



THE
**IMMORTAL
GAMES**

ANNALIESE AVERY

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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 bedsheet 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 terra-cotta 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 to the veranda are open and the weak dawn light is all gray 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 gray with the worries of a man twice his age.

“Theron is a good fighter, and the Gods shine favorably 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 rumors 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 center 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 gray in the dawn of the day. But green slowly fades in as I run toward the tree line 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 enamored 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 color 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 composed 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 Games. 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 me. 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 honor the strongest among us, and the fact that the winners and survivors are treated like demigods afterward 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 rumors 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 honored 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.

THE OFFERINGS TO THE GODS

I can see Theron in the training grounds. With his back to me and a blunt sword in his hand, he spars with wooden foes, the metal resonating on the poles, his grunts of exertion drifting across to me on the light breeze. Slipping into the shadows of the temple before he notices me, I watch from the pillar as he moves his body effortlessly, his shoulders square and feet steady, his arms flexing with each strike. He's strong, stronger than me, but I'm quick and nimble.

I smile as I think about the few occasions when I've managed to best him while sparring. It always surprises me, but I try not to let it show. He always tells me that he let me have that one, but the ones he lets me have are getting more and more frequent lately. He pauses and runs a hand through his light brown hair and, as if he can sense me watching, he turns to look at the temple. I swiftly push my back up against the column and imagine him squinting in my direction, raising a hand to shield his eyes as the quizzical look that I know so well crosses his face.

The Temple of the Zodiakos has twelve sides, as is the tradition, each representing one of the houses of the zodiac. I scoot around the temple, away from Theron, and stop when I reach the twisted pillar decorated with scuttling scorpions. Two pillars hold up this portion of the fanned roof. On the triangular apex of the roof the word SCORPIO is inscribed, and above it the constellation of my sign is carved into the stone. Making my way up the steps, I pass into the wedge-shaped chamber. My eyes are drawn, as always, to the mosaic floor. A scorpion, scattered with white tiles to mark the stars of the constellation, sits in a backdrop of deep blue. Small niches are carved into the curved walls, most already full of offerings to the Gods. By this evening, the offerings will be trailing out of the chamber and down the stairs.

My sandals slide over the smooth stones as I approach the arch that leads into the center of the temple. I pause on my way through and put my hand in my right pocket. The clay offering bottle, sealed with red wax, is warm in my hand. I've scratched my name on the bottle and next to it the name of the God I hope will choose me. I clutch it, my fingers pushing hard on the fired clay.

As I place the offering in one of the niches in the wall, I speak out loud. "Hear me, Zeus, God of all Gods. I stand before you, a humble servant and a worthy token ready to be chosen, ready to play the game and to win."

I have long held the belief that Gods cannot know the inner thoughts of mortals—if they did I would have been

struck down the night my sister was returned—and as I stand in the temple and call to the most powerful of all the Gods, I am glad of that small protection. Glad that my intentions remain unknown to all but me.

I wonder if my offering is enough to catch his attention; I wonder if *I'm* enough, and a shiver runs through me: *What if I am?*

I continue under the arch and into the circular inner hall. At midday the light will shine straight down through the oculus in the roof, spreading through the space and into the crypt below. But the sun is not yet high enough, so I take a candle from the side of the room and light it from one of the offerings already burning, then make my way down the curving stone steps in the center of the room.

There's a chill in the crypt. I shiver as my sandals crunch the grit and dirt beneath my feet. There are five sarcophagi down here, the resting place of those from Oropusa who had been selected by the Gods over the years to be their tokens in the Immortal Games. Five teenagers; four were not victors, but one was: She got to live to a ripe old age, dying when I was six. I can remember the festivities that were held as her body was interred in the temple with the other tokens.

There was nothing like that when Estella was placed here, her burial a somber affair, conducted in the darkness with the stars of the zodiac watching over her. Mother had collapsed on the stairs that led into the Gemini entrance of the temple and Ida had stayed with her, encouraging me to follow my

father down to the crypt. I remember walking across the mosaic floor, the twins looking back up at me. I knew the loss of Castor and why his brother had sacrificed divinity for him. I didn't know it then, but now, standing before Estella's sarcophagus, I realize that I have gladly made the same sacrifice; my life from that moment till now has been spent pursuing the chance to honor my sister.

Her sarcophagus is cut from stone and on the top lies the cold, hard image of my sister in marble said to have been provided by the Gods and fashioned by Hephaestus himself. The rendering always floors me. She looks just as she had on the morning of her selection, a true likeness preserved in stone for all time. She was so very beautiful, the fairest girl in all Oropusa, everyone said so. The Gods obviously thought the same; some said that when she was taken it was in honor of her beauty, and I can't help but think the same as I take in her fair face. I run a finger down a rigid white marble curl of hair, once so soft and dark, with a scent of roses. I remember the small, warm smile dancing on her lips, a smile that was gone when she was returned to us.

From the left pocket of my tunic, I take out the soft flower from the river path. Placing it at Estella's feet, I read again the inscription beneath: ESTELLA, TOKEN OF ZEUS.

I will make him pay for what he did to you, I tell her in my heart, but not out loud. If the Gods are watching and listening, my plans will remain out of their reach even if I am not.