.

‘You look hungry Neo, I can see you desire to test your tongue.’

‘All in good time Timaios,’ he said, laughing with his friend. ‘But I will win the eating contest today.’ Of course he would, his stomach was grumbling for food, he could eat four pigs like Dionysos feasting, and then drink it all down with diluted wine; he could salivate on the tenderness of each meat – ah, he wished the damn contest would start already.

‘I am not so sure, Apollo standing before you is on my side today, have you not seen the hyacinth flower I wear?’

Neophytos looked down and saw the red flower attached to Timaios's belt. The bastard, Apollo would favour him today. ‘Where did you get that?’

‘From your averter of unlawful desires.’

‘My Oreithyia?’

‘Yes, she entered the sanctuary moments ago with the other dancers, they are handing the flowers around for good fortune. It seems I am in more luck.’

Neophytos turned away from his friend, looking for his beloved – where was she? More men joined the two lines for the contest. Neophytos looked over their

heads, searching for the girl who doted him with her honey-sweet love. When was the last time he had seen her, four days ago? She had been preparing with the other girls for the procession dances for their three-day *Hyakinthia* festival.

People were scattered everywhere: other Spartan men were near the lounging statues of couples who lay on marble recliners shaped as lions feet, children raced each other to the left of the sanctuary near the marble buildings, and outside of the precinct chariot races would be starting soon, after the parades of carts decorated with Spartan girls and women finished going around. Then to his right, on the other side of the temple, were four rows of choir boys and girls already competing amongst themselves, playing the *kitharas* and *aulos*, and singing the celebration song to Apollo; Oh great Apollo, hail! God of the golden bow and the creator of the hyacinth flower. Oh great Apollo, hail!

People everywhere wore crimson tunics: the women wore short chitons, Spartan men were draped with their red cloaks, and they all wore grassy wreaths – except for the Helots, Neophytos’s mother amongst them. They stood out like deer, waiting for their predators to strike them down. They wore the symbol of their social class; dog-skin caps, that shielded their faces from Helios’ rays. Why could they not have a day off from wearing them? Neophytos thought.

He turned away from the groups of Helots and saw a couple of women walking around with baskets filled with hyacinths in their arms, their long, violet chitons lapping and fluttering in the wind like Pegasus’s wings; their veils covering their braided hair. One of the girls, Oreithyia, bent down and handed a child a red flower. She smiled at the little boy and Neophytos felt an overwhelming feeling of love that swelled his heart and made him smile. Ah, my Oreithyia, he thought.

He watched the little boy, a couple of metres in front of him, place the flower amongst the many others that rested against the circular altar. Neophytos remembered how he had gone to the altar yesterday with his mother and half-siblings, and placed their own red flowers amongst the rivers of red and purple flora. It had been the sorrowful day, the first day of the *Hyakinthia* festival where everyone mourned with Apollo for the loss of his lover, Hyakinthos. The hyacinth flowers spilled along the circular altar like the spilled blood of Hyakinthos when he had been killed by a discus. Neophytos could not imagine losing Oreithyia. How long had it been now since their secret union when they had first tasted each other’s lips? He watched her rise from the

ground and place the basket on her head, the flowers complementing her rosy lips and tanned skin. May Apollo bless her, she looked like a sun-light *Hesperides*, rich and luscious like the golden apples they were entrusted to care for. If only he could hold her in front of everyone like they did every night when her betrothed, Dexios, was away, fighting in battle with the other Spartans. He watched her compose herself, and when she was ready to walk away from the altar, she looked up, and Neophytos and her locked eyes on each other, and without being aware that Neophytos had been watching her, thinking about their relationship and her beauty, she stood there and smiled at him, Neophytos the Parthenian, the man she truly loved, and she wondered if they would ever be together, to hold hands in public. However, she would be ridiculed if she married him by the ever-watchful Spartan women, whose eyes were all-seeing like *Argos-Panoptes*; but she could not help thinking that if only Neophytos was a full-blooded Spartan like Dexios, they would be able to wed and create their own family. Yet, Neophytos had lost that right once he was born a half-blood, he had been dishonoured by the community to remain wifeless like the rest of the Parthenians. She did not know how their love affair was going to end, and when, and if Dexios returned, she could go through with marrying her betrothed. She looked away and bent down to give a little girl a flower – may her fate be different to her own.

Neophytos turned back to Timaios who had been watching him stare at Oreithyia. He was the only man who knew of their affair, but he had told them, their secret was safe with him. Just as Neophytos was about to talk about Oreithyia with Timaios, an old man shouted behind him, ‘Move, you dirty Parthenians.’

Timaios elbowed Neophytos, but he ignored his friend.

‘Are you deaf, boy? Move out of the way, you bastard child!’

Neophytos folded his arms, ‘Wait your turn, you old brute, there is plenty for all.’

‘*Move.*’

The Spartan men in front of him now turned around. ‘Let him through, show some respect to your elders,’ one said.

‘Did your mother teach you any manners?’

‘With this one, how could she when she is bending over like a dog,’ another said, who wore wristbands.

Neophytos clenched his fists while his arms were still folded; he tightened his jaw, wishing he could put these men in their place.

‘I bet ten *drachmas* a Helot is breathing hot desire into her bosoms and thighs,’ the man with wristbands continued.

‘Shut up, you cock-sucking swine,’ Neophytos yelled.

‘Come at me, boy. I will rip your balls off; there is no use for them in our city.’

‘You dare make war upon me, I scorn the threats you vomit forth.’ Neophytos lunged at the man in front of him, but the old man, who had tried to push through, knocked him in the ribs. He let out a breath full of air as the old man grabbed his arms behind his back.

No sound echoed throughout the sanctuary anymore; the choirs of girls and boys stopped competing. All eyes watched the men in front of the temple of Apollo.

‘Let him go!’ Timaios yelled.

‘Silence him,’ the man with wristbands yelled. Another Spartan punched Timaios and he fell to the ground.

‘Do you know who you are speaking to, boy?’ the man asked Neophytos. He did not care; he was a pig-headed brute, just like the rest of the Spartans. He did not answer him, but fumed out his anger.

‘Hold him steady, I want to admire the craftsmanship my son did to this Parthenian years ago.’ He pulled down the tunic from Neophytos’s chest and exposed the scar of the letter P above his left breast.

‘You are Dexios’s father?’

‘Yes, I am Doriskos.’

Neophytos remembered that day like any other when he had been bashed and ambushed by the Spartan boys, before they went to the barracks and trained in the *agoge*. Two boys had held him down while Dexios straddled him and carved the letter into his skin, branding him as a Parthenian forever. Someone had yelled for him to stop, Neophytos had thought the torture would end, but once the man approached them, he had said, ‘keep going, son, you need to carve deeper than into the flesh.’

Neophytos clenched his jaw as Doriskos’s face was so close to his own. This was enough, there had to be a change, he had to be respected, to be an equal. He head-butted Doriskos and watched the man fall back to the ground. The men stood still, shocked with what he had done. Neophytos was able to loosen his hands from the old

man's grip and punched him in the face. He grabbed Timaios's hand and yanked him up. 'Victory for the Parthenians!' he chanted.

Spartan men now lunged for them, throwing punches to stop them, but other Parthenians around joined in – this was not about a misunderstanding.

Women yanked their children away and ran out of the sanctuary, screaming. Dirt lifted into the air as people rushed away over the precinct wall and down the hill of the sanctuary into the bushes.

'The gods will have their heads,' someone screamed.

Neophytos punched another man to the ground with Timaios beside him. He looked around the rushing crowd but could not see the purple figure of his beloved. He was about to run to the circular altar to look for her when someone pushed him into the marble wall of the temple. The pork sausages fell to the ground, some hit Neophytos's head. He saw a wristband coming at him and he was punched in the face. He shook his head, drool falling to the ground, and took a swing at the man, punching him in the face. He jumped up, grabbed hold of Doriskos's shoulders and kned him in the genitals – now who would not be able to use his balls? Neophytos thought. With his hands full of Doriskos's hair, he bashed and bashed his head against the temple wall – more sacrificial blood for Apollo. The man fell to the ground, blood frothed from his mouth, dyeing his beard the colour of wine. Neophytos with one knee, knelt down on Doriskos's chest. Timaios approached him from behind, blood smeared on his cheek and mouth, a sword in hand, and gave it to Neophytos.

He smiled down at the man, shouts and screams drilled into his hears, but he let them fade away; this was his sanguinary time. 'Tell your son you were defeated by Neophytos the Parthenian.' He hoisted the sword and took his strike. A croaked yelp, spurted blood, hacked bone, an annihilated arm – ah, the smell of victory.

Timaios smacked Neophytos on the back, 'That will teach them; we will bring death upon the enemy.'

'Let this one live,' Neo said, 'his son can see the mark I have left behind for him.' He wiped the sweat dripping from his face, noting that he needed to change his headband once he got home, and turned around. He could see red cloaks twirling in dirt, and ripped crimson tunics moving side to side like snakes. He felt like a suppressed dog that had been suffocated by a leash, had finally bit back and ripped its

teeth into its master's arm, puncturing the skin; the blood oozing, the bitter taste and smell reassuring the dog of its freedom.

Neophytos noticed that amongst the blood and tunics, there were scattered hyacinth flowers around the circular altar. Had Oreithyia escaped? He was about to run over to the altar when he saw an arm appear with bangles, leaning on the ground, and a purple figure revealed herself closer to the flowers, bent down on her knees and looking around the sanctuary. Her veil had fallen from her head; parts of her hair had fallen out of her braid. Oreithyia looked up and Neophytos caught her eye. They stared at each other – if only he could take her to safety, but she could take care of herself, she had been doing it for a long time since her mother had died, when she was younger. Oreithyia stared back at Neophytos; blood soaked his hair, his hands covered in it. When would the fighting end, she thought, when would all of this frightening end?

‘Neo, come help me,’ Timaios called, fighting two Spartans.

He took one last look at Oreithyia and motioned his head to the right – go, run, he thought. He took a bronze dagger from a body on the ground and hurled it at one of the Spartans. It hit the man in the chest and he fell to the ground. Neophytos ran towards Timaios, snatched a sword from another body and struck another man down in his way. He followed Timaios away from the temple and jumped on top of one of the reclining couples statues, and fought another Spartan. The man's sword cut into Neophytos's arm, but he ignored the pain and thrust his sword into the man's stomach. He thought he was in a bloody bath as he watched the blood purge out of the man once he withdrew his sword.

‘Stop this madness,’ someone yelled.

Neophytos looked up, still mantled on the statue, and saw his friend, Phalanthos, on the steps of the temple, holding a spear like the statue of Apollo above his head, but with blistered hands, and an index finger missing.

‘Heed yourselves.’

‘They must be put in place,’ Neophytos yelled, jumping off the statue and walking towards Phalanthos. He kicked a flinching hand on the ground that tried to grab a sword.

‘You are all fools, they will gather more Spartans and they will come find us and kills us.’

‘Not if we take the upper hand,’ Timaios yelled, stepping closer to Neophytos.

‘They will come, they will kill our families, we must go, *now*.’

Neophytos looked at Timaios, perhaps if they killed the two Spartan kings they would not have to leave the city. They needed more weapons, they could fight them off?

‘We must go, leave the dead; the women will return and bury them.’ Neophytos watched as Phalanthos hurried down the stone steps, his long blonde braid swishing side to side as he walked right up to him. ‘Follow me; they will drive us out of the city.’

‘The gods will ensure us victory if we stay.’

‘Hold your tongue, Apollo will smite us for this treachery. We have spilt blood on a day of celebration. Gather your belongings from Messoa and we shall meet at Therapne,’ he turned away from Neophytos. ‘Hurry, men.’

Neophytos clenched his jaw, but listened to Phalanthos’s wise words – he was always right. He was the first Parthenian to train and educate the other Parthenians to be strong and fearless warriors, when all the Spartan boys at the age of seven left to go live in the barracks and train. Phalanthos would take them to the Plantanistas, a secret place that was surrounded by plane-tree groves, a couple of metres south of the tribe of Messoa. Two groups of Spartan boys would brawl with each other there for a couple of months, biting and gouging each others’ eyes out until one group won. Neophytos had learned how to fight with his fists and legs. The first time he had trained with daggers was the day he had been attacked by Dexios in the marketplace at night. If Phalanthos had not found him with Timaios, he would have not been able to take his spiteful revenge.

Timaios turned to him, ‘We could still raise an attack.’

‘I think Phalanthos is right, we are not able to control this.’

They followed the Parthenians down the sanctuary hill. It was going to take a good hour heading north on foot to get to Messoa and far away from Amyklai. Neophytos then noticed that Timaios’s hyacinth flower under his belt had missing petals, a couple still held on, but they were ripped and damaged – discoloured, just like Neophytos’s own heart.

Neophytos was beating down a sheet of bronze material later on that night, when the blacksmith's workshop door slammed open.

'They are going to kill you; they are sending the *krypteia* out tonight!'

'Let them come,' he said, looking up, 'I will cut their throats.'

'Why must you shed more blood to be heard?' Oreithyia took a step closer to him, her golden bangles jingling. He liked the sound of them, how they reminded him of her and when they had first kissed. It had been the *Karneia* festival and he had been watching her dance, her bangles and anklets clinking together with every precise twist and flick she made with her hands, her body whirling in the ring dance with four other chosen girls who were unmarried; he had become enchanted by her like Aphrodite herself, and that day, he had talked her into watching him during an athletic race. They had kissed afterwards behind one of the tents set up for the festival. She had revealed she had always been filled with *pothos*, passionate longing for him, since that day in the marketplace when he had given her food to take home. It had been raining, and it was the dreadful time she had lost her mother to childbirth. How things were changing now, he knew she did not want him to fight for his cause.

'They will kill you; you will leave me and go to Hades.'

'My rightful place is to be honoured, to be *respected* as an *equal*.'

'Do not let your pride suffocate you.'

'How can I when they have taken my right to marry, am I to remain wifeless because I was born a Parthenian?'

'They are going to kill you.'

'I am leaving with the others.'

'What about me, are you going to leave me all on my own?'

Beads of sweat travelled down Neophytos's face, his olive skin was alight by the fire in the corner that was illuminating the dark room. He ignored her and kept bashing down the bronze material, he needed to finish this, he had to get it right, it would be his last job as a blacksmith.

'Do I mean anything to you?'

He stopped. His hand unclasped the hammer and he leaned forward on the stone bench, his weight pushed on his arms, his head bent down. She had to come with him, he could not leave her with Dexios; he could not leave her here. He clenched his jaw, wiped his face with his arm and stood up. Their eyes interlocked and they stared at each other.

‘You will come with me.’

‘I will not die for your cause.’

‘I am waiting for Phalanthos’s orders’ we are planning on leaving the city.’

‘But I thought – ’

They heard a noise outside. Neophytos walked in front of Oreithyia – Zeus forbid, had the *krypteia* been sent out already? He grabbed his sword from the wooden stool where he had left it and watched the door pull open. He raised his sword, ready to strike.

‘I have word,’ Timaios said, taking in deep breaths, leaning forward.

Neophytos withdrew, and threw his sword on the stone bench. ‘What is the news?’

‘Phalanthos has returned, there is word going around that they are attacking us tonight.’

‘We must go.’ Neophytos grabbed his sword and the bronze armour he had been beating down to fit him. ‘Oreithyia, you must come with us.’

‘I cannot leave my family.’

‘If you want a life with Dexios and to bear his children, stay, but if you want to be with me, to be free of these people, come with us, we will marry, I will be able to marry you.’

They left the blacksmith’s workshop, Neophytos holding Oreithyia’s hand, his woollen cloak flapping in the wind, Timaios behind them. They travelled south to Neophytos’s family home and once they were in, his mother, Krateia, stood up from the hearth she had been sitting near.

‘Where have you been, I thought you were killed?’ she hugged her son, and Neophytos let go of Oreithyia’s hand.

‘We are leaving the city with the other Parthenians.’ He told her of their plan and the Spartan’s attack tonight. ‘You must stay indoors; they could kill Blathyllos and Elatreus if they see them.’

His mother called his half-brothers over to sit at the hearth where his half-sisters, Kydilla and Linnoreia were slurping down their broth soups in wooden bowls.

‘Will we not see you again, my boy?’

‘Boethus will take care of you all, I will send a messenger if our plans have been a success, but if you do not hear from me in a couple of years, you must find peace.’

He saw his step-father, Boethus, another helot, carving into wood, making a figurine. He did not move. His mother looked at Oreithyia behind him and Timaios, and she smiled. She looked up at her boy for the last time and cupped his face, ‘May the gods be with you all, my son.’ She kissed him twice on both cheeks and he hugged his siblings goodbye.

His step-father finally stepped forward, ‘Your mother will be fine with us,’ and handed him the figurine he had been carving.

They left the house and saw a snake of light approaching Messoia from the citadel of Sparta. The enemy was coming. They climbed onto their horses and travelled south to Therapne and met up with the other Parthenians and Phalanthos. Before Neophytos left, he looked down at the wooden figurine in his hand, and saw that it was Zeus Tropaios – he who turns to flight.

The Parthenians would find a new fate with order and law, by their own making, for the gods themselves willed it.

Glossary

<i>Agoge</i>	Spartan system of education and military training
<i>Apothetae</i>	deposits
<i>Aulos</i>	an ancient wind instrument like a pipe
<i>Argos-Panoptes</i>	a one hundred-eyed giant
<i>Drachmas</i>	ancient coinage/currency
<i>Hekatombaion</i>	July/August Summer
<i>Helot</i>	captured Greeks of Messenia and turned into slaves for Spartans, they were subjugated and carried out domestic duties and farming
<i>Hesperides</i>	nymphs who attend a blissful garden
<i>Kithara</i>	an ancient musical instrument – a lyre and similar to a modern harp and guitar
<i>Spartiate</i>	Spartan men of equal status and known as peers