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CHAPTER TWO**

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CHAPTER TWO

Gorgo's green eyes adjusted to the faint amber light coming through the window next to her bed, as she scanned her small, sparsely-decorated sleeping chamber desperately searching for the familiar to assure herself it was only a dream. At the foot of her narrow bed, a wooden chest sat on the stone tiled floor that haphazardly housed her belongings: a threadbare doll from early childhood, strips of leather parchment, a stylus for writing, a wax tablet, a dagger inlaid with engravings of a fox, lion and eagle, and a couple of tattered victory crowns made from laurel branches. On the floor beside her bed, the chiton she wore yesterday lay crumpled on top of her well-worn sandals. The door to her room was closed, and she could hear her mother's light snore coming from the other side. Everything was as it should be.

Too early to rise, Gorgo settled herself back down under her thin, woolen blanket and willed herself to relax. *It was just a dream*, she told herself, taking a deep breath and closing her eyes. She immediately pictured the young, lanky Persian man with his mystical helmet and icy blue eyes. Compassionate eyes. Her eyes popped back open and she sat up.

The Medusa dreams started two years ago just after her fifteenth birthday. At first, she didn't think they meant anything. Dreaming of Medusa fit a lonely young girl unluckily named after the mythical monster. However, these night visions didn't feel like regular dreams – the details were more vivid; they didn't fade with the day's chores or lessons, and with growing uneasiness, she started to realize that they were always loosely connected to real events.

That spring right before the barley harvest, she had dreamt that Hermes sent a band of helots to Medusa's island to capture her precious crown. She successfully fended them off by leading them into a dry field, lighting the tall grass ablaze and burning them alive. A week after the vision, a large fire erupted in the barley fields and every helot, woman and child in Sparta worked together to extinguish the flames. In the end, two plethron of crops were lost and four helots were burned alive in the inferno. After the smoke cleared, Gorgo felt sick with guilt. *Could I have prevented the fire? The helot's deaths?* But she was too frightened and confused by the coincidence and kept completely silent, not daring to tell a soul.

Several months later, she experienced an even more dramatic dream. As Medusa, she watched from her perch as a trireme filled with hundreds of soldiers sailed toward her island. However, as the ship drew near, she stared dumbfounded as Poseidon rose from the waters like a geyser and mercilessly capsized the ship, drowning all its occupants. Upon waking, Gorgo felt overcome with dread, so she went to her mother and confessed the details of the dream, but Mother casually brushed aside her concern citing her *overactive imagination*.

A few weeks passed and Gorgo accompanied her father to Gythio, the Spartan harbor, to greet a foreign dignitary. Stormy weather delayed his arrival, and while Gorgo waited impatiently with her father on the docks, she overheard two fisherman talk about *Poseidon's wrath*. Gorgo felt a chill crawl up her spine at the mention of the sea god.

The next morning, the bodies of foreign sailors and emissaries began washing up along the harbor wall.

Feeling a sense of dread and guilt, Gorgo tried to talk to her father about her visions, but he silenced her, “Enough, Gorgo. You are not an oracle. A true Spartan must remain practical and level headed at all times.”

When she returned home, she divulged all to her best friend Phoebe, an apprentice priestess living at the Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia. Unlike her parents, Phoebe’s large grey eyes grew wider with rapt attention as Gorgo unburdened herself.

“This is portentous,” Phoebe said standing up. “I need to consult the tomes in the great library or maybe talk to my mother.”

“What?! No, don’t tell anyone. I shouldn’t have told you.” Gorgo felt suddenly anxious.

“Are you crazy?! I should have been the first person you consulted. I need to anoint you with oil and lavender, I think.”

“Why?”

“Or maybe I should sacrifice something, but I can’t quite bring myself to do that yet.”

Phoebe’s mother and sister were also priestesses, but Phoebe didn’t yet show a natural aptitude for what many believed was a family calling.

“I don’t think that’s necessary, Phoebe. I just want to know what these dreams mean.”

Phoebe leaned closely into Gorgo with her eyes intensely focused, “Promise me that you will come immediately to me the next time you have a Medusa dream.”

“I promise.”

That was a year ago.

Gorgo pushed back her coverlet and rose from her bed. She pulled her cream-colored chiton over her athletic body. The sleeveless tunic only hit her shapely mid-thighs, and she draped a woolen himation over her shoulders to keep warm in the cool morning air.

Through her window, the pinkish-orange dawn grew brighter behind the rounded peaks of Mount Parnon. In the daylight, the tawny hills appeared scruffy, dotted irregularly with green bushes. Gorgo heard a faint shepherd's bell ring out heralding the day. She needed to move fast to get out the door to confer with Phoebe before her mother woke and stopped her *errand* for more pressing household business. She felt uncomfortable skipping her morning calisthenics, as the routine was so ingrained that to forgo them felt indulgent, but she decided that she would run the entire way to the temple to make up for it.

She slipped on her sandals and tucked her dagger into a holder that she strapped to her thigh – another habit drilled into her since before she could remember. *Every Spartan woman must be trained to fight in the event of a Helot revolt or invasion of the Homeland.* Mother lived in constant fear of a slave revolt, as the Helots outnumbered their Spartan masters by twenty to one and the responsibility for domestic order fell to the women, as the men were constantly training or campaigning. She tiptoed silently passed her parent's sleeping chamber into the atrium and headed swiftly for the front door.

"Going somewhere?" a deep, timbered voice cut through the darkened room.

Gorgo spun around and found her father – King Cleomenes – sitting by the cold and blackened coals of a long-dead fire. Middle-aged and muscular, he stroked his shaggy

copper beard with one battle-scarred hand. The new, thick, puckered scar angrily coursed the length of his tanned arm, and Gorgo couldn't help but stare at it unnerved and fascinated.

"Father! You startled me."

"And you, me. Now, answer the question." He knit his small, dark eyes closer together and focused on his daughter's face.

"Your fire's gone out. Shall I start you a new one?"

"If I wanted a fire, I would have a fire," he slurred his words while moving to refill a dirty cup with undiluted wine.

"Why are you sneaking out in the middle of the night like a common burglar?" He asked tipping forward and spilling some wine down the front of his peplos, which was already covered in dry stains.

"It's not the middle of the night," Gorgo snapped, unable to hide her disapproval. "It's morning and you should go clean yourself up before Mother wakes or a helot finds you." Gorgo chided, "You *are* the king of Sparta."

"How dare you talk to me like that," he roared. "A Spartan daughter should be obedient to her father."

"Ha! If you wanted an obedient daughter, then maybe you shouldn't have named me after a dreadful monster!" Gorgo's nostrils flared, as did her father's.

Ever since the King returned home from a campaign in Argos, he had been much altered. He drank too much and his temper was short. He had been obsessed with conquering and claiming the Argive land to the west, just as the previous King had once seized the Messenian lands to the east. As a Spartan king, he was expected to conquer

new lands and new peoples. But the Argives bitterly resisted and defended their land from Cleomenes' army. However, Cleomenes did not concede defeat. Instead he resorted to more and more brutal tactics. After capturing an Argive village, Cleomenes rounded up all of the men, and ordered their death by fire. He didn't delight in their suffering, far from it – but faced with a fearsome enemy, he felt merciless measures were the only way to make their armies stand down. It should have been a victory, but Cleomenes still heard their screams and smelled their charred flesh. He was plagued with his own nightmares, and even when he was awake, he saw and smelled things that nobody else did. In the middle of the night, he would call out to the gods to make it stop.

A certain Argive woman haunted him the most. A young poetess and the wife of one of the scourged men. She and the other wives took up arms to defend their homes against the Spartan invaders. The Spartan King refused to battle her or the other women because he recognized them for what they were: grieving daughters, wives, and mothers. He told his men to stand down. The poetess then took that opportunity to leave Cleomenes with a lifelong mark on his arm and on his conscience.

"The gods will not sing your praise," she spat at him as she sliced into his arm with her knife, "Not this day. This abhorrent day. They do not sing for monsters, and that's what you are."

Gorgo immediately wished she could take back her defiant words; she didn't want to fight with her father. She wanted to see Phoebe and tell her about her latest dream, and if she didn't leave soon, she would miss her opportunity. Given both of their stations, they didn't have much free time for adolescent idleness. Both had duties that made their tete-a-tetes infrequent.

Before King Cleomenes could launch into a new round of verbal barbs, the sound of horse hooves bounding quickly up the path surprised them.

“Who could that be?” Cleomenes asked moving toward the door, but Gorgo stopped him.

“No, father, let me handle this. Retire to the back.”

While King Cleomenes may have wanted a son, he treated his only daughter like his apprentice, though she would never wear a crown herself, he knew the strength of his bloodline would be critical to the future of Sparta.

Cleomenes looked down at his wine stained tunic and nodded retreating back into the shadows while Gorgo opened the door. A helot by the name of Macar tied up a horse. Gorgo knew Macar; he worked in the household of King Demaratus, who co-ruled Sparta with her father in a government style called a diarchy, where two kings ruled over a single kingdom. However, King Cleomenes and Demaratus had not been on good terms for many years.

Macar was a reedy, soft spoken man, and Gorgo realized as he walked toward her with his head bowed that she had never seen him outside of Demaratus’s house. He looked out of place outdoors and nearly tripped twice on rocks along the short path.

“Macar, is something the matter? Is it King Demaratus?” Gorgo was suddenly nervous that something was wrong.

“Pardon the intrusion, your highness. No, no, the king is w-well,” he stuttered catching his breath, “But he asked me to deliver this scytale to King Cleomenes in haste.”

“I will take it on his behalf,” Gorgo held out a hand, but Macar did not relinquish the tightly wrapped scroll.

“I’m under strict instructions to only release it to the king,” Macar stated with practiced precision.

“That may be, but the king is not available, and I am here in his stead.”

“Is he not within?” Macar glanced tentatively behind Gorgo into the dimly lit room.

Gorgo moved abruptly to block his view, “I will make sure my father receives the scytale,” Gorgo said with her own well practiced authority.

Macar hesitated, but Gorgo, who was tall for her age and intimidated most men with her confident stance, beguiling green eyes and razor sharp tongue, took a step toward Macar and extended her open palm once again for the scroll. Macar’s hand shook a bit as he handed it over.

“Thank you, Macar,” Gorgo said dismissing him.

Once Gorgo closed the door on Macar who headed back to the horse and rode off, King Cleomenes reentered cleaned up and in a fresh garment. All traces of the undiluted wine and fatigue in his demeanor were gone. He strode with purpose and power over to Gorgo, who was winding the scytale around a baton so that she could cypher the encrypted message, and grabbed it away from her.

Spartan generals used scytales to coordinate secret tactical plans in battle or communicate directives. Messages could only be deciphered using a cylinder exactly the same diameter as the one used to compose it. If it fell into enemy hands, it would be meaningless scribble without the correct sized tube. While it wasn’t uncommon for her father to receive or send scytales, many littered the table and floor of his study, it was

unusual for Macar to be sent from King Demaratus's house with such haste to deliver a secret message.

Gorgo's mother, Korinna, followed her husband into the great room. Like Gorgo, she was a tall and commanding woman. Unlike Gorgo, she had long tamed her wild hair and wore it cropped close to her head. This traditional style for Spartan married women emphasized her square jaw and high cheekbones.

"What was that all about?" Korinna asked as she gathered kindling to start a fire in the hearth.

"Demaratus has invited us for dinner tonight," Cleomenes informed her.

"And he sent a coded message to let us know?" Korinna asked disbelieving as the kindling began to catch fire. "Is that all it says?"

"He says he has news."

"Does he give a hint about the content of the news? Why was Macar so secretive?"

As Gorgo's parents discussed the significance of the scytale and Demaratus's motives, Gorgo slipped out the door unseen. A dinner party with Demaratus and his family did not spark Gorgo's curiosity, and she had a real portentous puzzle to work out: the meaning of her latest dream.

She quietly closed the door behind her and ran in the opposite direction of Macar's horse toward the Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, which sat on the banks of the Eurotas River.

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