

Chapter One

Timon

Helen, the queen of Sparta, often came to visit the orphanage I grew up in. She sometimes brought the king, Menelaus, and the princess, Hermione, with her.

After all, she liked to tell the orphans, she'd spent her childhood in the same orphanage.

"They found me and my sister in a basket," she'd say, "just outside the front gate."

Everybody knew the story. When the orphanage guardians discovered the basket, Helen was a newborn. The other child in the basket, who they assumed was her sister, was a year older. Her name, sewn into her tunic like Helen's, was Clytemnestra. Their birth dates were embroidered next to their names.

That was only the beginning of Helen's story. Eighteen years later, the kings of Greece decided she was the most beautiful woman in the world. Early in the morning of the day she was to marry one of them, Menelaus, the eighteen-year-old king of Sparta, she left in a ship with a wedding guest, Paris, also eighteen years old, a Trojan prince. The ship was bound for Troy.

The children in the orphanage, to say nothing of the guardians, couldn't put aside the questions all Greeks asked regarding Helen. Had Paris forcibly taken her with him? Or had she run off with him of her own free will?

Whether Helen's leave-taking was an abduction, the official story, or an elopement, as many believed, it precipitated the devastating war the Greek kingdoms fought against Troy. Parents of almost all of the children in the orphanage died in the war.

Helen

During our days on the ship sailing to Troy, the three guards Paris had taken with him to Sparta were somber, as if they anticipated nothing good would come from what Paris and I were doing. They were the same age as us, but they often seemed to me older than they were.

They'd initially assumed Paris and I would share a room on the ship, but he informed them I'd have one of my own.

"We aren't married," I heard him say to them. "Not yet at least."

Helen

On the morning of our arrival in the harbor at Troy, Paris sent one of his guards to the palace. When the guard returned to the ship, he told Paris and me Prince Hector, who was Paris's twenty-two-year-old brother, had agreed to speak with us in his chamber.

Paris and I seated ourselves on chairs facing his brother, who sat on his chair with his feet planted on the floor in front of him and his broad shoulders pulled back as if he'd already inherited his father Priam's throne and was hearing pleas from his subjects. Hector's eyes and hair were the same olive brown as his younger brother's. Their skin was the color of bronze.

Trojan boys and men had chosen to do what the Greeks did then. As if they didn't want to leave their boyhoods behind them, they began shaving off their facial hair as soon as it sprouted. Hector and Paris were no exceptions.

"I understand," Hector said to me, "you're not royalty."

"I grew up in an orphanage," I said. "Nobody knows who my mother and father were."

"And yet," Hector said, "you were betrothed to King Menelaus of Sparta."

"I was."

“I also understand you left Sparta with my brother the morning of the day you were supposed to marry Menelaus.”

“I did.”

“Achilles, Odysseus, Ajax, Agamemnon and all the other Greek kings were present for your wedding?”

“They were.”

“You decided, nevertheless, at the last moment, not to marry Menelaus?”

“As you can see, I sailed to Troy with your brother.”

Hector turned to Paris. “They’ll demand we send her back to Sparta.”

Paris nodded. “I’m certain they will.”

Hector turned to me. “My brother’s guard told me the Greek kings consider you the most beautiful woman in the world.”

I shook my head. “That was idle talk. I hope there’s a lot more to me than my outward appearance.”

Hector nodded. “I’m certain you’re right about that. Paris is also more than the winning athlete the Trojan people celebrate and love. And that’s why I’m confused. If the Greek kings demand we send you back to Sparta, will you want us to comply?”

“No, I wish to stay here with Paris.”

Hector turned to Paris. “Do you want a war with Greece?”

“Absolutely not,” Paris replied.

Hector turned to me. “Do you?”

“No,” I replied. “But am I supposed to believe two great peoples would fight a war over whose bed an orphan shares? I’m certain Menelaus was in love with me, but I’m just as certain he’ll find happiness without me at his side. I’m also confident he’ll be a successful king. The Spartan people will come to cherish his fairness. He’ll always put their well-being above his own. And of all the Greek kings, he’s the one who most wants peace with your people.”

Hector blinked his eyes. “But you wish to remain in Troy?”

“Yes.”

“You won’t go back to Sparta voluntarily?”

“No.”

“If the Greek kings declare war on us, they’ll need to sail here to fight us. You’ve already seen the great walls of Troy.”

“I was most impressed when I saw them.”

They were as high as the tallest trees in Greece. They consisted of rectangular stone blocks laid and mortared together as if they were bricks. Massively wide at their bottom, they narrowed as they rose but still seemed impenetrably thick at their top. Tall watchtowers rose over every entrance to the city like guardian giants from some other world.

“The Greeks will never breach or climb over those walls,” Hector said. “And we can hold out here for a long time.”

“You make me think,” I said, “you’re willing to fight a war with the Greeks.”

“A defensive war, yes.”

“Do you *want* to fight a defensive war with the Greeks?”

“Yes, I do,” Hector replied. “Some Greeks have chosen to hate Trojans. They fear our rising power and influence in the world. I understand their leader is Agamemnon, the brother of the person you were supposed to marry.”

I chose to remain silent.

“A war,” Hector said, “can’t stop those Greeks from hating Trojans. It can, though, make them respect us and not wish to fight another war with us.”

Again, I said nothing.

“My father and mother,” Hector said, “won’t send you back to Sparta against your will.”

Paris and I looked at one another.

We could only hope Achilles, Odysseus, Ajax and the other Greek kings would choose reason over emotion and remain opposed to the war Hector and Agamemnon wanted to fight.

Timon

When I was still quite young, I noticed a difference between the other orphans and me. They all had a connection to the world outside the orphanage. For some of them it was merely a location, a place in Sparta where they'd been born. Others knew the names of their parents and how they'd died. Some even had relatives they could hope to see one day.

Presumably, my father and mother died in the war, but nobody could say for certain they had. Nobody could tell me what their names were, where they'd lived or who their and my relatives might be. I had only my name and my birth date, sewn into my tunic like Helen's and her sister's. Even where that information had come from was a question nobody could answer.