

For the Most Beautiful



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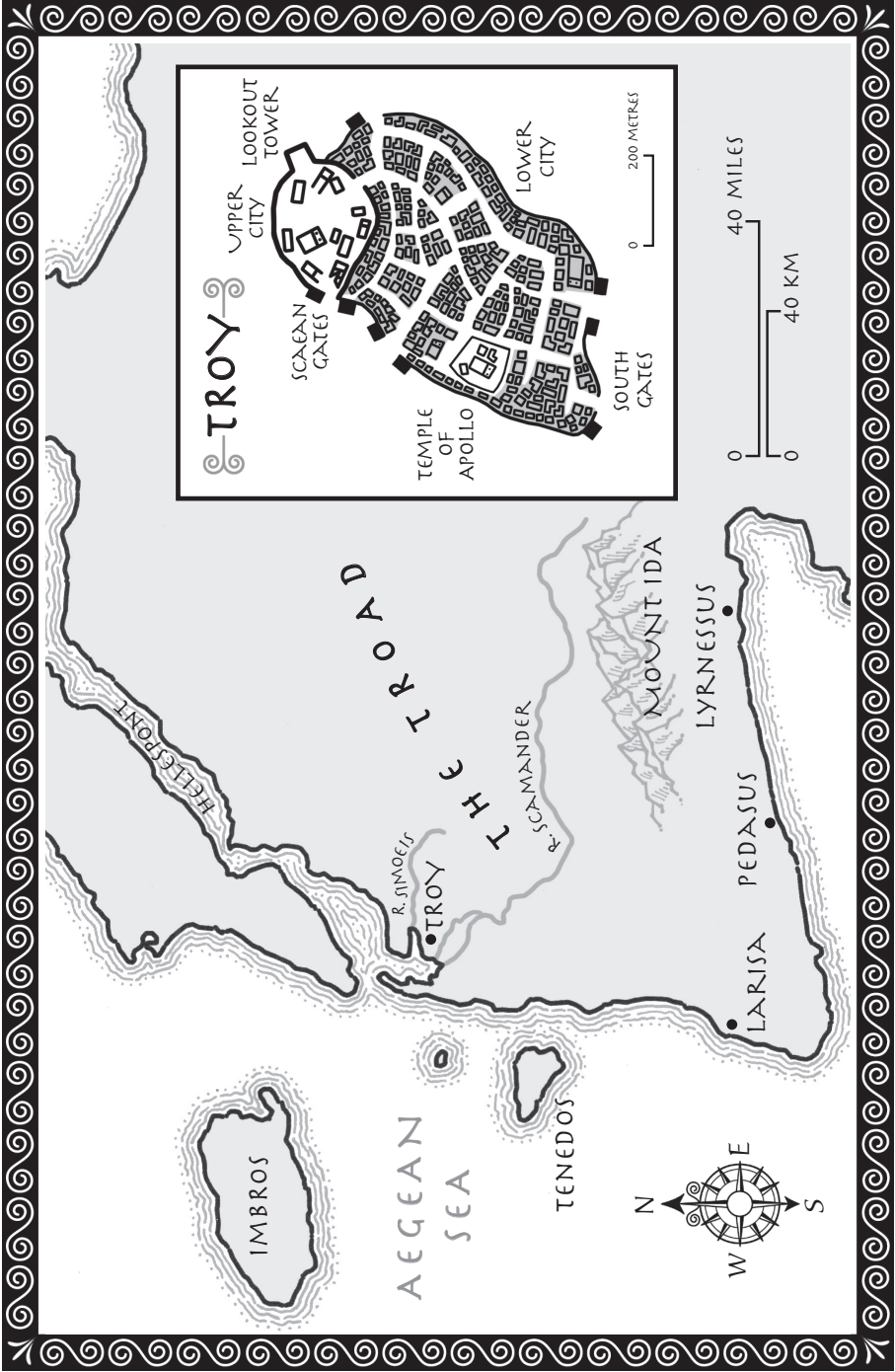
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For Oliver, always



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—?'

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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

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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.

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ΤΗ ΚΑΛΛΙΣΤΗ.

'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

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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.

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He is hardly sure that it happened. A mirage of the summer heat, he thinks. He wipes his sweating forehead with his arm. But if it did . . . If it is true . . .

His thoughts move back to the golden woman, the vision still shimmering before his senses. Helen . . . The name whispers in his mind, like a faint breath of wind in summer.

He smiles in spite of himself.

Helen . . . The most beautiful woman in the world.

Hermes, god of trickery and thieving, turns away from where he has been watching, hidden from Paris and the goddesses behind the thick trunk of the olive tree. He shakes his head. What a fool Paris was not to run away as soon as he heard what the goddesses wanted him to do. And Helen will create a problem, he thinks. She already has a kingdom in Greece over which to rule, and a husband, wedded and bedded – did the goddesses not think of that? If Paris is to receive his prize, it will mean war: a war that will rage across the world from the walled cities of the Greeks to the gold-filled treasuries of Troy . . .

Hermes pauses. A slow grin spreads across his face.

Of course the goddesses had thought of everything. Of course they had known what would happen.

That must have been why they had wanted to come.

He begins to pace up and down, his thoughts whirling as he puts the pieces together. They must have known that Paris would choose Helen. They must have realized that Paris would choose to seize her from her husband, Menelaus, and that Menelaus, in turn, would summon the Greek armies to avenge his loss in the greatest battle the world has ever seen. Why else would they have bothered with a paltry piece of golden fruit? Why else would Zeus have told him to bring them here, to Paris, an idiot if ever there was one? What god ever cared about an apple compared to the chance to start a war?

He cocks his head, his excitement rising, like the foaming crest of a wave before the shore. He can almost hear the sharpening of the weapons – the delightful scraping of bronze on stone that means the mortals are at it again.

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Definitely time for a war, he thinks. It's getting far too pastoral around here. A little blood to stain the plain, a few heroes fighting and dying, a couple of cities burnt, the columns of soot and ash curling up to heaven, like the smoke of a sacrifice . . .

He glances at Paris, who is sitting on the mountain slope, his head in his hands and his mind full of Helen. Hermes grins. Helen will not cause the war, he thinks. It will be the gods, as it always is, who do that. It will be the pride of the lords of Greece when they fight over a beautiful woman. It will be the greed of a prince who steals her to have her beauty for his own.

But Helen won't be the only beautiful woman in this war.

Hermes turns to gaze out over the green and black Trojan plain, the battlement-crowned towns of Lyrnessus, Pedasus and Larisa dotting the pale blue line of the coast all the way to Troy.

The contest for the most beautiful has only just begun.



PART I





Before the War



Χρυσήϊς
Krisayis, Troy

The Hour of Prayer

The First Day of the Month of Roses, 1250 BC

‘Three – four – five . . .’

We scattered. Like a flock of pure white birds frightened by a barking dog, we skittered away from Troilus, flapping, chattering, fluttering with the thrill of the chase.

‘Twenty-seven – twenty-eight – twenty-nine . . .’

Feet clattering against the cobblestones, hearts pounding against our ribs.

‘Fifty-two – fifty-three – fifty-four . . .’

Down a flight of stairs. Past a garden surrounded by a high wall, the ripe fig trees bursting with fruit, a grape vine climbing the wall. Pluck a grape, feel the juice on your chin, run on. Round a corner, across a courtyard. Avoid the old man selling fish and the group of women carrying water on their heads in large clay pots.

‘Cassandra – come on . . .’ I laughed and took her hand – after all, she was not as fast a runner as I, and she did not know where I wanted to hide. I felt her fingers close around mine, and we kept running, whispering and breathless, as excited as if we were children once more and not almost women grown.

‘Krisayis . . .’ Cassandra panted. ‘Krisayis, where are we going?’

I took a turn to the right into a long, narrow street, its name scratched into the cornerstone of one of the houses. A large stone slab was planted

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in the paving-stones beneath, roughly hewn from Mount Ida where the gods lived, its very crevices numinous with the presence of the divine. These slabs were scattered throughout the city, one for every sanctuary, and several for the gates in the walls and King Priam's palaces: markers, if you knew where they led, as well as guardians – the eyes of the gods upon our city.

Cassandra's eyebrows creased in sudden recognition. 'We're going to the temple of Apulunas!' she exclaimed. 'But you *know* your father forbade you to set foot in the precinct until—'

'Hush,' I said, my voice thrilling with excitement. 'We're almost there. It must be near here . . . somewhere here . . .'

I skirted around the edge of a small shrine with a bronze brazier set before it, streaming cloying incense into the air, and nodded to the two slave girls who were cleaning the steps. I had never been to Apulunas' temple before, but had I not seen it a thousand times from the tower in the walls? It was the largest in Troy, for Apulunas was the protector of our city and the greatest of the prophecy-giving gods. It was certain to be close by. I grasped Cassandra's hand and took a turn to the left.

And there it was. At the end of the alley, blocked off on either side by two tall mud-brick houses, the sloping wall of the precinct of Apulunas: five layers of enormous limestone blocks, each block almost half the height of a man, and laid on top of each other in uneven rows to the height of two grown men. Unlike the city walls, where the blocks of polished limestone fitted seamlessly together, the gaps here at their rough-hewn corners were so large that I could see between them into the sanctuary itself and make out the columns of the temple set against the sky behind.

'We *are* going to the temple!' Cassandra exclaimed, as I started towards it. The street was empty, the windows of the houses covered with woven rugs to keep out the heat of the day, a stray cat curled up here and there on a front step. 'Your father, Krisayis – we shall be in so much trouble . . .'

But I had already reached the wall, and was testing the gaps between the stones. They were large enough to fit my hands and feet with ease. I pulled myself up, fingers gripping the rough-chipped surface of the stone between the blocks as easily as if I were climbing the rungs of a ladder.

'You can't mean to *climb* it!'

Before the War

I shrugged my shoulders. 'It's the only way. We wouldn't be able to get past the guards at the main gate, would we? Come on, Cassandra – it's not that bad, and Troilus will never find us. We might even win the game this time! Look . . .'

I stepped up a layer of blocks, found purchase in the cracks between the stones with my foot, then reached up with one hand to pull myself higher, like the lizards I had seen climbing the palace walls on a hot summer's day. 'You see? It's easy!'

But Cassandra did not reply.

'Cassandra?' I asked, twisting around to look down at her.

She was facing away from the wall, standing still and staring.

'Cassandra, are you all right?'

And then I froze.

Three feral dogs the size of wolves had appeared at the other end of the alley, a hundred paces behind us, and were advancing down the narrow street, their sharp teeth bared, hackles raised. They moved stealthily, jaws curled in a low snarl, revealing sharp, pointed fangs, their wild, dark eyes fixed on us as if they would hunt and savage us as easily as hares caught in a thicket.

'*Quick!* Climb up!'

Cassandra did not need telling twice. Whirling around, her blue eyes wide with fear, she snatched up her skirt and started to pull herself up the wall. I was moving fast – there were only two more large stone blocks between me and the sky . . . One more . . .

I looked back, my heart racing. The dogs had started to run and they were gathering speed, teeth bared, snarling, spittle flying behind them. They were fifty paces away now and the distance was closing, and Cassandra was still within their reach . . .

Cassandra was breathing hard with mixed terror and exhaustion as she pulled herself higher. I stepped down a layer to help her and reached out my hand to pull her up. 'Come on, Cassandra! You have to keep climbing! Only one more – one more—'

And then we had reached the top of the wall, and the dogs were beneath us, snapping and leaping, jaws barely missing our heels as we scabbled up and on to the broad rough stones that capped it.

'Oh, Krisayis!' Cassandra breathed, as she pulled herself up next to

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me, her words ragged and uneven as she gasped for breath. ‘That was – *so – close!*’

I nodded, my heart hammering with fear and excitement. ‘I know.’ I looked down at the dogs, snarling and jumping only a few feet beneath us, white teeth bared, and shivered slightly; then I turned, lowered myself over the far side of the wall and climbed down, dropping on to the grass of the sanctuary.

‘We didn’t get hurt, though, did we?’ I said, as Cassandra started down after me.

‘No,’ Cassandra said, ‘but—’ She faltered, looking over her shoulder at the ten-foot drop.

‘Here,’ I said, moving forwards. I held out my hand to help her jump to the ground.

We gazed around us as we got our breath back, taking in our surroundings.

The temple was set above us on a slight hill, a tall, imposing structure of dark stone with bronze doors fronted by painted columns and set above an open courtyard, with a flight of steep steps. Around it were clustered several smaller buildings – a white-plastered dwelling, perhaps the home of the priest and priestesses, a wooden storehouse set against the wall and a workshop from which a faint smell of sand and dust drifted towards us. A single stone-flagged path wound up the hill towards the buildings, lined on either side by twisted old oaks and the sacred stone slabs of the gods, scattering the precinct like relics.

‘What now?’ Cassandra asked. ‘Can we not go back to the palace, Krisayis?’

I felt a twinge of guilt at the pleading note in her voice. I knew that Cassandra did not like to leave the palace grounds and that she disliked disobedience even more; she was happiest when she was in the palace, surrounded by her brothers, in her familiar element. But then, I thought, I simply could not let this pass me by. It might be the only chance I had to find out about the life my father was determined to force me into before he succeeded in his plans, and all was lost.

I brushed my long hair off my face, gathered my courage and started off across the precinct with determination. ‘We are going to the temple of Apulunas.’

Βρισηίς
Briseis, Pedasus

The Hour of the Evening Meal

The First Day of the Month of Roses, 1250 BC

I was standing in the palace herb garden, surrounded by fragrant lavender in the shade of a pomegranate tree, waiting, tall and proud as a princess should be. But my heart was quivering in my chest, like a small, frightened bird.

He has to want to marry me, I thought, standing there, trying not to show my desperation. He has to. I must fulfil my duty before it is too late. I have to be chosen. I have to show to my family that I can still be a good daughter and a good wife and, if the gods will it, a mother of princes.

Above all, above everything, he has to want me.

I flicked back a stray lock of dark hair from my forehead, as my mother always told me to do, and tilted my slim figure slightly to one side, just like the statues I had seen of Arinniti, goddess of love. I could hardly remember a time when they had not told me I was beautiful. Indeed, my old nurse, Deiope, had sworn from when I was a child that I should make a great match and a great marriage. With my long, dark hair, pale skin and delicate features, she had often said I looked like the living embodiment of the women whose brightly coloured portraits decorated the palace walls, their black hair braided down their backs, their skirts tied tight around slim waists. If it had not been for the prophecy, no one would have been anxious at all.

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But, because of the prophecy, nothing was certain any more.

I readied myself, drew myself up tall, like a queen, and tried to hide my quaking heart, which felt as if it had dropped all the way from my mouth to my slippered feet.

The small oak-wood gate of the garden creaked and I turned. It was my mother, the Queen of Pedasus, a woman known as much for the firmness of her hand in ruling our city as for her beauty. 'Now, Briseis,' she said, without preamble, as she always spoke and especially to me. She walked towards me down the stone-lined path, straight-backed and stern, her flounced skirt brushing the herbs at the path's edge and sending the soft scent of lavender and thyme into the evening air. 'It is my expectation that you do your best.'

I looked down at my hands, trying to be humble. 'I do try,' I said meekly. 'I did not ask for the prophecy. I did not want—'

'Briseis, please,' my mother said, folding her hands in front of her in her most regal stance and gazing sternly at me. 'Not this again. We each deal with the fate the gods have dealt us. You will be silent and let your beauty speak for itself. Perhaps this time, at last, the gods will bless us with good fortune.'

I touched my forefinger quietly to my thumb, sending a silent prayer to the goddess Luck that this might be so, then cast my eyes to the ground and tried to trust in my beauty and the gods.

There were sounds of footsteps on stone approaching the garden gate. I took a deep breath. My suitor was approaching – and, if he chose me, he would have the power to change my life for ever.