

Last of the Amazons

Steven Pressfield



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PRESSFIELD

LAST
OF
THE
AMAZONS

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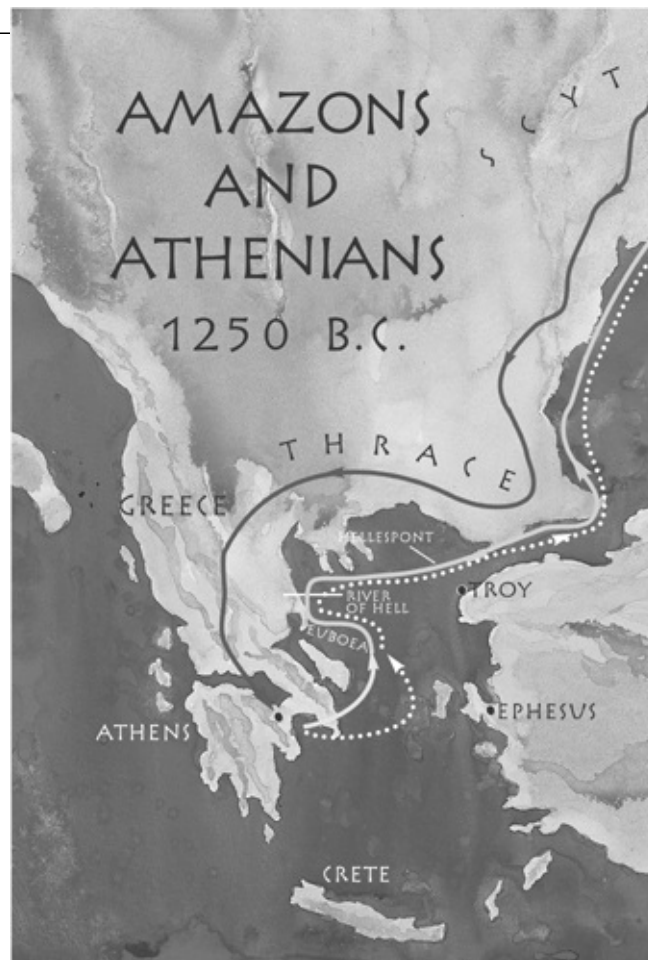
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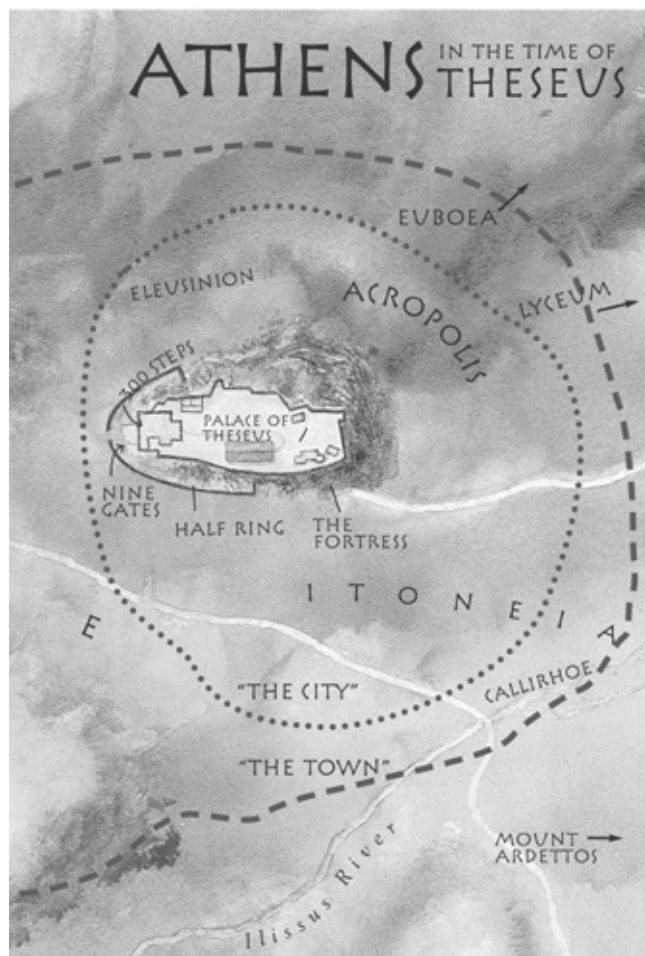
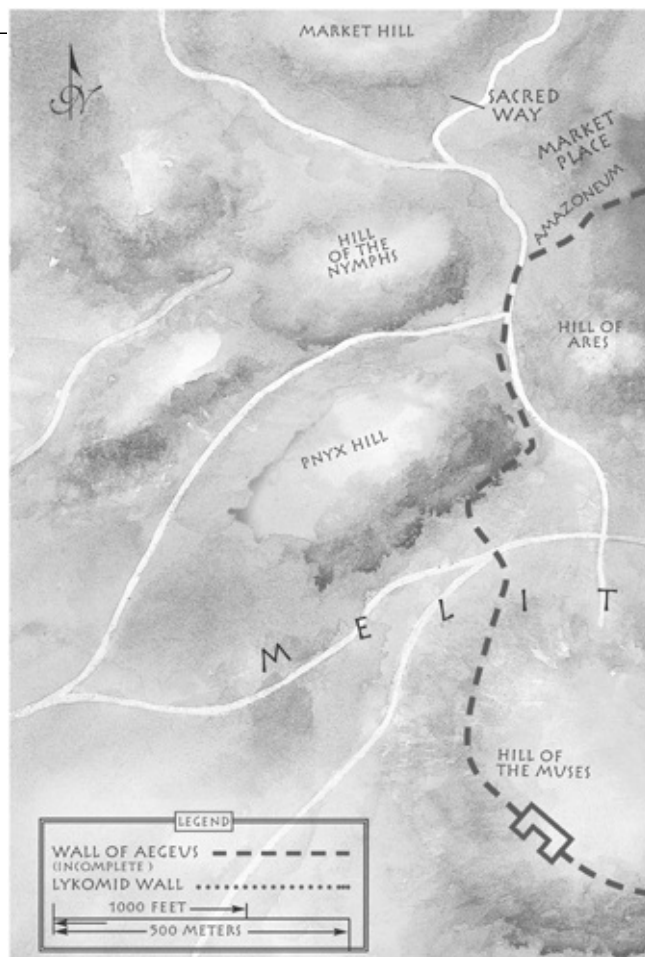
PRIAM: *Once before now I travelled to Phrygia where the vines grow, and there I saw a host of Phrygian men with their quick horses. . . . I too was numbered among them on the day when the Amazons came, women the equal of men.*

—Homer, *The Iliad*

This was the origin of the Amazonian invasion of Athens, which would seem to have been no slight or womanish enterprise. For it is impossible that the Amazons should have placed their camp in the very city, and joined battle close by the Pnyx unless, having first conquered the country around about, they had thus with impunity advanced to the city. That they encamped there is certain, and may be confirmed by the names that the places thereabout yet retain, and the graves and monuments of those that fell in the battle. . . . For indeed we are also told that [a number] of the Amazons [who] died were buried there in the place that is to this time called Amazoneum.

—Plutarch, *Life of Theseus*





BOOK ONE



MOTHER BONES

A TAME AMAZON



When I was a girl I had a nurse who was a tame Amazon. Of course such expression is a misnomer, and one of that race may be domesticated no more than an eagle or a she-wolf. Selene however (this was her name, “Moon”) had been detached at age nine from her *skyle*—the words for “battalion” and “family” being the same in the Amazon tongue—and sent to dwell among civilized society, at Sinope on the Black Sea, and had thus become conversant with settlement ways. She could not endure such confinement however; at age twelve she stole a horse and weapons and fled home to the Wild Land. As a grown warrior Selene fought at Thorn Hill against the Trojans and Dardanians, at Chalcedon against the Rhipaeian Scyths, and at the Halys against the fifty sons of Admetus. She could speak Greek and served both as adjutant and envoy, as well as commanding in the *hippotoxotai*, the fabled Corps of Mounted Archers. She held the rank of wing captain in the Great Battle of Athens, in which Theseus and his allies of the Twelve States, after months of fighting, at last beat back the army of women.

Selene surrendered shield and bridle at the pass between Parnes and Cithaeron, where the graves of Amazons may still be seen, alongside her lover Eleuthera, “Freedom,” who bore numerous wounds and to secure whose ransom and release Selene yielded up her own liberty. Selene was never shackled or stockaded in my father’s service, but held by her word alone, and so served honorably, governing my sister, Europa, and me until my sister’s fourteenth (and my eleventh) year.

You eldest of my daughters reckon the bloodbath that transpired at that season. Each year I recount the tale on this eve of the festival of the Boedromia, beneath that horns-skyward crescent called by men an Amazon moon. None of male sex, father, brother, husband, or son, may learn this chronicle now or ever, nor any fraction, so have we all sworn, even you youngest, donating our blood in the Iron Rite of Ares. Repeat with me now: who abjures this vow shall perish at our hands, so pledge we all.

Arise now, children. You youngest, take the hands of your sisters and follow me, Mother Bone, into the outer court. None will disturb us here. Double your overcloaks and set them in a ring upon the earth. The night is warm. Nestle at one another’s sides, resting your backs against the walls or trees. There. Let us form the Moon Crescent whose name is *labrys*, “double axe,” while I at its apex recite our lore. Listen well, daughters. Each verse I narrate, sear into memory. You eldest, who have heard the tale each autumn as you grew, accept this charge: if I alter so much as one stanza, bring me

book upon it, for our incantation wants naught of legend but truth alone. And when you come to impart this history to your own daughters, recall this commission and transmit these wonders uncorrupted, as I to you.

Selene feared the race of men. They exuded self-dignity, what she named *anaedor*, “no breath” “without soul.” She called Greeks “stick people,” by which she meant they creaked, stiff and wooden. Nor did she confine such reproach to men, but included Mother as well, and the women of our far west and of Attica entire, of whose behavior Selene could make no sense and in the presence of whose everyday acts, as the haggling with vendors or the chastising of servants, she often lowered her gaze, a gesture I have seen repeated by others among the Amazons, whose notation is of embarrassment for the actor observed and the courtly wish not to compound this by making her conscious of a witness.

Selene feared this quality in men, this obliviousness. It was what permitted them to tread on a beetle and not hear its cry, or rend the sheath of the earth with a plough and not feel her anguish. Yet Selene and her race, as all savage nations, were capable of appalling cruelty. God help the man, or woman, who fell into their clutches when they defended their honor or painted their faces for war.

Amazons believe in hate. Hatred is sacred to Ate, to Hecate and Black Persephone, and to Ares as well, whom they call with the nymph Harmonia their progenitor. Ephesian Artemis, whom they worship, was the greatest hater ever, they claim, surnamed Void of Mercy, and even Harmonia, whose name means concord to civilized folk, means rancor in their tongue. Amazons believe that mothers hate daughters and daughters mothers, that sea hates sky, and night day. The world is held together by hate, which is in their lexicon a bounty and divine dispensation. Lovers must hate one another before they may love, and to this end the bonding ritual which Amazon novices perform at eight and twelve when they formalize their *trikonai*, the notorious “bonds of three,” is constituted of a savage type of hand-to-hand brawling they call *anitome*, “anytime anywhere.” Kicking, biting, eye gouging, all are sanctioned. The elders form a circle about the fighting girls, plying with horsewhips any combatant perceived as slack in her attack. Once over, the fight and its memory, the Amazons believe, forms a bond which endures such that no warrior thus bound may ever desert another.

Selene cuffed Europa and me regularly. Nor were these love pats, but such blows as to fetch us on our feet. As frequently she caressed us, and many times must be scolded by Mother or Father for expressing affection at inappropriate moments, as in the presence of priests or elders. She slept in our beds, or we in hers, till we were six.

The shield and bridle that Selene had surrendered were objects of supreme fascination to my sisters and me. Father did not display these as trophies, not wishing to dishonor Selene; in fact he sought more than once to return them. Selene would not take them. They came to be stored in a chest in the loft above Father and Mother’s room. Europa and I soon learned to pick the lock; we would mount the attic and linger all afternoon, absorbed in the scent and sensation of these artifacts. We marveled at the workmanship of the bridle, which was ox-hide rimmed with ivory and electrum, the right cheekpiece depicting a griffin taking down an elk, the left a crescent moon, and a snaffle bit of pure gold. Selene’s shield was of bearskin, from the densest pack across the shoulders, crescent-shaped and three layers thick, laminated with a glue of elk sinew and faced with the skin of a black leopard. On one’s arm it felt like a timbrel drum, taut in its ash frame, astonishingly strong for something so light.

Selene smelled. Mother would not permit her into the formal rooms of the house, as the odor she exhaled, so Mother claimed, clung to every garment, to her hair, and even to the walls themselves. “Can you not smell it, children? Good God, what a stink!” Mother chased our governess, often with broom, to peals of our laughter. For Selene’s part, she abhorred the house and entered it only under compulsion, as civilized folk will a tomb. She could not hear in a house. I recall Father, seeking to chastise her for some transgression, calling her before his big counting desk. “Why the devil won’t you listen, Selene?” Her silence drove him wild. Finally he realized she could only hear him if he bespoke her out of doors. Soft worked better than hard. No blow or threat availed, nor gifts, however precious, to bend her counter to her will.

Selene permitted herself a solitary vanity: her hair, which was jet, of such luxuriance as to appear almost beyond human. She curried it as a horse’s mane, of which it reminded me, and dressed it, apart from men’s eyes, in the following manner. The top mass was first thrown forward from a part running ear to ear across the crown. The horsetail falling rearward was divided in four parts and cinched by four silver clasps, one for each cardinal direction. These were lifted off the neck and rolled together into a sort of broad horizontal bun, as gentlewomen of Cyrene do, which was then bound tight to the rear of the head by an ox-hide thong called *xaella*, “clothesline,” which itself is wrapped four turns about the head. The *xaella* is a weapon, a garrote. Its ends are tipped in elk horn and etched with the battle-axe of Ares. Once the rear was set, the thrown-forward forepeak would be drawn back, half of its mass cinched at the crown, to form a horsetail with its excess, the remainder woven in among the four quarters. The effect of this, either loose or topped with the Phrygian cap of doeskin, was both glamorous and fear-evoking, as the mass of hair seemed at once to make its wearer half a head taller and, as well, provide a helmet of its own, to cushion a fall or blow. The worst thrashing Europa and I ever received from Mother came when she discovered us dressing our hair in this fashion.

It became Selene’s wont, each autumn round the anniversary of the Great Battle of Athens, to “borrow” javelins and steed by night from Father’s stable and make away into the hills, holding out as fugitive for as long as a fortnight. At the first of these decampments, Father outfitted posses and published bounties for her recapture. Yet it became clear that no rider could overhaul her, or face her wrath if he did, but that Selene, left to her devices, would return of her own, sated by whatever trials or wonders she had undergone and content to serve out her sentence, so to say, for another twelvemonth. Never would our governess recount her adventures, despite Europa’s and my most piteous pleadings, save in the form of songs, whose verses appeared nonsense at first but later came to impart their cargo of wisdom.

These rideaways, as we called them on the farm, became if not condoned, then tolerated. My father came even to joke of them, inquiring of Selene when she planned to fly the coop this year, that he might draft his schedule around the date and hire on in advance a surrogate to supervise the children. Selene herself could not predict the hour of her absconding. She went when she went.

The bucks of the farm called Selene “Titless”—what they in ignorance took *A-mazos* to mean, though never to her face. In fact the term Amazon derives from the Cimmerian *Ooma Zygon*, “Daughters of the Horse.” This was meant pejoratively. The Cimmerians (who only acquired horsemanship latterly) sought to offer insult to their rivals of the plains. The Amazons viewed them with contempt. They never use the word Amazon to describe themselves; Selene employed it only to converse with Greeks and then grudgingly, because it had gained currency. Likewise she transpose

Amazon names into Greek, as Alcippe, “Powerful Mare,” or Melanippe, “Black Mare.”

They lusted after Selene, the swains of the farm, as they did all the maids, nor was Selene averse to grappling with him she favored, yet none could temper her or draw an uncoerced smile. Only beneath music’s spell would she relent, the proper tune proffered by the proper suitor, and then only with such a sorrowful and distant measure as to render her yet more remote.

There had been others of Selene’s kind in Attica then, taken like her of wounds after the Greco-Persian Battle. Several had been made mistresses; others placed in service. All ran off. Chained or bound, they died. Only Selene, constrained by her pledge and her care for my sister and me, abided. She acquired a certain notoriety. Town people would contrive occasion to visit the farm, nosing about to observe one of the Amazon race called in the Scythian tongue *oiorpata*, “man killers.” “Has her right breast indeed been seared off, to better draw the bow?” “Do you permit her near weapons?” “What holds her from running?”

Once a dame of the district of Melite, the aunt of Prince Atticus, to whom my sister would become betrothed, upbraided my father for exposing his daughters to such unholy influence. “The children will grow to be savages! Who will teach them to card and spin? How will they learn to hold seemly silence?”

My father believed girls should ride and run, nor grow effeminate, squeamish to take game or travel alone in the dark. Who better to impart such arts than a wing captain of Amazonia? Father admired Selene. He wore his custody of her with a covert pride, as one might holding the leash on a she-bear or a lioness. He felt protective of her. For men hated Selene on sight, and women more so, which phenomenon never failed to both stir and alarm my sister and me, and in the presence of which both of us were struck with a rage we could neither name nor exonerate.

Theseus himself, lord of Athens, owned acquaintance of Selene and had dispatched communications to her on occasion, including gifts which she disdained and, to our awe, discarded. On a spring noon of my eleventh year the king traveled out specifically to speak with her. Never had there been such a day. Here down our lane advanced Theseus, monarch of Athens and Eleusis, master of Crete and the Cycladic islands; he who had brought the dominion of law to Attica, binding within one polity the fractious Athenian barons and purging the land, in Myrinus’ phrase, of the brigands of misrule.

Theseus was our father’s kinsman, the king’s mother Aethra and Father’s mother Polycaste being first cousins, and both Father and his brother Damon had accompanied Theseus a generation previous on his first voyage to the Amazon Sea; yet never in memory had he trod the stones of our estate. He arrived by carriage, not horse or foot, for he had broken a bone in his thigh some days prior and moved with a gimp about by means of a forked staff. Ah, yet, when he came! Who had beheld a handsomer man? Taller by half a head than my father, himself tallest of the district, and carved as from oak. The pelt of his forearms, burnished gold from the sun, made me shiver, and his curls falling to his shoulders bore such a sheen as put one in mind of wild harts and martens. It took slender imagination to understand how Antiope, the Amazon queen, could have fallen so beneath his spell as to desert her own kind and even do battle against them, at this monarch’s side.

My sister and I scrutinized great Theseus’ apparel: a simple white tunic with a blue border and a rust-colored overcloak, clamped with a brooch of gold in the shape of a sponge. Here was the story:

Once during Theseus' early tenure as king, a commoner had approached the palace seeking hearing. He was informed that our lord was at his bath; entry was permitted to no one. But the king heard the man at the gate and motioned his guardsmen to relent. He received the fellow while still in the tub and rendered his judgment, which happened to be favorable. When the nobles learned of this they were outraged by its want of dignity. But the gesture endeared Theseus to the commons, so that from this day to act "from the bathtub" means to bypass channels and move immediately with compassion. In gratitude the petitioner presented Theseus with a golden charm in the shape of a sponge, which the king prized beyond all other honors and set in place on his garment, men said, before even his brooches of royalty.

So too did he act on this visit to our home, saluting Father as "Elias, dear cousin and friend," and Uncle Damon as "my fellow black sheep." He disburdened himself of all signia of rank, surrendering these to my sister and mother as a mark of respect to them, and when he sat apart with Selene beneath the oak (which ever after came to be called the King's Oak) it was a sight of wonder to those of the farm, above all the hands who despised her, to behold with what deference the king bespoke the captive maid and with what grave attention he received her response.

We could not know of that which he informed Selene, namely, the critical wounding in battle of her lover Eleuthera, three months' trek east in her homeland on the Black Sea. The report, months old, had only the day before reached Athens by ship, and Theseus, honoring ancient oaths, had felt bound to impart it to Selene in person. Amazons may only take lovers in threes, the triple bond they call *trikona*. Hell, they say, will take any one of the three in place of any other. This is the stem of valor in battle, the Amazons believe, for each triple-mate may donate her life to preserve her comrade's. Selene and Eleuthera were such mates. Nor could one tell by studying Selene's face what grief or resolve she formulated on that account, by so little did her aspect alter. Only later that evening, tracking her like spies, did my sister and I discover the charm of flint and horn she had hung upon the camphor tree which stood alone upon the farm's east-facing slope. This the Amazons call an *aestival*, which term has no equivalent in Greek. It is like a ticket one leaves for a friend to attend a chorus dance. An aestival is a pledge to set one's own life in place of her lover's and, failing that, signaling the vow to reunite with her in hell.

Theseus well comprehended these savage tenets and tendered warning to my father, speaking apart in the aftercourse of his interview with Selene, that she, driven now by a mandate superseding the pledge which held her in indenture, might claim her release or even seize it by her own hand. Father understood this as well. Both men were aware of the imperative held by all warrior races to serve honor before survival. This too might impel Selene to run.

We children divined this as well and more, intimates of our governess. We knew the romance which bound our king to the Amazon Antiope, who had fought at his side in the Great Battle. Perhaps the king yet loved Antiope, long perished as she was, or feared the magic of Eleuthera, who bore the wife's name of the Scythians, *Molpadia*, "Death Song." Our girls' eyes never left the monarch, seeking in his demeanor some hint of heartsoreness, which we thought we detected, unaware of its actual source. Nor did the youths of the farm, restrained by their own diffidence from approaching, dare bespeak the king in such frank manner as the governess. We could see them mutter to one another as men will. "What she got, that wild bitch, that sets her so high and mighty over us?"

They hated Selene before, and more now, so that this night, after the king's party had departed, the bucks came for Selene in her kennel, a bark lean-to alongside the room I shared with my sister, and dragged her forth to the dark. When Europa and I made to scream, Selene fixed us with a glare that commanded our silence, which she herself would maintain, we knew, and bear mute all the men would do, though we flew anyway to Father and Mother, but neither would come at once, though we implored them, knowing the ravagement of person being inflicted on Selene with each momentary delay. Father believed that on the farm, as on a ship, the hands sometimes may not be ruled but must work out their malice, and him or her judged most outcast must bear the toll. I hated my father in that hour. Perhaps he too feared Selene's flight yet knew not how to quell it, or felt his mastery of her failing or proving false. He departed to her rescue indeed, but absent haste.

Mother held Europa and me from following, and, tugging us to her breast, made to account. "Selene is not a person as you or I, children, but a wild creature who may bear that which to a human being would be intolerable."

"Do you mean she may be violated, as drakes in a gang assault a duck?" This my sister demanded and received a blow for her insolence.

Mother restrained us long enough for the men to work their evil: then, Father reappearing, with a look released us. We understood we might tend Selene now, and flew to her.

Men gave it out that what came later was payout for the way she was shamed, or grief at the news she had borne. It was neither. For one of her race, who had surrendered and served, no further shame was possible, nor was grief grounds for vengeance but only *altare*, union with the fallen, as the Amazons call it in their tongue.

Selene did not run away that night. Rather she called Europa and me apart, to that plane copse where she had schooled us in silence, and over three nights imparted to us her history. When an Amazon senses the hour of her death approaching—when wounded or ill, say, or on the eve of some battle before which she has received a vision or sign of her impending end—the law of her race commands her to "make her testament." She gathers her daughters and imparts her chronicle. Such account, Selene conveyed to us, rarely takes form as a narration of events, but may contain as much of visions and dreams as of waking adventure.

These annals Selene now delivered to us, as I this night pass them on to you. She told of her childhood upon the eastern steppe; of the arrival by sea of Theseus twenty years past; how the king had won the heart of Antiope, war queen of Amazonia, and fled with her to Athens. Selene told of the fury of the Amazons and of the marshaling, beneath Eleuthera, of their own clans, reinforced by the male tribes of the plains, Scyths and Maeotians, Thracians and Tower People, Massa Getai and Thysan Getai, and fifty other nations, and of this army's three-month trek west and assault upon our city. These wonders Selene narrated with such unwonted urgency as to strike my sister and me with dread (for why would she offer her testament unless she was preparing to die?) yet we were bound to silence by our love for her and the awe in which we held her.

On the third night she led us apart to that toppled wall we children called the Viper's Pocket and there, inserting her arm to the shoulder within a cleft, felt about and withdrew a stone adder, the

serpent yet torpid with the night chill, whose poison the Amazons employ to produce that state called in their tongue *adraneia*, “no turning back.” Clamping the snake behind the neck, Selene set its nostrils adjacent her calf. She uttered no cry, nor moved, as the fangs entered her flesh and she struck off the head with her sickle. Her blade prized apart the snake’s jaws and extracted the fangs, deep as the joint of a thumb. She sang:

Kallos beauty, orge wrath,

Heart speaks but none listen

Save we on this path.

Now look you there, daughters and granddaughters, beneath the moon, to that drystone wall which yokes the shearing pens to the gate of the lane.

From there, on the noon succeeding that night, Selene came mounted on my father’s stallion, which she had stolen from its stall moments before. Between the steed’s jaws set the golden bit of Selene’s bridle; on her forearm rode the war shield of bearskin and black leopard. She whipped the beast to the gallop, while the boys and men of the farm raced in a gang to cut her off.

Scyllus the goatherd Selene drove through with the flung javelin, there before the wall, striking him in the solar plexus with the full force of her throw, enlarged by the horse’s rising moment so that the goatherd did not even stagger but was nailed, as a plank beneath the joiner’s mawl, against the boards of the gate, slain before his mouth could gape or arm ascend to direct the alarm.

With the bow Selene slew Dracon the foreman, there beside the spring’s hollow, and at a gallop leapt the wall, loosing a second shaft as she flew, which took the boy Memnon square in the throat, slicing voice box through and severing the column which supports the weight of the skull, so that he dropped like a sack of stones, life-fled before his carcass hit the dirt. And here Mentor, called Torch Hand, who had abused Selene most brutally and handled her most with contempt, seeing her vault wall and palisade and bear down hard upon him, wheeled to flee.

Now from the Amazon’s throat, which had endured so long in mute forbearance, ascended that wailing cry which even to recall at the remove of years sends the gooseflesh coursing, and, snatching the woodsman’s hatchet she bore in the stead of a battle-axe in the brace across her shoulders, she slung this weapon upon her fleeing prey at a dead run, its warhead whistling end over end to fix him between the shoulder blades and plunge a full hand’s breadth deep into sinew and bone. The force of the blow drove the brute face-foremost into the dirt, where he struck and bounced, arms neither flung wide in agony nor extended before him to break the fall but hanging slack at his sides, and slid upon his chest as a stone skipped across a pond, to skid crown-first into the wattle underpan of the sows’ trough, dead as a rat and as void of locomotion.

Selene's mount's hooves thundered past and, strewing straw as she heeled him hard over, slewed round the corner and raced away up the slope, trampling the grafted vines which had been staked out just that forenoon. She vanished beneath the olives of the rise, leaving naught but hoof-punched dust to drift and settle, punctuating her flight.

ELEUTHERA MEANS FREEDOM

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Two nights later I woke to find my sister flown. I knew at once she had fled to follow Selene. The transom beneath the eaves was our accustomed escape (as our little room had no window and no outside door); in moments I was up and over, barefoot, and away into the woods.

There must have been fifty hiding places employed by Europa and me, to any of which she could have flown, yet my feet bore me toward that plane grove, our academy of silence, where Selene sacrificed a dove to the moon at each solstice. Once in winter when I had stamped there with the cold, our governess had made Europa and me (for one may not be scourged apart from the other) stand nightlong in frost so hard we lost sensation to the waist. I crested the slope now, lungs heaving, only to have a blow unseen cut my feet from beneath me. I plunged, on my back in my nightshirt, to discover a form atop my chest and a blade at my throat.

“Who has followed you?”

It was Europa. She was naked. Dark as it was, I could see three slashes carved in echelon into the flesh of her breast. This was the *matrikon*, the ritual self-mutilation practiced by the Amazons on the eve of battle.

“What have you done to yourself?” I cried.

My sister’s horse Redhead waited, laden with kit.

“You mean to track Selene!”

Europa hissed me silent. “Why did you follow, Bones?” (This is the name I was called as a child for the dearth of meat on my frame.)

“Take me with you!” I begged.

Europa had mounted to the crown of the slope and held there, motionless, listening. At last satisfied that no one had tracked me, she skidded down and again seized me by the wrist. “There, feel it?”

She thrust my hand between her legs.

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“I bleed woman’s blood.”

The hair stood erect over all my body. My sister’s first moon flow. She was a woman now. I could see from the churned earth that she had been dancing. She turned from me in a state of exaltation and elevated both arms toward the moon, which was her namesake, Europa “Broad Face,” as it was Selene’s “Full Moon.” Her breath steamed upon the air. I marveled to behold her in this transport impaled in ecstasy upon that shaft which lanced silver between the trees.

“Take me with you, sister!”

“You must keep this secret. You heard the men today!”

Indeed at dawn this day Europa and I had trekked into the city to the site of the Assembly and there watched from the *peuke* copse at the brow of the Pnyx (along with other children, slaves, and women debarred by law from deliberations of policy) as the men debated Selene’s fate and what action to take regarding her crime and flight.

Outrage had been fierce and immediate in the wake of the farmyard massacre. Before the blood of the slain had dried, their male kin had been sent for, while the dames swarmed about their slaughtered sons and husbands, wailing in woe and horror. Bring horses and weapons! Muster a posse! Father was appointed captain. My sister and I could see him stall. As an hour slipped away, and another, in the marshaling and provisioning and assigning of arms, the zeal for pursuit abated. Common sense took the futility of launching after Selene. Who could overhaul the Amazon, who had the postnoon’s start and gained more with each hour? Selene would run her mount till it dropped, then steal another and another, while the company on her trail must trade for or purchase fresh animals, through a country already made disgruntled by its prey’s passage, nor could an armed party pass through alien states without the absent permission of their princes. Theseus himself did not wish to make a case of this, when his ministers informed him of it later that day, reckoning other affairs of state of far more pressing urgency, namely the increasing boldness of certain barons, agitating for independence from the crown, not to say their allies in the Assembly, who sensed, perhaps, a slackening in Theseus’ support among the people and sought to exploit this for their own advantage.

The day passed, and another. Rage at Selene moderated, succeeded by grief for the slain and a darker sense, never absent among superstitious country folk, of a god’s hand in the play. Perhaps heaven had willed this holocaust. Surely the dead could make no claim to blamelessness. And the kin, however passionately they may have wished for revenge, were poor men with few resources and less influence.

And so all sought to put from mind this unhappy episode, the running-amok of an obscure and doubtless half-mad governess. But one man, Lykos, the son of Pandion, who was brother to Theseus’ father Aegeus and felt himself cheated of Athens’s throne, hated Theseus and bore him malice for the and other ills long past. Lykos perceived in the event of Selene’s crime and flight the chance to work evil to his enemy. So he set himself to inflame the people, declaring in assembly that such lawlessness unpunished would inspire further mischief—not the harmless outlawry of boys or men but that

women, most pernicious and foul. This struck a chord. For what husband or householder—Lykos incited the males of the Assembly—may close both eyes in sleep, when tame governesses sling fat darts and fly unsoured to alien lands?

The orator recalled to his hearers that epoch, so few generations past, when fathers could not even name their own sons with certainty, such was the promiscuity of women. Here at Athens our king Cecrops had founded the institution of marriage, by which the unchaste nature of the female was last governed and the rights of property accession, father to son, established in accordance with heaven's will.

“How scandalous, men of Athens, if our city, where God first bound female to male in holy matrimony, should be the site of this ordinance's overthrow. Here too did divine Demeter first tutor man in bringing forth the bounties of the earth. To our fathers she taught cultivation of the soil and husbandry of animals, by which arts, shared by us freely with all humankind, has the race of men elevated itself from the slough. Here our fathers founded the twin pillars of civilization—agriculture and monogamy. Will we, their sons, permit both to perish? Let this wild woman get away with murder,” Lykos railed, “and we might as well strike the city and return with her to cleft and mire!”

The Assembly met then as now outdoors on the hill of the Pnyx, presided over by Theseus, and from this vantage Lykos gestured to the quarters south, west, and north, recalling to his countrymen the siege of the state, only one generation past.

“Have you forgotten so soon, men of Athens? Let me remind you, then, of that hour when the hordes of Amazonia made their camp on the very stones upon which we convene today and kindled for their cookfires the timbers of our homes, which they and their savage allies had razed entire, driving us before their host in terror. Nor did the ranks of the foe stand slender or attenuated, but in depth twenty shields, with battalions of male auxiliaries, wild Scythians and Thracians and Issedonians, Black Cloaks and Tower People, Massa Getai and Thyssa Getai, painted Tralliai and screw-maned Strymonians, archers and slingers as well as armored infantry, and cavalry above thirty thousand. Nor could we repair to our estates, gentlemen, for the army of Amazons had captured all, laying waste the countryside from Eleusis to Acharnae, while we ourselves starved and rationed water, huddled on the Acropolis behind a palisade of timber and stone. Have you disremembered, men of Athens? Has this little scrape escaped your recall?”

Lykos called on Theseus to mount a pursuit of the Amazon Selene by a fleet and army. He so agitated the people that they stood upon the instant of approving a motion to pursue the fugitive all the way to the Black Sea if necessary, exacting vengeance not on her alone but whatever remained of her race, wiping them out at last and for all time.

Our king rose upon his hobbled leg. The herald set the speaker's *skeptron* in his hand.

“Men of Athens,” Theseus began, “I stand in awe of this demonstration of spirit. Would that the commonwealth could call upon such zeal in all her perils. Yet you will acquit me, I hope, if I detect within our speaker's fervor a subtler and more duplicitous scheme. What do you care for this issue, Lykos? I daresay you would not part with a parsnip for the sake of this female Selene or the victims of her wrath, none of whom you could even name before yesterday.” The king indicated his president

throne. “You’d like this seat, wouldn’t you, Lykos? Or failing that, the satisfaction of ousting me from it? Lykos! Your name means Wolf and like a wolf you stalk me.”

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Murmurs greeted this, and cries from both parties.

“What I shall do about this wild woman,” Theseus resumed, “I know not yet. But I know what I will not do. I will not pursue her across oceans. Not from fear of rivals, however skilled in the manipulation of their countrymen’s passions, but because it is simply not worth it. I will not elevate the moment of this lamentable homicide by my participation in the pursuit of its instrument.”

Theseus set forth an alternative. If Lykos craved so fervently the capture of this savage maid, let him lead the party in person. The state would foot the bill, declared Theseus, and he himself would donate twenty battle mounts, trained and tractable for sea transport. “Name your ships and men, Lykos, and I will fund them. If you return with your prize, may all glory redound to you.”

It was with no slender amusement that Europa and I, not to say the Assembly entire, played witness to Lykos’ recitation of alibis to duck this chore. He retreated beneath a storm of derision. The Assembly adjourned.

Now at midnight in the plane grove, my sister dressed and drew her riding cloak about her; she took Redhead’s reins and moved to mount. “Do you remember Selene’s testament?” she addressed me.

Of course I did. I could recite it by heart.

“And her story of Eleuthera’s warrior oath?”

Of course.

“If Eleuthera lies now near death in the Amazon homeland,” my sister spoke, “and Selene has flown to aid her, then I must go too. To preserve her if I can! I would gladly die beside her, or for her.”

None but a younger sister knows the thralldom in which she stands to her elder. It rubbed even harder with Europa, for she was such a prodigy as rider and runner, fastest of our district, boy included, and possessed of the wildest heart and keenest wit. Now she was a woman, set to launch upon the most brilliant of adventures, while I, her mealy brat sister, must not only wither at home bereft of her and Selene, but act out the pretense of ignorance to all who would quiz me later. I feared too for my dear sister. She was just a girl! I loved and hated and envied her all in the same breath.

Europa saw it. She drew me to her. “You must second me now, Bones, as Selene seconded Eleuthera. Do you remember the story?”

Indeed. Selene had told it a hundred times; we begged for it, my sister and I, never tiring of its recitation.

Selene’s elder mate of the triple bond called trikona was that Eleuthera whose life she had preserved by the sacrifice of her own liberty in the aftermath of the Great Battle of Athens. At the time of this childhood chronicle however (the one my sister referred to), Eleuthera was fourteen

Selene eleven—the same ages Europa and I were now—in the homeland of the Lycasteian Amazon on the Wild Lands north of the Black Sea. Amazons may not renounce their virginity until they have taken the lives of three foes in battle. At that time Eleuthera had claimed one and bore his scalp on a rawhide thong at her waist. This night of which Selene spoke, a raid had been made by two hundred Eleuthera's clan and others, upon a party of Phrygian freebooters encroaching on their country. Eleuthera, emerging from the fray at a hard gallop to that defile where Selene and the other novices too young to fight waited holding the second string of horses, had skittered across the plain (it was winter, the earth iron-hard) calling to her younger mate to vault and ride; victory was theirs and no pursuit. Mount and follow me!

Selene had sprung to the back of Eleuthera's two-horse, whom she had just finished "running off" to get him his second wind, and heeling him with all her strength had barely held her elder in sight, with such joy did Eleuthera's primary mount, a big long-legged gelding called Soup Bones, bear her across the frost. At last reining-in, Eleuthera had permitted Selene to draw alongside and, stretching her lance moonward, held out upon its shaft two scalps of men, slick with blood and the still-steaming flesh of the crowns from which they had been torn. Eleuthera here howled such a cry of joy, Selene told me, that my sister and me, as made the down of her arms stand up stiff as boar's bristles.

"Now by the laws I may take a man between my thighs," Eleuthera had cried, laughing. "But I shall not. Never! But make these my children"—she elevated the scalps—"and by them, and all that follow, preserve the free people!"

This was Eleuthera's warrior oath. My sister had imbibed the tale a hundred times, for she would beg to hear it, untiring, and Selene never denied her. I devoured it too, wondering at the manner by which our governess imparted it, ever the same, so that we came, Europa and I, to recite entire passages. My sister's soul drank the song as a horse hard-ridden sucks water from a forest pool, and Selene, perceiving and approving, enlisted her whole heart in consummating our conspiracy. She drew Europa to her, and me, inflecting the tale with her touch as well. As she told of Eleuthera's horse, we felt her knees press our flanks; her fingers played across our shoulders as hoof strikes on the steppes; she kissed us and flattened our breasts against hers so that the smell of her hair and the heat of her flesh reinforced the tale and became indivisible from it. She became Eleuthera to us, and as she told Selene, had surrendered in love to that warrior maid whose name means Freedom, so Europa and I fell in love with her.

I begged my sister to take me with her.

"Of course you cannot go, Bones. But you may aid me if you will."

I would! Just tell me how.

"Buy time for me. Conceal my flight. Play the warrior when they grill you. Offer nothing. Back me up as Selene has backed Eleuthera."

I knew she was duping me. I could tell as she took my shoulders in her hands and bent her gaze upon mine in savage confidentiality. She was ceding me a spy's errand and passing it off as a hero's. Yet she was my sister, my champion and mentor and ideal. What option did I own but to obey her, and

make my peace with being left behind?

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