

THE PRINCESS *of* SPARTA

HEROES OF THE TROJAN WAR

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PARIS SHIFTED anxiously in the dimly lit antechamber outside the Mycenaean megaron. A dozen Trojan men-at-arms stood in formation around him, an impressive honor guard resplendent in their ceremonial armor. They held thin spears ten feet long with tassels of gold tied around the head. Their helms were made of hammered bronze with an elegant crest of black horsehair. Leather pleats encircled their waist, each fold studded with copper pellets. Shin guards covered their legs from ankle to kneecap, and arm guards from wrist to elbow. It was an impressive sight, both ornamental and intimidating.

In contrast, Paris chose simplicity for his own garments. He wore a plain ivory tunic cinched at the waist with a thin golden belt. His Phoenician cape flowed from his shoulders, the deep crimson color vibrant against his tunic's pale canvas. His sandals were made of unembellished leather and he held a simple rounded helm in his left hand. Altogether, he projected a modest demeanor, a man who did not need to impress—just as Priam had instructed.

"Make sure your men look disciplined but disinterested," Paris instructed Glaucus again. "These visits are routine, these Mycenaean pose no threat." The captain nodded. This portion of their ruse had been Glaucus' idea. It was not Paris alone who would convince Agamemnon of Trojan superiority, but a collective effort of their entire delegation. Fortunately, Glaucus' men would walk over burning coals for their captain.

They had been waiting in the entry hall for far longer than would seem necessary. It had been the same at the harbor. Either these Greeks were stalling for time to prepare for his arrival, or they intentionally meant to keep him waiting. Neither boded well for his mission. The longer they waited, the more repetitive his instructions became.

"Dismissal, but not laxity." Paris added.

"My men are ready." Glaucus grunted, his tone a firm but

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gentle reminder for Paris to do the same.

Am I ready? He had never felt so agitated before greeting a new ruler. Every nerve in his body was taut. He kept looking over his shoulder expecting to find someone watching him. It was an unnerving feeling of being exposed in the wake of a battle.

Whoever he expected to see was never there. Nevertheless, Paris studiously watched every shadow. The castle was more fortress than palace, and it boasted enough hidden alcoves to house an army of assassins.

Or one mysterious beauty...

Try as he might, he could not get that woman's face out of his mind. He had an overwhelming urge to seek her out. If she was really flesh and blood, and not a siren like Glaucus insisted, he needed to find her. And that desire was distracting him to no end. His duty to his king could not afford such deviations.

Paris straightened himself, determined to stay focused on the task at hand. A good ambassador was an observant one. He sorted through the information he had gleaned about the Mycenaean king from his short duration thus far. From the towering Lion Gates at the base of the acropolis, to the monumental walkway to the palace, Agamemnon had designed his keep to strike fear and awe into his guests. The thick cyclopean masonry, with stones twice the size of men, would have impressed Paris had he not seen its like before. And found here, so far on the frontier, it smarted of pretentiousness.

The holding chamber he was waiting in was brightly painted in alternating squares of red, yellow and blue stucco, a delightful pattern that formed a series of zig-zags down the long hall. He counted each square twice, the familiar rhythm of counting numbers calming his agitated mind.

Finally, a short horn blast echoed from within the hall. Paris' soldiers formed ranks in front of him, and Glaucus gave him a curt nod before stepping forward to lead his troops.

Paris took a deep breath, calming himself like the mountain-dwelling Amorites taught him. Agamemnon was what mattered now. He let his mind drain of all else, letting his racing thoughts trickle out of him with each measured exhalation.

The double doors opened wide and light flooded out, momentarily blinding him. The megaron was packed. Highborns, from the look of their fine clothes, lined its walls, each noble craning their necks to get a better look at the Trojan men. A short herald stepped forward, bridging the gap between the entryway and the main hall.

“THE DELEGATION OF TROY NOW APPROACHES!”

Paris motioned to Glaucus that he was ready and the captain relayed the command. Glaucus used small almost unnoticeable hand signals, and the unit responded as one. They joined together in block formation, shielding Paris from view. Another wave from Glaucus brought forth two of their own heralds, each with a rounded trumpet in hand. They lifted the metal instruments to their lips and filled the air with a brazen blast.

The crowd erupted in whispers, murmuring to themselves over the magical quality of the brassy note, a sound so crisp it seemed almost godly. When the final reverberation died off, the Trojan delegation marched forward, the heavy fall of their boots drumming a staccato beat on the stone floor.

Directly before them, in the center of the room, stood a round ceremonial hearth twelve feet in diameter. It was bordered in decorated plaster with an extravagant design of flames and spirals. Surrounding it were four wooden columns sheathed in plates of bronze, resting atop carved base stones shaped to resemble lion paws. Upon reaching it his troops halted and, moving in unison with knees locked, they parted lengthwise, revealing Paris at the aft of the room.

The Mycenaean herald stepped beside him and raised his baritone voice again. “Paris, Son of Priam, Son of Laomedon, Prince of Troy approaches the Throne.”

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Paris' heralds resumed their trumpeting, trilling out a clarion song for his entry. He clenched the *kerykeion* in his right hand, letting the encrusted gemstones bite into the flesh of his palm. The impressive item was the one object of finery on him. He lifted it higher so it would be the first detail his host would see, then strode forward at a stately pace, allowing the throng to satisfy their curiosity of him.

Behind the pressing throng, the walls of the megaron were decorated in a massive frieze, showing an epic battle of the Mycenaean people. Horse-drawn chariots raced across a stylized landscape where Mycenaean warriors dressed in short white kilts fought in hand-to-hand combat with strange enemies: barbarians coarse of feature with wild shaggy hair. A retelling of the taming of the wild lands, Paris surmised.

As he passed his troops, the squad closed ranks behind him, pounding the butts of their spears in tempo with the renewed trumpeting. Once he reached the hearth, he took a sharp right turn, facing the throne for the first time since entering.

Agamemnon sat atop a backless throne, its rectangular legs plated with ivory tusks carved to resemble the haunches of a lion. The man himself wore a pelt of the regal cat, its reddish-orange mane lining the cape and imbuing the large king with the creature's fierce aura. Paris marched forward, keeping his eyes locked on the massive man before him. And Agamemnon studied Paris as Paris studied him. There was a distinctively smug twist to the king's broad face.

Paris heard his father's voice whispering in his ear, "*This Agamemnon thinks himself far grander than he be... Go, educate him otherwise.*" Paris stiffened his back, pausing before the throne, and lowered himself into a respectful bow—a mark of respect but not of reverence.

The Mycenaean herald returned. He bellowed a solid note from the bone horn strapped to his waist, a brutish sound following the elegant instrument from Troy. A flash of irritation creased the face of the king.

"You approach the throne of Agamemnon, Son of Atreus, Son of Pelops, Sacker of Lydia, Slayer of False Brothers, favored Son of the Hellas, Ruler of the Argive and High King of Mycenae. All Hail the King!" The herald was nearly out of breath by the time he finished.

"ALL HAIL THE KING!" the assembled Mycenaeans repeated.

Paris righted himself, prepared to launch into his prearranged speech, but the tingling sensation had returned. His eyes darted to the left of the throne.

And he saw her. A vision of elegance and grace. Their eyes locked and breath escaped him. He would not have been more stunned if Zeus had struck him with a thunderbolt.

Oh, fuck me.