

Memories of a Man Before Madness

*O Muse, I pray,
Sing of the lost Shade of Sparta,
His flight from Persia,
With ten thousand in tow.*

*O Muse, sing now of his sorrow,
And of his greatest joy,
His half-Persian lamb,
Which he did raise as lion.*

*Behold that dart, by which
Soul parted from flesh
And blood from blood.*

*Sing of the measures,
By which he stole,
To revisit his loved lion.*

*O Muse, I pray,
Deliver this shade
Safely upon the shores
Of Acheron.*

I remember the rhythm of the march. The sun shining down through ten thousand spears pointed toward the sky. The vibrations in my chest as we chanted. The Athenian who said his guts were in knots. The order is given, spears lower, the phalanx forms. I remember blood soaking the sand. A crimson river, running perpendicular to the Euphrates. I remember Cunaxa.

Nikomedes, was the name given to me by my mother. My father died at Pylos, separated from his shield. For that reason, I was pushed harder in my agōgē. Where one boy would barely succeed, I was deemed to have failed. When we were beaten, I was struck harder. Bruises and welts, fractures and gashes. Our instructor made a point to try and break me. As a child, I cursed my father for abandoning his shield. It was his cowardice that legitimized the brutality of the boy-herder.

One day, while returning to the barracks with stolen food, an older boy approached me. I had seen him in another mess hall; he wasn't part of my syssitia. He revealed a wooden rod and demanded the bread I had stolen. He tapped the rod against my forehead, letting me feel the stiffness to it. I ignored his demands and stared at a nearby potter; lost in the shaping of his clay. In the moment, I mindlessly took a bite from the loaf. The older boy took offense and brought the rod down on my shoulder. The pain shot through my arm, like a bolt from Olympus. It was sudden, but I had felt worse.

“Look at me!” He tapped my head once more. “I'll force that bread down your throat if you try that again.”

I looked at the loaf in my hands and then at him. He was focused on the bread. And so, I tossed it onto the roof of a nearby building. His gaze followed the bread, and the look on his face was a mix of confusion and oncoming fury. Before he could hit me with the rod again, I made my advance. Stepping forward, I drove my fist into his sternum. Spittle drooled onto my shoulder as he slumped forward and coughed. While he was recovering, I made my escape from the town and back to the mess hall, smiling all the way.

When that boy struck me, I was struck with understanding. The beatings were not out of hatred, nor out of punishment for my father's cowardice. The boy-herder was ensuring my strength, by treating me the same way the smith treats a blade. The bed from which I was hewn had been impure. He sought to hammer out that impurity. How many others had fallen victim to this boy before me? How many gave in?

If they did, I doubt they had been as tempered as I had. In that alley, starving and barely twelve years of age, I felt as Herakles. No longer did I despise my father. I never honored him, but I no longer prayed that he suffered in the depths of Hades.

The agōgē forged Spartans. It's where I was forged, but not tested. I fought in the tail end of the Peloponnesian war, but the March of the Ten Thousand was my greatest trial. I wet my blade with Persian blood at Cunaxa and remember thinking that I'd been properly tempered. The two-year long journey back to Greece hardened me beyond metal. We had surpassed legend. Each man, thereafter, was a shadow of Odysseus. The agōgē forged Spartans, but the march of we ten thousand Hellenes had remade us in the image of the gods.

Gods, you claim, but what know you of gods?

I knew of the gods of my beloved Greece. I knew they had not abandoned us in Persia. We walked with Ares and Athena. Ares fueled our passions, like fire we surged onward for home. Athena shielded we faithful along our path. But along the final stretch of the return, I most felt the presence of Hestia. The hearth called to me, like many of those along that march. A family, more children of Sparta. Truth be told, I thought less of making Spartan children and more of my own. As much as Spartan education did for me, I desired a more peaceful life for my children. To watch my children play in the fields of Greece was all I wanted for my old age.

When we finally saw the sea beyond Trapezus we were overjoyed. The sea meant passage for Greece and home. It was in this euphoric state in which I met Abarrane. She was a whore in one the city's brothels. In one another we saw an escape from the lives we led. She saw passage from Persian soil and I saw a chance at a family. It was less than ideal, but neither of us complained. During the voyage home, Abarrane was with child.

Our brief union was not tender, but not void of happiness. By the time our feet touched Grecian soil, she was showing. My comrades never vocalized disdain for her, at least to my person. Greece held no such understanding. They had not been on that march. Deprived of touch, compassion, our only company another man who might lie dead in the morn. I never loved Abarrane, but I owed my peace to her.

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I remember holding her hand and wiping sweat from her brow. Some affliction was taking her, so I'd taken her to an asclepeion. The healers there seemed to care little of her origins, at least openly. When her illness first struck, she scorned me. Cursed me for bringing her to Greece. I was silent, as was often the case. She grabbed my chin and pulled me close.

“Watch over her.” She released me and placed her hand on her womb.

“Her?” I asked. I was not opposed to a girl. She wouldn't have to go through the agōgē. Abarrane stared at me for a time before turning her gaze out the window.

“I used to pray by the water.” She looked up and smiled as she spoke. “To the spirit.” Her gaze turned toward the window. “I would tie little ribbons, scraps of my clothes, to branches along the shore.”

“You have nymphs in Persia?” I chuckled, to her disdain.

“They are less cruel in Persia.” She winced as the child moved. “Or perhaps more so.” Silence fell over us. Priests shuffled past our room; their sandals slapped dully against the stones.

“What was it you would pray for?” I asked. Abarrane's eyes fell, and her lips quivered. She cleared her throat.

“Not to die on Persian soil.” Her hand fell onto my own, and a second silence overtook us. “Alara.” She murmured. Before I could ask, she had the answer. “The spirit of the water.”

“Our daughter.” I smiled with Abarrane, but I could see how tired she had become.

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Alara was too strong for Abarrane. She was every bit a Spartan, right from birth. The tightness by which she clung to my chest, it was not out of fear. She was to be a warrior; kin of grey-eyed Athena. She never seemed to cry, but instead fought her tears. Her plump face would turn red with effort. I would laugh at her little red face, and Alara would return in kind.

She was raised on the land I'd been given after my return. Each Spartan man was given land upon becoming a full citizen. It was a small vineyard, and it was worked by Helot slaves. From the age of six onward, I gave Alara a passive education in the art of war. I did not put her through anything like the *agōgē*. She drilled with spear and small dagger with me every other day. She would sometimes ask to practice daily. I feared that some harm would come upon her, so I made excuses as to why she couldn't.

Eventually, a sophist began making rounds through my estate. He was an Athenian, unremarkable in my eyes. He would educate Alara on matters I did not feel confident enough to teach myself. I'd been educated on matters of philosophy and poetry, of course. Lacking the confidence to teach my child, I left such things to the sophist. Damned was I, for lacking in such a simple subject.

Though it was forbidden by Spartan law, I tended the fields with the Helots. Sitting idle did me no good, so I worked when the sophist came to teach Alara. I had ten Helots working the field, and so I joined them. Never cruel with them, they remained wary of me. Spartan law demanded Helots receive a quota of beatings, regardless of wrongdoing. I made clear that as long as they kept quiet about my

working the field, there would be peace between us. And so there was, uneasy as it was. I still carried a blade on my person.

Some weeks had passed since I began my field work when a sudden storm came upon us, preventing any significant work. I sent them home and left for my own. Usually in the field, I had never observed one of Alara's studies. The storm masked my entry, the rain against the roof had grown terrible. I approached Alara's room, to find the door closed and the sophist speaking in a hushed tone.

This sophist, a wretched creature, I discovered with his hands upon my daughter. He tried to explain himself, only fueling my rage. In a fit of rage and madness I killed him with my hands in the same room as my child. Alara sat in silence as I strangled a man to death beside her. Long after he stopped moving, I removed my hands from his throat.

Turning to Alara, I saw nothing on her face. Her eyes were wide, but not with fear. She looked at the wretch beneath me like a judge of the damned. She looked at me as well, but I could not tell what lie behind her eyes. In that moment, Greece had lost its luster, even blessed Sparta felt foreign beneath my feet. I needed to take Alara away from Greece.

After a short deal of deliberation, I elected to take Alara north. Persia sat to the south and the east, and the west was home to the Gauls. North was largely unknown to me. All I had ever heard of the north was of the Hyperboreans. Giants who lived in eternal peace and sunlight. As fantastic as it sounded, it was a better alternative to Persians and Gauls. I would take Alara north and she would live freely in peace. The night we left home, I stood with Alara at the edge of our vineyard, holding a torch and my spear.

"Ready, *manari mou*?" My little lamb, I called her. I had for years. This moment was just one of habit. Looking back, it was inappropriate given the circumstance. Alara shook her head and furrowed her brow.

“I’m not a lamb.” She replied, curt. Her words caused my heart to tighten.

“Well, what would you prefer?” I choked. Her visage was that of Pallas Athena, made all the more striking by the torch’s flames. She didn’t reply immediately, she just stared at what should have been our home.

“*Leaina*.” Lioness, she said. This child, only ten years old, declared herself a huntress. As her father, it struck something in me. I had coddled her for all her life, afraid to let her take up spear. If I had given her a full tutelage as a Spartan, instead of fearing for her gender, she may not have had to suffer at the hands of another. So when she demanded to be a lioness in my eyes, I felt it was my duty to remedy my failure. Not simply as a warrior, but a father.

“Alara Leaina,” I murmured, kneeling and thumbing at the spear’s shaft in my hand. “Starting tomorrow, you begin your agōgē.” She smiled, if but for a moment.

You forced a lie upon her, nothing but a fantasy. Do you feel no shame, Nikomedes?

It was no fantasy to her. Alara wanted to be a Spartan, she never once imagined herself as anything else. Or perhaps I had never considered she wanted anything else. My doubts fade when I remember her eyes. Alara had flames on her mind and they shone through her irises.

“Can we burn it, papa?” She didn’t ask, more stated a fact. We were going to burn this vineyard and everything in it.

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In Blessed Sparta I taught Alara a basic skill, that of being a thief. Just like we were taught in the agōgē, thievery is a vital skill for a soldier to have. It started with bread, with which she showed a great deal of proficiency. Then it was clothes, texts, medical supplies, essentials for the exodus from Greece. When word seemed to be catching on, we left Sparta for Argos, then Argos for Megara, and Megara

northward from the peninsula. A few times she was caught, and I had to intervene. But we made our way north, training and camping as often as we could.

She was my constant companion and I was hers. I would entertain her as best as I could with stories from Persia, of my youth, of our history as Spartans. We would hunt together, her favorite of which was a lioness. That was when she learned about using her speed to her advantage. It felt appropriate that her first kill was the symbol she had chosen for herself. This journey doubled as a pilgrimage, I wanted her to know herself as well as the land. Our first major stop was at Thermopylae.

The Hot Gates marked the finest stand of both Sparta and Thespieae, I told Alara by my side. I cursed the cowards of Thebes and the blasphemous Persians. Of the greatest testament to our Heraclid blood: Leonidas. I regaled her with the selfsame fervor of my tutors and their fathers before them. Our old King Leonidas and his Three Hundred Spartans remained the pride of our people, almost a century later. The glory they had gifted to we Spartans not yet born was nothing compared to what they themselves had earned.

And Alara reveled in her heritage, at least half of it. It was a source of guilt, her mother's memory. Abarrane's brief time with me gave me a glimpse of Persian nature. They were a people not too unlike the Greeks. More akin to Athenians than Spartans, admittedly. Their gods were not ours, but they shared a love for art and tradition. Their art was not Greek, though. Nor were their traditions. Somehow, I felt I was betraying Abarrane's memory by neglecting her half of our daughter's blood.

We left Thermopylae for further north, toward Olympos. This was my first time gazing upon the seat of the gods. There, I told my daughter, sits our father Zeus and stands his son Herakles, with whom we share our blood as Spartans. As sacred as this moment was, gazing up the slope, I felt something stir in my gut. While I put on a smile and recalled stories of the Olympians, I found myself feeling nothing. Olympos was imposing, of course, but nothing about it stirred godliness into me. I looked at the pilgrims

scattered about and thought about how foolish they looked. In the depths of Persia I had felt the presence of the gods, and yet, at the very seat of their glory I felt nothing.

Nevertheless, I continued lecturing Alara on the history of the gods, much to her delight. That day on the steps of Olympos marked two years since leaving Sparta. We had traveled the lengths of Greece, stealing and training in the wild. Any further north and I would once again leave Grecian soil. Macedon was not as foreign as Persia, we at least had the same gods. And yet, as I thought that, such a detail seemed to be of little consequence.

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We departed Greece for the sanctuary at Dion. It was the closest town in Macedon to Olympos, and it housed a great sanctuary to Zeus. It was there that we found a safe passage north in the form of an expedition. The expedition was comprised of scholars, caravaneers, and mercenaries, I would sign on as one of the latter. The scholars sought the land of the Hyperboreans, same as us.

After my journey east, I was intrigued by the idea of constant snow. The whipping sands and beating sun had claimed more lives than the Persians. All the snows I had ever seen were soothing, rarely had I experienced any as cruel as the heat of Persia. And so we went north, toward Hyperborea.

Alara, I told them, was my son Callisthenes, and we were leaving Greece after a pilgrimage. The training we had done had built her frame, she appeared as handsome boy, maybe younger than she really was. The captain of the mercenaries, a Corinthian by the name of Eurydamus, simply nodded and said that he was welcome, but will not be included in the payment. I nodded, smiled, and thanked him.

There were one hundred mercenaries, half of which were Greek, and I the lone Spartan. It was the source of some awkwardness, at first. Largely, the Macedonians viewed me as simply another Greek, while the other Greeks viewed me as either a Spartan animal or a criminal trying to flee Greece. Can't say

that any of them were wrong. I was a thief and an arsonist training another just like me. And I had murdered a man with my hands, when I readily had a blade at my side.

I kept up our training regimen, a few men would watch occasionally, including Eurydamus. They had never seen Spartans at work, let alone the adaptations I'd made for mobility. Alara trained in full armor, both to help hide her growing as a woman and to build her strength. She marched next to me and would recite poetry that she was to read between sparring sessions. I took the agōgē and made it mobile.

Eurydamus eventually approached me about sharpening the skills of the other mercenaries. I accepted, noting the softness of the Thebans. It was straining, at first, but it served to build bonds between us and strengthen us for the coming north.

The Thracian tribes were populous, but not unreasonable. We had the benefit of their faith. The Thracians claimed descent from Ares, much like we Spartans did from Herakles and Zeus. We could at least barter with them and pass through their lands with relative ease. The same could not be said for the man-wolves.

Only day after leaving Thracian territory we felt a great sense of unease wash over us. We had seen shapes of men moving through the wood. In unfamiliar territory, I began to recall the dread march from Persia. We began to hear the howling of wolves, but from the throats of men. Men word murmured Lycaon in the night. The further we moved into those lands the more numerous the man-wolves in the forests became.

I approached Eurydamus about how to best survive the situation, citing the march. He was an older Corinthian, he likely had seen more combat than I, and yet he frowned.

“What do you suggest we do?” He had a grim look in his eyes. I could tell this was one thing he had not experienced in his time. Few had, a journey like the March of Ten Thousand was rare. Often, when a force is cut off from the main body, it is destroyed.

“I’d suggest we form a hollow square around the supplies and scholars, as a start.” I suggested the same tactic that we had employed in Persia. Our present company was a much smaller number and had a vulnerable baggage train. These lands were more wild than Persia, we needed to protect our vulnerabilities as well as our numbers. “Next,” I continued, “we will need to conserve our food supplies, we will need to experience want for food.” Eurydamus frowned and nodded.

“Morale will begin to fade, Nikomedes.” He produced a flask of wine and began to pour himself a cup. A thought in my head began to race as we spoke. “Do you think the men will abandon the expedition?”

“I think the men will stay.” I straightened my posture as he drank his wine. It became difficult to think as the knot of anxiety built within. We had with us, as most expeditionary forces do, a basic altar for prayer.

“Men tend to value their lives and their pay above your concept of manhood, Spartan.” He remarked. With the altar we had some scores of sheep, intended for sacrifice. Some of the meat was eaten, but there was still emergency value in what was burnt.

“I said nothing of pay, Corinthian.” I looked him over as I spoke. Eurydamus had experience, decades more than myself. But he had not retained the knowledge he had gained. Corinthians, Athenians, Thebans, the like all across Greece, they were societies of coin. Spartans were not given coin for our services or labors. Our payment was the glory we earned for Sparta and ourselves, the land we were given

to live and die on for Sparta. This was no glorious battlefield and we were not on a campaign, but it was a duty. A duty to defend and a duty to Alara. Eurydamus had no such commitments.

And adding to my frustrations were thoughts of those sheep. They could be counted among our stores, if not as sacrifice. The image of Olympos, vast and empty, had hung in my thoughts often. Now, far from Greece and far from resupply, we would deny ourselves their marrow.

“Is that all, Spartan?” Eurydamus slurred, and my thoughts to lurched onto my tongue.

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Impious, blasphemous Spartans. That is what he called us, me and my child. Eurydamus ejected me from the camp, barring Alara from me. He said he would teach my son in my stead, and hopefully the gods would show mercy for the boy’s ignorance. For me, however, there would be little. I was forced out with only my shield, my spear, and the clothes on my back. If I made it back to Greece alive, I was forgiven in the eyes of Zeus. Alara wailed, and for the first time, I saw her cry.

Looking her in the eyes, I nodded. She stared at me, unsure at first. I nodded again and stood up, leaning on my spear. She stared at me like I was Olympian in stature. Dropping my shield, I outstretched my hand and placed it on her head. We had kept her hair cut short to pass her off as a boy. It was dark and full of curls. I said my departing words with a sure smile on my face.

“I love you, my *leaina*.” My little lioness. Alara looked up to me, and once again resembled Pallas Athena.

“With it, not on it, *liontari*.” Lion, she called me. I smiled and picked up my shield. She may not have known my plan, but she knew I would not abandon her.

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I went south, out of sight of the scouts, before doubling back after an hour. I knew their path, and planned to follow them from a distance. They would mistake me for one of the man-wolves in the dark, if anything. I had seen their behavior, I could imitate it if spotted. Then, when the watch was weakest, I would steal into camp and grab Alara, along with more supplies. Haste was important, as Alara could not hide as Callisthenes for long without me being the one caring for her.

In a cruel twist of the fates, I never went through with this plan. Halfway back to the camp, I was stopped. One of the man-wolves stood in my path at the edge of a clearing. He was a large one, but up close, I saw he was little more than a man under a wolf's pelt. He was silent, holding a spear and leather shield. In my peripheral, two more emerged from the trees. Raising my shield and readying my spear, I began walking backward. There were just the three in sight.

They moved in unison, like wolves in a pack. I knew the two on the sides would advance if I charged for the man in center. The one to my right, my spear side, had no shield. I leapt to meet him and thrust my spear into his neck. The other two made their advance, but did not check mine. I turned to face them and drove the spear up and into the left stalker's chest. As his club fell to the ground, I retreated back once more, facing the spearman. Our weapons touched, I could tell he was sizing me up and looking for an opening. As his eyes darted downward as I skirted the soft edge of his shield and struck his heart. The finished off the last two men with similar blows.

Circling around the clearing, I looked for any more man-wolves. The forest went silent, save my footsteps and the air passing through the trees. I slowly stood up, keeping my shield to my chest. No movement or sound. I moved to where the spearman had stopped me and began inching back to camp, watching and listening. Tis good my ears were sharp, but a shame I jerked my head. The twang of a bow caused my head to jerk and put my left eye in the arrow's path.

There were stars above. It felt as a dream would, strange and bewildering to the senses. My vision was rimmed with a hazy dark. I heard, or thought I heard, the crunching of leaves underfoot. I knew they were distant, but I could not turn my head to see the source. They began slow but quickened in pace. With each step there was a heavy thud. I felt no fear until they were upon me.

I was running. I did not get up and run, I simply was. Fear had overtaken me, the footsteps behind me were those of a hunter after prey. A hand landed on my shoulder, with an iced grip. I never looked on it, but I knew it was a terrible beast. No progeny of Echidna nor Typhon could strike such terror in a mortal mind as this unknowable horror. When it touched me, I heard the deformed voice of a man.

“A shade, this one?” It spoke within my skull. “Unburied, the wretch is.” His voice was like ice growing and branching needles into my brain. “Unworthy to be buried, unworthy to cross the Acheron.”

Acheron. I thought, the river of pain. Where then, will I go? As if in response, the voice laughed.

“Back to the rotted tits of Gaia with you.”

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I jolted upward. Now my left eye began to hurt with incredible pain, but I could see with it. I looked around me, it was now morning in the center of that same clearing. The forest was grey and covered in mist. I felt a queer sensation, or lack of one. My heart did not beat within me, and I did not breathe. This felt different from the dream-like haze I had just woken from. I felt nothing, not the dried leaves under my fingers nor the moisture in the air. I'd wondered if I had dreamt the arrow, or if I was never dead to begin with. I stood and turned around, putting such hope to rest.

There my body lay, looted and unceremoniously left to rot.

-End of Part I-