

The final part of the bestselling STARCROSED trilogy

SHE MUST RISE

GODDESS

OR THEY
WILL FALL . . .

JOSEPHINE ANGELINI

'I haven't wanted a book so much since *The Hunger Games*'
Los Angeles Times



CHAPTER ONE

Helen could see what she guessed was the River Styx just off to her left. It was a roaring torrent, riddled with icebergs. No sane person would dare swim across it. Feeling stranded, she limped around in a tight circle. A quick scan of the horizon showed that there was no one else on the barren plain.

‘Damn it,’ she swore to herself, her voice breaking. Her vocal cords were not completely healed. Less than an hour ago, Ares had slit her throat, and although it still hurt when she spoke, cussing made her feel better. ‘So typical.’

She’d just made a promise to her friend Zach. He was dying in her arms, and she’d sworn that she would make sure that he drank from the River of Joy in the afterlife. Zach had sacrificed himself to help her, and in his final moments he’d given her the clue that had allowed her to kill Automedon and save Lucas and Orion.

Helen intended to keep her promise to Zach even if she had to carry him to the Elysian Fields and right up to the banks of the River of Joy herself – broken ribs,

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wonky leg and all. But for some reason, her usual way of navigating in the Underworld wasn't working. Normally, all she had to do was say out loud what she wanted and it just happened.

She was the Descender, which meant that she was one of the exceedingly few Scions who could go down to the Underworld in her living body and not just as a spirit. She could even control the landscape to a certain extent, but of course just when she needed that talent the most it found a way to go on the fritz. It was just so *Greek*. One of the things Helen resented the most about being a Scion was that it meant that there was an appalling amount of irony in her life.

Helen pinched her bruised lips together in frustration and raised her hoarse voice to the empty sky. 'I *said* – I want to appear by Zach's spirit!'

'I have that one's soul, niece.'

Helen spun round and saw Hades, lord of the Underworld, standing several paces behind her. Tall and poised, he was wreathed in shadows that dissipated like fingers of fog relaxing their grip. The Helm of Darkness and the extra yards of fabric from the black toga he wore obscured most of his face, but she could just make out his lush mouth and square chin. The rest of his toga was draped over his body like a decorative afterthought. Half of his smooth chest and his powerful arms and legs were bare. Helen swallowed and concentrated on focusing her swollen eyes.

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‘Sit, please. Before you fall,’ he said softly. Two simple, padded folding chairs appeared, and Helen eased her abused body into one while Hades took the other. ‘You are still wounded. Why did you come here when you should be healing?’

‘I have to guide my friend to paradise. Where he belongs.’ Helen’s voice trembled with fear, although Hades had never hurt her. Unlike Ares, the god who had just tortured her, Hades had always been relatively kind. But he was still the lord of the dead, and the shadows around him were filled with the whispers of ghosts.

‘What makes you think that you know where Zach’s soul belongs?’ he asked.

‘He was a hero . . . Maybe not at the beginning when he was still being a jackass, but at the end, and that’s the bit that counts, right? And heroes go to the Elysian Fields.’

‘I wasn’t questioning Zach’s valour,’ Hades reminded her gently. ‘What I asked was: what makes *you* fit to judge his soul?’

‘I . . . huh?’ Helen blurted out, confused. She’d taken one too many knocks to the head that night, and she wasn’t up to a lesson in semantics. ‘Look, I didn’t come here to judge anyone. I made a promise, and I just want to keep it.’

‘And yet I’m the one who makes the decisions here. Not you.’

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Helen had no argument for that. This was his world. All she could do was stare at him pleadingly.

Hades's soft mouth curved into a distant smile, and he seemed to consider what Helen had said. 'The way you handled the freeing of the Furies proved that you are compassionate. A good start – but I'm afraid compassion is not enough, Helen. You lack understanding.'

'Was that a test then? The Furies?' An accusing note crept into her voice as Helen recalled what she and Orion had gone through on her last mission in the Underworld. She got even angrier when she considered what the Furies themselves went through. If those three girls were tormented for thousands of years just to prove that Helen was a compassionate person, then there was something terribly wrong with the universe.

'Test.' Hades's lovely mouth twisted bitterly round the word, as if he could read Helen's thoughts and agreed with her. 'If life is a test, then who do you think grades it?'

'You?' she guessed.

'You still don't understand.' He sighed. 'You don't even understand what this is.' He gestured to the land around him, indicating the Underworld. 'Or what you are. They call you the Descender because you can come here at will, but the ability to enter the Underworld is the smallest manifestation of your power. You do not understand what *you* are enough to judge others yet.'

'Help me then.' He seemed so sad, so beat down by

his lot in life. She suddenly wanted to see his eyes very badly and leaned closer to Hades, trying to dip her head down to see under the fabric obscuring his face. 'I want to understand.'

The shadows spun out again, hiding him and murmuring the regrets of the dead. Helen's insides chilled. The words from the tyrant prophecy came to her mind – *born to bitterness*. She sat back.

'Shadowmasters,' Helen whispered. 'Do they get their power from you?'

'A long time ago, a woman known as Morgan La Fey from the House of Thebes had the same talent you have – the one that allows you to come to the Underworld. She bore me a son named Mordred, and since then my burden has haunted the House of Thebes.' His voice trailed off regretfully before he stood and held out a hand to her. She slipped her hand into his and allowed him to help her stand. 'You must go back now. Come to me as often as you like, niece, and I will try my best to bring you to understanding.' Hades tilted his head to the side and laughed quietly to himself. His lips parted, revealing diamond-shaped incisors. 'That's why I've allowed you, and those with the same talent before you, to enter my realm – to learn about yourselves. But right now you are too badly injured to be here.'

The world shifted, and Helen felt his mile-wide hand lifting her out of the Underworld and placing her gently back in her bed.

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'Wait! What about Zach?' she asked. As Hades released her, Helen heard him whisper in her ear.

'Zach drinks from the River of Joy, I swear it. Rest now, niece.'

Helen reached out to move the shadows away from his face, but Hades had already left her. She fell into a deep slumber, her broken body greedily sucking up sleep as it tried to heal itself.

After Ares was sealed away in Tartarus and the rift in the ground closed, Daphne had carefully collected her daughter's broken body as Castor carried Lucas and Hector carried Orion back to the Delos compound. Daphne had only been running for a few moments when her daughter fell asleep in her arms. For a moment, Daphne was worried. Helen's injuries had been horrible – some of the worst Daphne had ever seen – but when she listened for the sound of Helen's heart, she heard it beating slowly but steadily.

It wasn't much past dawn by the time they made it back to Nantucket from the caves on the Massachusetts mainland. In the early morning light, Daphne carried Helen up the Delos staircase and down the hallway to the first room she could find that seemed to belong to a girl. She looked regretfully at the pretty silk comforter that her filthy, blood-soaked daughter was about to ruin. Not that it mattered. The House of Thebes had a large enough fortune to replace it. A fortune that had, in part,

once belonged to Daphne and Helen's House – the House of Atreus.

Tantalus could scream 'holy war' and rant about how it was the 'Scions' turn' to rule as much as he wanted, but he'd never fooled the Heads of the other Houses. The Purge some twenty years ago was just as much a grab for the other Houses' wealth as it was a grab for immortality.

The prophecy that had started the Purge said that when the Four Houses were made into One House by the shedding of blood, then Atlantis would rise again. The exact wording that Daphne had memorized stated that in the new Atlantis, the Scions could find immortality. The prophecy didn't actually say that the Scions would *become* immortal – it just said they could *find* immortality there. Daphne wasn't optimistic enough to think immortality was a sure thing. But Tantalus was, and he'd used this prophecy to rally the Hundred Cousins of Thebes around him to kill off all the other Houses.

The whole thing was a sham, as far as Daphne was concerned, sanctified by a lot of mumbo jumbo from the last Oracle – who they all knew had gone crazy after making her first prophecy. But it worked.

Lots of Scions left their vast properties behind to be plundered by the House of Thebes in order to play dead and avoid the slaughter – like Daedalus and Leda, Orion's parents. Like Daphne herself. But Daphne had never cared for money. Then again, she'd never had any moral qualms about taking money when she needed it. Other

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Scions, like Orion and his parents, did have qualms about theft, and they'd struggled for the last two decades while the House of Thebes lived in luxury. Remembering this, Daphne placed Helen on the bed and destroyed the lovely comforter with a little smile.

Before Daphne could turn to get water and gauze to clean her daughter's rapidly healing wounds, Helen disappeared and life-draining cold took her place. Daphne assumed that Helen had descended. Time ticked by. Daphne waited, her anxiety growing with each moment. She had thought that trips to the Underworld were instantaneous – that time didn't pass. So much time went by that Daphne began to wonder if she should wake up the rest of the house, but before she made a move Helen reappeared. Her body smelt like the barren air of the Underworld.

Daphne's teeth chattered, not from the cold, but from the fearful memories the smell of that air awoke in her. She had nearly died so many times now that she could guess what part of the Underworld Helen had visited. The smell was not baked enough to be the dry lands, and there was a touch of damp mud clinging to Helen's feet. Daphne guessed that meant she must have gone to the banks of the River Styx itself.

'Helen?' Daphne cooed. She smoothed her daughter's hair and peered into her chilled face.

Helen had been terribly injured in her battle with Ares, but if she were going to die Daphne knew she

would be dead already. Helen must have used her ability to descend to the Underworld on purpose, probably to look for her newly dead friend – the envious one who'd unfortunately got himself enslaved by Automedon.

More than once, Daphne had gone on similar journeys looking for Ajax, but she did not have her daughter's ability to come and go in the Underworld at will. She'd had to all but die to get there. After Ajax had been murdered, she had no will to live, but she knew that killing herself wouldn't reunite her with her lost husband. Daphne had to die in battle like Ajax had, or she would never end up in the same part of the Underworld. Heroes went to the Elysian Fields. Suicides went – who knows where? She had thrown herself into every honourable fight she could find. She sought out the other Scions in hiding and recklessly defended the weak and the young – just as she'd done for Orion when he was a little boy. Many times, Daphne had been nearly killed in battle and made the journey down to the Underworld, always seeking her husband by the banks of the River Styx.

But all she had found was Hades. Unrelenting, enigmatic Hades, who would not restore her husband to life and take her instead no matter how much she begged or bargained. The lord of the dead did not make deals. She hoped Helen hadn't descended in the hopes that she could raise her friend back to life. It was a fool's errand – for now, anyway. But Daphne had been working for nearly two decades to change that.

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'Can't see you,' Helen murmured, and her fingers flexed, like she was trying to grab something. Daphne immediately understood. She too had wanted desperately to see Hades and had tried to pull the Helm of Darkness off his head. Eventually, after Daphne half died enough times to pay off all her blood debts and rid herself of the Furies, Hades had finally shown her his face.

It was recognizing Hades that had set her plan in motion. The plan that had broken her only daughter's heart by separating her from the one she loved.

'Oh. Sorry,' Matt said from the doorway, startling Daphne out of her spiralling thoughts. She wiped her damp face and turned to see that Matt had Ariadne draped limply across his arms. She was a ghastly shade of grey and barely conscious, having exhausted herself trying to heal Jerry. 'She wanted to sleep in her own room.'

'I'm sure they'll both fit,' she said, gesturing to the wide bed. 'I didn't know where else to take Helen.'

'Seems like there's an injured person on every piece of furniture in the house,' Matt said. He carried Ariadne over and laid her down gently next to Helen.

Strong boy, Daphne thought, staring at Helen's friend.

'It'll be easier to watch over them together, anyway,' Daphne said, still surveying Matt.

He'd shaped up and put on a lot of muscle since last she'd seen him, but even so. Ariadne was a buxom girl,

not a willowy thing like Helen, and Matt wasn't even breathing hard after carrying her down the long hallway.

Ariadne mumbled something unintelligible to Matt before he pulled away, her face crinkled in protest at his departure. He stopped to smooth her hair. Daphne could nearly smell the love wafting off him and filling the room, like something sweet and delicious baking in an oven.

'I'll be back soon,' he whispered. Ariadne's eyes fluttered and then stilled as she fell into a deep sleep. He ran his lips across her cheek, stealing the smallest of kisses. He turned to Daphne and looked down at Helen. 'You need anything?'

'I can handle it. Go. Do what you need to do.' He gave her a grateful look, and she watched him stride out of the room – back straight and shoulders squared in the new light of morning.

Like a warrior.

Helen saw herself running down a beach towards the biggest lighthouse she'd ever seen.

It was strange at first. How in the world could she be watching herself like she was watching a movie? It didn't feel like a dream. No dream had ever felt so real or been so logical. Still not understanding what was going on, she quickly got wrapped up in the drama and just went with it.

Dream Helen was wearing a long, diaphanous white

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dress, held together by a richly embroidered girdle. Her sheer veil had come loose from the pins in her hair, and streamed behind her as she ran. She looked frightened. As the giant lighthouse loomed closer, Helen saw her dream-self recognize a figure standing at one of the points of the octagonal base. She saw a flash of bronze as the figure undid the buckles at his neck and waist, and allowed his breastplate to fall into the sand. She saw herself cry out with happiness and pick up speed.

After shedding half his armour, the tall, dark young man turned at the sound of her voice and ran towards her, meeting her halfway. The two lovers crashed together. He caught her up against his chest and kissed her. Helen watched herself throw her arms round his neck and kiss him back, then pull away so she could kiss his face over and over in a dozen different places – as if she wanted to cover every bit of him. Helen's mind drifted closer to the entwined pair, already knowing who the other Helen was kissing.

Lucas. He was strangely dressed and wearing a sword round his waist. He had sandals on his feet, and his hands were wrapped with worn leather straps and covered with bronze gauntlets, but it was really him. Even the laugh he gave as the other Helen smothered him with kisses was the same.

'I've missed you!' the other Helen cried.

'A week is far too long,' he agreed softly.

The words were not English, but Helen understood

them just the same. The meaning echoed in her head, just as the relief of being reunited with her love echoed through her – as if it were her body pressed against his. Suddenly, Helen knew that it was her body, or had been, once. She had spoken this language, and she had felt this kiss before. This wasn't a dream. It felt more like a memory.

'So you're coming with me?' he said urgently, catching her face in his hands and forcing her to look at him. His eyes glowed with hope. 'You'll do it?'

The other Helen's face fell. 'Why, always, do you talk of tomorrow? Can't we just enjoy right now?'

'My ship leaves tomorrow.' He let her go and pulled away, hurt.

'Paris . . .'

'You are my wife!' he shouted, pacing in a circle and tugging his hand through his hair exactly like Lucas did when he was frustrated. 'I gave Aphrodite the golden apple. I chose love – I chose *you* over everything that was offered to me. And you said you wanted me too.'

'I did. I still do. But my sister has no head for politics. Aphrodite didn't think it was important to mention that, while you may have been tending sheep that day, you were not a shepherd boy as I believed, but a prince of Troy.' The other Helen spared an exasperated sigh for her sister and then shook her head, giving up. 'Golden apples and stolen afternoons don't matter. I cannot go with you to Troy.'

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She reached for him again. For a moment, he looked like he wanted to resist, but he didn't. He took her hand and pulled her to him as if he couldn't bring himself to reject her, even when he was angry.

'Then let's run away. Leave everything behind. We'll stop being royalty and become shepherds.'

'There's nothing I want more,' she said longingly. 'But no matter where we go, I would still be a daughter of Zeus and you a son of Apollo.'

'And if we had children, they would have the blood of two Olympians,' he said, impatience making his voice harsh. Apparently, he'd heard this argument many times already. 'Do you really believe that's enough to create the Tyrant? The prophecy says something about mixing the blood of four houses that are descended from the gods. Whatever that means.'

'I don't understand any of the prophecies, but the people fear any mixing of the blood of the gods,' she said. Her voice dropped suddenly. 'They'd chase us to the ends of the Earth.'

He ran his hands over her belly, cupping it possessively. 'You could be pregnant already, you know.'

She stopped his hands. Her face was sad and – for just a moment – desperate. 'That's the worst thing that could happen to us.'

'Or the best.'

'Paris, stop,' Helen said firmly. 'It hurts me to even think about it.'

Paris nodded and touched his forehead to hers. 'And what if your foster father, the King of Sparta, tries to marry you to one of those Greek barbarians like Menelaus? How many kings are asking for your hand now? Is it ten or twenty?'

'I don't care. I'll refuse them all,' the other Helen said. Then she cracked a smile. 'It's not like anyone can force me.'

Paris laughed and stared into her eyes. 'No. Although, I'd like to see one or two of them try. I wonder if Greeks smell better after they've been struck by lightning. They certainly couldn't smell worse.'

'I wouldn't kill anyone with my lightning,' she chuckled, twining her arms round his neck and moulding her body closer to his. 'Maybe just singe them a bit.'

'Oh, then please don't! Singed Greek sounds like it would smell far worse than fully cooked,' Paris said, his voice growing heavy as he smiled at her. Suddenly, the humour ran out of their shared gaze and sorrow replaced it. 'How am I going to sail away without you in the morning?'

The other Helen had no answer. His lips found hers, and he threaded his fingers through her hair, tilting her head back and taking her weight as she gave herself up to him. Just like Lucas did.

Helen missed him so much she ached – even in her sleep. It hurt so much she woke up and rolled over,

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groaning as she accidentally put too much pressure on her healing bones.

‘Helen?’ Daphne asked softly, her voice inches away from Helen in the darkness. ‘Do you need anything?’

‘No,’ Helen replied, and let her swollen eyes drift shut again. The dream that greeted her made her wish she’d stayed awake, despite her injuries.

A terrified woman was struggling against a massive claw that was wrapped round her waist. Enormous wings, fringed with feathers each larger than a person, beat the air as the giant bird hauled her into the night sky. The skyline of New York City flashed past as the woman struggled.

Helen saw the bird tilt its beaked head to look down at the woman in its talons. For the briefest of moments, the menacing eye of the eagle rounded until it was shaped like a man’s. He had amber eyes. Blue lightning flashed in the black middle of his pupils. The eagle screamed, freezing Helen’s blood and sending shivers through her sleeping body.

The Empire State Building rose up in front of them, and then Helen saw no more.

Orion was screaming his brains out.

Helen shot up at the sound, shoved her mother aside, and started running. She charged down the dark hallway

and halfway across the room, Lucas a blur at her side, before the two of them suddenly processed the situation and froze.

‘What the hell?’ Hector roared from the foldout bed that was set up next to Orion’s. He flipped on a light.

Orion was standing on his mattress, wearing a pair of brief shorts, pointing at a tiny, dark figure crouched in the narrow gap between the two beds. It was Cassandra, huddled on the hardwood floor with only a pillow and a thin blanket to sleep on.

‘What are you doing down there?’ several voices clamoured at Cassandra. Castor, Pallas and Daphne had come up behind Helen and Lucas in the doorway.

‘You bit me!’ Orion howled, still dancing on the bed, freaking out. Noel, Kate and Claire, running at a human pace, arrived shortly and filled the room.

‘I’m sorry!’ Cassandra wailed. ‘But you stepped on me!’

‘I thought you were a cat until I . . . I nearly took your head off! I could have killed you!’ Orion raged back at her, oblivious to the large audience. ‘Don’t *ever* sneak up on me!’

Orion suddenly clutched his chest and bent double with pain. Hector jumped up to grab him before he fell down – but not before everyone saw. Orion had two fresh wounds on his chest and stomach from his fight with Automedon. They were an angry red, but healing

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fast and in a few days they would disappear completely and leave him unmarked. But what caught everyone's attention wasn't the new wounds, it was the long scars that marred his otherwise perfect physique.

One cut across his chest, and another was on his left thigh. As he slumped against Hector, his strength spent, they all saw the worst one on his back. Helen stared at the ghastly bone-white seam that ran parallel to his spine. It looked like someone had tried to hack him in two from the top down. She felt Lucas take her hand and she clung to it, squeezing back.

'Everyone out!' Hector barked when he noticed the shocked silence and the stares. Tilting his shoulders, he tried to hide Orion with his body. 'You too, little pest,' he said softly to Cassandra, still crouched on the floor.

'No,' she protested. The thick, black braid that snaked down her back was coming undone in wild ruffles, and her face was a stubborn mask of alabaster skin, dark eyes, and bright red lips. 'I'm staying here. He might need me.'

Hector nodded, giving Cassandra his reluctant assent, and folded Orion's fainting body back into bed. 'Get out,' he said over his shoulder to the rest of them, quietly this time. Everyone turned at once.

Passing through the doorway, Helen and Lucas leaned towards each other, both of them feeling their injuries again and needing support now that the adrenaline rush

had passed. But instead of letting the two of them help each other, Pallas caught Lucas, and Daphne propped up Helen, pulling them apart.

‘Did you know about those?’ Lucas asked before they were led away in opposite directions.

‘No. I’ve never seen him without his clothes on,’ she answered, too shocked to be anything but blunt. She had seen Morpheus *as* Orion half naked, she reminded herself, but not Orion himself. Lucas nodded, his face shadowed with concern.

‘Back to bed, Helen,’ her mother said sternly, and urged her to turn.

Helen let her mother lay her down next to Ariadne’s slack form. As she shut her eyes and tried to fall back asleep, she heard Noel and Castor speaking to each other in the next room. For a moment, Helen tried to block it out and give them some privacy, but the urgency of their voices wouldn’t allow even a mortal with normal hearing to ignore them.

‘How did he get those scars, Caz?’ Noel asked, her voice trembling. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it. And I’ve seen plenty.’

‘The only way for a Scion to scar like that is for it to happen before he or she comes of age,’ Castor said, trying to keep his voice down.

‘But our boys fought all the time when they were little. Remember Jason’s javelin pinning Lucas to the *ceiling* that time? They don’t have one scar between the

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three of them,' Noel snapped, too upset to take Castor's cue to be quiet.

'Our boys always had plenty of food and a clean place to heal after they beat each other up.'

'And Orion didn't? Is that what you're saying?' Noel's voice broke.

'No. He probably didn't.'

Helen heard the sound of rustling fabric, followed by deep sighs, like Castor was pulling Noel close against his chest.

'Those scars mean that Orion was very young when that was done to him. And afterwards, he must have starved through his heal without anything to eat or drink or anyone to care for him. You've never seen those scars on a Scion before because most wouldn't survive what it takes to get them.'

Helen gritted her teeth and turned her face into her pillow, knowing everyone on the top floor had heard the exchange between Noel and Castor. Her face got hot as she thought about how they were all probably judging Orion – pitying the abused and abandoned little boy that he once was.

He deserved better than that. He deserved love, not pity. Helen also knew that her mother was watching her while she tried, and failed, not to weep with pity for that little boy herself. She pulled the covers over her head.

Daphne let her cry herself back into a deep sleep.

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Helen saw her other self getting kicked down a dusty street by an angry mob.

The other Helen's dress was torn, covered in dirt and smeared with stains from the rotten food that had been thrown at her. Blood leaked from a huge gash on her head, from her mouth and from the heels of her hands where she had scuffed them on the ground as she fell repeatedly. The mob gathered around her, picking up stones from the side of the road as they closed in.

A blond man, twice her age and more than twice her size, ran forward to beat her with his fists – as if his anger needed a more immediate outlet than just hurling a stone. It seemed he had to use his own body to hurt her in order to feel satisfied.

'I loved you more than anyone! Your foster father gave you to me!' he screamed, half out of his mind as he hit her. His eyes bulged and spittle flew from his mouth in a white spray. 'I will beat the child out of you and love you still!'

Helen could hear the mob murmuring, 'Kill her, Menelaus!' and, 'She may carry the Tyrant! You must not try to spare her!'

The other Helen did not fight back or use her lightning to defend herself against Menelaus. Helen watched her other self get knocked down so many times she lost count, but each time the other Helen got back to her feet again. Helen could hear the thumping of his fists against her back and hear the man grunting with

exertion, but the other Helen did not cry out or plead for him to stop. She made no sound at all, except for the huffing of her breath as it was knocked out of her lungs by the blows he dealt.

Helen knew what those fists felt like, she even knew what Menelaus smelt like as he beat her. She remembered it.

Finally, Menelaus fell to his knees, unable to beat her any longer. The other Helen was simply too strong to die by his hand, though it was clear to Helen that dying was what the other Helen had intended to do all along.

When the first stone struck her, she did not cower or try to cover herself. More stones followed, battering her from all sides, until the mob ran out of stones to throw. But still the other Helen did not die. Frightened now, the mob began to back away.

A sickened hush fell over the crowd as they watched the gruesome spectacle they had created. Still alive, the other Helen twitched and flailed amid the piled-up stones, her skin pulpy and ragged over her broken bones. She started humming softly to herself – a groaning tune sung in desperation to keep her mind off the unbearable pain she was in. She rocked back and forth, unsteady as a drunk. She was unable to find relief in any position, but she swayed as she hummed to comfort herself as best she could. Helen remembered the pain. She wished she didn't.

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The crowd began to whisper, 'Behead her. It's the only way. She won't die unless we behead her.'

'Yes, get a sword,' the other Helen called out weakly, the words garbled in her ruined mouth. 'I beg you.'

'Someone have mercy and kill her!' a woman shouted desperately, and the mob took up the cry. 'A sword! We need a sword!'

A young man, hardly more than a boy, strode out of the crowd, tears streaming down his pale face at the sight of the other Helen. He unsheathed his sword, swung it high over his head and brought it down on the gory mess at his feet.

A slender arm knocked the blade out of the way before it could strike.

A woman appeared, bathed in golden light, her shape changing repeatedly. She was young and old, fat and thin, dark-skinned and fair. In an instant, she was every woman in the world, and all of them were beautiful. By choice, it seemed, her shape settled on one that looked very similar to Helen's.

'My sister!' she screamed pathetically, scooping the injured girl up out of the rubble. Sobbing, Aphrodite cradled the other Helen in her arms, wiping blood from her face with her shimmering veil.

The crowd shrank back as the goddess wept, their emotions captured by her magic. Helen could see their faces turning into masks of sorrow as their hearts broke along with Aphrodite's.

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'Let me go,' the other Helen begged the goddess.

'Never,' Aphrodite vowed. 'I would rather see a city burn to the ground than lose you.' The other Helen tried to argue, but Aphrodite quieted her and stood up, cradling her close, as she would a baby.

The goddess of love faced the mob, glaring at them. Her eyes and mouth glowed as she cursed them all in a thunderous voice:

'I abandon this place. No man shall feel desire, and no woman shall bear fruit. You will all die unloved and childless.'

Helen heard the pleas of the crowd beneath her as she felt herself soaring up into the air along with the goddess. They were tentative, confused at first. Soon the pleas turned into wailing as the crowd understood how dark their futures had become with a few words from an angry goddess. Aphrodite flew out over the water with her beloved sister in her arms, leaving the cursed place behind.

Far out on the horizon was the mast of a great ship – a Trojan ship, Helen remembered. The goddess flew straight to it, carrying both of the Helens with her.

Matt looked out at the dark horizon. The wind off the water was cold, and the sky was so full of stars that it looked like a city dangling upside down in mid-air. He'd just survived the longest two days of his life, but Matt wasn't tired. Not physically, anyway. His muscles didn't

ache, and his legs didn't drag. In fact, he'd never felt better in his life.

Matt looked down at the ancient dagger in his hand. It was made of bronze, and even though it was mind-bogglingly old, it was still razor sharp and balanced perfectly from tang to hilt. Matt held the pretty thing across his palm and watched it settle into the muscles of his hand like one was made for the other. *But which for which*, he thought bitterly.

Zach's blood had been washed off the edges, but Matt still imagined he could see it. Someone Matt had known his whole life had died with this dagger in his heart before bequeathing it to Matt. But long ago it had belonged to another, much more famous master.

The Greeks believed that a hero's soul was in his armour. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* told of warriors who had fought to the death over armour. Some had even dishonoured themselves to get their hands on the swords and breastplates of the greatest heroes in order to absorb that hero's soul and skill. Ajax the Greater, one of the most revered fighters on the Greek side of the Trojan War, had gone on a rampage to possess Hector's armour. When Ajax woke from his madness, he was so horrified with how he'd tarnished his good name that he fell on his own sword and killed himself. Matt had always puzzled over that part in the *Iliad*. He would never have fought over armour, not even if it meant he could become the

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greatest warrior the world had ever known. He wasn't interested in glory.

Matt tossed the dagger as far out into the churning water as he could. It flew, end over end, for a very long time. He watched it moving away from him, impossibly far and fast. Many seconds later, Matt could hear the faint splashing noise the dagger made when it hit the water, despite the roar of the surf.

It was humanly impossible to throw anything that far, and doubly so to hear it splash down. Matt had always relied on logic to solve his problems, and logic was telling him something so unbelievable that logic no longer applied.

He had secretly wished for this. But not *like* this. Not if this was the role he was meant to play. Matt didn't even understand. . . . Why him? He'd learned to fight because he wanted to help his friends, not because he wanted to hurt anyone. Matt had only ever wanted to protect people who couldn't protect themselves. He was not a killer. He was nothing like the first man to ever own the dagger.

A wave turned over at Matt's feet, leaving something bright and glittery behind on the sand. He didn't have to pick it up to know what it was. Three times he had tossed the dagger out into the ocean, and three times it had returned to him impossibly fast.

The Fates had their eyes on him now, and there was nowhere for Matt to hide.

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The ship had square white sails. Above them, snapping in the wind from the tallest mast, was a red triangular pennant embossed with a golden sun. Row after row of oars stuck out from the sides of the ship. Even from the air, Helen could hear the rhythmic thumping of a kettledrum, sounding out the tempo of the strokes.

The water was not the brooding navy blue of the Atlantic but a clear, startling blue – the same jewel-blue as Lucas’s eyes. *Azure*, Helen thought. Still clinging to consciousness, the other Helen moaned in Aphrodite’s arms as the goddess brought her down to the ship’s deck.

As Aphrodite landed, frightened voices cried out. From the place of command behind the tiller, a large man stepped forward. Helen knew him instantly.

Hector. He looked exactly the same, except for his hair and the style of dress. This Hector kept his hair longer than the one Helen knew in Nantucket, and he wore a brief linen garment tied round his waist with a leather belt. Leather straps were wrapped around his hands, and a thick, gold ornament encircled his neck. Even half naked he looked like royalty.

‘Aeneas,’ Hector called over his shoulder as he stared down disbelievingly at the bloody mess in Aphrodite’s arms. A carbon copy of Orion, minus the disfiguring scar across his bare chest and back, stepped forward and stood at attention at Hector’s right shoulder. ‘Go below and wake my brothers.’

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'Hurry, my son,' Aphrodite whispered to Aeneas. 'And bring honey.' He nodded respectfully to his mother and strode off, but his gaze stayed on the other Helen as he moved past. His face was drawn with sadness.

'Water!' Hector barked, and many feet marched off at once to obey him. Half a moment later, Paris ran up from belowdecks, with Jason one step behind. Like the other ancient versions of the men she knew, Jason looked exactly the same, apart from the clothes he wore.

A strange, choked-off cry burst out of Paris when he realized what he was looking at, and he ran to the other Helen on unsteady legs. His hands shook as he took her from Aphrodite, his face blanching under his deep tan.

'Troilus,' Hector said to Jason, indicating with his chin for his youngest brother to take the bucket of water that had just arrived. The other Helen pushed weakly at Paris's chest when he tried to bring water to her lips.

'What happened, Lady?' Troilus asked Aphrodite when it was clear that Paris wouldn't, or couldn't, speak.

'Menelaus and his city turned on her when they found out about the baby,' the goddess said simply.

Paris's head snapped up, his face frozen with disbelief. Hector and Aeneas shared a brief, desperate look and then both glanced down at Paris.

'Did you know, brother?' Hector asked gently.

'I hoped,' he admitted, his voice hushed with emotion. 'She lied to me.'

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All the men but Paris nodded, like they could understand Helen's choice.

'The Tyrant.' Aeneas barely whispered the word, but it was obvious they were all thinking it. 'Mother. How did Menelaus find out that Helen was pregnant?'

Aphrodite tenderly brushed her fingertips across her half-sister's shoulder. 'Helen waited for your ship to clear the horizon and then she told Menelaus herself.'

Paris started shaking all over. 'Why?' he asked the other Helen, his voice high with the effort to hold back tears. The other Helen ran her bloody hand across Paris's chest, trying to soothe him.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered, and put her hand on her belly. 'I tried, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't kill us myself.'

Troilus leaned against his brother, propping him up as they all regarded Helen with a mixture of awe and dismay.

'Don't mourn, Paris. Your baby lives,' Aphrodite said. 'She will grow to look just like our beautiful Helen, and her daughter will grow to look just like her mother – and so on and so on for as long as the line lasts. I have seen to it, so that even after my half-mortal sister is gone I may always look upon the face that I love best in this world.'

The golden glow of the goddess brightened, and she regarded the men of Troy one at a time, her voice taking on the timbre of quiet thunder rolling in the distance.

'You must all swear to me that you will protect my

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sister and her child. If Helen and her line of daughters die, there will be nothing on Earth for me to love,' she said, her eyes falling apologetically on her son, Aeneas, for a moment before they hardened against him. He dropped his head with a wounded look, and Aphrodite turned to Hector. 'As long as my sister and her line of daughters lasts, there will be love in the world. I swear it on the River Styx. But if you let my sister die, Hector of Troy, son of Apollo, I will leave this world and take *love itself* away with me.'

Hector's eyes closed for a moment as the enormity of the goddess's decree sank in. When he opened them again, the look he gave was one of defeat. What choice did they have? He glanced around at his brothers and at Aeneas, all of them silently agreeing that they could not say no, despite the consequences that were sure to follow.

'We swear it, Lady,' Hector said heavily.

'No, sister. Don't. Menelaus and Agamemnon have sworn a pact with the other Greek kings. They will come to Troy with all their armies,' the other Helen moaned urgently.

'Yes, they will. And we will fight them,' Paris said darkly, as if he were already facing the warships that would inevitably sail to their shores. He lifted her up, and she struggled lamely in his arms.

'Drop me over the side and let me drown,' she pleaded. 'Please. End this before it begins.'

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Paris didn't answer her. Holding her up high in his arms to keep her close, he carried her belowdecks to his bunk. The other Helen finally lost consciousness, and Helen's visit to this terrible dream or vision or whatever it was ended abruptly as she fell back into a natural sleep.