

DAUGHTER OF SPARTA: CHAPTER TEN

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TEN

After a fitful night's rest, Gorgo headed to the Gymnasium in the morning to settle her mind with exercise. The events of the previous day plagued her thoughts – the abrupt end to her surprisingly pleasant time with Perseus and Phoebe's cryptic dream interpretation kept her tossing and turning all night long.

She hoped her friend slipped out of the adyton without getting caught, but worried not knowing for sure. She wondered when they would find another moment to talk privately together. *It could be weeks*, she groaned inwardly. *And what about Perseus? Will I ever have another moment alone with him?* The prospect seemed dismal.

The Gymnasium stood on a grassy knoll on the opposite side of the village from the agoge. As she approached, it bustled with activity. Young girls and women were exercising in small groups. Gorgo crossed over the worn track where some women were running laps, then headed past a group practicing javelin, directly to her favorite station. At the archery practice area, a gaggle of young women gathered around a tall, lithe female instructor whom towered over the group. From a distance, Aglea might be mistaken for a slender young warrior from the agoge, but her long hair was a brilliant silver and the aged lines chiseled into her taunt skin marked her years of experience. Aglea's husband had died in battle, which garnered her the highest honors in the community; she had also bore four well-built sons whom had all distinguished themselves at the agoge. Combined with her own athletic achievement in the Heraean games, her status among the Spartiate was almost legendary. Since the passing of her

husband, she dedicated herself to sports and competition, training the bodies of Spartan women to ensure they gave birth to vigorous children.

When Gorgo joined the group, Aglea was giving an archery lesson to girls lined up in a row, firing at circular wooden shields with vermilion stains at the center of each target to mark the bullseye.

Usually, Gorgo was an excellent shot, but today everything was a miss and the tufts of grass surrounding her target were littered with arrows. The more she tried to focus her aim, the more she failed, causing her temper and composure to further erode. Aglea worked with her one on one, encouraging her to stand straighter, align her chin over shoulder, and tuck her tailbone as she aimed for her mark, but Gorgo's movements only became more strained and halting.

"You can't *will* the arrow onto the target, Gorgo; align yourself properly, clear your mind, relax and trust the arrow will find its mark," Aglea counseled before leaving Gorgo to advise someone else.

As Gorgo continued to struggle, an audience began to assemble behind her; the girls at gymnasium were unaccustomed but eager to witness the daughter of the mighty King Cleomenes flounder with a bow and arrow. Soon they were whispering their critique of Gorgo's pitiful practice only making her feel worse, a feat she didn't think was possible.

As she nocked another arrow and began to draw the bowstring; someone in the audience laughed. Gorgo spun around on the pack, her face as bright as the vermilion bullseye. She kept her bow lifted with the string drawn taut against her sweaty cheek. The girls jumped and scattered, save one.

“You think I’m funny now,” she threatened looking directly into the smug eyes of Demetria, the girl Gorgo suspected had been the source of mockery, for she was the kind of person who thrived on the misfortune of others. Demetria didn’t flinch. “Based on what I’ve seen this morning, princess, it’s doubtful I’m in any peril of being hit by one of your arrows.”

Aglea dashed back to Gorgo placing herself between the two young women. Facing Gorgo’s bow, she looked kindly but intently at her. “Anger takes out your eyes, you know. Best to shove it aside,” Aglea said guiding Gorgo’s bow downward. Gorgo felt some of her emotion release and dissipate as her arm relaxed.

Aglea turned to Demetria and the girls that had started to reassemble, “There are plenty of targets, ladies. It is a shallow life and lowly death for those that suffice to watch the deeds of others.” The group dispersed, but not before Gorgo met the amused eyes of Demetria and felt her fury reignite. She threw her bow down to the ground and marched across the grounds of the Gymnasium heading for the exit.

She tramped back home angry at herself for her outburst. Usually she did not allow emotions to overwhelm her like that. Growing up, friends and family chided her for her hotheaded nature. *Gorgo, the gorgon. Your father’s hot blood runs deep in your veins.* But as she matured, she saw how her father’s outbursts let others get the better of him and was committed to avoiding the same folly.

As she reached home and entered the courtyard, she heard the unmistakable nicker of Areion, Leonidas’s stalwart mare, acknowledging her arrival. The black beauty stood patiently outside in the courtyard like a trained guard awaiting further orders. Gorgo’s heart sunk. This meant that Leonidas was here conferring privately with her father, and

she felt a fresh annoyance intensifying. Although her father showed great regard for her opinion, even amongst the highest officers; she was never formally invited to take part in the men's planning. Undoubtedly her father was showing off the Map of the World, the treasure she had been pulled away from the day before.

The horse nickered recognizing Gorgo and inviting her to stroke the tender spots above her muddy eyes and under her chin. Gorgo took a moment to stroke the mare's soft muzzle in order to steady her emotions before facing her father and his heir, the darling of Sparta, Leonidas.

Her father often called Leonidas away from the agoge to privately mentor his younger half-brother in leadership and military strategy. Gorgo tried not to feel jealous of their special bond, but more often than not, she failed, beset with envy. She loathed this aspect of herself; however, Leonidas didn't help matters, always arrogant and disagreeable toward her when her father was present.

She found her father and Leonidas as she expected, leaning over the Map of the World deep in conversation. Though a couple of decades separated the two men and most would say that they did not resemble each other, when they stood together, Gorgo saw their familial connection in their shared body posture.

Both preferred to cross their arms across their chests left over right and stood with their left feet pointed forward so that their body weight rested on their right hips. They both favored their left hand, too, whether standing, pointing, eating, drinking or writing.

Neither noticed Gorgo in the doorway, so she waited for a natural break in their discourse to fully enter the room.

"You want to make landfall here in Miletus?" Leonidas asked pointing.

“The Emperor has issued a warrant for Aristagoras’s head. He can’t show himself there. We can meet up with the Ionian forces just north of Miletus in Ephesus. Then we will march to Sardis, the gateway of the Royal Road, and we will take the passage all the way to Susa.” Cleomenes said, drawing his finger along the road carved into the bronze map.

“Won’t the Emperor station guards there, as well? If I were Darius the Great, I would have men in every corner of Ionia ready to catch the traitor.”

“Perhaps, but Aristagoras is confident his loyalists will ensure Ephesus is a safe dock for our arrival, securing the route along the Royal Road. Aristagoras says the palace in Susa is made of pure gold.”

“How many triremes will you ask the Ephors to commission for this enterprise?”

“Twenty.”

“Our entire naval fleet!”

“Indeed. I just hope it’s enough.”

“It’s decided then. War is certain.”

“The Georsia will vote tomorrow, but Pausanias reports that all are already in agreement.”

“You and Demaratus are in agreement?”

“You sound surprised, Leonidas.”

“I am. It’s all happening so fast,” he said running his hands through his hair. “Don’t get me wrong, I will gladly serve beside you commanding a mora, but I am struggling to understand your haste. You usually take more time on something so weighty.”

“There is no time. The Ionians need our aid *now*,” Cleomenes snapped, irritated by Leonidas’s hesitation.

“Why didn’t Aristagoras approach the Senate in Athens first? The Athenians are Ionian, and naturally would want to help their cousins.”

“Because Sparta has the mettle and menace to face a foe like Persia and win!” Cleomenes said vehemently, smacking the table with his fist. “We are the military superpower in the Peloponnese.”

“Brother, I’m just trying to understand,” Leonidas said evenly, “You taught me to beware of foreign entanglements that do not directly serve the security of Sparta. So I want to know how Sparta benefits from freeing Ionia from the yoke of Persia. It cannot be to plunder the golden palace in Susa?”

“Of course it isn’t. It’s to free the Ionians from Persian tyranny and increase our buffer against the dark Persian disease that is consuming the world around us,” Cleomenes waved his hand dismissively.

“But why poke the giant now, they have shown us no aggression, and I am told Aristagoras travels with a Persian man. If he seeks a war with Persia, why does he travel with one of their kind?” Leonidas continued.

“Perseus.” Gorgo interjected as she strode across the room to join them. “His name is Perseus.”

“Ah, Gorgo,” her father said looking glad for her interruption. Leonidas grimaced; he gave her a curt nod and then looked back down at the map.

“Gorgo spent the day with Perseus, the nephew of Aristagoras, yesterday,” Cleomenes informed Leonidas.

“I gave him a tour of Sparta.”

“And did you ask him why he dressed like his uncle’s enemy?” Leonidas asked.

“No, not exactly,” Gorgo admitted.

“Seems like that would have been a good thing to ask. If it were me, it would have been my first question,” Leonidas patronized.

“He did tell me that he considers himself an Ionian, a Persian, and a Zoroastrian, which is his religion.”

“I know what Zoroastrianism is,” Leonidas told her dismissively. “How do we know he’s not also a spy for the emperor?”

“Did you learn anything else?” asked Cleomenes. “Anything about his uncle or his broken ties with the Persian Emperor.”

“I didn’t ask.”

“She didn’t ask!” Leonidas repeated throwing up his hand.

She looked directly at him, angry now, “No, I didn’t. We were interrupted by Chara calling for help at the river’s edge.”

“Clembroutus’s wife?” Cleomenes asked.

“Yes. Nico got caught in the rapids, and he and I hauled him back to shore. Without Perseus’s help, Nico would have surely drown.”

“My nephew, Nico?” Leonidas was at a loss for words.

“Yes, he saved Nico’s life.”

“Thank you, Gorgo. Thank you and Perseus,” Leonidas said sincerely.

“Hmmm,” Cleomenes pondered stepping up to the Map of the World. Gorgo did too taking in the gleaming treasure set in the middle of the table. She fought against the

urge to touch the bumpy mountain tops and smooth contours of the lengthy Royal Road that coursed from one coastline of Persia to the other at the farthest edges of the known world. It struck her again the sheer enormity of the Persian Empire. It could hold thousands of Spartas.

After a short contemplative pause, Cleomenes spoke. “Gorgo, I want you to seek out Perseus’s company again today. I want you to find out more information about Perseus’s role in his uncle’s war and if he knows anything about his uncle’s plans.”

“Are you sure that Gorgo can be discreet enough for this mission? No offense to Gorgo, but she isn’t very sly. She is brash and direct. It may raise his suspicions and alert his uncle to our mistrust,” Leonidas disparaged, erasing all of the new goodwill generated by the story of Nico’s river rescue. “Perhaps I can deploy a few of my spies to obtain the information instead.”

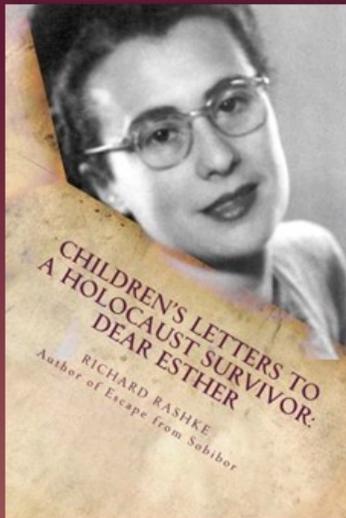
“No,” replied Cleomenes, “Perseus already knows Gorgo and therefore is more likely to open up to her. Meanwhile, you can accompany me to speak with old Pausanias. I have questions about how long he has known Aristagoras.”

Leonidas relaxed showing satisfaction with this outcome. But Gorgo felt uncertain, vacillating between excitement for having a reason to see Perseus again and dread that he wouldn’t want to see her.

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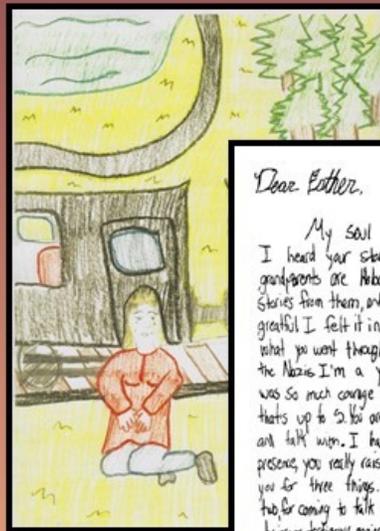
She did make it out and kept pledge by sharing her brutal story with frank honesty with school children. Her courageous story generated hundreds of letters from children expressing their love, concern and outrage. She wrote each of them back continuing to spread her hopeful message that compassion and acceptance conquers hate and bigotry.

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Dear Esther,

My soul felt so powerful and sad when I heard your story. My great-grandmother and great-grandparents are Holocaust survivors. I've heard many stories from them, and hearing stories from you was so grateful I felt it in my heart. I couldn't believe what you went through fighting back at those animals called the Nazis. I'm a young boy, and I never knew there was so much courage in one single body, but I guess that's up to Sobibor. You are an amazing person to hear about and talk with. I love such movies when you're in my presence, you really raise my spirits. I want to thank you for three things: one for making the play 'Dear Esther', two for coming to talk with our school personally, and three for bringing testimony against the Nazis. You are a great and lovely person.

Your Friend,
Boyi

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