

Spartans, aside from their reputation as warriors, were also often considered to be too pious. They had sat out of Marathon because the omens were ill, leaving Athens to win that victory. Good Spartans paid heed even if the gods demanded their children.

*Only for Cassandra to spare me after I condemned her*, Nikolaos reflected as he kept his head bowed, the air thick with the smoke of offerings. Not just his, but those that others had burnt in thanks for a great and recent victory in the field. But where they offered praise in thanks, he came a beggar seeking wisdom. Pleading for guidance in his quest for honor.

A heavy footstep, far too heavy even for the most well armored of hoplites, interrupted his prayers, as did the voice of the woman who had entered.

“The Wolf of Sparta, hiding in Athena’s temple.”

Turning slowly and reaching for his spear, Nikolaos froze as he saw who - no, *what* - had entered through the smoke. His mind could barely comprehend the interlocking metal armor beyond any smithing he had seen. Especially the all-concealing helmet resembling a skull. Was this one of the Cult’s monsters, like Alexios was, or something else?

“Finding honor requires wisdom,” he answered as he held his weapon.

“And so you come to a temple of your enemies, to beg their goddess for an answer.” The black clad woman snorted. “A sheep, like so many Spartans.”

Nikolaos tightened his grip. “Have you come to sacred ground to give insult, or do you have a purpose? To finish what my daughter did not?”

“Hardly.”

She stepped within striking distance of his spear, her sword still undrawn. And every step closer only made him more uncomfortable. From the way she spoke the language, to her armor, to how she moved at all, it felt unnatural. She did not belong, as out of place as shade among the living or the living amongst shades.

“Then what do you want?”

“I came to find an answer. Sheep or wolf.” She exhaled. “It seems Sparta’s only wolves are outcasts.”

“Watch your words, whatever you are,” he growled as he lowered the tip of his spear so that it pointed at her neck. “I search for honor, but I am a Spartan by blood and creed.”

“And what is a Spartan?”

Her question rolled over him, particularly as all she did was turn her head heedless of his spear.

“We are the pride of Lakonia, the shield of Hellas. The heirs of Leonidas and his three hundred.”

“What of the seven hundred Thespians or four hundred Thebans? Or the Athenians and their triumphs in Marathon and at sea?”

“You have studied us, foreigner.”

The other chuckled. "War teaches many lessons. History is one of them."

Nikolaos lowered his spear. "Then you know by what law Leonidas fell."

"You are certainly fighters, but what do you fight for? What ambition does Sparta have today?"

"To stop Athenian domination as we stopped the Persians. Sparta's freedom."

"Ah yes, the freedom to keep others in slavery. How many losses can Sparta take before the helots grow bold?"

His gut tightened, as if a cloak had been removed to reveal the ghastly wound beneath. "You think slaves are a threat to warriors?"

"If there are wolves among them? Fear is the least you owe them, Spartan."

"If I wanted a lecture on the failures of Sparta, I would talk to Perikles," Nikolaos growled to shove the uncomfortable question aside. "Why are you here?"

"To find out if you really are the Wolf of Sparta, or just another sheep."

He was about to turn away, to dismiss this barbarian (who somehow spoke the language fluently) as speaking in riddles. But he hesitated - he had fled in search of answers, and now in Athena's temple he was in the presence of one who should not be here.

*Of course*, he realized, taking a deep breath to steady himself. “Very well then, foreigner, I will play your game. What is a wolf?”

“It is not another of civilization’s neat cages. The question you should be asking is what does Nikolaos of Sparta desire?”

He closed his eyes, his thoughts going back. To happier times. Before the ephors came with the prophecy of Sparta’s supposed downfall. To what he did afterwards, to hide from the pain as a hoplite hid behind his shield when arrows blackened the sun. To the work he threw himself into.

“To be a Spartan... no, to be a father.”

“And when Sparta demanded the death of your children, you obeyed. You cowered behind duty as your daughter begged. A sheep, like all Spartans.”

Suddenly he lashed out, his spear striking this woman in the chest. The head stuck into the breastplate, but failed to penetrate. Rather than draw her sword, she instead snapped the weapon at the head, tugging the tip out of her armor.

“There you are,” she chuckled, examining the broken spear. “Now what will you do, Nikolaos?”

She dropped the broken spear onto the temple floor and turned, abruptly leaving as Nikolaos stood in shock at what he had attempted on sacred ground. He picked up the broken weapon, staring at it as his mind weighed the words spoken to him.

He had been a sheep, simply going along when his children's blood was demanded. He failed them as their father, when Cassandra was braver than he was. Then he adopted Stentor as a distraction, only to abandon him too. He let others dictate his course, and held his tongue when his family was unjustly wronged by Spartan law.

No more. He picked up the broken spear and left the temple. He set a course for others still, but it was not as the Wolf of Sparta. It would be the fate that Nikolaos chose.

And he chose to be a father to at least one of his adopted children.