

DAUGHTER OF SPARTA: CHAPTER SIX

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SIX

Restless with anticipation, Cleomenes and Gorgo played a game of Petteia to pass the time while they waited for Demaratus's chariot to arrive with Aristagoras and his treasure. A popular game amongst the men of Sparta because it taught strategy and tactics, each player moved sixteen stone tokens across a board divided into sixty-four square tiles with the goal of outmaneuvering their opponent. Cleomenes had taught his daughter to play to keep his own skills sharp and she proved an apt challenger. Her approach to the game was very different than the men he usually played with who merely followed scripted stratagem and programmed responses that had been passed on as part of the games tradition. Gorgo instead teased out pieces with complex patterns, forcing them into vulnerable positions to be attacked, working in a circle around the board quickly picking off compromised tokens and ultimately subjugating her opponent. She had an uncanny ability to anticipate her adversary's moves and adapted her strategy to counter their responses. Today, however, she was distracted by every sound that floated in from the window.

"You're not concentrating," Gorgo's father chided when he captured yet another one of her stones, but when he thought he heard riders in the distance, Gorgo used Cleomenes's preoccupation to her advantage to apprehend one of his most valued pieces.

"Had you been planning that the whole time?" he murmured, shaking his head and staring at the board.

"Maybe." Gorgo smiled wryly.

Just then, they heard the unmistakable sound of horse hooves clomping up the path, and both abandoned the game without a second thought rushing out the front door as Demaratus's chariot came to a stop in front of the house.

"Finally," Cleomenes said standing in the courtyard with arms folded.

"I picked up Pausanias along the way," Demaratus said as way of explanation.

The sun was nearly at the midpoint in the sky, Gorgo observed looking upward to pinpoint the radiant orb traversing overhead.

"It was my fault," Aristagoras said catching Gorgo's skyward glance. "Forgive me, but it has been quite a long while since I enjoyed such a lavish dinner party, and consequently I overslept."

"We both did," Perseus echoed. Unlike the previous day, when his face looked dark and broody, he wore a relaxed and cheerful expression. He made a point to nod at Gorgo as he exited the chariot and stood with his uncle.

The noblemen were accompanied by an entourage of a dozen helots and soldiers. Behind Aristagoras's chariot, there was a sturdy wooden cart with four soldiers guarding a large covered object – the treasure. While Pausanias greeted the king and Korrina, who joined to welcome the gathering party, Aristagoras hurried to the wagon and instructed the four soldiers to unload the concealed cargo.

"Careful," Aristagoras supervised, as the men each stood at a corner to lift and move the mass across the courtyard toward the entryway. The visitors followed as Cleomenes led the procession into the house.

"Set it on the table," Cleomenes ordered directing the soldiers into the main dining room toward a large rectangular pine table that had been in the family for generations.

“Gently,” Aristagoras added hovering over their shoulders like a worried mother.

“She’s been across the mighty Aegean, Aristagoras, surely your surprise can withstand the trip from the chariot to the table,” Demaratus joked.

“Ah, but my uncle shared his bed with the treasure to keep it safe,” Perseus ribbed causing Demaratus and Pausanias to laugh.

Placed in the middle of the table like a centerpiece, Gorgo estimated it was more than two pous in diameter and at least a dichas high. It was round like a platter, but the drape that hung over it blanketed mysterious knobs and protrusions that jutted from the surface. Gorgo had no idea what it could possibly be, and judging from the chatter in the room, neither did anyone else.

“Patience, my allies. All in good time,” Aristagoras said.

Gorgo felt exuberant anticipation as she squeezed in between her father and Demaratus at the head of the table.

“Ah, Princess,” Aristagoras bowed formally, “I’m glad you can join us.”

He then turned his focus to the diarchs, Cleomenes and Demaratus, “Great Kings of Sparta, you command the greatest army the world has ever known. Conquering the Persians to free the Ionians will be effortless. The witless brutes roam the hills and mountains in small, thieving packs.” Aristagoras spoke like a practiced orator; he moved his hands while he addressed the group, and the effect was mesmerizing; holding everyone in rapt attention. “They are neither organized nor unified. When two gangs meet, they fight. Their mistress is chaos, but yours is merciless order. Even in the Persian capital city of Susa, in the halls of Darius the Great, who grows fat on laziness, the mighty Sparta is most feared.”

At the mention of the barbarians, Gorgo couldn't help but glance at Perseus, for he again wore the garments of a "witless brute" – a long tunic over short baggy trousers. Perseus, however, looked affable and attentive; his stance was confident and relaxed.

"There is no need for honeyed compliments, Aristagoras," Cleomenes beamed clearly enjoying the praise. "We are all anxious to see the treasure you spoke of last night."

"Yes, I think it is time. Princess, would you help Perseus do the honors?"

Gorgo nodded, but when she met Perseus's eyes, she felt transported back to her dream to the moment when Medusa met his gaze in Athena's shield. Unnerved, she immediately dropped her focus to the linen cover, feeling a cold shiver creep up her spine.

"Ready?" asked Perseus.

Korrina and Elissa had joined the group at the table and even the soldiers crowded to the closest edges of the company, eagerly peering over shoulders to catch a glimpse of the mysterious treasure. Gorgo and Perseus ceremoniously removed the cloth to unveil a most unusual object.

"Behold!" Aristagoras proclaimed as the cover slipped away revealing a massive bronze disc, like a giant coin, but with thick, rough edges and a sculpted surface. The bronze was perfectly polished and gleamed under the sunlight streaming in from the window. Ridges and crests protruded from the top forming peaks and valleys across the face of the shining platter. It reminded Gorgo of something she had read about, but never seen.

"Is that what I think it is?" Cleomenes asked in a hushed and reverent tone.

“You know what this is?” Aristagoras probed.

“What is it?” Pausanias demanded to know.

“Gorgo, remember we found a reference in a book together?”

“Yes, Father, but I don’t think that’s possible. Anaximander’s Map was destroyed after the Ionians fell to Persia.”

“Anaximander’s Map?” Demaratus questioned understanding the significance of the reference.

“However did it survive?” Cleomenes was impressed and clearly valued this treasure. Aristagoras was pleased with the king’s knowledge and appreciation.

“Sadly, Anaximander’s Map was lost - a consequence of war - but this is better than his rough depictions. This Map of the World is more detailed and accurate. It’s the creation of another brilliant cartographer of Miletus. A historian by the name of Hecataeus.”

Gorgo took a closer look, running her hand over the polished topological features. The edge of the giant platter depicted the River Okeanos that encircled the whole Earth and marked the barrier between the known world and the other world – a place that included the gods of Olympus, the dead who dwelled in Hades and all manner of spirits that existed in the beyond. The body of the bronze plate showed the known world -- one round land mass divided into three sections. The northwestern section was labeled “Europa,” in extravagant script, the southeastern area was called “Asia,” and the southwestern piece was named “Libya.” The three pieces were divided by natural geographic boundaries that Gorgo recalled from her lessons.

“Are these the Pillars of Hercules?” she pointed excitedly to two promontories that rose out of the map and divided Europa from Libya.

“Yes, and that’s the Strait of Gibraltar that connects the sea to the River Okeanos,” Aristagoras said.

Directly across from the Pillars of Hercules on the other side of the map was Bosphorus, another strait that naturally divided Europa and Asia.

“Up here,” Aristagoras pointed is the Don River –”

“That also separates Europa and Asia,” Gorgo filled in.

“Why yes.” Aristagoras sounded pleasantly surprised. “I don’t believe I have ever met a woman so knowledgeable about cartography.”

“Father has a passion for it and taught me everything he knows.”

“Does he really?” Aristagoras looked to Cleomenes, who nodded with pleasure.

“How fortunate for me to be from Miletus, the birthplace of modern cartography.”

“Miletus is a port town and it sees travelers from all over the world,” Perseus chimed in, clearly proud of the reference to his homeland.

Gorgo gawked at the map taking in the world’s rugged mountain ranges, sloped valleys, winding rivers, and wide plains. She had never seen so much bronze, meticulously forged in such fine detail. Pointing to the Pillars of Hercules and drawing a line across the Aegean Sea toward Bosphorus, she wondered aloud, “Where is Sparta?”

Aristagoras pointed to a tiny, insignificant dot near the center of the map.

“That can’t be true,” Gorgo said astounded. “Surely Sparta is much larger, it takes a full day to walk from end to end.”

“The world is a vast and wondrous place,” Pausanias said.

“Well said,” Aristagoras agreed delighted in his audience’s reactions.

“What’s this?” Cleomenes asked pointing to a long, deep trench that cut across Asia.

“It’s the Royal Road. Built by Emperor Darius. It extends from the tip of Troy in the west all the way to the Arabian Sea in the east,” Aristagoras explained. “The Emperor calls it a highway.”

“A highway?” asked Demaratus.

“Imagine a cobblestoned path that cuts across mountains and over rivers,” Aristagoras said. “It ties barley fields in the northwest to rice paddies in the southeast, yet a man can travel the length of the road in less than seven days.”

“Not possible,” Cleomenes objected, as the others gathered each murmured their doubts.

“Oh but it is possible,” Aristagoras asserted. The Emperor can make a proclamation from his palace in Susa, and word will reach the outermost edges of his Empire in less than a week.”

“So all of this section – the majority of Asia – is the Persian Empire?” asked Gorgo. “It’s enormous!”

Aristagoras glanced over to Perseus and gestured inconspicuously.

“Princess, would you like to go for a walk with me and get some fresh air?” Perseus face drained of color and appeared ashen.

“Ah yes,” agreed Aristagoras, “Perhaps Gorgo wouldn’t mind taking my nephew for a tour of the village now. He is ignorant of Spartan culture and eager to learn your traditions”

“Excuse me?” Gorgo panicked.

“Remember, last night you agreed to show Perseus the sights?”

“Yes, but now?”

“You don’t look well, Perseus,” Demaratus said looking up from the map and taking in the young man’s pallor.

“I think I just need some air,” said Perseus.

“Yes, good idea.” agreed Cleomenes. “Gorgo –”

“But I would much rather stay and learn more about the Map of the World,” she protested.

“It took four soldiers to hoist this map, Gorgo, it isn’t going anywhere today. Take Perseus around Sparta and you can meet up with us later at the cheese contest.”

“Cheese contest?” Aristagoras said intrigued.

Gorgo desperately searched for another reason to stay, loath to be alone with the young man from her ominous dream. *I wish I had talked to Phoebe.* She glanced one last time over to her father, but his eyes warned her not to press.

“An old tradition,” Cleomenes said returning his attention to Aristagoras.

Gorgo slumped her shoulders and acquiesced, “It would be my pleasure,” she said to Perseus with a forced smile, and he followed her out of the door.

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