



THE
IMMORTAL
GAMES

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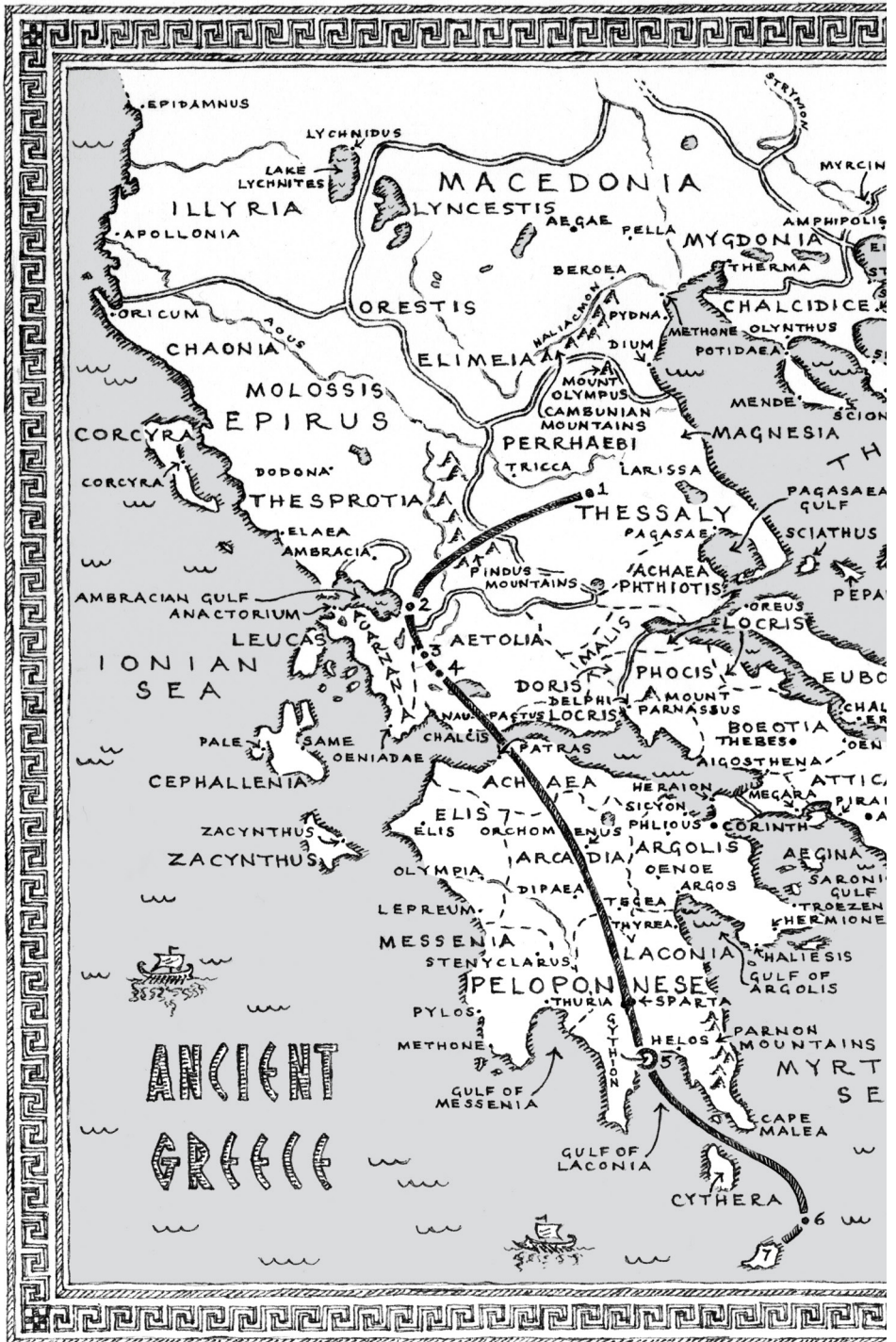
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*For Linda Rosemary Spendlove
Who once taught me the secret to immortality.*

*“The measure of a man is
what he does with power.”*

—PLATO





THE BLOOD MOON MORN

The villa is still and cold in the dawn, but not as cold and still as the bed next to me. I look at it, the pillow untouched, the bed sheet still tucked in.

It's been five years since my sister last lay in the bedroom beside me, but I still catch my breath every morning; I still ready myself as I turn to face the emptiness. And this morning, this day, I feel her absence more deeply than usual.

I sit up and swing my legs out of bed; the terracotta floor tiles are cool under my feet. I quickly discard my nightdress and let it fall, then cross to the chair by my dresser and pull on the tunic that's waiting for me. Our housekeeper Ida must have left it out while I slept. I secure my leather belt in place and quickly plait my hair, tying it with a length of leather thong. The small clay offering jug I left on my dresser is still there and I snatch it up in my hand. It fits perfectly, the red wax of the seal holding in the rich wine that I decanted into it before bed last night.

I slip it into the fold of my tunic. My sandals have been placed under the chair and I scoop them up as I tiptoe to the door and slip out.

I cross the mosaic tiles of the hall swiftly, making my way to the front door. I'm just about to turn the handle when I hear my father call out. "Ara!"

I hesitate for a second, then walk into the reception room at the front of the villa. The doors on to the veranda are open and the weak dawn light is all grey shadows. My father blends into them as he sits behind his desk, an oil lamp casting a soft amber light on the papers he's studying. If there is any warmth in the light it runs out before it reaches his face.

"Are you ready?" He doesn't even look up. I don't need to ask him what he is talking about, what I need to be ready for.

A shiver runs through me as I stand in front of his desk with the toes of my bare feet pressed into the hard floor, my sandals swinging in my hand, and suddenly I feel like a small child of six rather than a young woman of sixteen.

"I'm ready. I was just going for a run, to leave an offering at the temple."

My father's eyes still haven't left his paperwork; I wonder if he truly sees it, just as I wonder if he ever truly sees me.

"Good, an offering is always welcomed by the Gods, and a run will keep you in shape. I don't know why the instructors insist on declaring the day of the Blood Moon

one of rest. Surely today of all days preparation is called for.”

“Yes, father.” What else can I say? “I’m going to meet Theron at the training grounds. We’re going to spar before they start to prepare for the festival.” I wince as I hear the hope in my voice, the hope that he will praise me, that he will notice me.

I see his face in the flicker from the lamp. The five years since Estella was taken from us have made me a woman and our father an old man. His beard covers a chin too fond of wine and his once brown hair is grey with the worries of a man twice his age.

“Theron is a good fighter, and the Gods shine favourably on the boy; you can learn a thing or two from him, Ara.” My father says, and I quickly agree. He finally looks up and when he does, I get the feeling that he is not looking at but through me. “It’s Theron’s last chance is it not? It will be a shame if the Gods do not choose him; a young man like that would make Oropusa proud.” I feel the sting in his words. “He’ll make a good husband one day, and if the rumours of his birthright are true then maybe there is some worth in this friendship that the two of you have.” He looks at me then, just for a moment, and I feel my cheeks run hot. I try not to think of Theron in that way and know too well that my father only sees one element of worth in me.

He looks back to his papers and I stand in the silence of the room, waiting. The nothingness engulfs me as I stand

in the centre of it. I remind myself to relax, to surrender to it. I have been in the shadows since the day Estella died. I should be comfortable in them by now and most of the time I am, but today ... today I thought it might be different and that small spark of hope burns me as I feel it gutter and die.

My father says nothing, so neither do I. I turn from him, from the small glow of light in the room and back out into the hallway. I close the door of the villa behind me, silently, and stand in the morning air taking in a big breath. I fill my lungs with the morning and hold it in till it burns, and small stars appear in the daybreak. Then I let it out and breathe normally as I secure my sandals and start running.

I set off at a sprint; for the first few moments my body is fine because it hasn't realized what's happening yet. But it soon does. I push on, urging my limbs to keep going, to keep up the punishing pace. I feel energy surging through my body and I feel alive as the fields rush past me; the ground, and the crops – a dull grey in the dawn of the day. But green slowly fades in as I run towards the treeline that edges the field and creates a natural barrier around the farmland and the stream that makes my father's land so rich and fertile.

Apollo's fingers are stretching in the sky, pink tendrils reaching up into the gathering blue of the heavens, and I watch as a large eagle circles high and slow, one of the signs of Zeus. I wonder if he is watching me. I hope so.

My pace naturally slows as I reach the stream and run along the undulating bank, my footfalls irregular as I navigate the rocks and vegetation. The tall trees are blocking out the sunrise and the coolness of their branches is welcome as the sweat runs down my body making my tunic damp.

The stream flows into a pool and I stop here, kneeling to cup my hands in the icy fresh water, sending ripples across the surface as I wash my face. Drops fall from my chin into the pool. I stay there and stare at it like Narcissus. I see myself reflected, but unlike him I am not enamoured by what I see. On display are all the parts of me that I shared with Estella and all the parts that I didn't. Our cheekbones and jawline were the same, but my nose is my own, fuller and round at the end. Hers was perfectly straight and small, and her eyes were delicate and shapely, the soft brown of an old oak tree. My eyes have always been too big for my face, but the colour I've always liked, a rich chestnut brown that reminds me of autumn.

Estella never had a scar on her cheek like I do, either. I run my fingers across the thin line of silver white that is never kissed by the sun. It looks stark and bright against my skin in the reflection and is a little raised beneath my fingertips. I'd received it in my first week of training, just a few days after Estella was murdered by the Gods.

My father is a stoic man; he knows the training will not keep me safe, but it might give me a fighting chance, something he had not thought to give to Estella. My

mother was already defeated and beyond my tears of protest at that time.

There was no easing into it. The instructors were not paid to be kind to us. They were hard on us so that we would become hard. Over the past five years I have become as unyielding as the marble of the temple that houses my dead sister's body.

I remember that first day. We were navigating a field full of obstacles, myself and the other children whose parents took the Blood Moon and its threats seriously. Back then I couldn't run without getting out of breath or falling over my feet. I tripped and stumbled my way through the training field and when I came to the obstacles, I could hardly lift my body over them. I fell at the first one, a simple balance beam comprising of a felled log. I can somersault across that log now, and all the others. But back then my balance and core strength were nonexistent. Blood ran down my cheek, dripping off my jaw, mixing with the tears, but I didn't stop. I was headstrong even then. My muscles burned, and my body ached, and I cried my way around the course, but I still didn't stop. I thought of Estella. I thought of how she had not been ready when the Gods chose her to play their Game. I knew that I would be: I would be prepared, and I would be strong, and I would be ready for them, ready for Zeus.

The unthinkable had happened to my family and I. Estella had been chosen to play the Immortal Games, and she never came back to us, not whole, not alive. And just

like my father, I wasn't about to let the Fates have their say without me having mine too.

There is always speculation as to why the Games happen. Some say it is to honour the strongest among us, and the fact that the winners and survivors are treated like demi-gods afterwards suggests that might be true. But others say it is the Gods' way of controlling us, of letting us know that they can take anyone that they choose at any time.

Before Estella had been chosen on the evening of the Blood Moon, there were only a handful of children in our village whose families sent them for training. It had been so long since the Gods had chosen a token from Oropusa that we had forgotten to fear the lunar eclipse and the possibility that the Gods were not only watching us but walking among us, ready to take one of us as the moon turned red. This was a mistake that was soon rectified but also soon forgotten.

As the years passed and the Blood Moons came and went without any of the other children being chosen by the Gods, the anxiety dwindled, not for all – not for me or my family – but enough that fewer and fewer children are now sent to train.

Usually, the instructors drill us from early morning to sunset, sometimes beyond. Some of the trainees have chores, expectations on their time and they train around them. I am thought of as one of the lucky ones – my whole life is dedicated to training. Every day I get up, I train, I

eat, I sleep, I repeat, and all so that I have the best odds of surviving, so that if chosen, I have a fighting chance.

I push myself up from the side of the stream, knocking the dry dirt from my hands as I start walking through the gathering morning in the direction of the training grounds. I doubt that any of the others will be there, except Theron. Theron has always been there; he was there before Estella was chosen by the Gods, training every day, hoping to stand out and be selected.

Theron's mother is a beautiful woman, the most beautiful in Oropusa. It is said that Aphrodite herself blessed her at birth, and that she had been wooed and seduced by a king. The king then refused to marry her and cast her out of his kingdom carrying Theron.

Theron has definitely inherited his mother's blessing, and the way he is always so certain of himself makes me believe the rumours around his royal birthright. He and I are alike in one way – we both want to catch the attention of the Gods. For him being selected for the games is his way of proving his worth to his absent father, and for me being selected is an opportunity to avenge my sister.

But unlike Theron, tonight is not my last Blood Moon. I have two more chances left to be honoured by the Gods.

I let out a snort as the thought passes through my head and I catch the smell of something sweet and light. Following the scent, I soon find a tangle of wild peonies pushing their stems through the solid greenery of the bushes that line the river.

I stop and breathe them in then curl my fingers around the stem of one of the beautiful blooms, snapping it off.

I gently place it in the folds of my tunic on the opposite side of my body from the offering to Zeus.