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Olympos

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Extract

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Part 1

1

Helen of Troy awakes just before dawn to the sound of air raid sirens. She feels along the cushions of her bed but her current lover, Hockenberry, is gone—slipped out into the night again before the servants wake, acting as he always does after their nights of lovemaking, acting as if he has done something shameful, no doubt stealing his way home this very minute through the alleys and back streets where the torches burn least bright. Helen thinks that Hockenberry is a strange and sad man. Then she remembers.

My husband is dead.

This fact, Paris killed in single combat with the merciless Apollo, has been reality for nine days—the great funeral involving both Trojans and Achaeans will begin in three hours if the god-chariot now over the city does not destroy Ilium completely in the next few minutes—but Helen still cannot believe that her Paris is gone. Paris, son of Priam, defeated on the field of battle? Paris dead? Paris thrown down into the shaded caverns of Hades without beauty of body or the elegance of action? Unthinkable. This is *Paris,* her beautiful boy-child who had stolen her away from Menelaus, past the guards and across the green lawns of Lacedaemon. This is Paris, her most attentive lover even after this long decade of tiring war, he whom she had often secretly referred to as her "plunging stallion full-fed at the manger."

Helen slips out of bed and crosses to the outer balcony, parting the gauzy curtains as she emerges into the pre-dawn light of Ilium. It is midwinter and the marble is cold under her bare feet. The sky is still dark enough that she can see forty or fifty searchlights stabbing skyward, searching for the god or goddess and the flying chariot. Muffled plasma explosions ripple across the half dome of the moravecs' energy field that shields the city. Suddenly, multiple beams of coherent light—shafts of solid blue, emerald green, blood red—lance upward from Ilium's perimeter defenses. As Helen watches, a single huge explosion shakes the northern quadrant of the city, sending its shockwave echoing across the topless towers of Ilium and stirring the curls of Helen's long, dark hair from her shoulders.

The gods have begun using physical bombs to penetrate the force shield in recent weeks, the single-molecule bomb casings quantum phase-shifting through the moravecs' shield. Or so Hockenberry and the amusing little metal creature, Mahnmut, have tried to explain to her.

Helen of Troy does not give a fig about machines.

Paris is dead. The thought is simply unsupportable. Helen has been prepared to die with Paris on the day that the Achaeans, led by her former husband, Menelaus, and by his brother Agamemnon, ultimately breach the walls, as breach they must according to her prophetess friend Cassandra, putting every man and boy-child in the city to death, raping the women and hauling them off to slavery in the Greek Isles. Helen has been ready for *that* day—ready to die by her own hand or by the sword of Menelaus—but somehow she has never really believed that her dear, vain, godlike Paris, her plunging stallion, her beautiful warrior-husband, could die first. Through more than nine years of siege and glorious battle, Helen has trusted the gods to keep her beloved Paris alive and intact and in her bed. And they did. And now they have killed him.

She calls back the last time she saw her Trojan husband, ten days earlier, heading out from the city to enter into single combat with the god Apollo. Paris had never looked more confident in his armor of elegant, gleaming bronze, his head flung back, his long hair flowing back over his shoulders like a stallion's mane, his white teeth flashing as Helen and thousands of others watched and cheered from the wall above the Scaean Gate. His fast feet had sped him on, "sure and sleek in his glory," as King Priam's favorite bard liked to sing. But this day they had sped him on to his own slaughter by the hands of furious Apollo.

And now he's dead, thinks Helen, *and, if the whispered reports I've overheard are accurate, his body is a scorched and blasted thing, his bones broken, his perfect, golden face burned into an obscenely grinning skull, his blue eyes melted to tallow, tatters of barbecued flesh stringing back from his scorched cheekbones like . . . like . . .* firstlings—*like those charred first bits of ceremonial meat tossed from the sacrificial fire because they have been deemed unworthy.* Helen shivers in the cold wind coming up with the dawn and watches smoke rise above the rooftops of Troy.

Three antiaircraft rockets from the Achaean encampment

to the south roar skyward in search of the retreating god-chariot. Helen catches a glimpse of that retreating chariot—a brief gleaming as bright as the morning star, pursued now by the exhaust trails from the Greek rockets. Without warning, the shining speck quantum shifts out of sight, leaving the morning sky empty. *Flee back to besieged Olympos, you cowards,* thinks Helen of Troy.

The all-clear sirens begin to whine. The street below Helen's apartments in Paris's estate so near Priam's battered palace are suddenly filled with running men, bucket brigades rushing to the northwest where smoke still rises into the winter air. Moravec flying machines hum over the rooftops, looking like nothing so much as chitinous black hornets with their barbed landing gear and swiveling projectors. Some, she knows from experience and from Hockenberry's late-night rants, will fly what he calls air cover, too late to help, while others will aid in putting out the fire. Then Trojans and moravecs both will pull mangled bodies from the rubble for hours. Since Helen knows almost everyone in the city, she wonders numbly who will be in the ranks of those sent down to sunless Hades so early this morning.

The morning of Paris's funeral. My beloved. My foolish and betrayed beloved.

Helen hears her servants beginning to stir. The oldest of the servants—the old woman Aithra, formerly queen of Athens and mother to royal Theseus until carried away by Helen's brothers in revenge for the kidnapping of their sister—is standing in the doorway to Helen's bedchamber.

"Shall I have the girls draw your bath, my lady?" asks Aithra.

Helen nods. She watches the skies brighten a moment more—sees the smoke to the northwest thicken and then lessen as the fire brigades and moravec fire engines bring it under control, watches another moment as the rockvec battle hornets continue to fling themselves eastward in hopeless pursuit of the already quantum-teleported chariot—and then Helen of Troy turns to go inside, her bare feet whispering on the cold marble. She has to prepare herself for Paris's funeral rites and for seeing her cuckolded husband, Menelaus, for the first time in ten years. This also will be the first time that Hector, Achilles, Menelaus, Helen, and many of the other

Achaeans and Trojans all will be present at a public event. Anything could happen.

Only the gods know what will come of this awful day, thinks Helen. And then she has to smile despite her sadness. These days, prayers to the gods go unanswered with a vengeance. These days, the gods share nothing with mortal men—or at least nothing except death and doom and terrible destruction carried earthward by their own divine hands.

Helen of Troy goes inside to bathe and dress for the funeral.