

THE OLYMPIC CONSPIRACY

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extract from chapter 1

As the full moon rose, Sosi began to shake. He took deep breaths. The last thing he wanted was his mother, and certainly not his brother, to realize he was scared.

"Hurry up," Lady Alcmena snapped. "We haven't got all night. You need to be in Theron's bed in the Blood House before morning if we're going to fool the Judges into thinking you're him."

Theron smirked. "I bet he's forgotten how to do it."

Sosi squared his shoulders. "I haven't forgotten."

His curse meant he could change his shape every month. But for the past few years, he had not dared make more than minor changes to his appearance, having learnt from his mother's beatings that normal boys did not shed their skin like a snake every full moon.

He eyed his brother's body, exposed to the moonlight on their mother's bed, and couldn't help a pang of sympathy. Theron's muscles were as hard as marble, his skin brown from frequent oiling in the sun, his chin scraped clean of its first soft hairs. He had trained hard all year so he would be at the peak of his fitness when he came to Elis for the final compulsory month's preparation before the Games began – only to get injured on his second day. The bandage around his foot showed a sickly yellow stain. Sosi averted his eyes before his brother could accuse him of staring and wondered what to do about the wound.

"Well, little brother?" Theron said with a bitter twist of his lips. "Finished gloating yet? Make sure you copy my body exactly. Those puny muscles of yours aren't going to get you very far in the Olympic Training Camp, no matter how much you look like me."

"I'd better not copy you *too* exactly," Sosi retorted, their dependence on him making him bold. "Don't want to end up with a useless foot like yours, do I?"

It was a stupid attempt at a joke. A look of anger crossed Theron's face. But he seemed to remember that Sosi was doing him a favour and said nothing. Their mother frowned. "Just make it quick," she said. "I'll watch the door."

When she'd gone, Sosi stripped down to his loincloth and approached the bed. The night air raised goose bumps on his exposed skin as he perched on the edge of the bed and took his brother's hand. It was clammy with sweat. Could Theron's injury be worse than he'd thought? He darted a look at his brother's face, and caught an expression of curiosity mixed with disgust – the sort of look people gave sacrificial animals when the priests took out their entrails on an altar to tell the future.

Sosi closed his eyes.

Theron needs me. This is my chance to show I can control my curse.

He imagined a scar on his foot in place of his brother's wound. Then he opened a door inside his head, and his curse surged through in a mass of dark scales and writhing coils. It was fiercer than he remembered. He was smothered by the darkness and far too hot. He had an urge to jump through the window and flee into the cool, moonlit grass of the Elean countryside.

"Breathe, you little idiot, breathe!" Theron's voice came from a great distance, as if he were shouting underwater. Sosi dragged his hand free. As he did so, the darkness tore, and the walls vibrated to a clap of thunder.

Sosi fell off the bed. He landed heavily, which surprised him until he remembered. Of course, Theron was bigger than him these days. His skin felt tender, and his loincloth was uncomfortably tight. Embarrassed, he fumbled with the knot and retied it.

Theron was staring at him with a strange expression. Their mother, who had rushed in at the sound of the thunder, stared too. Almost afraid to see the result, Sosi looked down at himself. Moonlight, flooding through the window, made his limbs glisten silver. Flakes of skin clung to him like a snake's discarded scales. He felt a bit sick. But he'd done it.

"Amazing," Theron breathed, the bitterness that had clouded his words since the accident briefly missing from his voice. "You actually look handsome, little brother!"

"Sit down." Lady Alcmena picked off a bit of skin and prodded Sosi's scarred foot. Satisfied, she wound a bandage around it to match the one around Theron's, and sat back on her heels. "You'll do," she grunted. "Should be good enough to keep your brother's name in the Circuit lists, anyway. Don't kill yourself trying to win anything – you haven't a hope against the other boys."

“It’s only until my foot’s better,” Theron reminded him, his smile dying. “Just so I don’t get disqualified for not completing the compulsory training programme. Then I can take over again. I’ll be fit to run well before the Games themselves, don’t worry.”

But Theron’s injury was not an accident... a Persian terrorist is trying to sabotage the Olympic Games! Only Sosi, the snake-boy with an ancient magic, can help his brother and save the Games. Find out more in “The Olympic Conspiracy”.