

DAUGHTER OF SPARTA: CHAPTER EIGHT

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EIGHT

The tang of decayed plants and stagnant water enveloped Gorgo and Perseus as they entered the grounds of the Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia. Swampy tall grass, scraggly bushes and tall ash trees outlined the broad rectangular Temple. As they passed by, two simple Doric columns flanked the entrance. Gorgo pointed to the messages for all who entered, engraved on the entablature resting above the columns: on the left, "Know Thyself" and to the right, "Nothing in Excess." This she knew was the Spartan way, and she felt the same reverence that always overwhelmed her when she entered this sacred place.

Set to the side of the Temple, stood a towering statuary of Artemis made of smooth, bleached stone. The goddess of the hunt was carved to look like she wore a short tunic like Gorgo's, revealing her well-toned legs, and in her hand, she held a bow and arrow. A leopard and stag stood beside her. Scattered around the statue of Artemis lay small handmade clay figurines – prayer offerings. Some were rudimentary depictions of animals like deer and fox, but as Perseus bent down for a closer look, he was surprised to see many statuettes of shapely female forms.

"Why would people leave fertility idols at the feet of Artemis?" he asked picking up a small, finely crafted figure made by patient hands.

"She is the guardian of the circle of female rites of passage – birth, menses, pregnancy, and childbirth."

A hearty cheer exploded from behind the stone temple interrupting their conversation, and Perseus set down the votive.

“It’s beginning,” Gorgo said excitedly. “Let’s go!”

Though twilight had not yet faded from pink to purple, torches lit the sides of the walkway guiding Gorgo and Perseus to the back of the building where a lively crowd was gathered in a semi-circle around a large stone altar.

Gorgo spotted her father and mother sitting on a platform designated for the diarchs and their families, and she led Perseus through the mob of Spartan citizens toward the royal congregation.

Usually, either King Cleomenes or King Demaratus presided over the ceremony – they worked out a routine where neither attended together, but on this night, both kings were present. The powerful men sat affably with Aristagoras between them; their troubled relationship magically repaired by the foreign diplomat.

Gorgo turned to Perseus, “Your uncle must have special powers.”

“What?” he asked over the din of the crowd that pulled his attention in every direction.

Gorgo pulled Perseus toward him and spoke directly into his ear, “Your uncle. He has mended what I thought was irrevocably broken.”

“What’s that?” he asked in her ear.

“My father and Demaratus,” Gorgo said gesturing. “They haven’t been on such good terms in a very long while.”

Perseus looked at the royal box and his face hardened. After a pause he said, “It appears my uncle has reminded them of what they share in common - ambition.”

Gorgo looked back at the diarchs and Aristagoras, puzzled at why Perseus was always so cynical toward his uncle, but then she caught sight of her mother and Myia

with their heads bent toward each other in conversation. Korinna's mouth spread into a smile at something Myia said. As they laughed together, Gorgo felt a warm rush of nostalgia.

Ismene and Erinna were also in attendance. A rambunctious Ismene hooted at the stage where a broad shouldered Leondas, dressed in traditional bronze armor and a red cape, tried to quell the crowd. Erinna leaned forward to join the older women in their joviality. It dawned on Gorgo that Erinna felt the same longing for happier times.

She pressed forward not wanting to miss another moment of the joyful reunion and settled herself next to Ismene, who continued to cheer despite Leonidas' raised hands calling for quiet.

Perseus looked around not sure whether to sit by his uncle or Gorgo, but Gorgo shifted closer to Ismene, making room for him next to her. At the sight of Perseus, Ismene hushed momentarily and greeted him with a shy smile.

When Leonidas finally caught a break from the noisy crowd, he began to speak. "Thank you for your spirited welcome on this fine evening Father Zeus has provided for us. I have had the distinct pleasure of training each *paidískoi* you will see tonight. They came to me as young pups, still squealing for their mothers' laps, but over the past eleven years, through hard work, discipline, and dedication, they have become men. Tonight, they take another step closer to the promise their mothers invested upon us when they willingly committed them to the agoge so many years ago. These mothers didn't just want their boys to become men. They wanted them to become Spartans!" At this all of the mothers in the crowd sprang to their feet and proudly stood, shouting their sons' names as the gathering applauded their civic service. "Soldiers in the greatest

army the world has ever known; defending the greatest idea the world has ever!”

Leonidas paused for effect as the crowd exploded once again.

“Now, before we begin, I want to welcome my brother, King Cleomenes,” he said nodding to the king. “And King Demaratus. Two kings together for one graduation ceremony,” he narrowed his focus down at the first row of young men. Unlike Leonidas, whose raven hair reached past his shoulders, the graduating men wore theirs cropped close to their heads. The traditional red tunic of a hoplite absent; they were clad only in simple leather breechcloths.

“I hope you prove yourselves worthy of such a prestigious audience.”

The young men kept their eyes staring straight ahead, unmoving, as if Leonidas and the crowd weren't even there. Leonidas looked back up at the crowd, threw his hands out wide as if trying to embrace them all at once and shouted, “Now who wants to see a cheese contest?”

The crowd screamed wildly, then began chanting in unison, “Sparta! Sparta! Sparta!”.

Drums began to beat as the Priestesses of Artemis Orthia appeared from a hidden area behind the altar. Draped in flowing, sheer robes with dark brown hair piled tightly in tiered rows on top of their head, they looked virtually identical. Their lean, naked bodies visible through the diaphanous fabric gracefully danced in a circle around the stage, writhing rhythmically to the steady beat of the drum. Each bore the same transfixed expression on their pale faces. After a few laps around the stage, they formed a semi-circle with locked arms behind the altar standing perfectly still as the drums went silent.

Gorgo thought of Phoebe and knew as an initiate she was likely tasked with lower duties on this night. Upon closer inspection of the women on stage, she recognized Hegasa's unmistakable dour face and Lyssandra, the head priestess and Phoebe and Hegasa's mother.

From the left side of the stage, opposite Leonidas, four helots carrying a large wicker basket struggled to the altar, erected a giant mound of cheese and hurried off the stage. The same four helots then returned and placed four wooden stools between the line of young men and the cheese filled altar. The crowd went silent. Leonidas straightened his body, stared forward and with shoulders pulled back and chin raised, barked a command to the graduates seated in the front row. With one sharp military movement, they snapped to their feet in perfect unison, lining the front of the stage facing the altar.

"What is the goal of this competition?" Perseus asked Gorgo.

"The graduates are to run to the altar and grab as many cheese rounds as possible and bring it back to the crowd until all the cheese is gone."

"That's it?"

"Just watch, Perseus."

The drums began to beat again and three burly soldiers, dressed like Leonidas in polished bronze armor and billowing red capes, marched onto the stage, turned abruptly and stood at attention behind the wooden stools placed in front of the altar opposing the line of initiates. Each soldier held a long whip made of oxen hide leather.

"The hoplite on the end," Gorgo pointed, "that's Clembroutus, Nico's father."

Leonidas looked at the line of young men and spoke on more time, "Do Sparta proud!" Then he stepped up onto a stool and removed a whip from his belt. The three other soldiers followed suit and the drumming built to a crescendo as the line of priestesses, arms still locked, pounded the floor rhythmically with their feet and swung their heads in wide, frenzied circles.

Leonidas lashed his whip, making a cracking sound that made Perseus instinctively jump and the initiates surged toward the altar as the crowd cheered and the contest began. None of the young men showed any signs of hesitation or reluctance, years of intense training led them to this moment of absolute determination even as the whips started to make contact, tearing red ribbons across their arms, backs and legs. In the first wave, sheer numbers gave the initiates the advantage and the majority made it to the altar unscathed. Even those that felt the bite of a hoplite's whip continued forward through the pain, grabbing as many rounds of cheese as they could, hurrying back across the stage and launching the cheese into a rapturous crowd. After the first few waves, however, the initiates became scattered and spread out across the stage, with some at the altar and others near the crowd. This discord gave the hoplites easier targets as fewer passed by at once, with sometimes two whips landing simultaneous blows on a single participant. Very soon, the floor of the altar became slick with splatters of blood as the constant flailing began to take its toll.

When the first young man finally slipped and fell to the ground, his hair sticky and matted with clotted blood, the crowd rose to their feet clapping and stomping, while two hoplites with blood-lust on their faces relentlessly flailed the helpless young man until he fell flat, unconscious from the beating. The crowd howled enthusiastically including the

two kings and Aristagoras, who seemed to embrace the festive mood. The only one not standing in the royal box was Perseus; his face set like stone.

“Stand up,” Gorgo urged him, but he resisted.

On the altar, another young man fell to his knees dropping two rounds of cheese that rolled haphazardly across the ground causing another competitor to trip and fall. He struggled to stand back up as two of the hoplite’s whips tore into his back leaving bright red hash marks. He raised his arms over his head while his whole body twitched and shuddered in pain until he too lost consciousness and fell prostrate on the stage, his motionless body covered in lacerations.

Perseus stood up, and Gorgo took his hand in hers to pump it up skyward in celebration, but he yanked it away violently causing Gorgo to spin and face him.

“I’m leaving,” he said.

“Leaving? But you’ll miss the best part?”

“And you think I’m the barbarian—” Perseus began, his voice shaky and full of anguish. He turned and stormed off.

Ismene said in a worried tone, “Where is he going?”

“I don’t know. Should I go after him?” Gorgo didn’t want to miss the end of the competition, but she felt compelled to pursue him, for he had been left in her charge.

Ismene encouraged her, “I think you should.”

Gorgo took off to follow him. “Wait up,” Gorgo called.

He quickened his pace using his shoulders and elbows to push through the throng to reach the torch lit path.

“Perseus, where are you going?”

Behind Gorgo, the crowd roared and she couldn't help but look back toward the altar to see what happened; her view was obscured by people jumping and pumping their fists. When she turned back around, Perseus stood directly in front of her, his face was gray like the color of granite.

"What is the purpose of that brutality? Why does your fertility goddess call for men to spill their blood on her altar? All for the glory of Sparta!" he quipped sardonically. "It's barbaric, if you ask me. My uncle sure picked the right place. I don't need to convince you of war. You'd willingly pick up a spear and march to Miletus yourself if you were allowed, wouldn't you?"

"I don't understand," Gorgo struggled, baffled by his rant.

"No, I don't expect you would."

He turned away again and stomped toward the exit past the Temple gates.

"Perseus—"

"Leave me be."

"You'll get lost."

He laughed bitterly, "Map-makers don't get lost."

Gorgo watched him walk past the gate and back on the trail that would lead him to town. There was only one road. *He'll be fine*, she thought hesitating as his form grew smaller in the distance.

"Who was that?" a soft and familiar voice lilted in her ear.

Surprised, Gorgo turned. "Phoebe! What are you doing here?"

“Mother stationed me at the Temple entrance in case someone sought the services of a priestess, even though everyone in all of Sparta is already here. She said I was still too young to participate in the cheese ceremony.”

“I’m so glad we finally have a moment to ourselves,” Gorgo said feeling relieved at the sight of her friend like a real weight had been lifted off her shoulders. “Phoebe, I had another dream.”

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