

DAUGHTER OF SPARTA: CHAPTER SEVEN

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SEVEN

Gorgo and Perseus walked in awkward silence down the path toward the city of Sparta. Fields of crimson anemone carpeted the sides of their route, but Gorgo barely noticed. She felt uneasy being alone with the young barbarian who came to her in a dream. Who wanted to murder Medusa. She recalled what he said before aiming his sickle at the gorgon's neck: "You are our last hope. Our realm is threatened, and it is only the power you possess that can stop this war."

Perseus finally broke the silence, jolting Gorgo from her inner world, "Adonis's windflower also grows in Miletus, but they are usually shades of purple – often lilac."

Gorgo looked around, taking in the colorful meadow.

"I have heard the delicate flowers either ward against evil or signify a bad omen, which do you believe?" he asked, straining to make conversation.

"Neither," Gorgo replied. "I don't believe in superstitions." Although that wasn't wholly true, she didn't want to share that with the stranger. "Anyway, the wind never lets them remain for long."

Just beyond the red sea of anemones, stocky fig trees grew in long, neat lines. Helots moved between the straight rows picking the heavy purple fruit that hung toward the ground. Jay birds squawked along the tree line reaping their own harvest that grew at the leafy canopy. Perseus seemed very intrigued. "Looks like a bountiful crop," he said, awkwardly continuing the struggle to force polite conversation.

Gradually, the dirt path became cobblestoned, and mid-morning activity along the road grew as they drew closer to the city center. They ambled past the crowded agora

where rows of vendors displayed their wares. Gorgo pointed out the bouleuterion where members of the Gerousia assembled regularly. It was a simple stone structure with steps leading up to the columned entryway. There, a group of young girls practiced a dance routine as their instructor stood nearby clapping out the rhythm. The familiarity of the scenery started to ease Gorgo's apprehension. *This is my great city, and these are my proud people; I am safe here*, she thought starting to relax.

"What would you like me to show you of our city today?" Gorgo dutifully inquired.

"I would love to see your Acropolis. Perhaps there is a storyteller we can listen to on the steps of the Senate building,"

"A storyteller?" Gorgo asked surprised by his request.

"When I was last in Athens, I went to the Acropolis and listened to an old mystic captivate a crowd with his outlandish ideas. He spoke so emphatically that all were convinced of his veracity. He could have said anything, anything at all, and everyone would have agreed. It was a sight to behold."

"What was his idea?"

"I don't even recall. What struck me was his passion – his utter dedication to an idea. I would love to witness something like that again," he reminisced.

"I can certainly show you to the Acropolis, but I doubt we will encounter any storytellers. We might be able to catch a wrestling match nearby." Her voice lilted upward invitingly, and Perseus gave her a bewildered look before shrugging. "Anything is better than back there," he nodded backwards in the direction that they had come from.

"But your uncle sounds very much like the storyteller who enchanted you?"

“My uncle can certainly spin a good story,” Perseus agreed without enthusiasm. “Tell me,” he said changing the subject, “How do you even know about Anaximander’s Map?”

“I read about it.”

“But how and why? You’re a girl.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I’ve just never met a girl who could read before; who was interested in such things. Girls your age are usually married, tending to their husbands and family.”

“Married already!” Gorgo choked. “I’m sure I will be when the time comes, but first I must be educated.” Gorgo had heard that girls were raised differently in Sparta than in other places around the Peloponnese, but it still astonished her never the less. “Where you are from, what do girls do if they are not doing lessons?”

“Weave, I guess. My mom is always weaving.” Perseus replied.

“Weaving?” Gorgo scoffed.

“I take it you don’t like weaving?”

“I don’t know how. It’s a helot’s job to weave.”

Perseus frowned, “There are very few slaves in Miletus or anywhere in the Persian Empire. Zoroastrians do not believe in the oppression of others.”

“Zoroastrians? I thought you were Greek – Ionian your uncle said – but you dress like a Persian. What exactly are you?” Gorgo blurted, unintentionally brusque.

“I like to think that I am all three. I am a follower of Zarathustra, living in the Persian Empire with Ionian lineage.”

“Who is Zarathustra? Is he a god?”

“No, he is a religious philosopher of great wisdom. *Humata, Hukhta, Huvarshta*, which means: Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds,” Perseus exclaimed. “His followers are called Zoroastrians and we believe there is only one god, Ahura Mazda, the Lord Creator, who has given us the right of free choice, and the responsibility of the consequences.”

“One god?” Gorgo gasped at the blasphemy. “Preposterous! How could a single god possibly preside over all of creation?” The sun, the moon, the harvest – war, peace, birth and death? It’s not logical!” She had now abandoned all propriety as she bristled at the absurd ideas of this mysterious foreigner.

Perseus stopped suddenly and turned sharply to confront her, but just as he was about to speak, a terrified scream interrupted their exchange. Startled, they both turned west toward the riverbank, then Perseus abruptly ran off toward the sound of distress. Gorgo immediately followed, with her long strides easily keeping pace.

As they ascended a hilltop and moved down toward the river, they found a woman kneeling at the edge of the rocky riverbank yelling frantically.

“Hold on, Nico. Don’t let go.”

Gorgo followed the woman’s gaze and spied a small boy surrounded by the rushing river water clutching with both his arms and legs the branch of a fallen tree that was partially submerged in the rapids between the shore and a large boulder. Water raced all around and over his small form causing the terrified boy to choke as he struggled to keep his head above the surface.

Perseus immediately ran to the river’s edge at full speed. Noticing his hasty approach, the woman turned to him and shouted, “Please sir, help my precious boy!”

He's going to drown! I only turned my back for a moment and river took him. Help him, please!"

Without hesitation, Perseus pulled off his tunic and kicked off his sandals, reassuring the mother, "Everything's going to be okay."

Gorgo stopped a few paces behind. Time seemed to slow as her analytical mind rapidly assessed the situation. The boy was stuck in a precarious place, but Perseus didn't care; he was getting ready to dive into the river head first.

"Stop!" Gorgo shouted with an inner force that surprised herself. Surprised, Perseus and the woman turned to her. "You can't just jump in."

"I grew up by the sea, I'm a good swimmer," Perseus waved her off and turned toward the water.

Gorgo leapt forward and grabbed his arm holding him back. "The Eurotas River does not care if you are a good swimmer or not. Jump in and you'll make a bad situation worse. That branch is ready to give. If you add any weight, it will be swept down the river and you and the boy will be dragged along with it."

"Please help my boy," the mother begged, her eyes wild and desperate.

"We have to do something," Perseus urged kneeling down to get a better look at the boy.

"We will. We just need to be smart," Gorgo said looking around at a cluster of ash trees that bent toward the river.

The boy screamed louder, as the branch he hugged loosened and some debris that collected around him escaped and was swept up into the white water.

“The water is going to take him,” the mother panicked kneeling next to Perseus, grabbing his arm. “Please, please go, help my Nico.”

“Hold tight, Nico,” Perseus instructed. “We are going to get you out of there. Be brave.”

“Yes, be brave,” the mother echoed.

Gorgo pulled out her dagger from her thigh holder and ran toward the cluster of ash cutting away a grouping of vines that clung to the trees. “We can use this for rope,” she shouted over her shoulder, beginning to wrap the vine around her waist.

Perseus spotted a piece of abandoned fisherman’s netting on a nearby branch and plucked it off. “We can use this too,” he said handing it to Gorgo.

“Excellent,” she agreed taking it and tying it to the loose end of the vine.

“Nico,” Gorgo called to the boy. “I’m going to throw you this netting, and I want you to put your arms in the net like you’re wearing a cloak, like this,” she said demonstrating for the boy. “Do you think you can do that?”

“No,” the boy cried.

“Yes, you can, Nico,” Perseus coaxed, “Remember, you’re brave.”

“Please be brave, Nico,” implored his mother, her voice hoarse from screaming.

“Ready?” Gorgo asked.

The boy nodded and Gorgo threw him the netting. She misjudged the distance, and when the line hit the water, the current pulled it down river away from the boy. She reeled the line in to try again. Rapidly reassessing the angle of approach, she moved upriver away from the rocks to a grassy beach. She waded into the river as far as she dare go, at the very edge of the strong current. She threw the vine down river to the

boy, and this time, it floated within reach, and he was able to grab it and wrap himself in the netting.

“Good, Nico,” said Perseus, following Gorgo into the river’s edge. “You’re doing great.”

“Nico, we are going to pull you toward the beach. You need to let go of the branch.”

“No!” the boy screamed clasping the branch tighter and lifting his body out of the rushing water.

“Hold still!” Perseus shouted, but it was too late. As the boy squirmed in panic, the dry branch made a thundering crack as it completely dislodged from its mooring.

The suddenness of the breaking branch caught Gorgo off guard, and the weight of the boy at the end of her tether lurched her forward toward the rushing rapids. In that instant, Perseus leaned in, grabbed her waist and heaved backwards. The commanding current tugged at the flailing boy threatening to pull him down river. He hung there like a fish on a line half submerged skipping along the surface. The mother screamed, “All is lost!” but Perseus dug his heels into the wet sand and with the strength of youth dragged Gorgo to the shore while she held tight to the line that secured the boy.

As they moved together further up the riverbank, they slowly pulled their catch into calmer water. The instant the boy could stand on his own, he ran to his mother as the rescuers collapsed in a heap into the tall grass along the riverbank.

Gorgo and Perseus lay together breathless for what seemed like a long time but was only a few seconds. As their adrenaline slowly subsided, Gorgo noticed that Perseus still had his arms around her waist and felt a strange rush of excitement, mixed with awkward terror grip her exhausted body. Her first instinct told her to pull away, but she

could not move. As if turned to stone, she had lost command of her body. She lifted her head slightly and her eyes momentarily met his. Perseus was staring at her, smiling awkwardly. In a flash, she was transported to the vivid memory of her dream when Medusa stared into these same compassionate eyes. The flashback broke the spell that held her frozen in place, and she quickly rolled away and leapt to her feet.

Perseus was looking up at her now and he opened his mouth to speak when suddenly a giggling blur of the exuberant Nico belly flopped onto his chest in a giant hug that knocked the wind from his lungs. At the same time, Gorgo felt a soft arm wrap around her shoulder and she turned toward Nico's mother.

"Gorgo!" the mother exclaimed. "I can't believe you're our rescuer. When I first saw you, I thought you were the goddess Soteria herself," she squeezed Gorgo tighter, "Instead Soteria delivered you in our time of need."

"Chara!" Gorgo said with surprise. "I was so focused on helping, I didn't stop to see who you were."

"And, I am glad you were so focused. My Nico is saved!"

"It's been far too long since I have seen you, Chara. I can't believe how much Nico has grown. My father says Clembrotus struts like a gamecock when he speaks of his son and even the great Leonidas expounds on the merits of his favorite nephew."

At the sound of his name, Nico jumped off Perseus, running to hug Gorgo while Perseus stood and joined the women. Gorgo laughed as Nico collided with her thigh.

"Chara, let me introduce you to Perseus; he is visiting Sparta with his uncle, a diplomat from the island of Miletus."

Chara smiled broadly and embraced Perseus warmly, “Welcome brave hero, I thank you for coming to my Nico’s rescue.”

“Perseus, Chara is the wife of one of my father’s brothers, Clembrotus” Gorgo said. “We haven’t seen each other since Nico’s blessing ceremony when he was a baby.”

“And, we must rectify that,” insisted Chara. “Please, Gorgo, you must come to the house and I will hold a feast in your honor. Yours too, Perseus.”

“I would be delighted, Chara,” Gorgo said and they hugged one more time before saying their goodbyes.

“Where to now, tour-guide?” Perseus said with the same awkward smile Gorgo noted on the riverbank. “Follow me, I’d like to show you something,” Gorgo replied as she led Perseus back to a dirt path that wound away from the city up a surrounding mountainside. The sides of the path were densely forested with fresh scented Cypress trees; Perseus took a deep breath and sighed contentedly.

As they ascended, the mountain air became chillier than in the valley, but the sun’s rays filtered through the foliage drying their wet clothing. Soon the trail grew rocky, and they climbed over large boulders until they came to a cliff. Their demeanor had completely transformed from earlier in the morning, and they were now relaxed and casual together. They plopped down on the edge of the cliff letting their legs dangle over the side.

Directly below them, barefooted boys marched on a field in a perfectly rectangular formation. The field was surrounded by squat buildings – barracks. Perseus pointed to it and said, “That must be Sparta’s famous agoge.”

“All of the sons born to Spartan citizens attend. After the blessing ceremony, boys remain with their mothers until they are seven. Then they are brought to the agoge to live in the barracks until they’re fully grown.”

“What if a man is not suited for soldiering or wants to do something else?”

“The sons of Spartan citizens want to be soldiers,” Gorgo said with certainty.

“In Miletus, some men do become soldiers, but others farm or fish. My father, for instance, was a merchant and worked at the harbor meeting boats that sailed into the port. I often helped him and my brothers on the docks encountering all sorts of people from around the world – Ethiopians wearing the skins of leopards and real barbarians living in the most northern parts of Thrace where snow doesn’t just coat the tips of the mountains, but covers the whole valley in a thick white blanket. And from the far east...” he reached into his tunic, and pulled out a small engraved ornament that hung from his neck on a piece of leather. He took it off and handed it to her to hold, “Jade.”

She accepted the pendent that was smooth and surprisingly cool in her hands.

“My father gave me this before he and my brothers followed my uncle to war. He died in the Siege of Naxos.”

“You must be proud,” Gorgo said without hesitation. “Death in battle is a noble fate for a soldier.”

“But he was a merchant,” Perseus replied almost imperceptibly, staring out toward the horizon.

Gorgo examined the talisman closely. On the pale green oval someone had carefully carved what looked like snakes. It was exotic and mysterious. The initial trepidation

Gorgo had felt when she first set off on the walk with Perseus threatened to return as she held the necklace. She handed it back.

“I don’t like snakes, myself,” Perseus admitted with a shiver, “Personally, I like to keep a safe distance from them.”

“Some believe they bring luck,” Gorgo said.

“Yes, that is precisely what Hecataeus told me too,” replied Perseus as he slipped the amulet back around his neck.

“The same Hecataeus who made the Map of the World?” Gorgo’s mouth dropped open. “You know the maker of the Map of the World?”

“He was teaching me how to be a cartographer before my uncle brought me to Sparta. That’s what I had hoped to become.”

“Will you return and finish your apprenticeship when you leave?” inquired Gorgo.

Perseus cleared his throat, “When my uncle’s business is concluded in Sparta, he says he wants to leave me here to train at your agoge.”

“Sometimes foreigners attend the agoge for a year or so,” Gorgo said brightly. The thought that Perseus wasn’t just visiting for a couple of days made her feel the same rush of excitement she felt when he held her in his arms after rescuing Nico. She felt her face redden uncontrollably at the memory. She glanced over at Perseus and was relieved that he was looking out at the vista oblivious to her blushing cheeks.

He nodded to himself, “It will be good for me. Teach me how to be a warrior.”

“You want to be a soldier now?”

“To fight in the Ionian Revolt. Yes,” he said decisively. “Absolutely.”

Gorgo approved of his ardency. She recalled his bravery at the river. How he was willing to dive headfirst into danger to save a stranger. "I think the agoge will make a fine warrior out of you."

Perseus's forehead furrowed at her sentiment, but he nodded in agreement as he continued to look over the landscape. Gorgo followed his gaze and pointed, "That's the Acropolis. With the Temple of Athena on top."

The roof to Athena's Temple was made of polished bronze. Under the afternoon sun, it looked like it was on fire."

"It's stunning," Perseus said mesmerized.

"Athena is the patron goddess of Sparta," Gorgo apprised.

Perseus snorted, "Of course, she is the goddess of war."

"And wisdom," Gorgo added.

Perseus scanned the whole countryside. "Where is Sparta's fortification?"

"We don't need one," Gorgo boasted. "The Spartan army makes a fearsome human wall and can stop anything or anyone."

"I understand well why my uncle came here first." His voice changed. It was unexpectedly clipped and distant. "He wants your fearsome human wall to sail to Miletus start a war with Persia."

"He came to the right place."

"Yes, it seems he did."

Something had shifted. Gorgo wasn't sure what prompted the change, but she felt it just as she felt the sun pass over the mountain summit, cooling the already brisk

mountain air, Perseus transformed instantly back into the brooding young man she encountered the evening before at King Demaratus's dinner party.

"The hour grows late," Gorgo said after an uncomfortable silence. "We should head to the Temple of Artemis for the cheese contest."

They walked awkwardly back down the mountain as Gorgo searched for a way to restart the conversation.

"I'm really glad you suggested a tour of Sparta," Gorgo began hopefully.

"Yes, thank you for agreeing to show me around. I have learned a great deal," he replied with detached formality.

"As have I," Gorgo said in return. She wanted to say more, but couldn't think of what else to say, so she stayed silent and ruminated about their shared afternoon. When she set off, she felt threatened by the man from her dream but that evaporated at the river. She wondered what he thought about her. *He doesn't think anything. Stop being ridiculous*, she told herself. *You were simply doing your father's bidding by taking him for a tour, and now the tour is over.*

As they neared the gates of the Sanctuary of Artemis, a raucous cheer erupted, and Perseus tucked away his cool countenance. Warm curiosity reemerged as he leaned his head toward Gorgo asking, "How can a competition involving cheese cause such enthusiasm?"

"Follow me, and I'll show you," Gorgo replied not sure what to make of this capricious young man and his oscillating moods.

Chapter Eight coming soon at [Historic Heroines](#).



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