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For the Most Beautiful

Written by Emily Hauser

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'CHOOSE,' SHE SAYS,
REACHING OUT TOWARDS HIM.

'CHOOSE TO WHICH OF US THE APPLE
MOST BELONGS . . .'

FOR THE MOST BEAUTIFUL

EMILY HAUSER

A NOVEL OF THE WOMEN OF TROY.

For the Most Beautiful

Emily Hauser

Doubleday

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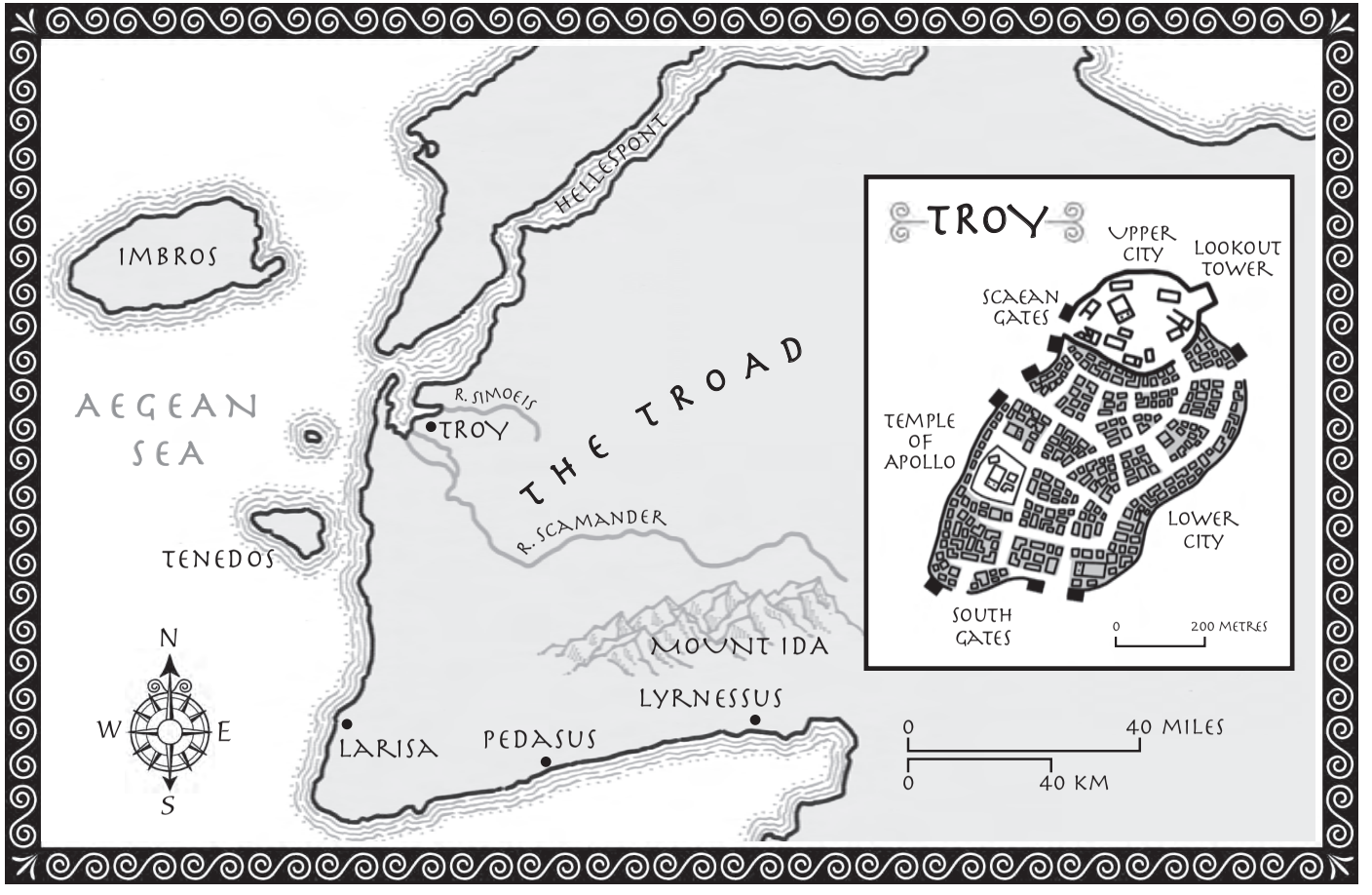
HELLESPONT
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R. SIMOEIS
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MOUNT IDA
LYRNESSUS
LARISA
PEDASUS
N
W
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S
0
40 MILES
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40 KM
TROY
UPPER CITY
LOOKOUT TOWER
SCAEAN GATES
TEMPLE OF APOLLO
LOWER CITY
SOUTH GATES
0
200 METRES

Prologue

High summer on the slopes of Mount Ida. Sweat trickling down his forehead, flies buzzing around his herd with their incessant thrumming, the stench of the goats thick in his nostrils mixed with the salt of the sea air from the north. He pushes the hair back from his brow and looks up to the sky. The sun, Apulunas' chariot, is at the height of its course.

The middle of the day.

He moves to the shade of an olive tree, his dog following at his heels. The cool darkness beneath the shimmering leaves envelops him and eases the heat on the back of his neck as he picks up a loaf of bread wrapped in stiff linen and his leather pouch, filled with wine. Though he is a prince born of the line of the kings of Troy, he has tended the goats on Mount Ida since he was a boy. The king hopes to show his people that his sons are not afraid to work the land which provides Troy with its famous wealth; yet Paris has always preferred the soft whisper of women's robes swishing through the painted corridors of the palace to the hollow clang of the goats' bells. He unties the thong around the neck and lets a few drops fall to the parched earth as a libation, an offering to the gods who make and destroy all things. The wine hisses on the ground and disappears, soaked into the thirsty soil.

His dog begins to growl behind him.

'What is it, Methepon?'

He turns. The dog's hackles are raised, his snout quivering. He bends to grasp Methepon's leather collar, but the dog snarls and barks, sending saliva flying.

'What—?'

There is a sound of movement, a rustling as of leaves upon the wind. Methepon is growling and barking ever more insistently, long teeth bared, eyes fixed ahead.

Paris looks up.

Three women are standing in the sunlight just beyond the shade of the olive tree. How they came to be there he does not know; neither, in this moment, does he care – for they are women of breathtaking beauty, with rich hair falling over their shoulders in waves, soft, shining skin, and robes of the finest gauze that brush against their slim waists and thighs. He feels the tension in his muscles relax. What in the names of all the gods is Methepon so afraid of? And then he smiles, thinking of his brother Hector, whose wife Andromache is as plain as the Trojan fields in winter. There are some men, true, who would fear to be before three such beauties.

But if there is one thing he, Paris, of all the princes of Troy, knows above all others, it is women.

One of them beckons to him, smiling. He bends down to pull at Methepon's collar again, but the dog is still snarling fiercely, paws dug into the dirt. 'What's wrong with you?'

Methepon lies down on the ground, whining, refusing to move.

Paris frowns. 'Very well,' he says, shrugging his shoulders and picking up his pouch of wine. 'Stay here, then.' He strides out of the shade towards where the women stand. 'I apologize,' he says, bowing deeply. 'My dog is not normally so—'

'Mortal.'

The voice rings in his ears. It seems to come from within his own head. He stops where he is and stares at the women, and they smile back at him, eyes glinting. There is a hardness to them, now that he is closer – as if they were sculpted of marble or stone with a sharpened chisel, not soft and made of flesh. He swallows. 'Who – what – who are you?' he says, trying to ignore the renewed growling and snarling of his dog behind him.

'Goddesses,' comes the reply. 'The three great goddesses: the ones you pour wine for. Goddesses of Ida.'

'Goddesses?' he says. 'Goddesses of Troy?'

He thinks of Arinniti – his favourite goddess – the one he worships with

rose petals and pomegranates, whose statue he keeps in a shrine in his chamber. Era, queen of the gods, the august patron to whom his mother Hecuba lays a fresh-woven robe each night as an offering. Atana, the goddess of war and wisdom, whose high temple graces the upper city of Troy and whom the priestesses worship with almost as much reverence as Apulunas himself.

'You cannot be,' he says. 'It is blasphemy to say so. The gods appear only to their chosen priests within Troy.'

The women smile, and the air shimmers slightly. 'Look again.'

He looks up. He sees Era with her crown of golden oak leaves and the sceptre in her hand, her bearing infused with easy command, and even through his fear he sees in her the deep allure of a woman who knows that the world is hers for the taking. Atana has a burning intelligence in her grey-green eyes, and as he turns to her he feels the urge to plumb the secrets of the earth with her, to fly to the tops of the mountains to steal eggs from the eagles' nests and dive into the depths of the oceans. And the third . . . The third has skin paler than ivory brushed by roses in full bloom, shining hair that falls in waves to the curving swell of her breasts and a mouth as red as apples at the height of summer.

'What do you want of me?' he asks, his voice shaking.

The last of the three smiles, a smile that promises everything – and he knows, from the rush of desire that channels through his veins, that she truly is Arinniti, his Arinniti, to whom he prays each morning and each night. She extends a hand. In it is an apple, an apple of gold, glimmering in the sunlight, some words he cannot read etched into the surface.

'Choose,' she says, reaching out towards him. 'Choose to which of us the apple most belongs.'

He stares at her. 'You are goddesses,' he says. 'How can I choose?'

Arinniti smiles again, revealing white teeth. 'Because we have chosen you.'

He hesitates, then stretches forward a trembling hand. She drops the apple into it.

He brings it closer to his face, gazing at the sheen of its skin, the impossible perfection of its surface.

And then he sees the inscription etched into its flesh.

ΤΗΙ ΚΑΛΛΙΣΤΗΙ.

'For the most beautiful,' he whispers.

The goddesses are staring at him, their faces hungry, their eyes dark and wild.

'If you choose me,' Atana says, in a low voice, 'I will give you victory. You will win every battle you choose to fight. Everyone will come to you to beg you for the secret of your fame. Kings and gods will look up to you. You will fail at nothing.'

She draws a hand through the air, and at once his vision is obscured with golden light. Cities form before him – cities besieged by warriors whose brazen armour glints in the sun, stretched across the plain beneath the cities' walls in a sea of sparkling weapons, led by a prince with his own fine features and curling hair. He sees palaces toppled, their golden ramparts dissolving like sand, and ahead of him, an empire stretching as far as the eye can see – innumerable cities, countless lands, all his for the taking . . .

The apparition vanishes as quickly as it came.

He blinks, turns to the ox-eyed beauty with the oak wreath. 'Choose me,' Era breathes, 'and you will become king of the world. You will have power beyond your wildest dreams. You will sit on thrones and carry jewel-clustered sceptres. The sky itself will bow down to touch the earth at your command. Who needs to win a war, when you can force the peoples of the earth to do your bidding?'

His vision changes. Now he sees gold-clad kings kneeling at his feet, a jewelled sceptre in his hand and a crown upon his head. He watches as the kings raise their sceptres to him as their ruler, and hundreds upon thousands of warriors and slaves bow to him, acknowledging his power . . .

He cannot see Arinniti through the vision spread before him, but he knows she is speaking from the sound of her voice – something like the froth of ocean foam caressing the shore.

'I offer beauty,' she says, and, for a third time, the golden image shifts. He is looking now into the eyes of a woman – a woman so beautiful that he feels as if the breath has been drawn from his body at the very sight of her. Her hair is soft, like fine-spun silk, her eyes deep as liquid honey, her skin the colour of

virgin oil, her breasts round and firm as pale-skinned apples, just visible through the long gold-spun veil she wears draped sheer over her naked skin. He hears a soft groan of desire, and knows it has come from his own lips.

Arinniti laughs – sensual, confident. 'My gift,' she says, 'is nothing less than the most beautiful woman in the world.'

He reaches his fingers forwards, trembling, the tips brushing the woman's veil, but as he does so, the vision disappears.

He hesitates, gazing at the goddesses, the image of the woman filling his mind.

He cannot know that a war hangs upon his choice, the tale of which will be told for a thousand years and more. He cannot know that heroes whose names will echo through the ages will fight and live and love and die because of the words he will say now. All he knows is that Arinniti is looking at him, and as he gazes back into her face, her eyes are blue, like the clear shallows of the sea, and her breath is like roses in summer upon his face.

'Arinniti,' he breathes.

Her lips curl into a smile.

'Helen is yours,' she says, and her fingers close around the apple he is holding out to her.

There is a scream of rage from Atana and Era. A pillar of flame rises up around the three goddesses, casting their skin into shadows and turning their eyes a burning orange, their hair flying around their faces in the fire. The air around him grows hot, unbearably hot, as if it would melt, and the goddesses' forms shimmer before him, dissolving into the yawning chasm of chaos. He falls to the ground, his eyes aching, his palms covered with sweat. A sharp breeze whips across his forehead.

He looks up.

The goddesses are gone. All is peaceful once more. The sound of goat bells echoes across the mountainside, interspersed with the occasional rustle of leaves as a lizard skitters across the rocks, and the cries of the eagles circling overhead. The city of Troy is just visible on the horizon, its sturdy walls and upper city rising above the mud-brick houses of the town, and, beyond it, the plain, the meandering rivers lined by tamarisk trees, and the shimmering sea.

He stands up, shaking.